

CLIP CETL Fellowship Report Form

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Assessing current industry practices and educational needs in order to facilitate students' transition to work and increase employability

Project background

BSc (Hons) Cosmetic Science was developed at LCF in 2000, aiming to provide the Cosmetic industry with graduates ready to work in its R&D departments. In addition to being the only BSc of the University, it was the only graduate course in the UK devoted solely to the Cosmetic industry.

Within the last couple of years, the course team started feeling that this unique subject area needs some re-positioning, not only because it now faces competition from other universities, but also because the industry it serves has changed since 2000. Despite plenty of evidence of the changing face of the industry, we were not able to find any systematic analysis of how the change affects jobs, especially the knowledge and skills profile now required from young graduates. The course re-validation was imminent and I felt that it was my responsibility, as a subject leader, to get hold of the facts, which would help us move the BSc course forward.

In addition to undergraduate provision, LCF has an intention to develop a post-graduate (PG) course in this area. With no model courses in the UK, a rapidly changing industry and no market research data, it would be a risky enterprise. Hence, my second aim was to collect and analyse some facts and opinions regarding this possible new PG development.

My interest in doing this research was predominantly practical, in terms of collecting data that would inform our course development, but it was combined with my innate pedagogic curiosity.

In October 2006, I was awarded a 10-week fellowship, which was going to combine periods of industrial placement with other fact-finding activities, like interviews and questionnaires. It has become clear very quickly that one of the effects of the change within the Cosmetic industry was a universal time pressure, so I realised that the questionnaire would be my main source of data. I have designed two types - one for junior and one for senior professionals. The 'junior' questionnaires were distributed to: current placement students, final year BSc students who have just completed their placements, and young graduates within the three years of their employment. Its 29 questions were divided into four sections: ***starting your new job, subject knowledge, skills, and continuing your education***. Two categories, i.e. graduates and students, were analysed separately and the results compared using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The 'senior' questionnaires went to those working in the industry for much longer, some of them for over 25 years. The four sections (28 questions) were: ***global***

changes & their local effects, jobs within the context of change, graduate profile, and postgraduate education.

More than 50 questionnaires were eventually completed, a very pleasing number considering that each was 5 pages long, and required mostly descriptive answers. The samples of two questionnaires, together with the participant information sheet and consent form, are available from CLIP CETL or myself.

In addition, three companies agreed that I could spend a day within their R&D departments, where I was allowed not just to observe what was going on, but also to ask questions and to interview some staff members. One large company allowed me to arrange a panel discussion with three very senior managers, which brought plenty of useful insights. This focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed.

The results were analysed in a qualitative manner, following the principles of triangulation.

Project findings

The three detailed summaries of responses (students, graduates and senior staff) are available from CLIP CETL office or from myself. Following below are key issues.

Summary of senior staff responses

The senior staff responses gave an invaluable insight into the changes within the Cosmetics industry and their effects on jobs, without which the course planning would be an un-informed activity. Many of the global drivers apply cross-industries, so the data may be useful to other course teams. The main themes were:

- Move of production to the Far East; followed by the closure of R&D facilities
- Globalisation, increased competition, domination of small number of large companies, control of costs at all levels
- Mergers & acquisitions, resulting in job loses for more experienced people, while less experienced are often given too demanding positions before they are ready
- Lower investment in staff, especially in smaller companies
- Increase in the number of non-technical jobs (legislation, audits, safety assessment) at the expense of technical (in R&D, production)
- Impact of legislation, including environmental, and of various NGOs and pressure groups
- More demanding, better educated and older average consumer

According to the respondents, an ideal set of young graduates' skills includes the following:

- Effective communication (including oral & written, numerical, IT, record keeping, information retrieval)
- Time management (flexibility, ability to multi-task)
- Project & risk management
- Business awareness
- Teamwork & people skills
- Problem solving (ability to think logically and analyse data; ability to think laterally, ability to translate information into practical knowledge)
- Commitment (demonstrated initiative, attention to detail, focus on delivery)

When asked about typical gaps in the new graduates' knowledge, senior people said:

- Business awareness, knowledge of the economic factors and drivers
- International regulations, patents, product registration, safety assessments
- Depth of understanding in general, especially in technical areas

The skills usually lacking were identified to be:

- Time, project and risk management (“focusing on small tasks and failing to see a bigger picture”)
- Effective working relationship skills
- Effective communication skills
- Standard of written English; numeric skills
- Self motivation, ideas generation, demonstrated initiative

Some participants noticed that “skills are often there, but they don't know what is expected”.

