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## **Designing a blended learning module to enhance students experience and graduate skills**

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Graduate employability, and the skills and attributes required to produce ‘employment ready’ graduates is a commonly discussed theme in Higher Education Institutions for several years now. The metric driven DLHE and upgraded Graduate Outcomes survey measure only a snippet of post graduate life, but does it truly get to the heart of what being ‘employment ready’ means. Do these agendas encourage HE Institutions to look beyond the ‘measured’ metrics and produce students who leave HE with a passion for self-learning and exploration, are lifelong learners and have high levels of satisfaction and well-being? In my opinion, these agendas do not adequately capture what should be ‘employment ready’ for life, especially in a post Covid era, where job satisfaction and well-being have come to the forefront of many individual’s priorities.

Learning, and not just gaining graduate skills should be at the heart of a ‘good’ student experience. Students should leave HE having had deep learning experiences, and tutors’ roles should be to facilitate such learning. Traditional methods of instructor led teaching often results in surface level learning aimed to pass exams, with students often learning by rote from textbooks. This often leads to knowledge that is often forgotten as soon as the exam is over. It does not promote a desire for independent lifelong learning, knowledge acquisition or improve self-efficacy. Designing modules around learning opportunities that inspire, create confidence, and provide the skills to enhance knowledge should be at the core of what Teaching Excellence is: Continuous feedback and groupwork is the key to this (Warren et al, 2019).

True Teaching Excellence (not merely metric driven teaching) is something I am passionate about in my own role as an Educator. My subject specific discipline is Accounting and Finance, and below I will share the several years of research driven changes to a final year A&F module I lead that transformed it into a module that produces graduates who are confident with their abilities, well-rounded, lifelong learners and choose careers that lead to high levels of satisfaction and well-being.

### **The Problem with Accounting and Finance Graduates**

A common complaint we hear from industry is that Accounting and Finance graduates, whilst technically very competent, often lack adequate written communication, verbal presentation skills and the ability to work in teams. As previously mentioned, traditional methods of Teaching & Learning, often exacerbates this issue. To encourage inclusive environments and deeper learning for students, educators should create dynamic T&L environments. One such way to do that is through an integrated blended learning environment where problem-based group learning and continuous feedback creates deep learning.

### **Integrated Blended Learning using Groupwork and Continuous Feedback**

An integrated blended learning environment supports a constructive approach to learning where students exert control and feel responsible for their own learning (Russo et al., 2021). For my module, I use blended learning **not** to reduce face to face contact time, but rather to get students engaged with interactive online educational materials before class, that enhance the learning in class. Instead of spending class time disseminating information, students have access to online materials that teach them the theoretical concepts underpinning the module. The class time is then spent on opportunities for feedback and critical discussions.

The module I lead is Strategic Financial Management. It is a third year UG module and has been designed and **continues to evolve**, using continuous feedback, both tutor to student, student to tutor and peer to peer. The module provides a supportive and inclusive learning environment to a very diverse group of students; approximately 180 in the UK and 600 plus at six TNE partners. It has a mix of students who are continuing from their second year of study on two programmes of study, a large group of students returning from a placement year and a large group of Chinese Direct Entry students, who all have very different learning styles and needs. A common trait that binds all the students together however is that they all want to achieve the best degree possible. As such, the module has been designed to leverage from the strengths of all these diverse groups of students and designed around preparing them for their professional careers after graduation.

The module uses a real-time case study approach that connects real world problems with authentic assessment. Rather than students receiving feedback following the submission of the summative assessment, the learning sessions, content, and assessment approach are designed around continuous feedback and groupwork. The positive outcomes of such approaches lead to better opportunities for learning from each other and maximising feedback. The assessment instrument is an individual case study report and is used as the framework to structure the weekly learning sessions. Under the tutors' guidance, the use of weekly case study group activities (including group presentations) creates an inclusive environment that encourages peer to peer feedback, further enhancing student's confidence in their learning strategy and

increasing participation and student satisfaction among a diverse set of students. It is my belief, that teacher and student experiences of traditional classrooms do not always encourage students' questions and/or discussion. This is especially true for some cultures where power dimensions place the teacher in an authoritative role and questioning authority is not encouraged. As my modules have a large cohort of students from cultures where this is the norm, I find that the way this module has been designed actively encourages participation from all students irrespective of cultural differences. This approach to module design has produced students who not just tick graduate outcomes boxes but has prepared them for lifelong fulfilling careers.