Lost in translation: career coaching deaf students

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Understanding employability skills creates numerous challenges for deaf students who use British Sign Language. Graduates need to possess an array of employability skills and career coaching is one way in which careers advisers can support students and graduates. This process helps to identity their skills, define their career goals and translate their experiences into a format that employers anticipate. Careers guidance may not assist deaf graduates unless appropriate changes to methodology and approach are implemented. An example of good practice that could serve as a template for use within the sector is offered.

Overview

Understanding employability skills creates numerous challenges for students and graduates whose first language is English. When the student is a deaf person who uses British Sign Language (BSL), English is effectively a second language and so comprehension and understanding problems are increased[1]. Deaf students' English literacy development has often been delayed by an education system which has failed to provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge to find meaningful employment opportunities (Barnes, Bradley and McCrea, 2012). Much has been written about the need for graduates to possess an array of employability skills which they need to evidence in their CVs and applications forms (CBI & UUK, 2009). Career coaching is one way in which careers advisers can support students and graduates in the job application process. This process helps students to identity their skills, define their career goals (Chung & Gfroerer, 2003, 1996) and translate their experiences into a format that employers anticipate. However, a career coaching approach may not assist deaf graduates who are unable to hear discussions relating to 'employability skills' or have direct access to the language associated with career development. This creates a huge barrier to their understanding and demonstration of employability skills unless appropriate changes to methodology and approach are implemented. This article assesses the problems with generic career advice for deaf students and outlines an example of good practice at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) that could serve as a template for use within the sector.

Background to graduate employment or underemployment

At a time of huge cultural and financial change for universities, capped student numbers, increased tuition fees, the recession and changing demands in the job market, terms such as ' employability skills ', 'work placement opportunities' and 'volunteering' are increasingly being used by universities to attract potential students. Universities are working alongside employers to identify what attributes employers require and how they can provide those (CBI & UUK, 2009). Never has the employability agenda been so important in higher education, however, for deaf students, access to employment and work experience is beset with challenges and barriers. This is reflected in a report produced by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) that stated one in five of the

1 The term deaf refers to those students who use BSL as a first or preferred language. However, many of the issues discussed in this article also relate to deaf students who do not use BSL.

deaf respondents were unemployed and looking for work compared with one in twenty in the UK labour market (RNID, 2006). If we look at the graduate picture in 2008/09, the destinations of deaf graduates showed an increase in unemployment levels of over 100% in just two years (AGCAS, 2011). Therefore, whilst the 'career barrier' for graduates is well-documented both nationally and internationally (Punch, Hyde & Power, 2007), we believe that deaf graduates are further hindered by linguistic barriers which make the employability process even more difficult.

For BSL users, English is not their first language; their English literacy development has often been delayed by an education system which has let them down, by communication methodology which is inappropriate, and by assessment strategies based on hearing norms (Barnes & Doe, 2007). This results in deaf students having more restricted literacy skills than their hearing peers. Yet, studying at higher education level requires all students to understand and use academic language and literacies. They need to be 'fluent and confident using the spoken and written language conventions of their academic discipline' (Barnes & Doe, 2007: 106). Deaf students who are under-prepared in terms of their literacy and their ability to access and produce written English at higher education level will struggle to access this academic discourse.

These linguistic barriers are clearly illustrated when deaf students and graduates need to express graduate development and employability skill sets in a written format. Farrar (2007) discusses the difficulties experienced by students in general, when conforming to write in academic settings – including doubts about conveying themselves adequately. She acknowledges that those uncertainties are increased for deaf students if 'there are difficulties with sentence structure, spelling and confident use of an academic style' (p.5) or in this case an employability style.

Furthermore information gaps between career staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in application form writing become more complex when one considers that the deaf student is often involved in mediated learning via a third party (Barnes & Doe, 2007). These third parties (i.e. interpreters) may themselves have minimal knowledge of the language of higher education or more specifically, of how to adequately convey the specialist language needed for the application process.

Additional barriers to employment for this group of students are indicated by reports that 60% of employers expect graduates to have some kind of work experience; and that it is 'not at all likely' that a graduate without work experience will be successful in gaining employment (High Fliers, 2011, 2012). Finding work experience is extremely challenging for deaf students and graduates as they do not have the same access to spoken networks about where the latest jobs are. Telephone interviews are problematic, if not impossible; and they may find application forms and CVs difficult to complete. They will certainly have difficulty gaining information about the job or application process. In addition, Punch et al (2004) argue that deaf graduates are excluded from certain employment sectors such as retail and hospitality (a common employer for most students). A further barrier is funding for interpreters for voluntary experience; historically there has been no funding via the government's Access to Work Scheme or from Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). This has made gaining work experience for deaf students a considerable challenge, thus hampering their ability to gain and subsequently demonstrate employability skills to employers without having the 'means by which these skills can be attained' (CBI & UUK, 2009). These examples illustrate how much more difficult is it for a deaf graduate to secure employment, work placement or even volunteer opportunity, when competing with non-deaf graduates.

