

Sustainable graduate employability: an evaluation of ‘brand me’ presentations as a method for developing self-confidence.

Alex Tymon^{a*}, Charlotte Harrison^a and Sasa Batistic^b

^aFaculty of Business & Law, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, England; ^b Department of Human Resource Studies, Tilburg University, The Netherlands.

Corresponding author: Mrs Charlotte Harrison, Faculty of Business & Law, University of Portsmouth, Richmond Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO6 3DE. Email: Charlotte.Harrison@port.ac.uk.

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This paper evaluates ‘brand me’ presentations as a method for developing employability-related self-confidence (ERSC). Measurements of ERSC were taken at three points in time from a sample of 105 full-time business and law students at a UK university. These were analysed alongside student feedback, assessment artefacts, and semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers. Findings indicate that ERSC increases over time, skills are learnt, and new behaviours are developed. We contribute to sustainable graduate employability literature by empirically demonstrating theoretically proposed links between career management learning and ERSC. Furthermore, we show that self-confidence may be a situated behaviour, rather than a fixed trait, which generates practical suggestions for career management teaching. We join the teaching excellence debate by demonstrating a method to measure learning gain in higher education. We also add to research methods knowledge by adapting an evaluation framework from the Human Resource Development field for use in this context.

Keywords: career management; learning evaluation; self-confidence; sustainable employability; teaching excellence.

Introduction

Using longitudinal mixed methods, this paper explores how a novel career management learning method enhances sustainable employability in second year business and law students at a UK university. Specifically, we report on a systematic evaluation of repeated ‘brand me’ presentations to develop employability-related self-confidence (ERSC).

This research is necessary because career management units are firmly embedded in most university programmes, despite being viewed as unimportant, by many students and some educators, and a lack of evidence that such teaching is effective in developing employability

(Clarke 2017; Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh 2017; Tymon 2013). This study is also timely, in that the need for evaluation evidence has recently been emphasised in the UK by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which places the measurement of learning gain in the spotlight (BIS 2016; HEFCE 2017; Strang et al. 2016). This study helps justify the resource investment of both universities and individuals (Williams et al. 2016) by providing missing evaluation evidence and contributes to both theory and practice.

Firstly, the literature theorises that developing self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy (3Ss) enhances perceptions of employability as indicated in the CareerEdge model (Dacre-Pool and Sewell 2007). This model is widely adopted as a basis for much career management teaching. However, evidence that the 3Ss can be developed within career management units is illusive, and their mediating role towards self-perceived employability remains largely theoretical, leading to calls for more research (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios 2017; Qenanin, MacDougal, and Hamilton 2017; Qenanin, MacDougal, and Sexton 2014). This paper provides empirical evidence. Secondly, we contribute to educational research methods literature by adapting an established learning evaluation model from the field of human resource development (HRD) for the Higher Education (HE) context. This leads to our third contribution, linked to the teaching excellence debate, whereby we provide missing evidence of learning gain within HE (Strang et al. 2016). Finally, we show that ERSC may be a situated behaviour, rather than a fixed trait (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Luthans 2002), leading to practical recommendations.

Practical recommendations include devoting class time to 'brand me' presentations and providing lecturers with professional learning opportunities. However, we emphasise running

‘brand me’ in a carefully managed way that draws on, and adds to, the theories of experiential and social, or vicarious, learning.

We begin with an overview of the literature on sustainable employability and the CareerEdge model, which theorizes the link between career management learning, the 3Ss, and self-perceived employability. We then justify our specific focus on self-confidence and highlight links with discourse around teaching excellence and learning gain within HE. We then offer a summary of our ‘brand me’ method, alongside a theoretical rationale for why it should enhance learning. The methodology section explains the data collection and analysis methods before the results and findings are discussed. The paper closes with theoretical and practical contributions, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

Sustainable employability and the CareerEdge model

Most universities now expect students to take and pass career management units (Clarke 2017; Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh 2017; Tomlinson 2017; Tymon and Batistic 2016). This is especially the case with business and law students, who complete the more vocationally oriented courses that have expanded university enrolments in recent years (Pettigrew, Cornuel, and Hommel 2014). This justifies our focus on this cohort.

