

Abertay Enterprise Framework – Business awareness beyond subject learning

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This is a working paper presented at the *3rd International
Enhancement in Higher Education Conference in Glasgow 6-8 June
2017*.

The resources from the conference can be found at
<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/conference/event-resources>

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Abstract

This paper proposes a new approach to developing business skills more broadly across the graduate cohort in Scotland. The approach has been developed as a response to a previous study of employers¹ - particularly SMEs - and through anecdotal evidence from tutors who send students on work placements. This evidence showed a clear gap in the business skillsets of graduates in areas such as marketing, human resource management and leadership.

The approach designated Abertay Enterprise Framework has been developed to run from SCQF 7 to 10 (the normal length of a degree programme). Instead of studying business-related topics in isolation (e.g. a module on introductory marketing) the topics will be integrated into the students' cognate area of study in such a way as to show the interconnectedness of these themes and their chosen subject area. This combination allows students to enter and leave the framework at different SCQF levels without requiring prerequisite knowledge.

This is a working paper to show findings to date on the Abertay Enterprise Framework project.

Keywords: enterprise education, business education, enterprise, entrepreneurship, Higher Education.

¹ This project was funded by the Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework Partnership

1. Introduction

There is an increasing recognition that learning for entrepreneurship in the context of Higher Education goes beyond the formal classroom through experiential and discovery learning with considerable experimentation in how this can be achieved (Rae, 2010). Enterprise education is not programmed knowledge (Gibb, 2002; Hannon, 2005; Pittaway and Cope, 2007) but instead led by creativity, informality, curiosity (Penaluna and Penaluna, 2008) and how it is applied to recognise and act on real-world situations and opportunities (Rae, 2010).

Existing literature has sought to define the scope of enterprise education and other forms of education (Gibb, 1999; Solomon, Duffy and Tarabishy, 2002). Enterprise education programmes have three sets of objectives (Hytti and O 'gorman, 2010), the first being to “develop a broad understanding of entrepreneurship... and... the role... in modern economies; the second objective is “learning to become entrepreneurial” and deals with need for individuals to take responsibility for their own learning, careers and life; and the third objective is to learn “how to” be an entrepreneur by learning how to start a business” (ibid., p. 13).

In this project we adopt an even broader view of entrepreneurship to include not only entrepreneurship for new business creation, but also intrapreneurship (entrepreneurial activity as part of an existing organisation's development). This wider focus of business and enterprise education aims to develop business skills that are relevant for student's employability and critical to support their career pathways regardless of they decided to start-up their own business or not.

A number of reviews of skills demanded in the creative industries and the computer games industry have been undertaken by bodies such as Creative Skillset (2011, 2014) and NESTA (NESTA, 2006; Livingstone and Hope, 2011), according to which the most common impact of skills gaps in the Creative Industries is delay to the development of new products or services, people management, marketing and project management.

Based on our own research and interviews made with managers from SMEs in Scotland, mostly in the Creative Sector, the message coming from SMEs was that they needed their employees to have a range of such skills alongside the core, often skills for which they were being employed. Education gaps were described as non-technical in nature and students were found to lack business and enterprise skills including abilities in areas such as marketing, project management, people management, legal frameworks and business finance.

Responding to these findings, the Abertay Enterprise Framework (AEF)² was established as a business and enterprise education programme designed to be integrated into any programme study across the University.

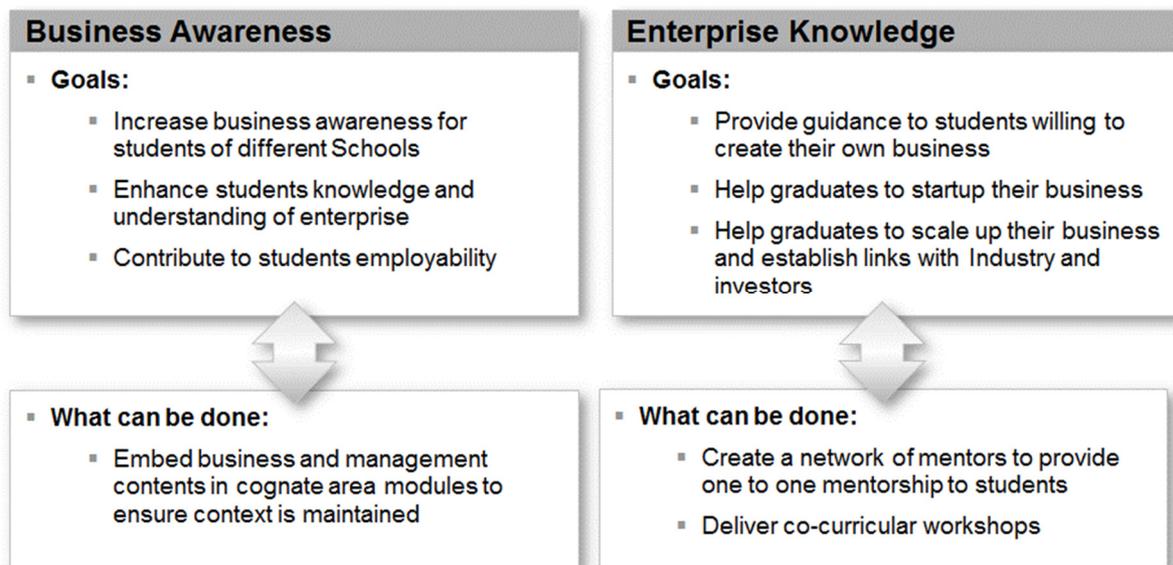
2. The Abertay Enterprise Framework concept

