Giving ourselves the edge: capitalising on collaboration

Jill Hanson
Regent's College London, UK

Alison Pope
Staffordshire University, UK

Carolina Salinas
Staffordshire University, UK

Abstract

This paper considers the collaboration of academics and third-space professionals to create an enrichment programme in an English university. It briefly outlines the programme and explores student engagement and reaction to it before identifying tentative short-term outcomes associated with it: increases in self-reported self-confidence, academic, digital, professional, and leadership skills. The programme created space and time for academics and third-space professionals to come together, share their knowledge, and recognise each other's expertise to manifest 'knotworking' (Veles, 2022). A project lead with experience of being an academic and a third-space professional helped to facilitate understanding and develop 'ingroup' features such as a sense of shared connection, co-operation, mutual help, and respect for each other. We conclude that an evolving framework of third-space professionals which is firmly part of the real institutional fabric leads to less reliance on project-based reinventions and instead fosters a steady rate of beneficial progress for the entire learning community.

Keywords: third space professionals; knotworking; enrichment.

Introduction

Clouder et al. (2020) note that university is an opportunity not just to gain a qualification, but to develop wellbeing, social and personal lives, and identity and possible selves. Whilst some of this will be developed within curricula, universities typically offer extra-curricular

activities in the form of clubs, societies, sports, student wellbeing support, careers development, and bespoke projects and initiatives. Embedding these opportunities into the curriculum makes them more accessible (e.g. Lowe, 2023), more motivating, and more effective at enhancing the development of reflective thinking and confidence (e.g. Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009). This appears to have gained importance in a post-pandemic environment where the cost of living constrains some students' ability to engage with university. However, as Buckley and Lee (2018) note, extra-curricular activities add value by offering students another opportunity to evidence ancillary skills and experience as well as building social bonds and helping to inoculate against stress, which are also important post-pandemic.

Buckley and Lee (2018) identify the positive impacts of extra-curricular enrichment activities on academic performance, confidence, employability skills, and the development of social ties. Given the high numbers of applications for graduate jobs (Institute of Student Employers, 2021), it can often be extra-curricular activity which enables a graduate to differentiate themselves and evidence the skills recruiters are looking for (e.g. de Main, Wakefield and Holmes, 2022). In response, post-1992 universities focus on work readiness and employability skills development to enable their students to build 'social and cultural capital' (Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice, 2020, p.5).

Much of this skill development can take place in a 'third space' which exists 'between professional and academic spheres in which lateral interactions, involving teams and networks, occur in parallel with formal institutional structures and processes' (Whitchurch, 2012, p.i). This space is inhabited by third-space professionals — those who span academic and professional services and are involved in teaching, learning, and research without being on an academic contract (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). Third-space professionals are often involved directly in the design and delivery of this enrichment-focused, experiential learning.

In a post-pandemic world with political, financial, and economic impacts on higher education and the students within it, good outcomes for students may best be achieved when academic colleagues work collaboratively with third-space professionals to create curricular and extra-curricular learning experiences. However, this collaboration is precarious if left informal, reliant on the often temporary relationships colleagues may develop. Universities need to create mechanisms to ensure that if individual working

relationships are lost, the constructive interdepartmental partnership is retained and strengthened. Veles (2022) notes that third-space professionals need to move away from almost accidental involvement or project-based relationships and towards the 'knotworking' networking approach advocated by Engestrom (cited Veles, 2022). This 'knotworking' facilitates the sharing of expertise and ensures that knowledge is formally embedded.

Dependency on informal working relationships, rather than formal structures or projects, is one barrier to developing effective enrichment for students in higher education. As de Main, Wakefield, and Holmes (2022) note, another challenge is the frequently low engagement of students. Students may face several barriers to engagement. In post-1992 institutions, the student body is typically comprised largely of people who have been described as 'non-traditional' students (Crabtree, 2023). Non-traditional students can refer to those who are the first in their family to attend university, mature students, disabled students, single parents, care leavers, those who are carers, students from low-income families, and those from minority ethnic groups (Cotton et al., 2017). Financial support is often limited (e.g. Aljohani, 2016; Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice, 2020), and students may be working significant hours to pay their bills — a fact only exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis. They may be caring for children, parents, or siblings (e.g. Eriksson, Adawi and Stohr, 2017; Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice, 2020) which leaves them less time to engage with extra-curricular activities. Non-traditional students may also have precarious mental health, be disabled or neurodiverse, or be ethnically diverse, and find these extra-curricular opportunities inaccessible and exclusive (e.g. Shah and Cheng, 2018; Clouder et al., 2020). Even where opportunities are not inaccessible or exclusive, non-traditional students can lack the confidence to take these opportunities (Le, 2024) and be less likely to perceive the value of these opportunities (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010).