However, the efficacy of many career management interventions in universities is criticised (Clarke 2017; Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh 2017; Small, Shacklock, and Marchant 2018). Some assert that the problem lies in a focus on simplistic, narrow and short-term human capital-based employability models, overly targeted at acquiring generic skills, valued by employers for the here and now (Clarke 2017; Holmes 2013; Perriton and Singh 2016). Such

critics argue that graduate employability is a more complex, elusive and fuzzy construct, which goes beyond simple human capital development (Forrier, Verbruggen and De Cuype 2015). In illustration, Holmes (2013) urges consideration of three perspectives: possessional, positional and processional; Williams et al. (2016) identify four capital dimensions; whilst Clarke (2017), Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh (2017) and Tomlinson (2017) promote wider models, with six or more dimensions and capitals respectively.

This wider view is shared by the authors of this paper, who are attracted to the notion of sustainable employability and its response to ‘individual aspirations, capabilities, needs and expectations’ (De Vos and Van der Heijden 2015, 7). Today’s graduates will encounter futures typified by non-linear sequences of different career experiences, which may include: full-time and part-time paid employment; unpaid, self and unemployment; sabbatical and care-giving periods, all unique to every individual (De Vos and Van der Heijden 2015). We therefore assert that basing career management learning on sustainable employability models, which emphasise individual choice, control and proactivity, will support students long into the future (Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh 2017; Drenzo and Greenhaus 2011).

One sustainable employability model that stands out for us is CareerEdge (Dacre-Pool and Sewell 2007). Endorsed by the Higher Education Academy (HEA 2013), and described as the ‘most comprehensive’ employability model (Small, Shacklock, and Marchant 2018, 158), CareerEdge proposes a multi-layered path to enhanced self-perceived employability (Dacre-Pool and Sewell 2007; Dacre-Pool, Qualter, and Sewell 2014). Within HE, self-perceived employability is a laudable objective of career management learning because it is linked to positive career outcomes (Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh 2017; Clarke 2017; Veld, Semeijn, and van Vuuren 2015). Importantly, the CareerEdge model does not dismiss

traditional generic skills, attributes and experience, indeed a self-assessment tool for these has been developed and validated (Dacre-Pool, Qualter, and Sewell 2014). Rather, the CareerEdge model relegates these skills and attributes to ‘lower-order’ status, preferring to give prominence to the ‘higher-order’ dimensions of the 3Ss (Dacre-Pool and Sewell 2007), and the notion of gradueness (Holmes 2013; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios 2017). The theorised assertion is that the 3Ss, alongside evaluation and reflection, develop gradueness and are mediators between career management learning and self-perceived employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Dacre-Pool, Qualter, and Sewell 2014).

The importance of self-confidence

Each of the 3Ss are thought to be important forms of psychological capital, associated with individual differences in employability (De Vos and Van der Heijden 2015; Williams et al. 2016). However, self-confidence was chosen as the focus of this study for three reasons. First, self-confidence is defined as a ‘person’s sense of his or her own competence or skill and perceived capability’ (Cheng and Furnham 2002, 330). As such it is the manifestation of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Turner 2014) and, unlike the other two Ss, self-confidence can be observed by others and measured (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007). ERSC is aligned to the notion of impression management, specifically the tactics of self-promotion that have been linked to positive recruiter evaluations (Ellis et al. 2002). This includes explicit verbal statements and non-verbal behaviour used by people when talking about achievements and qualities that increase their employability appeal in recruitment interviews (Bolino et al. 2008; Kumar and Beyerlein 1991; Wayne and Liden 1995). It is these tactics that the ‘brand me’ activity aims to develop.

Secondly, although technical ability and other forms of capital are valued by employers, these are often taken for granted, with recruitment decisions largely based on overall appeal, credibility and inter-personal skills, with dynamism, professionalism and sociability being especially useful (Humburg and Van der Velden 2015; Lepistö and Ihantola 2018). Therefore, ERSC enhances the value and credibility of other forms of capital, which widens employability appeal (Williams et al. 2016) and enhances self-perceived employability (Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh 2017).