We believe that deaf undergraduates need specific support programmes, including one to one career coaching sessions to enable them to gain experience and skills, and to put them in a better position in the recruitment market. The wider university must be engaged with the challenges deaf undergraduates and graduates face. Deaf students need to be provided with more access to careers information, skills audits, application processes and mock interview support. For this reason UCLan has developed a range of training and career coaching opportunities.

Example of good practice: provision for Deaf students/ graduates at UCLan

UCLan has, for many years, been at the forefront of providing high quality services for deaf students (Barnes, Bradley and McCrea, 2012). The support service for deaf students was developed in 1993 alongside a new degree in Deaf Studies. The combination of good quality support plus a signing community within the university led to increasing numbers of deaf students enrolling at UCLan. These numbers have allowed UCLan to develop specialist services which may not be possible in institutions where there are only one or two deaf students. Careers' coaching for deaf students is just one example.

Working closely with the BSL and Deaf Studies course team and with the interpreting service, we identified gaps in the support of deaf students during transition from higher education to work. Additionally, the support being offered to deaf students whilst studying for their degrees was not being replicated at the end of their course. Whilst non-deaf graduates knew how to access the careers services and opportunities, deaf graduates, through lack of awareness and access to information, were being left without knowing where to turn for help. This prompted a multi-disciplinary, cross-university initiative to provide specialist career guidance, training events and one to one coaching sessions.

Employment Opportunities Group

In 2010, a multi-disciplinary group was established to explore the issues and barriers faced by deaf students in gaining employment opportunities and skills. The group incorporated the specialist careers adviser (for students with disabilities), the principal lecturer from the BSL and Deaf Studies degree programmes, the Head of the interpreting services, an adviser for deaf students and representatives from the university work placement team, the undergraduate job centre and the mentoring service. Most importantly, representatives from the deaf student body were also involved. The group's main focus was to identify and address the issues and barriers faced by deaf students in gaining work placements, voluntary work, and both term-time and post-graduation employment opportunities. The group identified a number of areas which were raised as specific issues for deaf students such as how to access employment information, using an interpreter in an interview, writing a CV and applying for ATW funding. The result was the first Deaf Futures event, inviting deaf alumni to give advice to undergraduates on how to get work and stay employed. This was delivered in BSL and led by deaf undergraduates.

Deaf Futures

Following on from the success of this event, we applied to Action on Access (www.actiononaccess.org) for funding to continue this work with other partners within higher education. The premise was to create a sustainable network and in conjunction with the existing Employment Opportunities Group to share good practice across HEIs. We developed a series of workshops for staff, students and graduates.

The staff-facing workshops were opened to disability advisers, careers advisers, and work placement teams and to anyone who had an interest in developing employability services for deaf students. A series of workshops were developed focused on exploring the barriers faced by deaf students in trying to gain employment, work placements and voluntary work; Access to Work (ATW) and teaching practical skills for coaching. The final event was an online webinar which illustrated how this Deaf Futures network could be sustained and disseminated knowledge and good practice across the sector.

The student-facing events took a slightly different focus. The first event was a full day practicum consisting of a number of different presentations, workshops and 'market place' advice stalls. Delivered fully in BSL, it was open to a national audience and aimed to give undergraduates first-hand advice on how to start their own businesses, information about jobs and work experience and practical skills and techniques for interviews and CV-writing. The latter events included role-play and hands-on activity. Feedback from the day indicated that this type of event

provided students with access to valuable information and skills that they would not have otherwise had access to. Asked what they had learned from this event, the students emphasised, in particular, the practical interview skills, shared experiences and an awareness of the world of work and the range of opportunities on offer to deaf people.

From our experience, it is apparent that students and graduates lack an understanding of employability skills and the ability to define what some of the skills mean. Even trickier is the ability to translate their experiences into a demonstration of these skills. Evidence emerged via the Deaf Futures events and individual career coaching appointments that this was particularly the case for deaf students and graduates using BSL as their first language. Therefore, the second workshop utilising a group career coaching approach aimed at assisting deaf students in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the terminology used in relation to employability and to demonstrate different types of examples they could use to evidence their employability skills.