This case study describes our university's development of a new enrichment programme which conceptually sat outside of the curriculum but that could be linked to courses and modules. The development of this enrichment programme was a collaborative venture that moved beyond informal working relationships. We briefly discuss the findings from the formative and summative evaluations of the first year of the enrichment programme, describing how we worked collaboratively to build programmes which were extra-curricular but still accessible and offered the right skills development for our students. The evaluation received ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee in 2022 and again in 2024.

Method

Problem

Our university's previous enrichment programme was stand-alone and available for three weeks at the end of each academic year. Evaluation noted that most sessions were attended very poorly, with students having disengaged from the university at that point in the academic year. To redress this and ensure that our students developed not just new skills but also the ability to articulate them, we utilised the new career platform to create a new enrichment programme.

The enrichment programme

A digital platform procured to facilitate career development for our students was used to create the enrichment programme and make it available to all our students (UG and PG). The programme rewarded students who engaged with online or in-person activities via points which stacked into awards. These were validated through certificates and were further incentivised through financial prizes. Award content followed Clouder et al.'s (2020) argument that university is a space for students to develop not just academic knowledge and skills but also wellbeing, personal and social lives, identity, and possible selves. The awards offered development in academic, digital, professional, career-management, leadership, interpersonal, and personal skills.

Award content was comprised of online learning provided by the platform, but we awarded students who participated in extra-curricular activities including sports, clubs, societies, research and community projects, internships, and other skill-building activities delivered by various colleagues across the university. To earn points, students needed to articulate the skills development that had taken place. The purpose of this was to facilitate the articulation of skills from specific experiences (as is required in applications and interviews).

Results

Based on findings from pilot work in spring 2023, an enrichment programme launched in October 2023. We launched five awards:

1. Academic and digital skills.
2. Professional skills.
3. Interpersonal and leadership skills.
4. The Leadership Academy.
5. The Staffs Engage Award (recognition of participation in projects, clubs, societies, and other university-delivered activities).

Over the 2024 academic year, over 130 students (representing 2% of our student population) engaged directly with the enrichment programme awards, earning eleven platinum awards, five gold awards, five silver awards, and seven bronze awards. Whilst this take up is still low, it showed a doubling of engagement and attainment compared to our pilot phase and nearly a trebling of engagement compared with the stand-alone programme delivered previously.

Evaluation of the enrichment programme via an online survey issued towards the end of the academic year (N=250) revealed that students reacted favourably to it, typically rating it as relevant, interesting, and easy to work through. Over 85% stated that they strongly agreed they would recommend it to a friend. Qualitative feedback on the programme was also captured from participants:

> Thank you for running such a valuable programme (second-year undergraduate student).
>
> Completing activities in EDGE has given me more confidence in my uni work (first-year undergraduate student).
>
> I chose to focus on developing my CV and some softer skills and it was really helpful for that (third-year undergraduate student).
>
> It is very user friendly and accessible (distance-learning postgraduate student).

Students indicated that engaging with the programme had developed their skills. Self-report skill audits, which students completed before and after the programme (N=56), revealed that students reported an increase in self-confidence, career-management skills, professional skills, academic skills, interpersonal and personal skills, and digital skills (see Figure 1). Self-confidence showed the biggest change, increasing by 28%, whilst digital skills demonstrated the smallest increase (4%). This is a small sample size, so results are tentative.