Thirdly, there are suggestions that self-confidence is a situationally specific concept, rather than a fixed trait, which, if true, means it can be developed (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Luthans 2002). This is important for those tasked with facilitating career management units. It also provides an opportunity to contribute missing evidence on learning gain within HE.

Learning gain within HE and the teaching excellence debate

In UK universities, TEF places renewed focus on teaching, yet an agreed definition of, or accepted way of measuring, teaching quality does not yet exist (Gunn and Fisk 2013; Strang et al. 2016). The first TEF assessment predominantly relied on quantitative measures, such as student satisfaction, progression and employment rates (BIS 2016), rather than more difficult to measure learning gain. Projects exploring how learning gain can be measured are ongoing, but little evidence currently exists (Gunn and Fisk 2013; HEFCE 2017). This is not surprising when we consider similar, and well-recognised, issues from the world of HRD. Evaluation of learning has always been poorly done in organisations, with less than half doing anything at all, and only 7% doing so comprehensively (Mackay and Tymon 2016). Deciding what, when and how to measure complex learning outcomes is hard, collecting data is time consuming, and

there are issues of proving cause and effect without experimental studies (Dai and Tymon 2016). However, because organisations need to justify training and development budgets, well-established frameworks for collecting evaluation data exist in the HRD literature (e.g. Kirkpatrick 1959a, 1959b, 1960; 1977; Warr, Bird and Rackham 1970). To evaluate the ‘brand me’ activity, we adopted and adapted these frameworks for use in the HE context to guide the data collection and analysis.

The ‘brand me’ presentations

These two-minute ‘elevator pitches’ take place in taught career management sessions where students are encouraged to construct their personal brand. They identify their aspirations, strengths and values, and develop their ability to articulate these in a confident way, all of which have been linked to improved employability (Holmes 2013; Qenani, MacDougal, and Sexton 2014). Students repeat the activity three times (at the beginning, middle and end of the year) and they are recorded and uploaded to an online portal for students to view privately. The timing and recording are important as this enables students to reflect on their developing performance throughout the year. These self-reflections are further enhanced by feedback from peers and lecturers in class, and a few weeks later by ‘mock employers’. These anonymous reviewers assess the recorded videos to provide written feedback and a rating. The ‘brand me’ activity is not formally assessed; rather students submit their reflections on the learning from it in an assessment artefact at the year end.

Four theoretical arguments for effectiveness of this teaching method

First, we adopt the principles of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb and Kolb 2009; Kolb 2015). Adapted for the educational setting (Jackson and MacIsaac 1994), students are encouraged to reflect, conceptualise and plan how they could do things differently after each ‘brand me’ presentation. However, in contrast to much experiential learning at university, the ‘brand me’ activity is repeated three times over the year. This encourages multiple iterations of action, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation. Known as the learning spiral, this deepens learning and transforms behaviour in the longer term (Kolb and Kolb 2009; Weimer 2013). Secondly, we enhance the reflection and conceptualisation stages of the experiential learning cycle by employing multi-source feedback which is thought to deepen learning (Mackay and Tymon 2014; Taylor 2014), with students’ self-reflection enhanced by the views of peers, lecturers and mock-employers.

Thirdly, we devote class time to ‘brand me’, which signals importance. Moreover, this enables social and vicarious learning as observing feedback given to others by tutors and peers facilitates direct and indirect modelling that enhances learning outcomes (Bandura 1995; Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007). Furthermore, conceptualising and verbalising one’s own feedback to others clarifies desired behaviours and enhances self-learning (Taylor 2014).

Finally, lecturers are encouraged to position the ‘brand me’ activity as being authentic and having real-world relevance (Fink 2013; James and Cassidy 2016; Lombardi 2007). If students perceive this to be the case it should enhance face validity, resulting in increased engagement and motivation to learn; willingness to persevere; and continued participation throughout the year (Weimer 2013). If these four arguments are correct, we should expect to see positive student reactions, and the acquisition of new skills and behaviours, when we evaluate the ‘brand me’ activity.

