Dibben, L and Morley, D.A 'Using the Living CV to help students take ownership of their learning gain'

Abstract

There is an increasing emphasis on embedding employability skills and experience within the higher education curriculum to address new concepts of 'learning gain' and the perceived student demand for a value for money experience. An exploratory study, at a southern university in the UK, found that students articulated an improved work readiness when they were presented the 'Living CV', an initiative that connects programme learning outcomes into CV outputs. During 2018, a larger, mixed methods study (n=127) was conducted across all three years of fashion degrees. Students completed a pre and post questionnaire before and after a presentation on the Living CV and their views were further explored in a focus group and interviews. Results found that the Living CV presentation heightened students' awareness of the applicability of their programme learning to their future employability and how they could use their academic learning outcomes on their CV as a tool to achieve this. The study recommends that personalised and explicit coaching on 'work literacy' should be integrated into university programmes at all levels to include the Living CV, discussion about and experience in the world of work, increased employer engagement and preparation for interview.

Key words: Learning gain, work readiness, learning outcomes, curriculum vitae.

Introduction

Higher education policy is creating a culture of expectation that students should have a value-added experience or 'learning gain' (BIS 2015; 2016) that takes them forward into further study or graduate level employment on completing their degree. As academia turns the spotlight on itself and asks what additional measures it can employ to make this happen, there is one important element that cannot be overlooked - students need to take ownership of their learning gain if they are to achieve their potential within and beyond their HE experiences.

This chapter's premise is that part of the academic role is to assist students to understand the currency of their learning and constructively build on, and from, their programmes of study as part of their ongoing professional development. The difficulties and challenges of students being able to achieve this are discussed further in the chapter's literature review.

The 'Living CV' (Dibben 2017) is an initiative that was launched following a concern of a head of department that third year fashion students failed to show an accurate reflection of their university experience on their CVs when applying for work on graduation. The Living CV encourages students to translate their learning outcomes into CV outputs, so their hidden learning becomes explicit to not only themselves but future employers. It is a concept born from the realisation that students often fail to see how their programmes of learning equip them for a career and it acknowledges that there is often a mismatch between the students' perception of their learning - having to pass units to get through each year - and the currency of that learning in the workplace.

An exploratory study of 17 final year Fashion Photography undergraduate students was conducted in 2016 and found a link between students' clear understanding of their learning outcomes and an improvement in self-confidence, self-efficacy and satisfaction with their course. Students completed a questionnaire on their work readiness and satisfaction with the course before they were shown how a Living CV could link to their degree and then asked to repeat the questionnaire. Six students

demonstrated an immediate improvement in confidence, eight said they could now see how their degree had prepared them for the workplace and nine felt their university education would make employers notice them.

The chapter presents the results of a larger, mixed method study completed in August 2018 with 127 students drawn from a range of fashion related degrees at a university in the south of the UK. Students completed a pre and post questionnaire before and after a presentation on the Living CV and their views were further explored in a focus group and interviews. This study informs a debate as to how students' learning can be made explicit for them and how that knowledge might help them find meaningful employment.

Literature Review

Much is made of the so-called glut of graduates who flood the workplace, ill equipped for a professional career and unprepared for the demands of industry. The reality is far more nuanced and upbeat. But while statistics consistently show that by far the majority of graduates are in work three years after completing their degree (HESA 2016), there is evidence to suggest that a fair proportion of them are in employment that doesn't make the most of the skills earned while completing their degree. In its 2015 report, 'Supply and Demand for Higher Level Skills', Universities UK called for better understanding of why certain graduates end up in jobs that do not match their skillset and how that could be remedied. In addition, UUK urged universities and employers to jointly develop a 'skills translation' to pinpoint how and where missing soft skills could be learnt. An earlier CBI/NUS report (2011) acknowledged that a successful transition from higher education to the workplace required necessary 'attitudes and aptitudes' being embedded through the degree process and for their presence, and value, to be made explicit to students.

It has never been more important to help students understand the purpose behind their course of study and its value. At a time when value for money, and the idea of 'students as consumers', are becoming increasingly common, if contentious mantras, Tomlinson (2017, p.464) concludes that, whoever the student, "there are many shared concerns; particularly around getting a beneficial and equitable 'return' and value from higher education".