Figure 1. Self-reported short-term outcomes from participating in the enrichment programme awards.
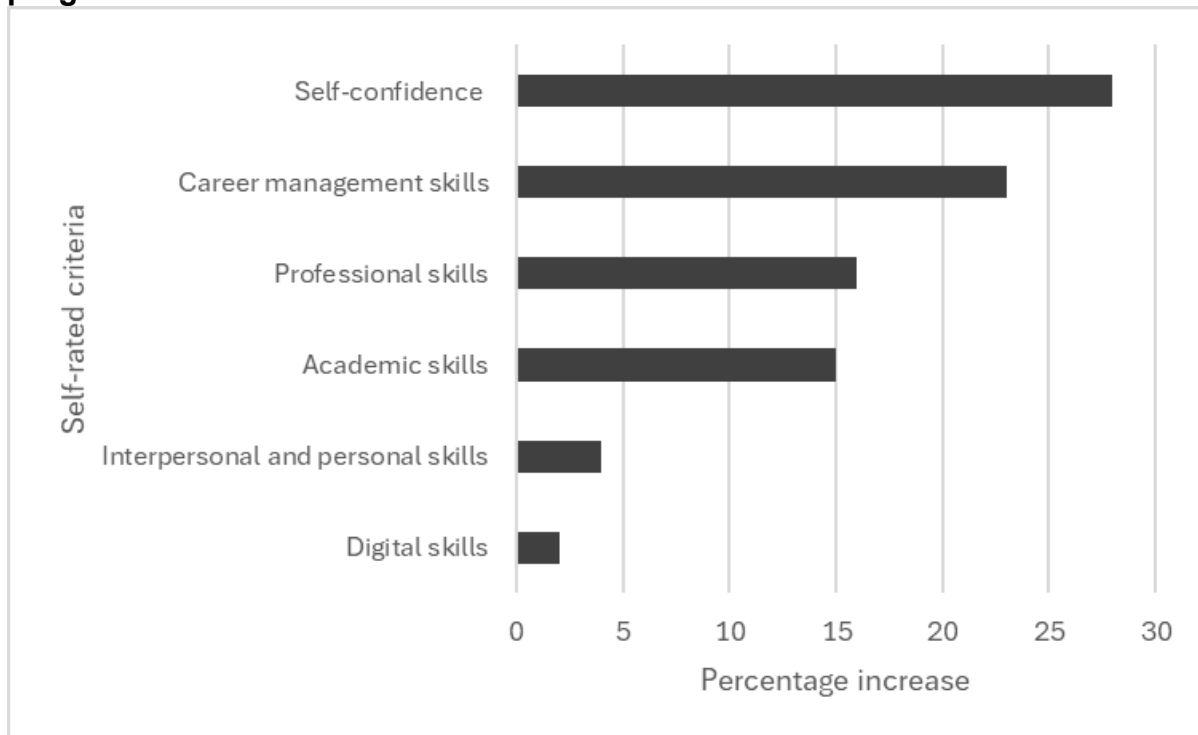
Discussion

We wanted students to engage with non-credit-bearing activity within and outside of their courses so that they could develop those key skills which support achievement on their courses: career development, personal and social lives, and emotional and physical wellbeing (Clouder et al., 2020). Initial evaluation data suggested that students perceived increases in their self-confidence and self-reported employability skills, in line with Buckley and Lee's (2018) findings. To create a programme that students would engage with and develop skills within, academics and third-space professionals collaborated to identify the most effective content, delivery mechanism, rewards, and recognition processes. A broad range of expertise was required in this collaboration, however it has been noted that academics, with heavy teaching loads and precarious work contracts, and third spacers who can struggle to be recognised as critical (by both academics and students) often have little opportunity for these vital collaborations to take place (Abegglen et al., 2020). This project created a formal space for the necessary collaboration.

A working group was established, comprised of academics from multiple departments, the study skills and library team, technical and digital services, student support services, the student and graduate employability team, and led by a member of the academic quality and development team. This role is a third-space role held by an individual with over 14 years of teaching experience. The diverse composition of the working group provided an array of knowledge, experiences, skills, and innovative ideas to engage students. The working group shared decision-making responsibilities and agreed on the best way to construct awards within the platform. Meetings provided a place and space for discussion between colleagues about the students (needs, challenges, and strengths), effective learning experiences/sharing of good practice, and the formation of collaborative relationships. The working group evolved into an in-group (Tajfel, 1970) where colleagues from different departments with different remits shared a sense of connection, displaying co-operation, good will, mutual help, and respect for each other.