Methodology

The question we pose is: to what extent does our ‘brand me’ activity enhance ERSC? Adopting an educational pragmatist approach (Biesta and Burbule 2003), well-established principles from the HRD field are borrowed and adapted as a framework (Kirkpatrick 1959a, 1959b, 1960) to underpin the data collection and analysis for this longitudinal, mixed methods study. These models are criticised (see for example: Alliger and Janak 1989; Kirkpatrick 1977) as they cannot prove cause and effect. However, they do allow inferences to be made of learning impact through the systematic collection of data at multiple levels (often one to five) and at various times (Kirkpatrick 1977). For this study, levels one to three were used.

Starting with level one, *reactions*. Data collection normally starts during, or immediately after, the learning intervention but is enhanced if this continues over time (Kirkpatrick 1959a, 1977). Reactions data establishes the extent to which students and educators believe the learning content and method is authentic and significant, or has face validity, with high levels being linked to motivation and learner persistence (Fink 2013; Lombardi 2007; Weimer 2013). Level two, *learning* data, is mainly collected during and/or after the intervention and concerns whether students have acquired new knowledge, skills or attitudes (Kirkpatrick 1959b, 1977). Finally, for the third level, *behaviour*, data is collected after the intervention, perhaps months or sometimes years later, to establish whether learning has been individualised and transferred into meaningful action or the extent to which new behaviours are being used (Kirkpatrick 1960, 1977). Level three evidence of learning transfer is most important to demonstrate real learning gain (Grossman and Salas 2011). The quantitative and qualitative data collected at these three levels, from lecturers, students and mock employers, is summarised in table 1 below.

[Table 1 about here]

Samples

All four lecturers agreed to take part in the study, thus our sample is 100% of the population. Of the 167 students who completed the unit, 123, or 74% of the population, gave informed consent for their data to be used, although sample numbers vary by data type, details of which are provided below. The average age of the students was 20.39 (SD = 3.14), and 52% were female.

Quantitative data collection and analysis

ERSC as perceived by others: mock employers rated five items, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), with consent given by 105 students. Data was collected at three points in time: in the first week of the 24 weeks unit (t1), in weeks 9/10 (t2), and finally in weeks 20 - 22 (t3).

As discussed earlier, ERSC can be evidenced by measuring self-promotion of achievements and qualities related to employability (Ellis et al. 2002), such as making people aware of accomplishments, talents or qualifications and talking proudly about experience or education (Bolino and Turnley 1999). Accordingly, our ‘mock employers’ assessed two relevant self-promotion items: *the student has presented a range of relevant qualities* and *the student talks positively about themselves*. In recognition that self-promotion includes both verbal and non-verbal cues (Bolino et al. 2008; Kumar and Beyerlein 1991; Wayne and Liden 1995), ‘mock employers’ also assessed more nuanced elements of communication. Effective

face-to-face communication requires congruency between three elements: verbal (words used), vocal (tone and manner), and non-verbal (body language) (Mehrabian 2007). Therefore, ‘mock employers’ rated the extent to which the student used *confident language; a confident tone of voice and confident body language*. To avoid individual bias, and facilitate shared meaning, our ‘mock employers’ were trained as a group, after which they worked in pairs. The Cronbach's alpha at t1, was .89, .84 at t2, and .86 at t3. To analyse these ‘mock employer’ ratings of ERSC at three points in time for the same group of students, we used a statistical technique called one-way repeated measures analysis of variance, suggested as being appropriate in such cases by Girden (1992).

Student feedback: consent was given to use data from 123 end of unit *feedback forms* including two items directly related to the ‘brand me’ activity: *to what extent do you consider the following core elements of this unit have helped to develop your employability:*

- *the ‘brand me’ presentations;*
- *listening to and providing feedback on other students’ ‘brand me’ presentations.*

Questions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 5 = to a great extent) and we report the average overall score for these items.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

Data from students: 28 students gave consent for their assessed reflective artefacts to be reviewed for evidence of reaction, learning and behaviour. Semi-structured interviews were also completed with 9 students, lasting between 13 and 20 minutes and carried out and

transcribed by a research assistant unconnected to the teaching of the unit. Questions sought evidence at the three levels of evaluation and what had contributed to any learning.

