DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL SKILLS PORTFOLIO FOR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

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SUMMARY

Professional Skills aims to support students in identifying and reflecting on existing skills to enhance opportunities in line with future career goals, informed by the QAA benchmark statement's emphasis on development of transferable skills throughout the degree (QAA, 2019). A BPS accredited psychology degree is required for graduates to be eligible for further post graduate training as a practitioner psychologist (BPS, nd). The course learning activities address BPS accreditation standards by supporting students' personal and professional development in articulating how their learning equips them with transferable skills and taking responsibility for their own learning and skill development (BPS, 2019). Students collate an individual portfolio using 2 assessments from a choice of 5 areas: CV and application; reflection on volunteer/paid work experience; science communication; open science; and a reflection on graduate attributes and goal setting. Students develop a rationale for their choice of assessment focused on their career goal and a reflect how the activities developed their professional skills, and support for developing a rationale is provided in the first lecture. The course is informed by the British Psychological Society career pathways (BPS, 2022), but also recognises that at least 80% of psychology graduates go onto non-psychology careers (Morrison-Coulthard, 2016). Thus, the focus of the activities and resources is transferable to a range of graduate career opportunities and subject disciplines. This case study outlines three of the portfolio assessments: 1. Graduate Attributes Reflection and SMART goal; 2. Volunteer/work reflection; and 3. Succeeding as a candidate (CVS and application).

CONTEXT

Psychology Honours and PGT (conversion) students at the University of Glasgow. Class size of 100-150 students. The 10-credit course is situated in the third year of a four-year undergraduate degree programme and in a one year MSc psychology conversion programme, both of which are British Psychological Society accredited degrees. The course can be delivered online or in person and lectures are supported by videos, interactive in class discussion, and MS teams.

1.GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES REFLECTION AND SMART GOAL

RATIONALE

In a rapidly changing graduate workplace, skills sought by employers need to be transferable across different careers (Barrie & Pizzica, 2019; Morrison-Coulthard, 2016). In addition to the assessment of subject specific and transferable skills, the degree programme also requires students to self-reflect and articulate these transferable skills, empowering them to take control of their own learning (BPS, 2019). With this in mind, we aimed to provide students with opportunities to research their career options, reflect on their graduate skills and develop relevant goals in the form of short reflective activities that can be adapted for lectures, practical classes, tutorials or delivered online (see GAs reflection Infographic).

Over 40% of our graduates in the School of Psychology are going on to full time study, and the remainder are employed in healthcare, business, education and the voluntary sector (U of G Careers service 2017), reflecting the national trend in psychology graduate destinations (HESA, 2021). Given the diverse career pathways of psychology graduates (Morrison-Coulthard, 2016) it was important to design the assessment to be flexible enough to capture a wide range of skills.

METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

In this assessment students reflected on the University of Glasgow Graduate Attributes, although the skills used in the reflection can be adapted to any subject discipline or institutional framework. Students engaged in the 'developing your graduate attributes' reflective activity in class (see slides for lecture 1), set themselves a SMART goal, then submitted their responses and received formative class feedback. For the assessment students used a reflective writing framework to reflect more deeply on their progress with the SMART goal, linking goals to career aspirations, and analysing what they had learned in the process.

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

In these examples of the reflective assessments a sense of ownership in applying their learning to personal and professional development is evident, along with meta-cognition on the process of learning, both important aspects of employability (Moon, 2004, Yorke, 2004). The GAs reflective activities have been transferred successfully to different subject disciplines, and evaluation of the GAs reflection reported a small increase in students' self-efficacy in and awareness of GAs after engaging in the reflective activity in the short term (Swinger & Hendry, 2021).

2. VOLUNTEERING AND WORK REFLECTION

RATIONALE

Advantages of a work placements are well known, but it can be challenging to establish placements with employers and offer flexibility to accommodate students' career aspirations (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Moores & Reddy 2012). Voluntary or paid experience working with client groups in relevant settings is recommended by the BPS as a way of building skills and understanding of psychology practitioner roles and counts as relevant experience in applications for highly competitive post graduate training programmes (BPS, nd; Clearing house, 2022). Throughout the professional skills course students are encouraged to seek out voluntary/paid opportunities while they are studying and to apply their psychological literacy to existing volunteer/work experience (Lantz, 2014; Mair, Taylor & Hulme, 2014). In this assessment we scaffolded reflection on experience gained in part-time and voluntary work in the context of students' career goals. Students focus on critical incidents or crucial events (e.g., a difficult situation, conflict) and explain its' relevance, what they have learned from it, and how they will change their future practice (see Volunteering and work reflection infographic). The activities can be used flexibly and online, as a discussion task, a formative or summative assessment.

METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Students completed an initial reflection on a critical incident experienced at work or while volunteering. In class we encourage students to articulate their reflections, ask questions, voice concerns and uncertainties (see lecture slides) and they receive formative feedback on their initial reflection. Using a reflective writing framework (Gibbs, 1988; Johns & Graham, 1996) students developed their initial reflection into a reflective assessment which contextualised their experience within career ambitions and professional development planning.

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Examples of the reflective assessment demonstrate students' development as critically reflective learners across diverse work experiences, with learning going beyond career orientated motivations to include feelings of reward and personal development (Barton, Bates & O'Donovan, 2019; Fowler, 2008). Students' overall satisfaction in the quality of the course increased by 30 % in 2020-21 and this was partly attributed to the introduction of formative feedback on the reflective activities. Students commented: "I enjoyed learning about the importance of reflection and about the skills needed to carry me forward in my career." "I thought the formative exercises were really useful and good feedback opportunities."

Flexibility is key in the reflective assessments, in that students have the freedom to reflect on the skills and experience that align with their interests and that teachers can adapt the activities to their context. It can be challenging for students in the sciences to adopt a reflective writing style (Marsh, 2004), and providing a framework, exemplars and opportunities for feedback can foster experiential learning (Coulson & Harvey, 2013).

3.SUCCEEDING AS A CANDIDATE: CVS AND APPLICATIONS

RATIONALE

Graduate employment outcomes are a policy priority in HE, yet students can lack in awareness of the skills demanded by employers (Crowley & Jeske, 2020) and often need support in evidencing and articulating their transferable skills (see Dalrymple et al., 2021 for a review). This is particularly important in psychology, unlike some undergraduate science degrees that lead directly to careers in those fields, becoming a professional psychologist requires 2-3 years of postgraduate study and supervised experience. Those who pursue this goal find there is significant competition to gain entry, so preparing in advance is crucial (Lantz, 2014). Gaining relevant work experience is also essential, for example, assistant psychologist posts in the NHS (Clearing House, 2022) require applicants to articulate how they can apply their skills in clinical settings.While the undergraduate degree develops highly sought-after transferable skills in communication, numeracy, teamwork, critical thinking and independent research (QAA, 2019), finding a career focus and a job can be challenging for students studying psychology as a non – vocational degree, with a risk of graduate unemployment/ underemployment (HESA, 2022). For example, compared to science graduates, fewer psychology graduates in Scotland enter full time work and more enter full time study or part-time employment (HESA, 2022). Indeed, psychology graduates reflect that they should have started career planning earlier (Lantz, 2019), highlighting a need for opportunities to explore career options earlier in the degree programme.

The CV and application activities aimed to develop students' career focus and pre-professional identity (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021) by gaining experience in articulating their skills in the current job market and creating a targeted CV and cover letter. Students also engaged with alumni which helped identify potential career directions and the type of experience required.

This assessment required students to research potential employers and the skills and experience required for their chosen career, then evaluate and apply their transferable skills to a currently advertised post graduate course or job role.

METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Students searched for a real-life graduate opportunity and created a mock application (cover letter/personal statement and CV). Before the class students were asked to select the best candidate from three cover letters and CVs for an assistant psychologist role and then discussed their evaluations in class. In class activity involved evaluating examples in relation to the assessment criteria and analysing their own CV to develop an action plan on what to improve (see lecture slides). Examples of students' work demonstrate how students applied transferable skills from their academic and extra-curricular activities to person specifications. We developed the assessment criteria to encourage students to present themselves in an engaging manner within a professional context. To support students in career planning beyond the course assessment, we collated video testimonials from University of Glasgow alumni about their career journeys and the challenges they faced, and guest speakers from the careers service and the Student Representative Council signposted opportunities.