Preparation for employability could be the end goal that intrinsically motivates students to engage in their studies from the start. Rothwell, Jewel & Hardie (2009) see undergraduates' work readiness being divided into four areas; the first being the student's commitment to the university, the second their perceived external employability, the third their ambition and the fourth their internal employability. The link between students' learning and their future employability is therefore complex. It is built through students' perceptions of their own abilities (Räty et al 2018) and throughout students' period of study drawing on the many different elements – skills, qualities, conduct, culture, ideology - that help form the whole professional (Jackson 2016).

One of the roles of the new Office of Students in the UK has been to take over the active research project on learning gain originally instigated by HEFCE. This looks at how to measure improvements in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development made by students during their time in higher education (Office of Students 2018). Over 70 universities and colleges were involved in 13 collaborative projects to pilot and evaluate a range of approaches for measuring learning gain while the National Mixed Methodology Learning Gain Project (NMMLGP) tracked the learning gain of more than 31,000 undergraduate students in 10 higher education institutions (Office of Students 2018).

The acknowledgment of learning gain, and the investment of research into this recently used term within UK higher education, has therefore been considerable. The progress report on the HEFCE

funded learning gain programme (HEFCE 2018) underlies the difficulties of both defining and measuring learning gain. Officially, learning gain "is concerned with the distance travelled by students during their course in terms of knowledge, personal growth, acquisition and development of a wide range of skills, and how ready they become for the world of work during the period of their studies" (HEFCE 2018, p.2). Although this is "expected then to have a positive impact beyond higher education" (HEFCE 2018, p.4) the pilot interventions were too early to measure longitudinal student progress and the complexities of the interrelated factors of individual student development were accounted for by statistical modelling. The progress report concentrates solely on the many methodologies that can be used to measure learning gain and its future contribution to the increasing web of matrices associated with the Teaching Excellence Framework (HEFCE 2018). Early analysis of the whole venture has questioned its worth (Kernohan 2018).

Social learning theorists, such as Etienne Wenger, present an alternative perspective in the learning gain debate whereby individual development is seen as an organic, rather than measurable, phenomenon; "Identity is the vehicle that carries our experiences from context to context" (Wenger, 1998 p. 268). Wenger echoes the work of both Eraut (2000; 2004) and Klein (1998) who emphasise the importance of the process of learning and that students can only effectively use this learning if it is made explicit to them. Cognitive psychologist, Klein (1998), in his research of the work of occupations who must react quickly under stress, identified structure and strategies for learning expertise so that implicit learning was deliberately identified and used for future learning.

These authors refocus the measurement of learning gain onto the ability of students to recognise their development by introducing pedagogy and structure that allows hidden learning to be made explicit. Again, Wenger argues that participation in a social learning situation may not be sufficient to learn (in this case, a university academic programme) but can be augmented by written artefacts; what he terms 'reification', where learner participation is accelerated by presenting learning in another format. Written programme learning outcomes could be an example of this, if the learning

outcomes promote students' understanding, rather than being a managerial step in academic curriculum design (Hussey and Smith 2003; 2008; Dobbins et al 2016).

Brooks et al (2014) conducted a study of students' use of learning outcomes across three disciplines at University of Leicester, UK, and found that learning outcomes were useful learning aids and a focus to students' learning. Barriers to their use included a lack of clarity in their wording and a recognition by students that learning outcomes were only a guide, rather than a prescription, to the students' learning potential. Brooks at al (2014, p.732) concluded that "students want learning outcomes to remain a central part of their learning experience and, indeed, that they would like them to become a more effective part of it". Hussey and Smith (2003) and (Dobbins et al 2016) support the potential of learning outcomes as both a tool for student centred learning and accountability.

Despite this recognition, no suggestion is made that learning outcomes are taken outside of the academic context to translate students' academic learning into evidence for future employability. Evans et al (2010) recognised the very real difficulties of 're contextualising' learning across different environments so students' theoretical learning can be used in a practice setting. The ability of students to extract their course learning into a format accessible for employers is therefore challenging. Research for the New College of Humanities (Ali 2015) found that out of 860 recruiters 20% discarded CVs before reaching the end and on average only spent 3 minutes 14 seconds reading an application. The report concluded that it has "never been more important for jobseekers to impress employers with a really strong CV" (Ali 2015) and for this reason, students require assistance in connecting their learning; evidenced through learning outcomes, to their search for jobs.