Suggested ways to help students acquire necessary skills while at university:

- Writing short reports (retrieving and condensing information)
- Practicing presentations
- Practicing time management and multitasking
- More practical experience (compulsory placements, more company visits, short secondments, internships)
- More industry-related multidisciplinary projects (“with tight deadlines, changing priorities and inbuilt critical reviews”)
- Building commercial/business awareness

This quote sums up the employer's view on the development of new graduates: “In general, it is the application of basic knowledge to the Cosmetic & Toiletry industry requirements that need to be taught by the employer. It is very much personality aptitude whether a new employee develops or not.”

The need for continuing education, including postgraduate, was discussed in the questionnaires, interviews and the focus group. The following quote illustrates the view on the PG course: “Since there are so few degree courses in Cosmetic Science, maybe there is space for shorter PG courses to teach Cosmetic Science to those with Chemistry or Biology qualifications.”

From the focus group discussion comes the following useful insight: “You should look into combining of commercial and technical elements at the post-graduate level...If you build on the areas when the technical world touches on the commercial, you could have quite a skilled person for our industry.”

Summary of graduates' responses

Broadly speaking, the themes arising from the graduates' responses were:

- The overall coverage of the course is very good; suggested improvements mostly concern the depth in specific areas; in fact, the phrase ‘*needs more depth*’ was the most frequent one in responses concerning the knowledge gained on the course
- Nevertheless, 93% were generally satisfied with the breadth and depth of knowledge gained
- There was 100% satisfaction with the level of skills, with clear understanding that certain skills can only be acquired on a job

- Given the opportunity, 80% of the respondents would be interested in post-graduate study

It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that both senior staff and young graduates from the industry comment on the lack of depth in certain technical areas. Finding the right balance between the breadth and depth of the course delivery, within the time and resources constraints, is a challenging task. Given the fact that the breadth of the BSc course is generally praised, it is possible that it simply cannot provide greater depth. Hence, there may exist an unmet need for the more specialised post-graduate provision.

Placement experience was viewed as very valuable by all students, even when an ideal match between the student and the company was lacking. This is a typical quote: "For me the placement year was the most important year of the course and I would have been very anxious to start the job without having spent a year in the industry. As a company, we would always choose to employ a graduate with placement experience."

Summary of current students' responses

From students' responses, it emerged that:

- There is a need for the development of critical judgement, including self-evaluation, during the course
- Students need to learn more about the corporate world/business environment before going on placements
- Students need to have a structured debriefing session after coming back from placements
- 83% of students are interested in post-graduate studies

Following are some student quotes:

"No amount of forced group work can prepare one for real-life confrontations at the workplace" – when asked which skills could only be obtained on the job.

"My employer was impressed with what we cover on our course and, compared with other graduates (e.g. chemistry, biology), our knowledge is very broad and well tailored to everyday situations in Research & Development."

Impact on learning and teaching

The focus of this study was the education/industry interface and students' transition to work. Therefore, the findings directly related to the above have been thoroughly analysed and certain actions, impacting on learning and teaching, are already being implemented.

The data collected have pointed out the need for a more thorough preparation for the placement year, hence an extended range of eight 'careers' tutorials with Fashion Business Resource Studio (FBRS) tutors have been planned in year 2. In addition, a 'placement debrief' session at the beginning of the final year has been introduced. These activities are aimed at building students' confidence when applying for the placements and, ultimately, for jobs. In particular, a debriefing session will be an opportunity for students to reflect on what they have learnt on their placements and also what they have identified as missing. This will allow the course team to make an informed action plan in order to enhance students' final year experience.

The data collected have clearly supported the stand that placement year brings about huge benefits to students (and indirectly to staff). Apart from allowing better performance in the final year, placement experience largely enhances graduates' job prospects. The course team, together with FBRS staff, will re-enforce their efforts to explain the benefits of (currently optional) industrial placement, to help students get a suitable position and to support students throughout the 30-week placement period. The Industry Day in November, where returning students present to the industry, college tutors and their younger peers, will continue to be the highlight of the course calendar. To help boost students' confidence, two oral presentation practice sessions (in the LCF Presentation space) have been arranged prior to the Industry Day. The fact that students also compete for the industry association's (CTPA) award on the day brings a healthy competitive atmosphere to the course.

Impact on the curriculum

Some preliminary findings are already embedded in the BSc course (re-validated in 2007); for example, the need for graduates to communicate effectively. We have paid particular attention on the development of students' written and oral communication skills specific to the industry. A new unit, Introduction to data analysis, has been created in year 1, organising some of the existing elements of course provision into a coherent and focused unit. Within this new unit, students will be introduced into writing succinct and informative reports, from primary and/or secondary data, taking into account their reader audience. Oral presentation skills are also being targeted, starting from year 1 and continuing progressively throughout the course.