Data from lecturers: semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed by the research assistant. Lasting between 17 and 23 minutes, questions probed for evidence of reactions, learning and behaviour change, as well as challenges faced by both students and lecturers.

Nvivo software was used based on the two-stage approach of ‘initial or open’ coding followed by ‘focused coding’ as suggested by Saldana (2009, cited in Bazeley and Jackson 2013, 126). The analysis was completed by one member of the research team and reviewed by a second member. Initial coding referenced the first three levels of the learning evaluation framework: reaction; learning; behaviour. The focused coding identified a number of emerging sub-codes as illustrated in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Results, findings and discussion

This section is organised under the sub-headings of *reactions*, *learning* and *behaviour*. A final sub-heading, labelled *rationale for success*, is added to highlight where relevant findings are linked to learning theory.

Level one: reactions

Three of the four unit lecturers enjoyed facilitating the 'brand-me' activity and saw value for, and engagement from, their students, as illustrated by the following:

'I really enjoyed teaching it...I could see, just how useful that was going to be ...They could actually see the immediate hit...they could come away with something that might have a practical use in the immediate future... it made a big difference to the amount of engagement we got... and they were happy to participate.'

These positive reactions are echoed in the student quantitative data with an average 4.13 out of 5 rating to the question: 'to what extent do you consider that the 'brand me' presentations have helped you develop your employability?'. The qualitative data further emphasises the value students associated with this activity, as illustrated by the sample below:

'Brand me was...very useful...exceptionally beneficial...amazing...a wake-up call...an eye opener...showed me what I need to do in order to succeed in a graduate interview... the main thing that stood out for me the best thing to do with that unit.'

However, in contrast to these positive reactions, one lecturer remarked that it was hard to raise their own energy levels when students seemed less than engaged. Interestingly, this seemed linked to their own lack of experience with employability, as illustrated by the statement:

'Making the effort to engage with employability was more of a leap of faith for me because I had had no exposure to that sort of thing when I was an undergrad.'

This indicates that lecturer selection may be crucial, a finding supported by several students who emphasised the importance of having supportive and encouraging lecturers. The need for committed lecturers is emphasised by their own observations on how challenging ‘brand me’ was for students:

‘I think it pushed a lot of them out of their comfort zone...from the word go, I think it was very challenging for students...it was a painfully slow process ...they didn’t appreciate the process throughout.’

These concerns are confirmed by student data with many saying they were ‘*apprehensive, nervous, uncomfortable or worried*’ and others commenting:

‘It was a daunting experience...I felt intimidated and unprepared...I hated the idea of doing the first presentation...it made me feel uneasy, having to present in front of people I did not know.’

Overall, the level one reactions data shows clearly that most lecturers and students recognise the real world, authentic nature of ‘brand me’ as a career enhancing activity despite, or perhaps because of, the challenge and discomfort they experienced. Moreover, 75% of the students who completed the unit participated in all three ‘brand me’ opportunities even though it was not part of the summative assessment. We assert that this unusually high level of continued engagement with non-assessed career management learning demonstrates suggested links between authenticity and student engagement, participation and persistence (Fink 2013; James and Cassidy 2016; Lombardi 2007; Weimer 2013). However, level one reactions data has only limited value; evidence at levels two and three is required to fully evaluate whether the ‘brand me’ activity leads to real learning gain.

Level two: learning

Our quantitative data shows that ERSC as rated by the ‘mock employers’ has increased (see figure 1). First, we applied Mauchly's Test of Sphericity, which indicates that the assumption of sphericity has not been violated, $\chi^2(2) = 0.752$, n.s, and therefore no correction was used. Then, following repeated measures of ANOVA, we determined that the mean of ERSC was significantly statistically different between our three points in time: $(F(2,194) = 33.795, p < .001)$. Additional testing also suggests that the change is linear $(F(1,97) = 69.092, p < .001)$. Post hoc tests using the Bonferroni correction (Girden 1992) revealed that ERSC increased more between t1 and t2: $(2.40 \pm 0.68$ vs $2.73 \pm 0.63; p < .001)$, compared to between t2 and t3: $(2.73 \pm 0.63$ vs $2.93 \pm 0.70; p < .01)$. t1 to t3 was: $(2.40 \pm 0.68$ vs $2.93 \pm 0.70; p < .001)$. We conclude this provides evidence of learning gain.

