

The Alchemy Exchange - Turning Student Consultancy Opportunities into a Good Student Experience

Felicity Mendoza and Jonathan Gorst

Sheffield Hallam University

Abstract. This paper describes the journey undertaken by Sheffield Business School, in implementing a student consultancy unit as an extra-curricular activity and the positive and negative issues that it has faced. It is a case study which will take the reader from conception through to a functioning student consultancy service. The Alchemy Exchange has established itself as part of the overall student offering, alongside course based consultancy while making itself part of the Business School's business engagement offer. The case study provides an insight into how an extra curricular activity can be used as a way to provide a cost effective consultancy service to business, while providing students with a real life learning experience for which they are paid, supervised by an academic and transferring knowledge.

Keywords: Student Consultancy, Extra Curricular Activity.

1 Introduction

This case study looks at the work of The Alchemy Exchange (TAE), a student consultancy unit based within Sheffield Business School at Sheffield Hallam University. It looks at how the original concept was developed into a working unit and the challenges it faced in becoming established to provide real life experiences to students.

2 Background

Originally named the Student Consultancy and Research Unit, The Alchemy Exchange was set up in 2009 as a mechanism for raising the profile of Sheffield Hallam University's newly rebranded Sheffield Business School (SBS) within the local business community (Damodaran, L. 2009). As one of a suite of Knowledge Exchange activities which included contract research, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) and Corporate Professional Development (CPD) (Prince

2007), TAE was tasked with generating income and developing new partnerships for the Business School.

In 2009, the choice for external organisations wishing to engage the Business School's consultancy services was between academic consultancy - at prices which often excluded smaller businesses and companies affected by the economic downturn - and free course-based consultancy projects, which could only happen at fixed points in the year. The quality of the latter could not be guaranteed, however, positive feedback from the most successful course-based projects suggested that there was potential to develop a commercial consultancy unit staffed by students, supervised by academics and managed by project facilitators. Client feedback from these free projects indicated a willingness amongst some external organisations to pay for student consultancy providing the quality of the output could be guaranteed. Internally it was felt that without the seasonal time constraints of the course-based projects and with the right students and academic supervision, consultancy projects could be delivered to a professional standard.

3 The Pilot

A pilot was carried out during spring 2009 in which 3 projects of differing values, £1,000, £4,000 and £12,000, were undertaken and it was concluded that the optimum project size was £4,000, which equated to approximately 10 student days with approximately 2-3 days of academic supervision. Whilst all 3 projects were delivered successfully, the importance of a rigorous process to recruit reliable students was highlighted when one student dropped out leaving the Academic Supervisor and PM (PM) to complete the work at short notice.

By late spring 2009 it was felt that there was sufficient potential to create the new role of PM whose task would be to develop the pilot into an income generating consultancy unit. The unit was renamed The Alchemy Exchange (TAE), a name which was chosen to enable flexibility as it grew.

4 The Administration

Initially, TAE was assigned one full time manager, supported by a 0.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) placement student. The PM liaised with the Finance department to develop a robust costing model and a daily charge rate was developed which would include associate, academic and project management. A terms of reference template was developed which, when paired with the University's standard terms and conditions for consultancy, acted as a binding contract with the client. It was agreed with Human Resources that students assigned to projects were employed on casual contracts under the role title of TAE Associate and paid £8 per hour.

5 Marketing

Long lead times for the design and production of web pages, flyers and stands meant that the TAE staff had to get the message out by other means such as

attending welcome lectures for selected courses, using the University's online vacancy advertising service and attending recruitment fairs.

B2B marketing activities included the development of web pages, flyers and stands and key University personnel such as Knowledge Transfer Champions and Business Development Managers were briefed on TAE's offer to business. Existing contacts were informed via newsletters and TAE was represented at several internal and external networking events.

6 The Students

The opportunity to work with TAE was open to students from all courses and stages of study from across the University, plus recent graduates, however, the majority of successful applicants came from the Business School's business and marketing courses. As the university with the largest number of students on sandwich courses in the UK, TAE was particularly attractive to undergraduate students returning for their final year after their industrial placement. With career success in mind, this cohort sought to maximise the return on their investment in their education by gaining relevant work experience and enhancing their CV ready for the graduate labour market (Lehmann, 2009). Many were also wary of inflexible and demanding part-time work which could impact negatively on their final year studies by obliging them to over commit whilst failing to develop their skills (Clegg et. al. 2010).