Methodology

a. Phase one

Following the gaining of ethical approval, a mixed methodological approach was taken whereby 127 students, across all three years from the fashion degrees within the School of Art, Design and Fashion, completed a pre and post questionnaire (figure 1). In between the two questionnaires, the lead author, familiar to the students as head of the academic programme, conducted a presentation on the Living CV. During the presentation the students were shown an exemplar Living CV of a fictitious student on their course for whom each unit's learning outcomes had been translated into CV outputs. A brief generic personal statement, that referred exclusively to the degree, was also added. There were no extra-curricular activities or part time jobs included. The students were then shown how the exemplar CV had been written and from which units the CV outputs had come.

After a brief discussion, the students were asked to complete the same questionnaire once more. Students were also able to add qualitative comments about their perceptions of the value of a Living CV.

Pre and post questionnaire, using a Likert scale of 1-5, completed by students

1. I can see how my degree is preparing me for the workplace
2. I have a CV that clearly records everything I have learnt at University
3. Units on my degree are designed to help me get employment in my chosen field
4. I will be able to use the skills learnt at University to promote myself and get work
5. My university experience makes me feel confident about future employment
6. My university education will make employers notice me

7. My university education has been worthwhile

8. I have an advantage over those people who have not studied for a degree in this subject discipline

9. My degree has helped me become a more confident individual

b. Phase two

The same students were invited to participate in a focus group (n=8) with the first author where the volunteer students discussed why they decided to study for a degree, their confidence, views on how ready they were for employment and how they thought the Living CV could impact their learning and job prospects. The focus groups were recorded with the students' identities anonymised in the transcript that resulted. Thematic analysis was then conducted to isolate the dominant themes that resulted from the student discussion.

c. Phase three

Three individual, semi structured interviews with three new graduates from the school were further conducted through recorded telephone interviews by the second author; unknown to the students, in July 2018. The anonymised transcript was also analysed through a process of thematic analysis.

Results

a. Phase one

Results were on a 1-5 Likert scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.

Figure 1: I can see how my degree is preparing me for the workplace

Before the Living CV exercise, the majority of students had opted for 4 *I agree that I can see how my degree is preparing me for the workplace*, and this was still the most popular choice after the exercise. However, across the entire group of respondents, 78 students changed their mind after being shown the exemplar CV. Before the exercise a large number of students opted for 3 *Neither agree or disagree.* After the exercise, this reduced significantly and there was a marked increase in those who answered 5 *I strongly agree that* I *can see how my degree is preparing me for the workplace*.

Figure 2: I have a CV that clearly records everything I have learnt at university

By far the majority of students opted for 1 and 2 when considering if they had a CV that clearly recorded everything they had learnt at university, demonstrating that they either strongly disagreed or disagreed. After the exercise, there was a marked shift to answers 4 and 5.

Figure 3: Units on my degree are designed to help me gain employment in my chosen field

Prior to the exercise, five students had strongly disagreed with the statement *Units on my degree are designed to help me get employment in my chosen field.* After the exemplar CV this reduced to zero. There was a marked increase in the number of students who opted for 5 after the exercise.

Figure 4: I will be able to use the skills learnt at University to promote myself and get work

There was little change in the most popular response before and after the exercise; *I agree that I will be able to use the skills learnt at University to promote myself and get work*. However, there was a marked increase in those who strongly agreed after being shown the exemplar Living CV.

Figure 5: My university experience makes me feel confident about future employment

The shift from negative to positive on the statement *My university experience makes me feel more confident about future employment* was pronounced. Prior to the exercise the majority of students had opted for *Neither agree nor disagree*. After the exercise, the majority either opted for *Agree* or *Strongly agree*.

Figure 6: My university education will make employers notice me

A similar pattern to Question 5 emerged with the vast majority of students shifting to *Agree/Strongly Agree* on the statement *My university education will make employers notice me*. No students strongly disagreed after being shown the exemplar Living CV.

