

Case Study – Space to be Entrepreneurial: Undergraduate Student Opportunities in Research and Enterprise.

On: The Value of Undergraduate Student Enterprise Initiatives

Purpose: Enhance the skills of undergraduates in employment and customer-focused enterprises

Funding: Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund.

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Catherine Allen graduated with a First in English from Warwick in 2010. She began her degree hoping to become an actor or theatre director but an initiative set up by the university gave a group of students, including Catherine, the opportunity to earn money alongside their studies, which has taken her successfully into a very different profession. This case study looks at enterprise from the undergraduate student perspective to show how entrepreneurship, often linked with research, can have a direct impact on the scope of the student experience.

As a first year undergraduate Catherine was involved in the 'Arts Faculty E-squad', a TQEF-funded and WUAP-supported project led by Robert O'Toole, Arts Faculty E-Learning Advisor. This student-staff support team gave undergraduates paid work experience to directly participate in e-learning developments, which included web-editing, recording lectures and other IT-based projects. She soon found the video recording and editing work particularly enjoyable and put herself forward whenever such projects became available. Through Rob O'Toole, Catherine became involved in the Capital Centre's project, 'Staging the Dream', where she met her current business partner, Pesala Bandara and made use of the training possibilities on professional editing systems being used at the university. The success of the project led not only to an understanding of the value of video within e-learning but to requests for similar work on projects and research initiatives around the university. Not wanting to disappoint departments outside the Arts Faculty, Catherine and Pesala were supported by Rob O'Toole to branch out, literally, creating their own production company, Branch Media. Initially their work was Warwick based, filming

collaborations work with the RSC, but soon using this experience to enhance the company's CV across the country as word got around in a very fluid, expanding sector of the media. After being approached by Robin Powell to work for him, Catherine is now Managing Director of Ember Television, an award-winning company which creates distinctive tailor-made video content across a range of media platforms. Its clients include Siemens, Toyota, the Church of England, as well as the universities of Warwick, Kings College, LSE and Nottingham.

The initial enterprise at Warwick provided a space for undergraduates to be entrepreneurial, with little prescription. Catherine was given ownership of small-scale enterprise projects and allowed involvement in their development and eventual use. She took the opportunity to research the video form and how it could be applied in e-learning and broader information media, as well as the arts.

The E-squad gave undergraduates tasters in new technology and the feeling that they were at the cutting edge of learning and practice. Being networked across the university is not common to undergraduates, but working directly with departments, administrators and academics on valued projects in a paid capacity gave them the opportunity, confidence and standing to build more equal relationships. For Catherine, networking was an important part of experiencing work in a professional manner, and developing her own professionalism in a field where contacts are key to building a client-base. The value of networking is not necessarily understood by students as it is not something they are naturally exposed to as part of their academic life.

Catherine has offered some useful advice for both students and the university in the value of developing student enterprise initiatives.

Tips for students:

- Make the most of your undergraduate years. Don't leave opportunities for developing skills and employment opportunities until your final year. Take the initiative from the first year, then if you become part of something that interests you this will give you the time to develop your skills and gain the most benefit.

- Use the university and its' facilities in the broadest sense to develop your skills, not just the academic opportunities within your department.
- Linked to the above, go to a range of events at the university, use the opportunities available to you and don't be afraid to talk to people, regardless of their position to get involved with what interests you.

Tips for those undertaking similar projects:

- Students understand and are open to digital technologies ... the older age group likes to use the term 'digital native'. The University could do more to use this as a mutually-beneficial resource. Why hire a social media consultant to report on what the student-body could have been involved in for a fraction of the cost, for example?
- Aim towards developing a culture where involvement in projects, research and enterprise is an integral part of the student experience. Nothing is more valuable for employment prospects than employment experience.
- Students will thrive if given a sense of ownership and an opportunity to accomplish a meaningful task: the value could be in learning a skill or being paid for a job.
- The only thing that could have enhanced the 'E-squad' experience for Catherine would be a direct connection with outside industry. For example, links with a digital agency for the media work may have given insights into costings and time-scales when working outside the university.

An inspiring Warwick graduate, we wish Catherine every success in the future!