Another prominent group included recently graduated international Master's students on Post Study Work Visas. A number of graduates from this group chose to stay in the city once their course had finished but found it difficult to obtain full time graduate level employment. TAE was therefore attractive to them because it offered the opportunity to demonstrate to potential employers their ability to operate on a professional basis outside their country of origin.

7 The Recruitment and Selection Process

One of the key concerns highlighted by the pilot was the risk that students might jeopardise the success of a project and, with it, the reputation of the University by being unprofessional or unreliable. Therefore it was important to design a recruitment and selection process which would test not only the skills and abilities of the candidates but their commitment and motivation as well. In order to mirror the kind of selection activities typically found at graduate level, students were invited to submit an application form, from which a shortlist was drawn up and a selected number were interviewed.

Successful candidates were invited to become TAE Associates and join a 'Talent Pool' of Associates who had access to project opportunities. The Talent Pool was developed in order to ensure responsiveness and avoid delays when a project was being scoped.

8 The Academics

During the pilot of TAE, the academic supervision was undertaken by a principal lecturer from the Marketing subject group. With many years experience of working as a consultant in the UK and Europe in conjunction with the University as well as within the private sector, the academic was well placed to guide the initiative forward.

Internally, TAE was positioned as a knowledge exchange activity, a 'softer collaborative experience' (Ramos-Vielba & Fernández-Esquinas, 2011), which allowed early career teaching academics the opportunity to experience knowledge exchange in a low risk environment with considerably less time commitment than a KTP.

However, the structure and practices of the University (Jacobson et. al., 2005) as well as the priority of teaching and individual achievement over organisational objectives, (Seonghee & Boryung, 2008) meant that interest amongst academics was low which resulted in the original Marketing academic taking on the supervision of 4 of the 6 early projects. There was also nervousness amongst academics regarding the ability to consistently deliver to a commercial standard given that students would be employed to carry out the bulk of the work (Neagle et. al. 2010).

As TAE's reputation grew and the PM's knowledge of individual academics' research and personal interests increased, more academics were attracted to join TAE.

As other academics, new to business engagement and consultancy, joined, the PM was presented with a new range of challenges. This group of academics, whose skills were based on in-depth research of a specific discipline, had to adjust their enthusiasm to meet the constraints of commercial consultancy. The PM was tasked with turning research ideas into cost-effective ways of meeting the clients' requirements within the budget and timescales available (Powell, 2007).

Feedback gathered from participant academics illustrated how they benefited from their involvement with TAE. These academics were able to use examples from their TAE experiences in the classroom and case studies were developed to enable students to work on simulated projects as part of their course.

Traditional knowledge exchange activities have been carried out between universities and industry. The TAE model and the available funding, however, encouraged charities and social enterprises to engage with the University and attracted a different type of academic to knowledge exchange (Reichenfeld, 2011).

9 The Clients

The early stages of TAE coincided with the emergence of regional funding sponsored 'Innovation Vouchers' for small and medium enterprises. The vouchers, worth £3,000, were positioned as a contribution towards consultancy services and gave recipients the opportunity to engage with universities as well as other commercial agencies. The nature of the funding had a significant impact on TAE's client profile and upon its development as a research and consultancy centre.

The £3,000 funding was available to SMEs in the region during the first year of TAE's operation. Despite the funding being intended as a contribution towards the cost of consultancy services, the majority of clients were not prepared to spend over the funding allowance. This led to projects being designed to fit the £3,000

model rather than to address the business issue in a holistic sense. In addition, many clients, due to lack of experience in engaging consultancy services, had unrealistic expectations about the level of detail that could be achieved within their budget and on more than one occasion pushed for additional work to be done over and above the specification.

In some cases there was a mismatch between the original client brief submitted to the funding body and the client's requirements which emerged during the first scoping meeting. It became apparent that the client's funding application was worded to match the funding body's eligibility criteria although the decision to access consultancy was promoted by a problem or change beyond the normal scope of the client's capacity or resources (Jacobson et al., 2005).

10 Project Management

Once chosen as a supplier, the PM, academic and client scope out the project in detail. A terms of reference document including the background to the project, its aims and objectives, the proposed research activities, timescales, costs and terms of business are then issued to the client.