Figure 7: My university education has been worthwhile

After being shown the exemplar CV, the large majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that their university education had been worthwhile. Before being shown the exemplar Living CV the majority of students had answered 3 or 4.

Figure 8: I have an advantage over those people who have not studied for a degree in this subject discipline

Like the question 7, the exemplar Living CV caused a marked increase in the number of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing to the statement *I have an advantage over those people who have not studied for a degree in this subject discipline.*

Figure 9: My degree has helped me become a more confident individual

While those who agreed with the statement *My degree has helped me become a more confident individual* remained the same before and after the exemplar Living CV was shown, more strongly agreed and fewer strongly disagreed, disagreed or neither agreed or disagreed.

When students completed the second questionnaire they were given an opportunity to share any thoughts about the Living CV. Some of the comments can be seen in Figure 2.

Students' written responses on their questionnaires

"A Living CV is helpful as it displays everything I have learnt and collects and shows the knowledge I have learnt, it also makes me realise how much I actually have to offer."

"It gives you confidence in your skills."

"The Living CV has made me feel confident and aware of how my course is benefitting me."

"It's relevant, appropriate."

"The Living CV has made me feel more confident about my future. It is something I would never have thought of myself. It makes my future easier."

"To show all the skills I've learned at university – even ones I didn't think of. I think it gives me a better chance of employment."

> "Specific and unique"
>
> "Makes yourself more unique, desirable and different."
>
> "I feel it enables us to explain our units more professionally."
>
> "Good way to promote yourself and become more confident."
>
> "It helped me record all the things I have achieved."
>
> "Recognising the skills provided to me through my course units."
>
> "It has given me more confidence to go out and get a job. Given me a confidence boost."
>
> "It will help me a lot."
>
> "It evolves as I do."
>
> "We can see how we are developing."
>
> "A lot of value. Didn't think of adding in my stuff I've learnt at uni. Yes, I strongly agree with using a Living CV."
>
> "Shows yourself and other employers all the skills developed at Uni."
>
> "Shows employers your skills whilst also having a way of recording all your achievements."
>
> "Shows the experience you can achieve from uni."
>
> "I am really pleased we were introduced to this, it is a fantastic way to really understand how everything we learnt this year can be put in a professional CV format to help get work. Before this lecture I had been quite uncertain about how everything we've been taught can be put into a CV and help us get work in industry. Thank you."

b. Phase two and three

Through thematic analysis, four key themes emerged from the focus group and individual interviews: reasons for going to university, concerns about finding relevant employment, the impact

of the Living CV and how the Living CV could be optimised. Students also gave their thoughts on what other measures would help with employment.

<u>1. Reasons for going to university.</u>

A common response from participants was that they came to university to make contacts, to learn and to develop their professional currency: *"I came to uni because I thought like it was the best way, the only way really, for me to get into the industry, like connections and stuff."* There was a clear link between the choice of course and their future career goals: *"For me the biggest reason to do a degree is so you can progress up the career ladder, to have a good career set in stone. But it's so competitive out there, a degree is required."*

The idea that a degree *"is the basic minimum"* was reiterated several times. The increase in graduates has changed the job market, *"it's made it so hard to get a job if you don't go to university because it's kind of the done thing now"*. Participants recognised that, *"if you don't have a degree you have to have something really pretty special even to just get an interview"*.

For some it was also a rite of passage, *"I think you grow as a person"*, that signified personal improvement. A wider acknowledgement of success was very much part of this; *"I wanted to be that sibling to have a degree"* and *"I kind of reached my goal just to get to university"*.

Although all students expressed concerns about the cost of a degree, they generally felt the experience and learning was worth the investment: *"I think every degree you pay for is crazy but I think overall the experience is worth it. It's good for building yourself up as well as your education"*. One student, however, saw the worth of her degree not in the learning but the final

outcome: *"You don't know if the course is worth it until the future, until you finish uni and get a job."*

2. Concerns about finding relevant employment.

Frustration around the difficulty of getting work experience opportunities was a common theme: *"Why should it be so hard? You are being trained in the current things and you can't find work experience. That's like a bit crazy to me."* and *"people want to kind of see a certain amount of experience – I have two experiences and they want to see three"*.

