

Stakeholder Summary

Many University Undergraduates Struggle to Articulate Skills Learned in Class

While students understand what many of the transferrable skills sought by employers are, a new report examining psychology students at Brock University by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) finds that university undergraduates may not have strong awareness of their skills and the connection to coursework. Students also feel their instructors are not emphasizing the connection between assignments and skills development.

The authors caution that the issue may not be the actual development of transferrable skills but that students may not be realizing what skills are fostered by specific projects and therefore struggle to articulate how their education gave them the qualities sought by employers.

Undergraduates' Understanding of Skill-based Learning Outcomes: Can e-portfolios Help? also examines if tools like e-portfolios, which require students to explicitly track and showcase skills developed during their education, could improve skill awareness. The study finds that while these tools may be useful over time, they had no impact as a one-time-only intervention or at the end of a degree.

Project Description

The study examined 141 students, which represents 61% of psychology majors in the third and fourth years of their degree at Brock University during the 2012-2013 academic year. Students were required to take part in an online video questionnaire and use a custom designed e-portfolio which asked them to provide detailed information on seven transferable skills: communication, teamwork, leadership, research/technical skills, critical thinking/problem solving and self-management skills. They were also asked to look at three activities that may help develop these skills: coursework, work experiences and extracurricular activities. Students were given course credit for participating in the study.

Findings

Most students were able to list transferrable skills they felt should be developed during their degree, but some skills were identified more often than others. Specifically, a large proportion of students made at least one mention of organization (88%), communication (85%) and interpersonal skills (76%), but critical thinking (62%) and leadership (43%) were listed less often. The authors say this is worrisome given the emphasis potential employers place on those skills. Though students could identify skills, they struggled to explain or define several of them. Many students' definitions focused on how each skill should be ideally executed (for example, communication should be clear/concise) and did not convincingly demonstrate they understood the core competencies associated with each skill.

Students also struggled to see the connections between their regular coursework and the skills they identified as important. For example, two of the course assignments were to be carried out in groups,

yet in both cases less than half of the students identified improving teamwork or interpersonal skills as a goal of the instructor.

Given these findings, say the authors, it is understandable that an e-portfolio would not have a significant impact on skills awareness. Such tools are only likely to be useful as part of a shift to a broader “skills across the curriculum” approach throughout their degree program that emphasizes the skills most important to their institution, program and chosen career path. This shift would encourage faculty to show the connections between their assignments and skills development. The tools would also need a dedicated space in the curriculum, as students are busy juggling coursework and other responsibilities.

Authors of *Undergraduates' Understanding of Skill-based Learning Outcomes: Can e-portfolios Help?* are Tanya S. Martini and Matt Clare, Brock University.