Once the opportunity had been agreed with the client the specific skills requirements, tasks and timescales were sent to the Talent Pool. Associates in the pool were asked to apply for the position by submitting an expression of interest and confirming their availability. First time associates were required to attend an induction which included briefings on safety for lone workers, equality and diversity, data protection and timesheet management. Associates were then briefed by the PM and academic supervisor about the project itself.

The PM arranged, attended and minuted regular progress meetings between the academic supervisor and the associates, managed the relationship with the client and ensured that actions were completed within internally agreed deadlines.

Nearing the appointed end of the project, the PM liaised with the team and the client to set up a meeting for the presentation of the findings. The project findings were delivered by the associates as a verbal presentation backed up by a full report.

11 Review of Years 1 & 2

After 1 year of operation TAE had carried out 24 projects with an average cost of £3000, reflective of the funding available. The potential of TAE as a resource was recognised within the University and out of the 24 projects completed in Year 1, 5 were carried out for internal clients whilst 17 of the remaining 19 external clients had received Regional Development Agency (RDA) funding.

However, at the end of the first year of operations, regional funding for SMEs came to an end. As the majority of clients had been start ups, micro businesses and not for profit organisations their budget for commissioning future projects was very limited. In fact, none of the funded projects led to self-financed interactions although some did lead to free course-based projects.

In Year 2, TAE completed 20 projects with an average cost of £1,500. Of the 20 projects, 3 were funded, 9 were paid for by the external organisations and 8 were internal.

Due to the lack of available funding it was necessary to offer a reduced cost option in order to continue to attract external organisations. Therefore an alternative TAE costing model was developed so that, in addition to the original model of a bespoke project team consisting of a PM, an academic supervisor and associate(s), potential clients were also given the option to act as the supervisor, overseeing the associates' work with the support of a PM. This had the effect of increasing the number of paid, non funded opportunities in Year 2 but reduced TAE's overall income by approximately 50%. In addition, a number of clients who opted for this model did not have the requisite skills or knowledge to supervise the project, resulting in increased pressure on the PM to provide academic supervision that had not been built into the costing at the project scoping stage.

It also became apparent during Year 2 that some clients were unable, either due to resource limitations or lack of expertise, to implement the findings or recommendations that the project had produced. Costs and other practicalities aside, ideally assisting with implementation and measuring impact should have been built in to the remit of the project (Smith and Paton 2011).

A SWOT analysis of TAE was carried out at the end of Year 2 to identify its key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats:

SWOT – The Alchemy Exchange	
Key strengths	Key weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing the student employability and business engagement agenda • Providing academics with links to industry, case studies and staff development opportunities • Cost effective service for external partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a recession, many businesses may not be prepared to outlay costs for consultancy, especially when business support was previously funded by business link • Marketing and business engagement strategy - difficult to articulate offering • Culture / bureaucracy of delivering commercial projects within an academic environment
Key opportunities	Key threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of UG and PG students across courses • Improving our offer to both students and businesses • Projects can lead to ongoing relationships and other opportunities such as placements, guest speakers and course-based projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cuts in access to funding for SMEs • Reluctance of businesses to spend money and /or time due to economic climate • Availability of students to who can afford to work in an ad hoc, flexible way

Source: Adapted from R. Keeton's Business Engagement Programme final report submission 2011

12 Feedback

As a result of the feedback gathered from all participants at the end of each project, a number of areas of best practice were identified. Projects tended to be more successful when:

- achievable and detailed project plans were developed collaboratively between the PM, academic and client
- realistic methodologies were employed e.g. primary research was only undertaken if the source could be identified in advance
- associates were matched to projects according to their skills, experience, interests and availability over the period required
- the academic supervisor, associate and client were committed to the project and understood their individual roles
- team work and communication were facilitated by the PM. For the majority of projects weekly meetings were used to monitor progress, review findings and delegate further actions.

Feedback collected from associates confirmed the value of TAE as a means of enhancing the student experience and developing employability skills.

13 Comparable Initiatives in Other Universities

During the pilot stage a visit was made to the University of Hertfordshire's Graduate Consulting Unit. Based within their Centre for Entrepreneurial Development, the Graduate Consulting Unit had been running for approximately 3 years at the time of the TAE pilot and their pricing model was influential in developing TAE's own prices. At that time, the Graduate Consulting Unit's management were considering branching out as an independent enterprise.