We noted that as the in-group features developed, distinctions between different roles (e.g. academic versus professional service) were diminished and instead the diversity of knowledge, skills, and experience created unique contributions for the group to capitalise on and enable project success. For example, the group was able to capitalise on good practice developed by our study skills and library team in partnership with our Nursing Department — the creation of study-skills audits which linked to supporting resources. With the audit tools we took something which began in one subject area and built it into a generic tool to be used across multiple programmes. This cross-fertilisation may not have occurred if the Nursing Department had developed this 'in house'. It was the third-space professional involvement that enabled transference and, as Veles (2022) found, this led to both academics and third-space colleagues feeling their expertise and input was valued and recognised.

Having a project lead that had worked in both academic and professional-service roles facilitated understanding of the benefits that different teams could bring and helped to identify challenges as well as solutions to overcoming them. Within the group, the lead was able to articulate challenges academics face *and* articulate challenges that third-space professionals face, thereby closing the distance between these colleagues. Little and Green (2021) discuss how it can be hard for third-space professionals to achieve credibility with academic colleagues but, having worked in similar environments previously, the project lead understood this potential barrier and worked to make it easy for third-

space professionals to bring their experience and expertise and so to enrich the project. Openly discussing each other's challenges as well as talents and abilities was not just effective at developing an effective enrichment programme, it also helped shape that ingroup.

Involving students in the redevelopment of the pilot added a further space for discussion between academics, students, and third-space professionals. This space enabled the voices of those experiencing the most demands and who were most affected by the current context HE finds itself in to be heard and to be pivotal in the development of learning which was accessible and meaningful. Student voice was effective in helping to persuade course leaders outside of the working group to embed curricular activity into the enrichment programme and vice versa.

This work is based on a small sample size of students and the experiences of colleagues over the last 18 months. To strengthen the reliability and validity of the outcomes associated with the enrichment programme, a larger sample size is required. Furthermore, the collaborative work between academic and third-space professionals should be studied over the next few years to explore how the knotworking develops alongside the enrichment programme.

Conclusion

In this example of academic and third-space collaboration, students were best enabled to achieve good outcomes when colleagues from across the university worked collaboratively. However, this collaboration needs to be formalised and universities need to create mechanisms to ensure that if individual working relationships are lost, the constructive interdepartmental partnership is retained and strengthened. Third-space professionals themselves also need to work together to ensure they can mutually capitalise on good practices and disseminate them across the institution in a positive way. Veles' (2022) notion of knotworking was evidenced, for example in the adoption and sharing of audits developed by our study skills and library team in partnership with the Nursing department. This 'knotworking' facilitates sharing of expertise and ensures that knowledge is formally embedded; students in some subjects are not disadvantaged when others reap benefits they cannot access. In this instance, university third space and

academic staff collaborated in this third space and capitalised on this. As Veles (2022) puts it, we 'worked on new projects together to advance the university's goals, create and implement new ideas, and reform traditional ways of thinking and working' (p.151).

Creating a proper institutional environment for third-space professionals to collaborate with academics is a boon. This can be achieved through the first step of creating a space where third-space professionals can discuss challenges and share best practices from their own areas of expertise. This can be further capitalised on by then bringing academics into that collaborative space. An evolving framework of third-space professionals which is firmly part of the real institutional fabric leads to less reliance on project-based reinventions and instead fosters a steady rate of beneficial progress for the entire learning community.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the collection of data for the evaluation of this programme was awarded by the Universities Ethics Committee in 2022 and again on 14 February, 2024.

Acknowledgements

References

Abegglen, S., Burns, T., Maier, S. and Sinfield, S. (2020), 'Global university, local issues: taking a creative and humane approach to learning and teaching', in E. Sengupta, P. Blessinger and M. Makhanya (eds) *Improving classroom engagement and international development programs: international perspectives on humanizing higher education*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited, pp.75−91. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/S2055-364120200000027007

Aljohani, O. (2016) 'A comprehensive review of the major studies and theoretical models of student retention in higher education', *Higher Education Studies*, 6(2), pp.1−18. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/hes.v6n2p1

Buckley, P. and Lee, P. (2018) 'The impact of extra-curricular activity on the student experience', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 22(1), pp.37−48. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787418808988