Students across both focus group and individual interviews shared concerns that gaining a degree was no guarantee of future employment in the field in which they had studied and they found this counter-intuitive: *"No one comes to uni not to get a* job*"* and *"the point is to get a degree, to get a job"* and *"the most important thing about coming to university is getting a job"*.

Participants also expressed concern that they would not stand out from all the other graduates seeking employment: *"One job I went for an interview for they said there were over 2000 applications and all those people had degrees"* Potential competition was seen as demoralising: *"There's a lot of pressure of failing, the feeling of failing is bad for everyone."*

3. The impact of the Living CV

Students found the Living CV to be an effective record of their learning and one that was easier to understand than the language of traditional learning outcomes: *"I recently looked at a Living CV and it made a lot of sense. It made me think about it a lot more"* and *"I think the learning outcomes*

language isn't quite understandable, I think it's just so complex you can't really relate to it. But when it's broken down it sort of makes sense".

The deconstruction of learning outcomes into CV outputs also helped students to view their degree holistically rather than divided into modules: *"I think I should have taken care a bit more on some of the units as I didn't see the point – but I do now".*

Students also reported that seeing a Living CV made them realise how diverse their skills were and how much they had to offer employers: *"It made me realise that I wasn't just learning about the course – you're actually learning about jobs, you're learning to think creatively and about business too"* and *"I haven't got half of the skills I should have on my CV – I don't know, I haven't got the confidence, it seems like I never even thought of it that way".* Students struggled to recognise the validity of including projects undertaken with industry while at university, as though projects completed within university time did not count as real experience.

Those students who had already adapted their CV to become a Living CV reported positive praise and outcomes: *"I had applied for a lot of jobs but they were all declining because I didn't have the experience or work experience, but I used a CV like this and I got the job, instead of using my old CV".*

In addition, students reported increased confidence when seeing their Living CV: *"I think it's professional, I think it looks like someone who knows what they doing. If you read this then you would think they are confident, they are sure they can do all that".* One of the students interviewed admitted that she simply would not have thought about putting all her university experience onto her CV: *"I think it's amazing and it really did open my eyes…like looking back at my units and university, I would never have been confident enough to have put it on there."*

4. How the Living CV could be optimised.

Students agreed that the Living CV should be two things; compulsory, "*a lot of people on my course …wouldn't do it voluntarily" (Student B, interviews)* and delivered in a face-to-face setting rather than online *"if it was online it would get forgotten about because we get so many emails and anything that's not in our brief gets forgotten" (Student A, interviews).*

It was felt that small group discussion and support were essential to help students fully understand the currency of their learning. The suggested composition of the discussion/support groups varied between fellow students, staff and industry but it was felt that industry would give an independent and informed opinion *"I think they also give more of an honest opinion of work and the CV and what companies are like"* and *"They looked through my CV and they looked through my portfolio and just gave me lots of advice that I wouldn't have necessarily known."*

Additional measures that would help with employability included seeing examples of other students' CVs, the use of a website on up and coming trends, seeing jobs in the context of where you want to live and what you don't want to do *"taking a broader view"* and the need to complete work experience. *"Doing work experience is vital because you find out what the industry is like. I think that needs to be pushed so much – working for a company is a vital part" (Student B, interviews)* and *"it prepares you for how you should work professionally, and it gets you used to work life and everything…I tell everyone that work experience is the way forward. The people that don't do work experience are the people that now can't get jobs because they don't have the experience." (Student C, interviews)*

Analysis

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It is a common mistake made by higher education institutions that a suite of vocational degrees with strong industry involvement, bespoke units and a plethora of live briefs result in students confidently recording their university education. Yet the research data found that student participants did not appreciate the value of learning outcomes as a tool to translate their learning into evidence for employment.

Students found the Living CV helped them to clarify, value and reassess the worth of their university studies in a way that learning outcomes alone failed to do. Participants had often missed making the connection between their learning at university and how they presented their work readiness to prospective employers. The majority of students accepted that their degree was designed to help them gain employment in their chosen field and also that the skills they were learning would help them to promote themselves and find work. However, the study found little connection between that knowledge and recording the details on a CV.