Typically, however, initiatives developed by other universities tend to focus on IT consultancy. Leeds Source-IT and Genesys Solutions, from Leeds University and The University of Sheffield respectively, employ students specifically from computing and software engineering to work on commercial projects for external clients. According to Neagle (p.267, 2010), the range of skills originally offered to clients were too broad and this led to management issues, therefore by narrowing the skills set on offer they maximised on their strengths and were able to duplicate their successes.

14 Challenges and Lessons Learned

The Alchemy Exchange is an ambitious project which was open to students and graduates from all levels and courses across the University. The initial targets (24 projects in Year 1) and the funding available for local businesses meant that, like Leeds Source-IT (Neagle, 2010), the offer to clients was too broad. In future, TAE will be limited to students within the Business School and will only take on

projects which are relevant to Business School courses. By focusing on market research and data gathering TAE will specialise in carrying out feasibility studies, scoping out new products, services and markets and providing content for business plans.

Although the first year targets were met, it was at the expense of developing a business development strategy to source projects once regional funding came to an end. An internal restructure saw the formation of a Business Engagement Team which was primarily tasked with securing high value, corporate contracts and therefore, low value, small scale consultancy projects tended to be overlooked. In addition, as TAE was repositioned as an employability initiative, there were further challenges for business facing colleagues to see its relevance to their remit. As Wolfenden (1995) points out, a coordinated strategy for developing external business relationships is challenging given the issues of 'ownership and communication'.

As one of a number of employability initiatives within the University, it was challenging to articulate TAE's offer both internally, to staff and students, and externally. The aim for the future is to bring all employability initiatives under one coordinating hub which will act as a single point interface between students, business engagement staff, academics and businesses as well as providing coherence and support that will develop and enhance corporate links (Keeton 2012).

15 Conclusion

In its initial stages TAE was tasked with generating income and developing new partnerships for the Business School, however, limited ability to generate significant profit or major corporate leads resulted in its re-positioning. The renewed emphasis on the student experience in the University's Annual Operating Plan, coupled with positive feedback from associates in the Talent Pool allowed TAE to change its focus and develop its strengths as an employability initiative. A change in emphasis on income generation and financial subsidy from the Business School facilitated the development of new employability initiatives under the TAE umbrella including free projects for non profit organisations and internships.

References

- Clegg, S., Stevenson, J., Willott, J.: Staff conceptions of curricular and extracurricular activities in higher education. *Higher Education* 59(5), 615–626 (2010), doi:10.1007/s10734-009-9269-y
- Damodaran, L.: The Graduate Consulting and Research Unit Feasibility study (phase 1). Sheffield Hallam University internal document (2009)
- Jacobson, N., Butterill, D., Goering, P.: Consulting as a Strategy for Knowledge Transfer. *The Milbank Quarterly* 83(2), 299–321 (2005)
- Keeton, R.: Business Engagement Programme. Final Report (2011)
- Lehmann, W.: University as vocational education: working - class students expectations for university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30(2) (2009)

- Keeton, R.: The Employability Hub 2012. Internal Sheffield Hallam University paper (2012)
- Powell, J.: Creative universities and their creative city-regions. *Industry & Higher Education* (October 2007)
- Prince, C.: Strategies for developing third stream activity in new university business schools. *Journal of European Industrial Training* 31(9), 742–757 (2007)
- Neagle, R., Marshall, A., Boyle, R.: Skills and Knowledge for Hire: Leeds Source-IT. In: ITiCSE 2010, Bilkent, Ankara, Turkey, June 26-30. ACM (2010), doi:978-1-60558-820-9/10/06
- Ramos-Vielba, I., Fernández-Esquinas, M.: Beneath the tip of the ice-berg: exploring the multiple forms of university–industry linkages. *The International Journal of Higher Education Research* (December 2, 2011)
- Reichenfeld, L.: The Barriers to Academic Engagement with Enterprise: A Social Scientist’s Perspective. In: Howlett, R.J. (ed.) *Innovation through Knowledge Transfer 2010*. SIST, vol. 9, pp. 163–176. Springer, Heidelberg (2011)
- Seonghee, K., Boryung, J.: An analysis of faculty perceptions: Attitudes toward knowledge sharing and collaboration in an academic institution. *Library & Information Science Research* 30(4), 282–290 (2008)
- Smith, A.M.J., Paton, R.A.: Delivering enterprise: A collaborative international approach to the development, implementation and assessment of entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research* 17(1), 104–118 (2011)
- Wolfenden, R.: Experienced of Enterprise in Higher Education within two research-led universities. *Education & Training* 37(9), 15–19 (1995)