[Figure 1 about here]

Despite the link inferred by the quantitative data, we wanted stronger evidence that the ‘brand me’ activity was responsible for this learning gain, which the qualitative data provides. For example, lecturers noted:

‘The brand-me presentations were one of the biggest learning areas for the students...By the end of the process they managed to articulate their strengths in a far more polished way...even if it was not a marked one, there was always an improvement.’

Students also recognised they had learnt the skills of proactive self-promotion and developed their ERSC, as evidenced by these examples:

'In my second presentation I look increasingly calm, maintaining eye contact...in the final presentation I could talk confidently about my work experience and skills ...doing the 'brand me' videos this year has given me the confidence to sell myself by talking about my skills and how they are relevant to an employer.'

Pleasing though this evidence is, real learning gain requires the transfer of new skills and adoption of longer-term behaviour change (Grossman and Salas 2011), thus we need to examine evidence at level three.

Level three: behaviour

Although lecturers provided second-hand accounts of new learning being translated into longer-term behaviour change, it is the learners themselves who tell the real story of learning transfer and the student data is rich with such examples. A small selection includes:

'I have used this [learning] in all the interviews I have been to...it has improved my first approach for an interview... selling myself in a certain way...not trying to pretend I have other skills, but to actually use the experience I have got.'

Furthermore, both lecturers and students noted lateral or horizontal transfer of learning (Gagne 1968; Royer 1979) or boundary crossing (Hager and Hodgison 2009), which demonstrates real depth of learning gain. For example, several students said they had become much better at doing presentations in general and were even happy doing them because of 'brand me', for example:

'I have done quite a few presentations [on placement] and got really good feedback I wouldn't have been able to do a lot of them before doing brand me.'

Taken together, this data indicates that our 'brand me' activity is linked to increased ERSC and, for some, enhanced skills in other contexts. This supports theorised links in the CareerEdge model (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Dacre-Pool, Qualter and Sewell 2014) which contributes to the sustainable employability literature (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh 2017; Direnzo and Greenhaus 2011; De Vos and Van der Heijden 2015). Furthermore, this provides illustrative evidence of learning gain in HE (Gunn and Fisk 2013; HEFCE 2017; Strang et al. 2016) and shows that ERSC may be a situated behaviour rather than a fixed trait as suggested by the literature (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Luthans 2002). Our findings also support Bennett's (2018) assertion that employability development is a metacognitive process and, as such, the 'brand me' activity, in the carefully planned and facilitated way we describe here, is resource intensive. Thus, before making practical recommendations to others, it is useful to analyse how we might have achieved learning success.

Rationale for success

Firstly, the use of the experiential learning cycle is important, with students as active participants required to talk about themselves, reflect, conceptualise and plan (Jackson and MacIsaac 1994; Kolb 2015). All the lecturers commented on the value of what one described as '*learning whilst doing*'. Some students also remarked on the value of experiential learning, an example being: '*It's quite difficult to learn if the teacher just talks at you, if you do things you remember*'.

A further reason for success is repetition of experiential learning, creating a spiral to strengthen or deepen learning (Kolb and Kolb 2009; Weimer 2013). The repetition, not just once but three times over the year, produced the largest number of positive feedback comments.

Lecturers said:

'They did it three times, they could see the three videos, and each time they would be trying to improve...knowing the brand me was to be repeated a number of times gave it additional meaning...the brand-me was a repeated opportunity and even if they were never brilliant at the end, they were a vast improvement from where they started.'

Illustrative student quotes include:

'I felt confident because I had done several practices ...being able to see yourself from start to finish really stood out for me... ...I was able to enhance my confidence every time I attempted the presentation...I can see the difference in my confidence and body posture throughout the different brand-me recordings...by the time I had done my third 'brand me' I had reflected on the previous presentations in order to improve and enhance my confidence... after completing my third presentation I became thankful for the opportunity.'

This last comment highlights a challenge for lecturers in using this type of pedagogy, in that students often do not appreciate the value of the activity until much later, strengthening the argument for committed lecturers.

