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**Developing graduates to be work ready and resilient future leaders – a case study**

**“Being work-ready means a rounded education that includes character, skills and knowledge” CBI People and Skills: Getting young people ‘work ready’, June 2019.**

Recent messaging suggests that Government ‘expects’ Higher Education Institutions to raise their efforts to develop ‘work-ready’ graduates for employers in our economy. The emphasis on the future of work agenda is that new graduates should be confident in their entrepreneurial endeavour; be resilient and responsive to change; exhibit professionalism; and become global citizens that meaningfully contribute to professional communities and wider society.

Chris Skidmore, the Minister for Higher Education, stated in a speech at UCL (2019) that, “If our students are to go out into the wider world and make a positive difference to society with their professionalism and leadership, then we need to be displaying those values to them now”. Local governments are also activating their messaging on the requirement of universities to produce ‘work ready’ graduates, evidenced in local ‘programme for government’ policy that is invariably integrated into a university’s strategic plan. This is underpinned by the incessant demand from employers for graduates, of any discipline, who are ‘work ready’ and resilient to contribute positively to business and organisations.

Congruent with this 21st Century skills agenda, scholars argue that human resilience consists of two key elements: “mistakability”, the ability to make mistakes and learn from these, and “adaptability”, the flexibility to adapt and learn accordingly. [Magowan (2018)](http://www.futureislearning.com) further argues that the future of work is learning and adapting (in a dynamic flux) rather than just in focusing on technology, and that critical learning must have a focus on identity, mindset & enablers to learn and adapt continuously. Developing capability to be resilient, adapt and learn are the fundamental characteristics of emerging future leaders who will contribute positively to their professional communities and wider society.

Central to the development of graduates with resilient and mindful leadership capability, Ulster University resourced the Ulster University Business School to pilot an ambitious curriculum embedded project to produce these ‘work ready’ graduates.

A collaborative team of academics and consultants completed a five-month design thinking process to co-create and produce the workshop materials for pilot delivery.

The two pilot workshops, titled ‘The Resilient Graduate’ and ‘The Mindful Leader’, collectively aimed to define and polish professional leadership competencies in students and facilitate the graduation journey from the Level 6 classroom to the world of work. Critically, the workshops were curriculum-designed to be a unique learning experience for the roughly 100 students who participated. The format for the two workshops were two 3-hour classroom-based workshops, and the content that was covered is outlined below.

**The Resilient Graduate**

* Being present and focused – submission of mobile phones.
* Millennials in the workplace
* Grounding exercises (Breathing & Calmness)
* Emotional resilience – Triune Brain Theory
* Leadership competencies employers are assessing
* Communication and collaboration skills – Helium Stick Activity
* Self-awareness as a leader & behaviours in trauma & rejection

The findings from The Resilient Graduate were positive:

94% of participants said they understood personal resilience

74% said they understood how to build personal resilience

84% said the workshop helped

76% said they would recommend to other final years

So too was the student feedback; “My mindset has completely changed from last week…the breathing exercises were really useful with regard to managing stress”.

**The Mindful Leader**

* Being present and focused
* Tai Chi – mindful and present exercises
* Personal effectiveness as a leader: influencing, negotiating, conducting yourself in change scenarios – Mirror Triangle Activity
* Fixed and Growth Mindsets
* Different perspectives - conflict in the workplace
* Team working & enterprise competencies - Lego Game Activity

The findings for The Mindful Leader were also very positive:

81% of participants said they now understood what mindful leadership is

83% said they knew how to lead people mindfully

78% said the workshop was valuable

77% would recommend to other final year students

As before, the feedback was also positive; “learn to de-stress and think like a leader…knowing that failing isn’t bad - it is learning”.

The workshops, therefore, had a significant transformative impact on final year students’ self-awareness and knowledge of employer’s expectations when transitioning into the workplace. The evaluations indicated that the workshop learning activities transferred practical coping strategies to enhance mindfulness and resilience leadership skills. This learning provided students with raised confidence to contribute positively to their future workplace, economy and wider society on graduation. The workshops are now being piloted in the remaining 3 faculties within Ulster University, hopefully with more positive results to follow.

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