Based on the previous findings, AEF was established to run from SCQF levels 7-10. This framework would consist of teaching and learning relating to creating an enterprising mind-set at levels 7 and 8, moving on to more technical issues of new and existing business development at levels 8 and 9 and new business start-up at level 10.

The framework would cover the gaps identified, but instead of studying these topics in isolation (e.g. a module on introductory marketing) the topics would be integrated in such a way as to show the interconnectedness of these themes with the cognate area of study. This combination would allow students to come in and out of the framework at different SCQF levels without requiring prerequisite knowledge (this would be absolutely necessary given the large numbers of students who are direct entrants to levels 8, 9 and 10).

The project is being implemented gradually and following a model based on two structural axes of intervention (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Overall representation of the Abertay Enterprise Framework



² Part funded by the Mathew Trust

In regards 'Business Awareness', an innovative model of intervention was established to enable business related materials to be delivered in conjunction with cognate area material and teaching to show the interconnectedness of the business material to the student's chosen employment industry.

We recognised that while all students will benefit from a wider appreciation of the issues which affect all organisations, not all will seek to start-up their own business. Therefore we created a second axis, 'Enterprise Knowledge', which sits outside the students' core curriculum and aims to provide guidance on start-up business creation and enables expansion of their business/industry networks and contacts.

2.1. Building 'Business Awareness' - pilot actions and future expansion

One of the great difficulties of creating the AEF was developing a framework which would work across a range of programmes, where students have vastly different experiences and subject knowledge. There are three ways content could have been included for students: creation of modules, as co-curricular activities, as an integrated scheme. The integrated approach has been taken as it has several advantages over the other approaches:

1. It can be built up over the whole programme without requiring a large amount of programme space for modules;
2. As it is integrated into subject content modules this provides the context for students in their field of interest;
3. As it is integrated into core modules students will develop an understanding of the value of this knowledge and the skills being developed, rather than hoping they will be able to self-select the learning in addition to their formal studies, when their lack of experience may prohibit their understanding of the value to be gained.
4. A framework over 4 years, but without dependencies, enables students to join the scheme at later stages and still gain content, whereas a module say at stage 2 (level 8) would be missed by a student entering at stage 3 (level 9). None of the 'units' of learning is a full module which enables them to be included in suitable cognate modules.

To be efficient to deliver the learning units needed to meet the needs of all groups while requiring little adjustment for their particular contexts. Without the use of the generic SCQF level descriptors (SCQF, 2010) this would not have been possible. The unit descriptors that will be created will not be official Abertay module descriptors as these would only be for full

modules i.e. 20 credits, but instead they allowed programme teams to see what the content of the framework is, where it should be placed within their programmes and the size of the relevant 'chunks' and additionally provide a suggestion of how it could be assessed.

A two stages approach was designed to deal with the implementation process, the first of which is being undertaken during academic year 2016-17 and aims to support the identification and validation of the units within the broad range of business topics.

The second stage, which will start during academic year 2017-18, will deal with definition of the unit descriptors according to the above mentioned criteria and gradual implementation in different courses, with prior 'buy-in' having been made by programme leaders.

Current position of stage 1 activities

The first activity was to interview Subject Leaders to discuss which areas of business would be of most value to their students. Although not subject experts in business, these people were highly experienced in dealing with students and employers, and in many cases, work placement providers. They were therefore able to provide anecdotal evidence which reiterated the findings from the original research about where student knowledge could be improved.