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

While working on the assessment students often reflected their target careers required more experience or skill development than they currently possessed, and this motivated them to seek our opportunities to gain relevant experience during their remaining time at university and/or rethink their initial career plans. The CV and application assessment and the markers' feedback supported students in their emerging professional identity by fine tuning their knowledge of what recruiters are looking for and adapting their CVs accordingly.

REFLECTIONS, CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

The Professional skills portfolio is a popular course with students, challenging their conceptions of graduate careers in psychology, and many report that it helps to kick start their career planning at university. The course could be developed to provide a more inclusive and international focus, signposting local and non-Western career options to support increasing numbers of international students and UK graduates working overseas. In future there is potential for the portfolio to be developed in other subject disciplines and labour market contexts and as a tool for self-reflection tailored to students' specific needs and background.

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HYPERLINKS & SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Professional Skills course specification (2022) https://www.gla.ac.uk/coursecatalogue/course/?code=PSYCH5030

U of G Graduate Attributes
University of Glasgow Graduate Attributes

Lecture 1 slides: Developing a rationale for the portfolio and reflecting on graduate attributes
https://gla-my.sharepoint.com/:p:/g/personal/maxine_swingler_glasgow_ac_uk/EcxtczqPvOxMkkqUvm4iWIwBHEkNAHjWoFkvJxWstdavYw?e=69hz6v

GAs reflection Infographic
https://gla-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/maxine_swingler_glasgow_ac_uk/EVBvuRINzv5HnM8oqRUsWHQBLJwaiV02HqsaZuRlrSS0Tw?e=57Qi9E

GAs Reflective Activity
https://sway.office.com/zVkoSpgGnLOsBDGy?ref=Link

Link to formative feedback from the lecturer for the GAs reflective activity
formative feedback GAS task_2022_23.docx

Assessment guidance for the GAs reflection assessment
https://sway.office.com/mVchPITfQbDMuWlb?ref=Link

Examples of GAs reflection assessments from previous students
https://sway.office.com/2GanR1eYaAahrQ6Q?ref=Link

Lecture slides: Volunteering and work reflection
https://gla-my.sharepoint.com/:p:/g/personal/maxine_swingler_glasgow_ac_uk/Ea6w4BRV7BVLh9KS5LN_IcoBa5ghTc8PwuDLGMAx_ONuYw?e=BlwwGb

Volunteering and work reflection infographic
https://gla-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/maxine_swingler_glasgow_ac_uk/EevAgsfmwAhIne_7jBeRDN4B4oQTAN_7BSWibedol5vsgg?e=9XmNbb

Volunteering and work reflective activity
https://sway.office.com/e1Kx6sWTmwMwl0SX?ref=Link

Lecturer feedback on volunteering and work reflective activity
Formative Feedback_volunteering&work reflection_2022_23.docx

HYPERLINKS & SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Assessment guidance for the volunteering and work reflection assessment
https://sway.office.com/etaa8NUwCNje7mGx?ref=Link&loc=play

Examples of Volunteer/work reflection assessments from previous students
https://sway.office.com/fYbMvJ6uGaDT2szx?ref=Link

CVs and applications lecture slides (co-authored with Dr Archie Roy)
https://gla-my.sharepoint.com/:p:/g/personal/maxine_swingler_glasgow_ac_uk/EYrEkRxUXatHgOnIOyEF6sQBK0sitsYTIE1vDvg73Fs5TQ?e=Yf4PFK

CVs and applications pre-class activity-selecting the best candidate
https://gla-my.sharepoint.com/:u:/g/personal/maxine_swingler_glasgow_ac_uk/Eb0UHtz1mYZCkAuHupWOOlMBKlpIguHwCP4peP1TOR84Tg?e=TOMm1V
(Content authored by Dr Archie Roy)

CVs and applications in class activity- evaluating CVs and applications
https://sway.office.com/0H3gtEE0h9jhkVzP?ref=Link

Assessment guidance for the CV and applications assessment (co-authored with Dr Archie Roy)
https://sway.office.com/znHfXolIh6ejKuGS?ref=Link

Examples of CV and application assessments from previous students
https://sway.office.com/aQAGDOd75jwE5d75?ref=Link

Video testimonials from graduates
https://linktr.ee/CareersSession