The findings have also shed some light onto the need for postgraduate courses in this area, their content and preferable formats. These are going to be discussed in detail with the Dean of LCF Graduate School.

Dissemination & Evaluation

The results of this fellowship were presented at CLIP CETL Fellowship Day in July 2007 and at the Senior Management Conference in November 2007. Other presentations or workshops are possible.

After having run a new BSc programme for a couple of years, we will evaluate the effects of changes introduced into the course on the development of the targeted set of skills. One obvious thing to do is to compare students' achievements (marks) in key areas before and after this change, as well as tutorial records with placement supervisors. In addition, a simplified version of the questionnaire could be given to students and their placement supervisors towards the end of placement, and the results compared with the existing data. Student employment is another indicator to be regularly followed and analysed.

We also aim, whenever possible, to follow our graduates' career progression.

Unexpected findings

It is interesting to compare some of the results from this study with the 2007 National Student Survey (NSS) results. There were some surprising findings from NSS regarding the BSc Cosmetic Science; e.g. it scored lower than before on the overall satisfaction with the course. The data from this study, collected almost at the same

time, but from a larger number of students and from our alumnae, contradicted the NSS findings. For example, there is 80-100% satisfaction with both the knowledge and skills they have acquired during their studies. Participants' suggestions for course improvement were very specific (normally concerning a further depth in particular subject areas), while their overall comments on the course were overwhelmingly positive.

This casts a serious doubt on the validity of the NSS data as a basis for immediate action. In addition to already known methodological objections, the timing of the NSS seems to be unfavourable for courses— students are in the midst of their final projects/dissertations, dealing with a high level of complexity, most of them worried about the final outcome. In my experience, the whole perception of the course changes once the dissertation is being submitted; it further changes during the job search and especially at the start of a new job. The perception is at its most objective (hence the most useful for us) after 2-3 years in the job. This is the reason I wanted to capture the feedback with the benefit of hindsight, and to compare it with the current students' feedback (please see two comparison charts below).

Reflecting on the process

Academics need the time to stop and thoroughly reflect on their courses, which is something they can rarely afford. Ideally, all course leaders should be given an opportunity to liaise with the industry and their alumnae in order to benefit their courses. However, the whole enterprise has to be planned very thoroughly, so that the problems with academic's absence from the course do not outweigh the benefits.

Before applying, I have carefully assessed whether and for how long I would be able to 'leave' the course, discussing it with my team members. We developed a strategy, which has been quite smoothly implemented once the fellowship was awarded. The whole experience was very enriching, and not just for me. CLIP CETL has provided a generous cover for my various duties, so a number of colleagues were in position to try respective aspects of my job for a term, which they seemed to have appreciated.

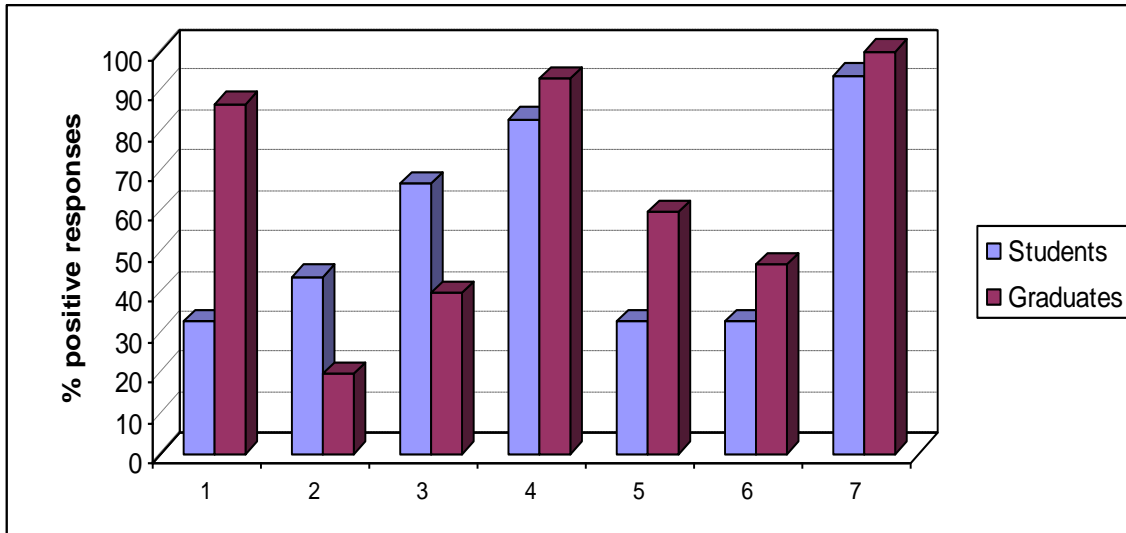
In terms of the process, one has to be thoughtful, but also flexible. Once I have realised that people would not have the time for the interviews with me, I went for a qualitative questionnaires. It was necessary to explain to participants my reasons for doing the study and possible benefits for them from spending their time on something that is not essential for their job. Personal contact was the key. Sending questionnaires to industry via willing intermediaries distinctly did not work.