The third reason for learning gain is the use of multi-source feedback (Mackay and Tymon 2014; Taylor 2014), as illustrated by these lecturers' comments:

‘Students consistently mentioned how useful it was to get the feedback from the mock employers, tutors and peers...I think that the opportunity to repeat the process, with the benefit of feedback, will stay with them forever.’

Students also recognised how feedback had developed skills and aided learning and this produced nearly as many positive comments as those linked to repetition, for example:

‘I learned a lot from the feedback received...my skills have developed because of feedback...I received constructive feedback that outlined some development points...the mock employers feedback helped me learn... I received feedback from my classmates [and] I was determined to do better next time.’

This last quote is illustrative of those providing evidence that social and vicarious learning was important (Bandura 1995; Taylor 2014) and further supports our decision to devote class time to this learning activity. Additionally, we saw evidence that our investment in the resource of ‘mock employers’ was sound, as illustrated by this comment:

‘When you get some real feedback it helps and when we did the brand-me presentations that’s what we were getting [referring to the mock employers].’

We assert that, although all forms of feedback were recognised as valuable, that provided by the ‘mock employers’ was singled out by some as being more authentic.

Conclusions

This study uses longitudinal mixed methods to systematically evaluate a carefully planned ‘brand me’ activity to develop ERSC and sustainable graduate employability. The findings make the following theoretical and practical contributions.

First, we contribute to the wider sustainable employability literature by providing empirical evidence for previously theorised links between career management learning and ERSC, leading to self-perceived employability. Secondly, we illustrate educational pragmatism, and add to literature on research methods in this context, by adapting a learning evaluation model from the HRD field for use in HE. Linked to this, our third contribution informs the teaching excellence debate by demonstrating a method to measure learning gain within HE. Finally, we show that ERSC can be developed, thus supporting the idea that it is a situated behaviour, rather than a fixed trait, which creates practical recommendations.

Our over-arching practical recommendation is the use of authentic ‘brand me’ presentations, as our data shows that this can develop ERSC. It is striking that 75% of students participated in all three ‘brand me’ opportunities, even though it was not part of the summative assessment. Whilst this suggests that many students appreciated the ‘real world’ relevance and benefits of the activity, we acknowledge that this was not universal, at least not in the short term. This makes a persuasive case for devoting class time to the activity and including ‘brand me’ as a compulsory component of career management units. This recognises the advice of Bennett (2018) that employability development should be embedded.

Our data confirms that developing ESRC is a metacognitive process and resource intensive (Bennett 2018). Thus, to ensure learning gain and effective use of resources, we stress the need for careful planning and management based on learning theories. We recommend

repeated use of the experiential learning cycle; employing multi-source feedback; and, perhaps most importantly, using committed and skilled lecturers. To achieve this, universities need to commit to professional learning opportunities for lecturers to develop their skills and confidence in relation to career management learning. The resulting development of sustainable employability can have long-term benefits for students, universities and employers.

Limitations and recommendations for further study

One potential limitation of this study is the use of a single UK university and thus further studies in other institutions would validate the results. Testing other elements of the 3Ss and their interaction with ERSC is also warranted. It is important to acknowledge the difficulties with measuring learning gain, in that students develop confidence through numerous means whilst at university and, therefore, we cannot be definitive on the impact of our intervention. As we note in the methodology, even the author of the evaluation model that we have adopted acknowledges that it provides inferences, rather than proves cause and effect (Kirkpatrick, 1977). A comparative study of students who participated in ‘brand me’ and those who did not would help address this limitation.

In relation to our practical recommendations, there are financial implications associated with using ‘mock employers’. These costs might be minimised if colleagues from the institution’s careers service could be involved, a practice we now successfully adopted. We assert that the other resource implications are reasonable and proportionate given the benefits that we have identified through our study.