Three topics were then chosen to be piloted in three different programs at undergraduate and post graduate level: 1) Idea generation (lean start-up, business model canvas); Business feasibility (market research, break even analysis); 3) Supply Chain Management. Programmes piloted: Sound Production, Counselling and Food Science. The wide variation in programmes selected for the pilot was a deliberate attempt to try to identify challenges which would be faced when dealing with a broad range of subject area tutors and students. The approach taken was found to be very successful. Short feedback questionnaires were collected from students and oral/email feedback from tutors. Both groups were highly complementary of their experience and the pilots have, so far, proved the model to be successful.

2.2. Improving 'Enterprise Knowledge'

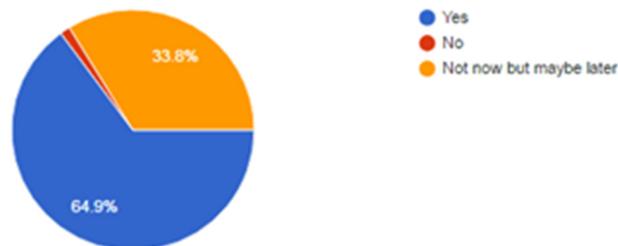
This approach complements the prior one, and establishes actions towards supporting students in creating their own business. These actions are made available to all University students regardless of their cognate area or level of studies. The actions covered are more dynamic in nature and are conceived to leverage the interaction of students with the external environment, therefore involving key external stakeholders, business partners and entrepreneurs.

Current position of activities

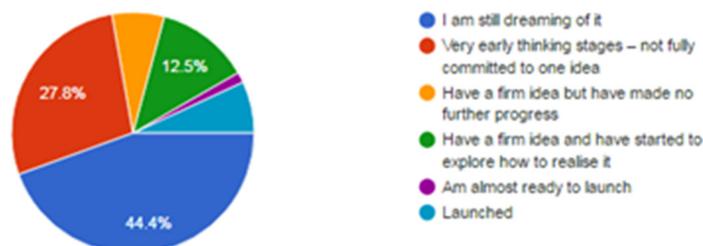
An Enterprise Appetite Questionnaire was circulated to all University students to understand students' interest in new business start-up (see Figure 2). The questionnaire had 74 responses, from across all stages of study but with the largest responses coming from stages 2 and 3. The questionnaire was kept deliberately short, to avoid putting off respondents, and therefore contained only five questions with questions 4 and 5 giving the most insight into student thinking.

Figure 2 – Sample of questionnaire results

4. Is setting up a new business something you would like to find out more about?
(74 responses)



5. Where are you on your new business journey (72 responses)



These results are not conclusive in terms of student thinking on enterprise, as the sample size is only 74 out of a potential student population of over 4,000. However, the purpose of the questionnaire was simply to gauge if there was interest in this activity prior to undertaking development of a series of interventions – workshops, mentoring, learning materials.

A 'Business Ignition Week' (BIW) has been developed to support students in developing a business plan through an intensive 3-day work programme. As part of this initiative a call has gone out for tutors to volunteer as mentors, to provide one to one mentorship to students who

undertake the BIW. A social media campaign via Twitter was created to seek out students who might be interested in participating. This activity is currently recruiting students and will run in May 17 (this being a time seen as most favourable by students who undertook the questionnaire). As this is the first year of operation, we view this as a pilot activity and will seek feedback on the experience. Going forward we would seek to include a wider group of mentors from outside the University and include guest speakers and additional input from local incubator units.

A systematic review of all enterprise related activity across Abertay has begun. In the academic year 2017-18 new actions will be implemented towards extending this community of practice to more students and staff members. An online repository of Virtual learning Objects related to business and enterprise contents is being developed as is a way to share practice and activities undertaken across the University. It is hoped that such a shared resource will serve students by opening up new opportunities for learning outside the classroom and provide tutors with material to support delivery in their own classes.

The platform will be based on the Blackboard software which is widely available to students and staff in the University. The construction of the platform will take into account the inputs of a focus group comprising staff and students which will be created for the project and will provide the necessary inputs needed. Moreover it is expected to produce a manual and 'train the trainer' sessions aiming to support staff from different cognate areas in embedding business and enterprise contents into their courseware.

3. Conclusions

The evidence collected from the original SCQFP sponsored project has been reaffirmed through the work undertaken in this project and expanded beyond subjects in the games industry i.e. that all students, regardless of subject, would benefit from a greater understanding of business. The project has also divided business knowledge into general business awareness and entrepreneurial activity. This enables a different approach to be taken for each part – business awareness within the core curriculum and enterprise start-up as co-curricular.

The project is currently in the pilot stages of delivery, but the outcomes achieved appear to suggest the model is successful in achieving the early aims of the project. It is yet to be seen if the further roll out of the project will be as successful and deliver the long-term benefit of increased employability of graduates.

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