The idea of being on employers' radar was further borne out by the question on whether the participants felt their university education would make them noticeable. At least half of the participants were negative about employers noticing them prior to the Living CV exercise. Qualitative data reinforced the idea that students themselves failed to see a connection between what they were learning and its currency within the job market. Once the Living CV has been introduced, that connection appears to be made. Students' learning was made explicit to them and a means of presenting this to employers was introduced.

One of the most striking findings of this research was the high numbers of students who, before being shown a Living CV, strongly disagreed or disagreed that they had a CV that clearly recorded

everything they were learning at university. Once shown an exemplar Living CV the sharp increase in those recording positive responses was notable.

The Living CV helped students to develop a more holistic view of their degree and a willingness to explore the value of its different components for future employability. This awareness sometimes developed retrospectively, *"I should have taken care a bit more on some of the units. I didn't see the point before but I do now",* and underlined the coaching students needed, throughout their programmes, to build on and embed these skills. Information gleaned from interviews favoured the Living CV being compulsory, delivered in groups and with someone – fellow students, an academic or experts from industry – on hand to advise. This would also begin to address participants' lack of confidence in relation to their work readiness.

Participants saw a real need for students to complete work experience and add this to their CV, calling it *"vital"* and *"the way forward"* with a clear understanding that university learning alone is not enough to make themselves employable.

<u>Conclusion and recommendations</u>

This chapter found that part of the academic role was to assist students to understand the currency of their learning and constructively build on, and from their programmes of study, as part of their on-going professional development. Some students simply do not see the currency of their learning if this is not explicitly embedded in the curriculum nor do they see how or why their programmes of study are constructed in the way that could act as preparation for graduate level employment. This unbalanced equation between learning and employability is clearly articulated by students in the research as they question the commitment to their courses against their ability to find work on graduation.

Students' perceptions of their value-added experience or learning gain needs to be disentangled from the context of their modular learning. It is likely that the help towards work readiness would be most beneficial if given over a period of time, and within a supported environment, to address underlying issues such as self-confidence and self efficacy. One of the misconceptions is ensuring the correct level of preparation in accordance with students' stage of study as there is a danger in thinking about undergraduate students as fully fledged professionals. Daniels & Brooker (2014) argue there is an inherent problem with the notion of graduate attributes as they are concerned with the future identity of the undergraduate rather than what is current.

The most effective type of 'help' is something that requires further investigation but students, during the study, articulated a preference for personalised and explicit assistance to make them work ready from the beginning of their academic programmes. Students also highlighted the importance of assistance to secure work experience and mobilise the expertise of people currently in the fashion industry. It is evident that these factors could be carefully integrated into a wider ethos of 'work literacy' during the university programme; to include both the Living CV but also continuing discussion about and experience in the world of work, increased employer engagement and finally, preparation for interview.

Although 127 students were involved in the questionnaire, this study has its limitations. It would be beneficial to follow students' educational journeys and measure their understanding of, and engagement with units, once they clearly understand the purpose and learning outcomes of their units of study. The Living CV, which was based on a general overview of the whole course, was conducted in one session and there would be merit in looking at the gradual introduction of the Living CV on a unit-by-unit basis to encourage full buy-in from both students and academics. Although the questionnaires were anonymised, the position of the head of department conducting a

focus group with volunteer students from within their own school, may have led to some bias in the responses. Further research could involve introducing the Living CV to students at the start of their degree and revisiting it at regular intervals, discussing the learning outcomes and monitoring its impact on unit engagement. This would also go some way to addressing UUK's call for a clear skills translation for students to help them find appropriate graduate-level employment on graduation.

In conclusion, the Living CV can be seen as a positive addition to a suite of employability measures designed to help students take ownership of their learning gain and translate their learning outcomes into CV language. In doing so it allows students to enhance their self-belief and enables them to revisit their own ideas about their work-readiness in a timely and developmental way during, rather than at the end, of their programmes of study. The changing higher education landscape requires both academics and students to think of learning 'beyond the curriculum' to lifelong learning and the wider skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology (Jackson 2016) required for identity development in varying work situations.

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