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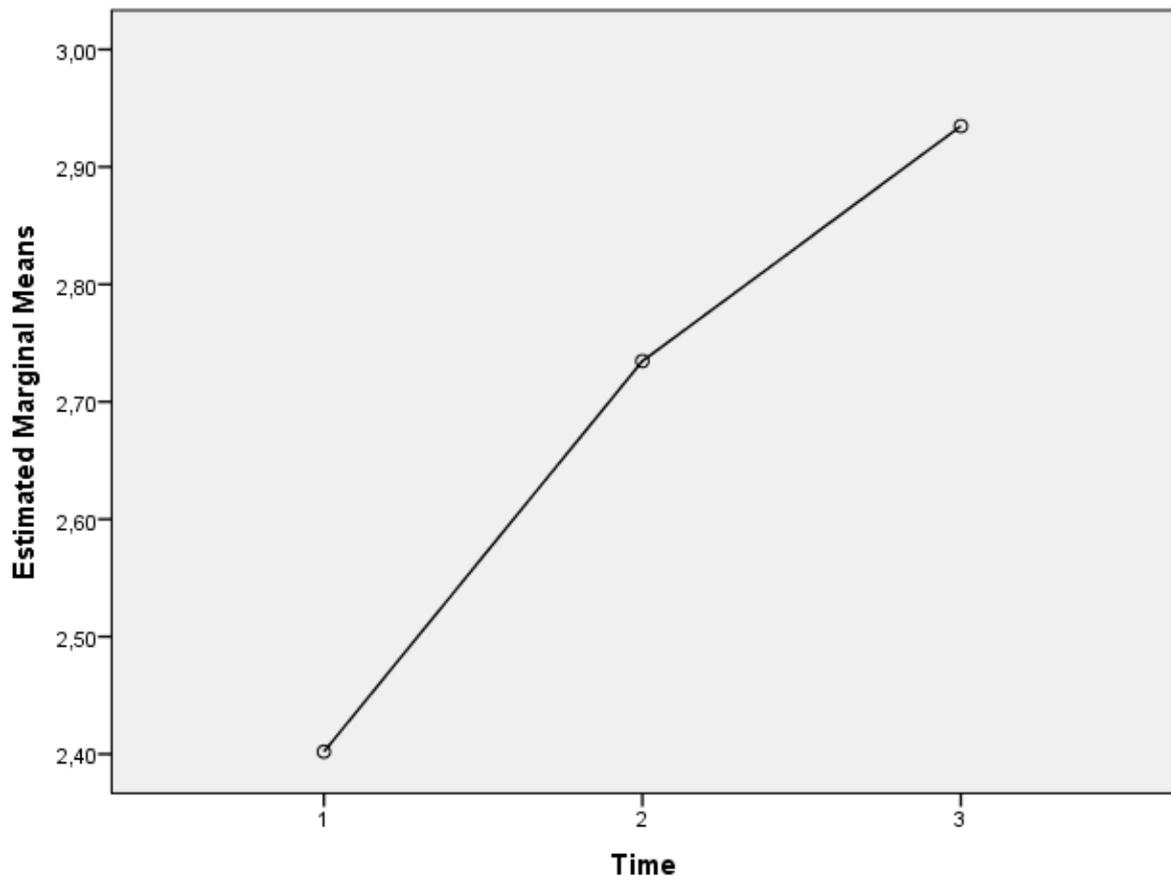


Figure 1. estimated marginal means of ERSC as perceived by others at three points in time.

Level	Data source	When collected
Reactions	Student feedback forms Student and lecturer interviews	At the end of the unit 6 - 12 months after the unit
Learning	Mock employer ratings Assessment artefacts Student and lecturer interviews	Weeks 1, 9/10, and 20 - 22 of a 24-week unit. At the end of the unit 6 - 12 months after the unit
Behaviour	Assessment artefacts Student and lecturer interviews	At the end of the unit 6 - 12 months after the unit

Table 1. Summary of data collection methods and timing

Initial Code	Focused Code 1	Focused Code 2	Focused Code 3
Reactions	Acknowledgment of face validity of the experience	Evidence of motivation and engagement with the process	Reference to being outside comfort zone
Learning	Awareness of change in ability	Evidence of experiential learning	Evidence of vicarious learning
Behaviour	Reference to application of knowledge	Reference to repetition leading to change in behaviour	Reference to using feedback to change behaviour

Table 2. Illustration of emerging sub-codes.