Case study: Student Consultancy Project

Queen Mary University of London

Queen Mary University of London's (QMUL) The Student Consultancy Project (SCP) is a **multi-disciplinary work-based learning programme** designed to offer university students an opportunity to build their employability through working on real-life consultancy projects with the arts and creative sectors, SMES, social enterprises, global companies and charity and third sector organisations in London.

Students work in multidisciplinary teams of 5 on a real-life consultancy project with an external client. The students come from a wide range of academic schools within our sciences, engineering, humanities and social sciences faculties and host clients from the creative and digital industries including organisations like Donmar Warehouse, Riverside Studios, Taylor & Francis Group, The British Independent Film Awards, British Blacklist, Half Moon Theatre, Wigmore Hall, Metail and The Cultural Me.

After working on a consultancy project student teams deliver their research and recommendations to the client in the form of a short report and presentation. All projects involve elements of research, analysis and recommendation. The consultancy work is complemented by a bespoke programme of 'wraparound support' which consists of a series of training and reflective sessions led by university careers professionals to support their development of multi-disciplinary employment skills. Students gain valuable experience working in diverse teams, applying knowledge gained from their degree to a complex business project and managing client relationships.

Why are you doing it?

The first aim of SCP is to build students' employability skills through applying their knowledge to real-world projects. The rationale is that by making students work in teams with peers from other disciplines on a complex business project, **we are preparing them for the world of work which is overwhelmingly multi-disciplinary in nature**. Whilst academic degrees are discipline-focused, most students will go on to work in professions where they will work with people who have different backgrounds and approaches to problem solving. Clients have commented on the benefits of this approach and have noted the value of the combination and range of disciplines that QMUL's students are drawn from. The client projects SCP takes on are usually generalist, involving a complex array of skills from research, qualitative and quantitative analysis, project management and verbal and written communication. This forces students to consider how the skills and knowledge gained from their programmes of study can be applied to real-world problems.

The second aim of SCP is to enable students to start to build their work experience and professional networks. QMUL has been named the most inclusive university in the Russell Group. We have a high proportion of students from non-traditional university backgrounds: 57% of our students are first in their families to attend higher education, 91% are from state schools, 60% are BAME and 27% of home domiciled undergraduates are from households at or below the poverty line. In 2014 we mapped graduate data and found that students from low income households – typically those in receipt of a bursary – were 14% more likely to be unemployed and 30% more likely to be under-employed than their non-bursary holder peers.

Following this initial analysis in 2014 we used academic literature and student focus groups to establish that many non-traditional university students struggled to gain paid internships or graduate jobs due to a lack of work experience and their lack of work experience was linked to their lack of professional networks. We wanted to give our students the opportunity to build work experience and develop the professional networks they weren't typically exposed to, increasing their confidence and graduate employability. As a result 50% of SCP's places are reserved for students in receipt of a financial aid bursary.

The third aim of SCP is to build connections with and serve our local community. QMUL is based in East London and our distinctive location makes us equidistant to Canary Wharf, the City of London, the Silicon Roundabout and the Olympic Park. As a pro-bono service, SCP has become a great platform for arts and creative industries organisations, charities, large companies, SMEs and start-ups to experience just how innovative, enthusiastic and capable our students are, regardless of their discipline. Hosts often comment on the value of the fresh perspective our students bring to their business challenge (see host quotes on page 3).

The programme has also connected our students with some fantastic professional networks based in the communities that many of them live in and/or grew up in.

What has happened/is happening?

Since launching in 2015, over 1,300 students have participated in our student consultancy programme. 93% of participants have fed back that they used their experience on the programme to obtain their next role. Analysis of graduate outcomes of this cohort has consistently shown that **students who participate in SCP are more likely to be in high skilled work after graduation when compared to students who did not participate in SCP** during their time at university. The likelihood of being in high skilled employment is even greater for bursary holder SCP participants when compared to their bursary holder peers.

Students who participate in SCP are more likely to be in high skilled work after graduation when compared to students who did not participate in SCP.

© Queen Mary University of London

In 2020 SCP joined QMUL's SKETCH (Student Knowledge Exchange Transfer through Community Hubs). SKETCH brings together 5 strands of existing extra-curricular student activity under one umbrella student-led professional services organisation which offers pro-bono support to local businesses and charities in the areas of legal advice, economic consulting, business consulting and the UK's first student-led venture capital fund. This enables SCP to easily link our hosts up with wider student-led services at the university based on their business needs as well as newly emerging multi-disciplinary university projects.

