Showcasing and extending student-led, employer-focused, extra-curricular activity
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Abstract
This case study describes a project to showcase and extend student-led, employer-focused, extra-curricular activity, building on earlier work which encouraged the formation of groups of students who were interested in undertaking these kinds of activities. Students at Loughborough University were invited to submit proposals for activities and funding was provided to successful applicants to enable them to jump-start their ideas. Imperial College London has well-established activities and Loughborough benefited from the close working relationship that developed between staff and students across the two institutions. Showcasing and extending student-led, employer-focused extra-curricular activity is a joint venture undertaken by Imperial and Loughborough. Students from each institution worked together to host two student-led symposia, one at Imperial and one at Loughborough.

Keywords: employability, extra-curricular, student-led, symposia

Background
At Imperial College London, student-led, employer-focused extra-curricular activities are sophisticated, longstanding and varied. While all Imperial engineering students are automatically given membership of various student engineering societies, which often have a careers emphasis, a parallel stream of student-led projects has emerged where students try to make a practical difference to the wider community by using their engineering know-how. A number of these projects have been running since at least 2003, and there are an estimated 200 students involved in or supporting projects or project proposals in any given year. Being student-led, there is little bureaucracy attached to these projects and staff liaison was on an ad hoc voluntary basis until formalised by the creation of a tutorship in 2008. The dedicated ‘Tutor for Student-led Projects’ provides support to any engineering student who undertakes student-led activity.

At Loughborough, these activities are in their infancy and have been initiated with previous HE STEM funding and assistance from staff and students at Imperial College during the 2010/11 academic year. There are approximately 45 students at Loughborough involved in these activities, supported by staff in the Centre for Engineering and Design Education (CEDE).

The student-led symposia initiative was conceived through the idea of creating a sustainable student-centric platform for academics, students and employers to engage with each other, enhance the academic credibility of extra-curricular activities and foster cross-institutional student interaction. The expected benefits to the students are increased retention and enhanced employability prospects gained through the organisation of the activities themselves, the organisation of the symposia and contact with prospective employers. A more detailed list of benefits for both universities and students will be made available at http://cede.lboro.ac.uk/studentledactivity. Conference and journal papers have also been submitted.
Rationale

We built upon and extended existing student-led, employer-focused activity by encouraging students involved in these projects to showcase their activities. This was achieved by the hosting of student-led symposia. Student employability skills are documented as essential: “It is a top concern for business that students should leave university better equipped with a wider range of Employability skills” (BIS, 2010, p. 8). Furthermore, “Courses that deliver improved employability will prosper” (Browne, 2010, p. 31). Yorke and Knight have published extensively on the importance of employability, for example, Embedding employability into the curriculum (2006). Whilst many academic staff recognise the potential for student-led projects to develop employability skills, the Imperial experience showed that students do not always recognise the employability enhancement that their work brings to them as they are focused on the engineering work outcomes rather than their personal development. Symposia provide a mechanism for helping students showcase to others (and thus to themselves) their achievements and the employability benefits it brings to them. However, the rationale keeps to the mantra ‘by the students, for the students’ in order that activities remain ‘student-led’.

Therefore, in essence, the overall aim of the project team was to create a mechanism whereby groups of students, staff and other stakeholders from within an institution or beyond would have a reason to interact and develop understanding and skills while sharing learning and helping to sustain and extend individual student-led groups.

The approach

The student approach

Students at Imperial College London have well-established activities, whereas the activities at Loughborough are in their infancy. The symposium concept was initiated to generate a sustainable medium for knowledge transfer, to enhance the credibility of the students’ work and to offer employers the opportunity to learn about the students’ activities, meet the students and engage with the institutions. It was also envisaged that staff would have the opportunity to witness the students’ potential for organising activities, which would inspire others to follow in their footsteps. The dates were also determined by staff, the first at Imperial College London on Saturday 5 March 2011 and the second at Loughborough University on Tuesday 28 June 2011.

Staff at both institutions issued an invitation to all students involved in activities to consider hosting a student-led symposium. Students were asked to submit an expression of interest if they wished to be part of the organising committee. A sufficient number of students were interested in forming a conference organising committee and all who submitted expressions of interest became part of the committee. Once the committees were established, each group was allocated funding to cover associated costs such as gifts for presenters, competition prizes and promotional items.

Staff offered guidance to the students and were available for help if required, but did not interfere with the programmes for the symposia. Three meetings were held: one at the commencement of the activities, a second mid-way through the organisation period and a final one just before the event. Guidance was in the form of a checklist designed to help with the organisation of the events and the setting-up of conference committees. Assistance was provided with the booking of rooms as students were not able to access this facility. Rail tickets were purchased to enable students from each institution to travel to the symposia. The student committees determined the food that they wished to provide; however, it was purchased by staff rather than the students as this was found to be less expensive.