Clouder, L., Karakus, M., Cinotti, A., Ferreyra, M., Fierros, G. and Rojo, P. (2020) 'Neurodiversity in higher education: a narrative synthesis', *High Education*, 80, pp.757–778. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6

Cotton, D., Nash, T. and Kneale, P. (2017) 'Supporting the retention of non-traditional students in higher education using a resilience framework', *European Educational Research Journal*, 16(1), pp.62−79. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904116652629

Crabtree, R. (2023) 'Barriers to student engagement: why don't university students engage?', *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 4(3), pp.28–47. Available at: https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/1156 (Accessed: 5 November 2024).

de Main, L., Wakefield, L. and Holmes, H. (2022) *Why won't they engage in extra-curricular opportunities?* Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/why-wont-they-engage-extra-curricular-opportunities (Accessed: 18 March 2024).

Dickinson, J., Griffiths, T-L. and Bredice, A. (2020) '"It's just another thing to think about": encouraging students' engagement in extracurricular activities', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(6), pp.744−757. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1813263

Ehiyazaryan, E. and Barraclough, N. (2009) 'Enhancing employability: integrating real-world experience in the curriculum', *Education + Training*, 51(4), pp.292−308. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/00400910910964575

Eriksson, T., Adawi, T. and Stohr, C. (2017) 'Time is the bottleneck: a qualitative study exploring why learners drop out of MOOCs', *Journal of Computing in Higher*

Education, 29, pp.133−146. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-016-9127-8

Institute of Student Employers (2021) *Student recruitment survey*. London: ISE. Available at: https://ise.org.uk/page/ISEPublications (Accessed: 20 November 2024).

Le, H.V. (2024) 'Factors impeding university students' participation in English extracurricular activities: time constraints and personal obstacles', *Heliyon*, 10(5). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e27332

Little, D. and Green, D.A. (2021) 'Credibility in educational development: trustworthiness, expertise, and identification', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 41(3), pp.804−819. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1871325

Lowe, T. (2023) 'Embedding employability into the curriculum: five recommendations to improve widening participation students' graduate employability', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (26). Available at: https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi26.925

McIntosh, E. and Nutt, D. (2022) 'Blended professionals: how to make the most of "third space" experts', *Times Higher Education*, 18 May. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/blended-professionals-how-make-most-third-space-experts (Accessed: 25 March 2024).

Shah, M. and Cheng, M. (2018) 'Exploring factors impacting student engagement in open access courses', *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 34(2), pp.187−202. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2018.1508337

Stevenson, J., Clegg, S. and Lefever, R. (2010) 'The discourse of widening participation and its critics: an institutional case study', *London Review of Education*, 8(2), pp.105–115. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2010.487328

Tajfel, H. (1970) 'Experiments in intergroup discrimination', *Scientific American*, 223(5), pp.96−102. Available at: https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/experiments-in-intergroup-discrimin/ (Accessed: 5 November 2024).

Veles, N. (2022) 'Recommendations for universities and the conceptual framework of the university third space professional staff cross-boundary collaboration and collaborative capital optimisation', in N. Veles (ed) *Optimising the third space in higher education: case studies of intercultural and cross-boundary collaboration*. London: Routledge, pp.150−195. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003259527

Whitchurch, C. (2012) *Reconstructing identities in higher education: the rise of 'third space' professionals*. 1st edn. London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203098301

Author details

Jill Hanson is an Associate Professor of Inclusive Education and currently works as Associate Dean (quality enhancement) at Regent's College London. Formerly at the University of Staffordshire, Jill led academic projects and Academic Development teams, delivering a range of cross-university projects. Her research specialisms are career guidance and transitions for young people with special education needs and disabilities.

Alison Pope is Skills Manager and a Teaching Excellence Fellow at the University of Staffordshire. Her fully integrated team supports students to develop all the academic and research skills they need to succeed in their programme. Within the team there is emphasis on playful learning, the acquisition of information, and digital and AI literacies. She is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE.

Carolina Salinas is Head of Employability at the University of Staffordshire, where she leads a dynamic team dedicated to designing and delivering inclusive enterprise, employability, and career-management programmes. These initiatives aim to enhance student and graduate progression and outcomes, with a particular emphasis on supporting underrepresented student groups. She is a senior fellow of Advance HE.

Licence