Next time, I would use more quantitative questions, which would be quicker for participants to do. Results would be easier to analyse and, to an extent, more reliable. However, it was not quite possible this time, since it would require a lot of 'guess work' from my part to put together statements, especially on the state of the industry. Starting from this set of data, it will be possible to do it in a follow-up research.

I wish to thank CLIP CETL for the opportunity to widen my professional horizon and, hopefully, to bring some benefits to the BSc Cosmetic Science students and tutors.

APPENDIX I

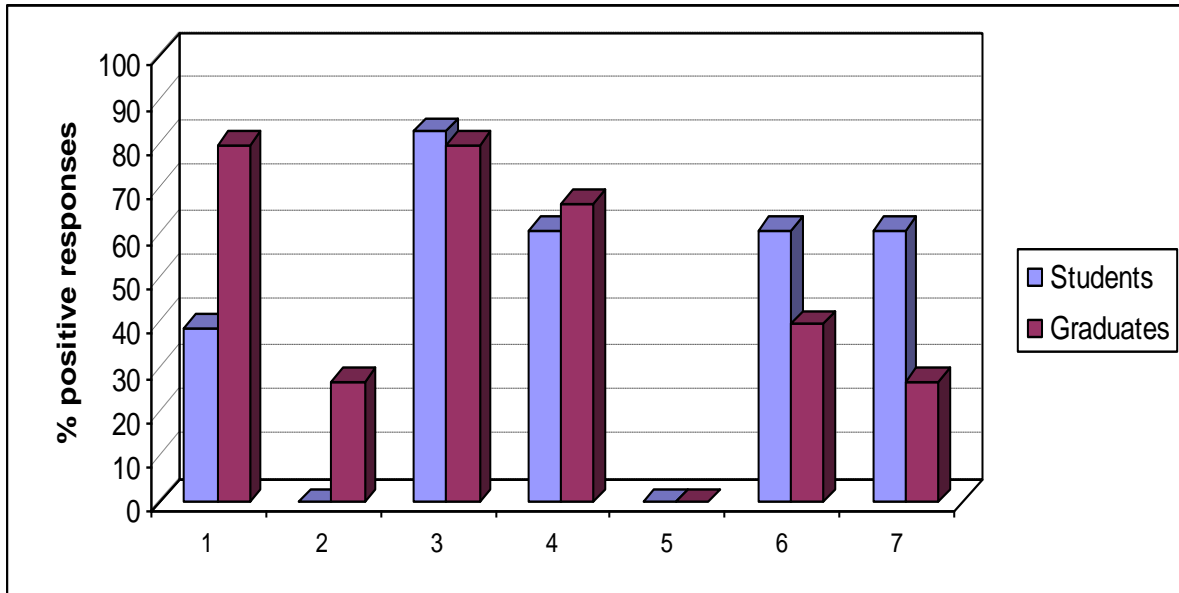
Comparison of students' and graduates' responses on the level of knowledge and skills acquired on the BSc course



1	Did you feel confident about starting this job?
2	Is there anything that your tutors could have done to prepare you better or make you less anxious?
3	Since you started this job, have you (or others) identified any significant gaps in your knowledge?
4	Are you in general satisfied with the depth and breadth of knowledge acquired during your studies?
5	Since you started this job, have you (or others) identified any significant gaps in your skills?
6	Do you think it would have been possible to develop the skill during the course of your studies?
7	Are you in general satisfied with the level of skills developed during your studies?

APPENDIX II

Comparison of students' and graduates' responses on further training



1	Have you received any training while working?
2	Have you taken any professionally relevant courses outside your work?
3	If you had an opportunity, would you like to continue your education at the postgraduate (PG) level?
4	Do you think having a PG award would further your career?
5	Have your employer advised undertaking PG training?
6	Would you prefer full-time mode of study?
7	Given the choice, would you continue your studies immediately rather than after a period of work?