The main difficulty for staff at both institutions was to stand back and leave the organisation to the students. This became extremely trying and nerve-wracking as the dates for each symposium approached and the students had a long list of outstanding or incomplete tasks, such as website development, programme of events and registration options. One valuable lesson learned by staff was that a last-minute approach does not necessarily prevent success. Students can and will work all night to complete tasks – they are used to deadlines. They are also ingenious: students at Imperial obtained free food simply by asking shops for donations. The students requested little
help or guidance and repeatedly tried to reassure staff that everything was under control, even though they had yet to start many tasks.

The students set up conference organising committees, shared out the workload, held regular meetings and developed ambitious event programmes which came to fruition just in time. They also worked to an allocated budget, managed the finances and produced an itemised list of their expenditure. A primary function of the tutors was to ask questions which either obtained a response or alerted the students to a task they had yet to consider; however, this was not with the view of the tutor granting permission as the students ran their projects.

The first symposium, organised by students at Imperial College London, was entitled ‘Global Citizen Symposium’. The programme had a keynote speaker from Global Poverty Action, panel discussions on ‘exploring key aspects of setting up and running projects’ and workshops on ‘exploring how to make the most of a project’. There were 55 delegates, including staff and students from both Loughborough University and Imperial College London and invited speakers. Details of the event are available at http://www.student-ledprojects.co.uk/

The second symposium, organised by students at Loughborough University, was entitled ‘Loughborough Symposium’ and attracted over 30 delegates (staff, students and employers). The lower attendance rate was mainly due to the timing of the event (28 June 2011, immediately after exams and outside of the academic year). The importance of timing is discussed later. The programme included keynote speakers from nPower and RSM Tenon group, a video of the students and their activities (produced by them), a panel discussion and group tasks with prizes. The website can be found at http://loughboroughsymposium.co.uk/Home.html. Further details are available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jakbi3KrM_4

In addition to the programme organised by the students at Loughborough, a workshop delivered by staff from Imperial and Loughborough was made available to staff from other institutions who were interested in setting up student-led activities (attended by 13 staff from eight universities).

**The staff approach**

The staff approach to the development of the symposia has been inferred above but can be summarised as the following, remembering that this is a student-led activity and that staff support rather than lead:

- Obtain institutional support for the scheme and make links with relevant staff and units, including the Student Union. Establish how the committee will function – solve potential funding and insurance issues before you start
- Engage the students: invite students to form a committee to run a symposium. Use previous symposium information to inspire potential members, take time to find the best route to engage students within your institution. If membership can be drawn from other relevant student groups, this will help provide content for the symposium
- If possible, provide funding to support the event for the first time. Encourage the students to seek further sponsorship
- Encourage a formal submission so that the students have to write down what they want to do and really understand what they are committing to. This could include a requirement for the students to evaluate their experience and obtain feedback from the event
- Introduce the students to previous symposium information (sample feedback forms, checklists for setting up events, etc.). This helps to set a standard and make sure nothing crucial is missed
- Provide practical help in areas such as setting dates and booking rooms
- Provide a listening ear at all times but don’t do the work for the students. Discuss progress with the students but it is their responsibility to make the event happen and be a success
- Attend the event and bring colleagues along with you.
A more general guide to support staff who wish to set up student-led activity in their own institution is under development in the form of a checklist and will be available from the authors. Supporting information is available from [http://cede.lboro.ac.uk/studentledactivity](http://cede.lboro.ac.uk/studentledactivity).

**Reflection on the student learning experience**

The symposium provides students with the opportunity to disseminate their activities beyond the confines of their own project and institution. They also have the opportunity to develop working relationships with employers and staff and students from their own and other institutions. The main challenge was for the students to find suitable dates for the symposia, as it is essential that there should be no conflict with timetabled lectures, tutorials and examinations. A significant benefit to students involved in the symposia organisation is ‘real world’ experience of, for example, timetabling, financial management, publicity, negotiation, public speaking and networking.

The Loughborough students found sustainability to be an issue and are being actively encouraged to ensure that there are students from all years of study involved with the running of activities. This enables a smooth transition of responsibility from year to year.

Students are able to formalise these learning experiences through participation in each university’s employability award scheme. The Loughborough Employability Award ([http://www.lboro.ac.uk/students/hub/award.html](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/students/hub/award.html)) “recognises the development of valuable employability skills through participation in the many extra-curricular activities across campus and through vacation work and volunteering”. Similarly, Imperial also has an employability award scheme in the Faculty of Engineering known as ‘CV2012’ and, like Loughborough, this works on a ‘points’ accumulation system ([http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/2012/getinvolved/cv2012](http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/2012/getinvolved/cv2012)).

Evaluation of the HE STEM project has shown that the students have valued their learning experience (more detail in ‘Evaluation’) and consider it to be worthy of continuation beyond the funding period. Additional activities have already taken place and more are planned (see [http://www.student-ledprojects.co.uk/#](http://www.student-ledprojects.co.uk/#)).

