

Case Study: Student Knowledge Exchange (SKE) Industry Live Project with Pentland Brands

Introduction

The Student Knowledge Exchange (SKE) industry live project with Pentland Brands provided an invaluable experiential learning opportunity for 206 final-year students, including 70% international students and 15% widening participation students. The project was meticulously designed to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world industry applications, fostering critical employability skills through a structured, inclusive, and collaborative environment.

Project Setup and Alignment

To ensure alignment with both the programme's Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and the business priorities of Pentland Brands, preliminary meetings were held between academic staff and industry stakeholders. These meetings facilitated the co-creation of the project framework, deliverables, and a timetable outlining key milestones. This collaborative approach ensured that the project's goals were mutually beneficial, addressing both educational and business objectives.

Project Deliverables and Timetable

- **Week 1: Client Discovery Session** The industry partner facilitated an introductory session, providing students with an overview of the organisation's priorities, pain points, and opportunities. This session set the stage for informed research and engagement, helping students understand the context and scope of the project.
- **Week 4: Interim Touchpoint** After conducting background research, students engaged in an interim session to ask informed questions and gain deeper insights into the organisation. This touchpoint was essential for refining their research directions and aligning their projects with real-world contexts.
- **Week 7: Formative Feedback Session** Small groups of students pre-submitted business research overviews and engaged in intensive feedback sessions with peers and academic staff. This process was inclusive and collaborative, fostering critical employability skills such as teamwork, communication, and critical thinking.

Skills Workshops

Throughout the project, the employability lead facilitated a series of skills workshops focusing on:

- Critical employability skills, including communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability.
- Utilising AI tools as co-pilots to streamline specific processes and enhance analytical capabilities.

- Developing innovative solutions to industry challenges, encouraging creativity and critical thinking.

Report Submission and Shortlisting

Students submitted their final reports, which were then shortlisted based on the level of innovation, critical analysis, and feasibility of implementation. Out of 206 reports, 40 were selected and shared with Pentland Brands. From these, the industry partner invited 10 students to present their findings at the head office in London.

Presentation and Industry Engagement

To ensure equitable access, the department funded the travel expenses for all selected students. During the visit, students:

- Toured different departments within Pentland Brands to understand various operational aspects.
- Engaged with key stakeholders, gaining insights into the organisational culture and industry practices.
- Delivered professional presentations of their findings, showcasing their research and proposed solutions.
- Responded to questions from industry stakeholders, demonstrating their ability to think on their feet and address real-world challenges.

Outcomes and Feedback

The immediate feedback from Pentland Brands was overwhelmingly positive. The stakeholders were impressed by the originality and practicality of the students' ideas, many of which offered fresh insights that the organisation had not previously considered. Pentland Brands committed to implementing several of these ideas and offered three students graduate positions.

Student Feedback

Student feedback highlighted the inclusivity and professional nature of the project. They appreciated the structured support, the opportunity to engage with real-world industry challenges, and the collaborative environment that allowed them to refine their skills and gain confidence. Students felt that the project was a transformative experience that significantly enhanced their employability.

Mapping to the SKE Framework and Experiential Learning Cycle

Concrete Experience: Students actively engaged in real-world tasks, applying their academic knowledge to industry challenges. This hands-on involvement developed their practical skills and provided meaningful industry exposure.

Reflective Observations: Continuous assessment and reflection were integral to the project. Students maintained journals and participated in peer reviews and group discussions, critically analysing their experiences and identifying areas for growth.

Co-Created Feedback: Regular feedback sessions with mentors and industry partners ensured that feedback was constructive and aligned with both student and industry needs. This collaborative approach fostered a culture of continuous improvement.

Abstract Conceptualizations: Based on their reflections, students developed new ideas and concepts. The project encouraged innovation and creative problem-solving, preparing students to conceptualise solutions applicable in their professional lives.

Active Experimentations: Students tested and refined their ideas in real-world scenarios facilitated by Pentland Brands. This phase provided valuable experience and enhanced their employability by applying new concepts and approaches in a professional setting.

Leveraging Technology: Advanced tools, including AI, were utilised to enhance learning and collaboration. These tools helped students develop analytical skills and improve their objectivity in problem-solving.

Developing a Collaborative Environment: The project promoted inclusivity and collaboration, encouraging students to take risks and view failures as learning opportunities. This dynamic environment empowered students to explore, grow, and innovate.

Conclusion

The SKE industry live project with Pentland Brands successfully integrated critical employability skills into the curriculum, provided real-world industry experience, and fostered an inclusive and collaborative learning environment. This case study exemplifies the effectiveness of experiential learning in preparing students, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, for successful careers. The structured support, practical experience, and professional engagement facilitated through this project have significantly enhanced the students' readiness for the job market and their overall professional development.