**Using a web-based platform to enhance employability skills of the global citizen student: introducing the Blended Learning Phased Assessment Employability Strategy (BLPASES) framework.**

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**Abstract:** The hospitality industry demands graduates joining the industry to have a wide range of soft skills involving communication, change management, self and other leadership, presentation, flexibility and application (Hofstrand, 1996; Pebble, 2002; Robinson, 2006). This study set out to pilot a Blended Learning Phased Assessment Employability Strategy- framework during a seven week, graduate module in a hospitality management programme. The purpose of this study was to enhance employability skills of the global citizen student at graduate level through the use of a web-based environment. First, the framework was designed where learners can develop their skills through a range of activities forming a phased assessment whilst considering the student profile is a mature, global citizen student who has typically completed a degree in a different field. The framework took into consideration that rapid developed is required without risking a cognitive overload whilst being designed to facilitate reflection, peer and community feedback.

**Introduction**

The development of employability skills is a key focus area within government policies, higher education strategy but most importantly by students when selecting a suitable course or programme (Higher Education Academy, 2011). One of the most challenging learning outcomes for direct entry students to a level 6 graduate programme in hospitality management is to build the necessary employability skills. Students enrolling onto this short, 14 week, programme have typically completed a degree in a different field and have joint the programme for the reason of becoming more employable in a difficult economic climate where the service industry is still expanding. Previous studies have offered suitable learning strategies (Kolb, 1984) and e-moderating models (Salmon, 2004). A phased assessment strategy, where students complete a range of activities or small assignments as part of a larger assignment, like a portfolio, increases student engagement and allows for development of skills (Baker, 2010). Introducing the Blended Learning Phased Assessment Employability Strategy (BLPASES) framework; this study set out to pilot a phased assessment strategy where students build the necessary employability skills within seven weeks, through the use of blended learning involving an e-learning environment called pebblepad.

**BLPASES Framework.**

Within this framework the student builds up the required skills through completing a range of activities, relevant to the employability skills needed in the field, which involve building up theoretical knowledge, experience, action and reflection and on-going feedback from the tutor and peers both online and in person.

**BLPASES Framework**

The framework was designed to enable learners to develop their employability skills through a range of activities forming a phased assessment. The framework considered that such skills will need to be applied within a seven week period and thus rapid developed is required without risking a cognitive overload. Finally as the skills required are predominately around self and other-leadership, the framework is designed to facilitate reflection, peer and community feedback, which are skills needed for cognitive learning. Within the BLPASES Framework, stages 1-5 display the industry/field- related activities the students complete online using the web-based platform. Within these stages students also complete activities in the field, alone or with peers and evidence needs to be uploaded on their portfolio. These activities are part of the phased assessment with the student only being able to complete stage five, if stage one takes place. The length of the horizontal platform indicates the time the student is expected to spend in comparison to the other stages. Stages A-D represents the peer and tutor involvement within the blended learning environment. The degree of the triangle/climbing step indicates the level of learning and developed is taking place through experiencing, application and reflection. For example at stage 3 the student only completes one activity online however the level of feedback from peers and tutor is peeking here, allowing for the student to develop to a level where they can progress to a much higher stage where they are required to provide evidence of their learning. In the first stage the student is introduced to the tool and the teaching and assessment strategy. The student becomes comfortable with the tool and the theory-action/experience/reflection template of the activities. The second stage requires the student to complete five activities which increase in difficulty as the student becomes more familiar with the tool and the theoretical site of the module. In class the student then receives feedback from the tutor and peers and is able to “experience” the online activities and learning in class. This enables the student to move to the next step. The third step requires the student to complete a larger activity which involves applying the reflective skills learned, understanding the literature around the subject and applying this within this activity. Returning to class, the student receives more feedback from the tutor and is able to experience the activity with a peer. As can be seen in the framework, this is an essential, rather steep, part of the development of skills. The student cannot successfully progress to the next step if this has not been completed. If the student has achieved the fourth step, they are now required to act upon what is learned and experience the skill together with a peer. A record, often a video, needs to be uploaded to the portfolio to enable feedback and reflection. The final feedback from the tutor and the student’s online reflection activity help the student to access the fifth step; demonstrating the employability skills achieved.

**How the Pilot study was conducted.**

The framework was piloted with a cohort of 26 students, entering the programme in February 2011. This cohort had the additional challenge of all students being international students, most from the Asia-Pacific region and coming from a different educational background. During the pilot a blog was kept to record benefits, limitations and challenges of the framework. The platform used was pebblepad, and it was set up in way that students were able to check each other’s portfolio's. This promoted peer and group work and enabled students to move on the next step. The gateway allowed tutors to track progress of the students at any time, giving feedback or spurring them on to progress. The portfolio helped students build their evaluation, analytical and critical reflective skills with the templates of reflection increasing in difficulty and the final reflection being without a template. Students not only visibly increased their confidence from week 1 to 7; they were also able to give written and recorded evidence of this. Tracking progress throughout, keeping a blog and listening to the students allowed for us to make changes to the portfolio template. All students were able to meet the learning outcomes of the module. One of the setbacks was that if students were not present during the first session, an additional session would need to be organised to ensure students were able to access the portfolio and understand the purpose. It was also noted that it is important that the portfolio activities are synthesised around a topic/skill, i.e. presentation skills, instead of their relevant occurrence in the session plans. To use this framework effectively, the module should be thought in a computer lab. It is questionable if this framework can be successfully applied to a larger cohort.

**Conclusion.**

This study set out to pilot a Blended Learning Phased Assessment Employability Strategy framework during a seven week, level six module. All students within the pilot confirmed they felt more confident about their employability within the subject industry then prior to the module, most stating the skills they had achieved. Using pebblepad within this framework allowed for visible progression tracking of the skills and eventually evidence. The evidence and/or the portfolio could potentially be shown to future employers. This study was a small, internal programme pilot focussed on making these students more employable. This paper set out to formulate a Phased Assessment Employability framework that be deployed within any university curriculum to enable progressive learning to take place. The framework would need to be tested within different fields and a comparison should be carried out between this blended learning approach, the traditional method of class-room teaching and a complete online approach.

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