**Evaluation**

Feedback forms, produced by the student organising committees, were distributed at each symposium. All feedback, from both staff and student delegates, was positive, some examples being:

- “The most meaningful thing I learned was to trust the students' enthusiasm and never to ‘squelch’ it.” [staff quote]
- “The best things were that our ideas could be brought to reality and make a real difference to people’s lives.” [student quote]
- “The key issues I would like addressed in the future are knowledge transfer and sustainability of projects.” [staff and student quote]
- “One idea, which may enhance future events, is to have a staff-student panel.” [staff quote]

The student organising committees from Imperial and Loughborough both deemed each symposium to be successful and have together now set up a national student-led projects community. They held a further event in London on 16 November 2011 (beyond the original aim of this project) and further events are being planned.

Following the experience and lessons learned from the first two events, the students were of the opinion that November would be the optimum time to hold the event, as their academic pressures were at a minimum and it would hopefully attract a significant number of ‘freshers’ who would then, if interested, have the remainder of the academic year to become involved in the projects. Timing was therefore an important evaluative outcome.

We take the student enthusiasm for continuing the symposia beyond the scope of the original project as the strongest indicator of the relevance, sustainability and value of the activity funded by the HE STEM grants. Of added value is its function in helping students to appreciate that they
have much to showcase to themselves, each other, to academic staff and, inevitably, to future employers.

In addition to the feedback obtained by the students from delegates attending the symposia, staff at Imperial and Loughborough also separately sought feedback from the students who had organised each symposium and the students who had attended them. The aim was to determine benefits, achievements, difficulties encountered and disadvantages, as perceived by the students. The feedback received was positive and included a range of perceived benefits as well as some difficulties. It is interesting to note that the students believed that the difficulties they encountered helped to develop individual areas of strengths:

- “I haven’t done my undergraduate study in the UK so I used this opportunity to improve my teamwork skills as well as interacting with UK undergraduate students. It was a new experience for me.”
- “It was a brilliant experience. It built on key skills – teamwork, leadership, innovation, management and communication.”
- “The best things were seeing the project through to completion, realising the potential of our projects at the symposium, gaining skills outside my degree and having the opportunity for networking and meeting other people.”
- “The worst thing was having to balance university work and extra-curricular activity. My advice is to stay focused and your time management skills will improve but don’t expect anything to be done during the exam period.”

We have recently been awarded ‘Practice Transfer Custodian’ status and are in the process of supporting seven institutions to initiate similar activities. Evaluation of these activities will also be undertaken.

**Discussion, summary**

The outputs and outcomes have exceeded our initial ideas and expectations. The symposia were professional, well-attended and well-received, with the students assuming overall responsibility for content and organisation. The students are continuing to plan future events. There were difficulties encountered with timing the symposia to meet the project timescales and avoid conflict with academic interests. Valuable lessons were learned by the students, in particular those relating to time management. The students realised that not only did the symposia organisation take longer than expected, but also that they underestimated how much time they could spare for the activities in the period before and during their examinations. However, it was these difficulties that prompted the students to choose November for their additional symposium. Their feeling was that this would be a good time for attracting new students and would not interfere with examination periods.

If students are to reach their full potential it is essential that staff, whilst being available for help if required, stand back and allow the students to take responsibility and learn from any mistakes that they may make. It is also important that staff do not underestimate student ability and commitment. We feel that the main reason for the success of this project is that the students embraced the idea with enthusiasm and were committed to its success.

**Further development**

One result of the successful symposia is the strengthened cross-institutional working partnership that has developed between both staff and students at Imperial and Loughborough. With the initiation of the national student-led projects community it seems likely that this link will continue indefinitely and the project will not only be sustained, but also significantly expanded.

One journal paper and two conference presentations have been submitted. Further work and dissemination is planned. Students from the organising committees will be contributing to the authorship of at least one of the papers.
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Further reading/bibliography

Imperial’s student-led projects are more mature than Loughborough’s and have established some websites, although not all project team leaders keep sites up to date (as they concentrate on hands-on engineering).

**e.quinox**
The award-winning e.quinox project at Imperial: electricity in outback Rwanda http://e.quinox.org/ (accessed 6 January 2012). This project has won students awards from JP Morgan (corporate social responsibility), the IEEE (electrical engineering humanitarian award), the John Lever Memorial Award (for student activity) and was a finalist in the 2010 World Challenge.

**Robogals**
A very readable, short document outlining the work of the Robogals project, which encourages schoolgirls to study STEM subjects by teaching them that they too can do robotics (workshops using Lego robots)

**Alumni response to student-led projects**
Students who graduated from the El Salvador project (see below) have created a charity to foster more students to do student-led international development projects

**El Salvador Project 2012**
Buildings and infrastructure in villages in El Salvador, Central America
Raincatcher Imperial
The Raincatcher Imperial project is student-led but the students have linked themselves to the international Raincatcher charity. The students organise and fundraise and go to Tanzania to install very large water capture and storage systems. The international charity has the benefit of bringing brand awareness and credibility to the student effort and being able to share know-how http://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/clubs-and-societies/a-to-z/r/raincatcher/ (accessed 13 March 2012).

SIFE Imperial
SIFE is an international scheme in 1500 universities, with students at Imperial running their own chapter and devising their own projects under the SIFE umbrella http://www.union.ic.ac.uk/scc/sife/ (accessed 13 March 2012).

Women in Set Imperial

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