How do you do it?

Approximately 130-140 students are on the programme each term, with three cohorts per academic year. Students are placed into 'diverse' teams taking into account academic subject, gender, year of study and their answers to a personality questionnaire. This is to ensure the team represents a variety of disciplinary knowledge and a balance of personality types.

We currently have 3.5 FTE members of staff working on the programme:

– 3 Programme Coordinators who develop viable projects with businesses, recruit, train and support students on the programme.
– 1 part time Administrative Assistant.
– 1 part time Careers Consultant who assists in designing and delivering the pre-training session & post programme skills debrief session.

Students receive approximately 7 hours of training sessions on team working, client management, presentation skills and a reflection session to embed their learning. Programme Coordinators act as supervisor throughout the project and remain the students' point of contact, holding coaching sessions and check in calls, and running a practice presentation session with each team ahead of their final client meeting.

What hosts say:

"We had a good feeling the programme would deliver interesting results and thinking, but we weren't prepared for the well thought out and incredibly invaluable insights that helped us approach our problem in a completely different way. Feedback covered everything from: go to market strategies, weaknesses in our proposition – even marketing! To say we were humbled is an understatement."

PINCHED, HOST

"I was incredibly impressed and I was hyper vigilant as it was looking at corporate partnerships. The team was thoroughly researched, innovative without being unrealistic. A very eloquent presentation and they have given me some great ideas – to begin with I was sceptical of some of the corporations they had selected, but when they explained their thought process they quite won me over."

HOST, DONMAR WAREHOUSE

What students say:

"I think I am most proud of creating new ideas because I did a lot of research into coding and tech which is completely different to my academic discipline – English. I managed to speak about it with confidence which my client was impressed by."

ENGLISH & DRAMA STUDENT, SPRING 2020

"It was a very new and exciting 2 months. Meeting students from different academic backgrounds helped me build on my weak areas and also gain different perspectives."

ECONOMICS & FINANCE STUDENT, SUMMER 2021

"The two most valuable skills that I have developed over the last few weeks have been teamwork and communication. I have learnt to work effectively with a team of individuals from different academic schools and backgrounds, and we have learnt to overcome challenges (such as COVID-19 lockdown) in order to produce exceptional work. I have also gained a lot of experience in communicating in a professional setting."

SBCS STUDENT, SPRING 2020

"I loved the experience. It was a great pleasure working in a multidisciplinary team and learning from them as well as seeing what goes behind a start-up company and how start-ups generate ideas and cultivate them differently from major corporations."

LAW STUDENT, SPRING 2020

What is the learning so far?

Importance of multi-disciplinary teams

For the types of projects SCP takes on, we're big believers in the importance of bringing together students from different disciplines. They each bring different strengths to the team, which increases their personal learning. In rare occasions where teams haven't had much of a disciplinary variety, project outputs have not been as dynamic. We therefore feel that multi-disciplinary teams are a benefit to both the students and clients.

"Our team was brilliantly multi-disciplinary!"

HOST, ENTIO

Tight project briefs and managing client expectations are crucial

Ensuring project briefs are concise and outline key outcomes enables us to manage client expectations. It also helps the student teams to focus their time and energy when tackling their business challenge.

Importance of wraparound support in enhancing learning

Through our wraparound support we have encouraged students to continually be reflective as part of their learning and use their initiative in order to come to solutions on their own.

The relationship between supervisor and team gives students the safe space to bring concerns and questions, and through adopting a coaching model, we aid their learning by building their confidence and autonomy.

Introducing wraparound support to these types of projects has increased our student retention rates by enabling us to support students to solve the types of problems that often come up in team and client working. These types of situations can be very intimidating if a student has never experienced them before. The post-programme reflective sessions are essential to ensuring students are able to identify and communicate the skills they've gained from the experience when applying to future jobs.

For more information
SCP page for businesses: The Student Consultancy Project Careers and Enterprise (qmul.ac.uk)

SCP page for students: Student Consultancy Project Careers and Enterprise (qmul.ac.uk)

SKETCH: Student Knowledge Exchange Through Community Hubs (qmul.ac.uk)

For further queries
Lindsey Shirah, Placements & Programmes Manager
l.shirah@qmul.ac.uk

Nicola Persue-King, Programme Coordinator SCP
n.persue-king@qmul.ac.uk

Culture & Commerce
Taskforce

CITY OF LONDON

CULTURE MILE
CREATIVITY AROUND EVERY CORNER

GLOBAL UK CULTURE

Queen Mary
University of London