The focus for this workshop was written English. Students looked at examples of job specifications and job descriptions and discussed employers' expectations of graduate level application forms. In particular we discussed that what the students were writing was not necessarily what the employer was asking for, or expecting. Literacy barriers were also being confounded by cross-cultural miscommunication. A literal deaf-cultural answer for why they want a job will not necessarily be the answer the hearing employer is anticipating. Students completed a Skills Audit using a tailor-made, visual and language modified Skills Glossary. They were encouraged to provide their own individual examples to evidence their skills. Previously this had been difficult as they had not understood the terminology of the job specification. Their evidence was then used to co-write personal statements. This was a practical session, which merely scratched the surface of what was needed, but indicated a real barrier for deaf BSL-users trying to enter the job market.

Some feedback from the students has been reproduced here, as it indicates not only the success, but also the need for this type of career intervention.

[Comments have been transcribed into English]

- *I have learned new words e.g. interpersonal, flexibility and adaptability*
- *I have learned lots which I didn't expect. I now know what I need to put on CVs*
- *I have learned about customer orientation and leadership, details that I can add as evidence*
- *I have learned vocabulary that I didn't know before e.g. Interpersonal, customer orientation*
- *I admit that the event has overwhelmed me because my knowledge is limited, so I hope the event may help. It's taught me that I should be involved in work experience.*
- *It's important to know how I can express my skills*

Events such as the Deaf Futures workshops ensure that key employability skills are also being introduced to and accessed by deaf undergraduates. It is not enough to assume that they will gain them in a similar manner to non-deaf students. All students felt that this session was extremely useful. Students were aware that they did not know how to express their skills on an application form even though the majority of students could easily evidence their skills in their first language (BSL). For this reason they appreciated that the terminology had been made more' simple and visual', that the presentations were in BSL and that the people supporting them could do so in sign language. This gave them a confidence they did not feel when trying to work alone in written English. Of course, the large number of deaf students studying at UCLan made this type of event possible. This raises the question of how HEIs can support deaf students where there is low-incidence within their institution, where there are few interpreters available, and therefore where workshops of this type cannot be delivered. One answer is to organise regional or national events. The other possibility is one-to-one (interpreted) career coaching.

One-to-one career coaching

One-to-one career coaching appointments have been offered to deaf students and graduates at UCLan

Futures[2] since 2008[3]. These sessions are supported by a BSL interpreter. What follows is a case study exploration of career coaching with one deaf student. Greg[4] started to attend career coaching sessions in 2009, partly with a view to building and developing a skills-based CV. The first CV he brought to the session demonstrated a lack of understanding of specific employability skills terminology. He had created a skills-based CV which only mentioned a very limited array of skill sets including communication, organisation and team working. In addition, the evidence supporting the skills sets was limited. Working through a BSL interpreter, it was obvious that Greg had sufficient skills and experiences to draw from; however, he lacked understanding of employability skills terminology, and how to use English to translate these experiences into evidence based skills. The amount of evidence expected from employers also meant his CV was weak and would not meet a job specification. For example, here is an excerpt from his CV, which shows a lack of evidence, brevity of response and limited linguistic ability to convey evidence of skill set:

> **Organisation Skills**
>
> I need to be organised for my degree studies and this has polished my already existing organisational abilities.

Therefore, early career coaching sessions focused on exploring Greg's understanding of a range of employability skills and what the employer would be looking for under each of these criteria. Through this exploration it became evident that Greg had a limited understanding of what each of the skills set meant. Whilst this issue is not limited specifically to deaf students and graduates, it is compounded by linguistic and aural challenges.

Firstly, I utilised a skills dictionary to provide Greg with plain English definitions of specific employability skills, which were explained in detail in BSL. In follow up coaching sessions, time was spent revisiting Greg's understanding and asking him to provide appropriate (and numerous) examples of evidence. Once Greg understood the meaning and the employers' expectation of each criterion, he was able to articulate his experiences and skill sets in BSL. The problem remained that he did not have the academic or formal language to convey these experiences onto paper (see Farrar, 2007). During one appointment the interpreter intervened and commented on the possible loss in translation. On reflection it became apparent that when the interpreter was translating my comments and advice into BSL, the formal language, expected by an employer was being lost. In order to make sure Greg was understanding, for example, the term interpersonal skills, the interpreter would sign, working together. In doing so, they failed to understand and therefore to portray the range of skills that fell under this umbrella term. In addition, Greg never got to know the actual term interpersonal skills. This is one example of the need for cross-cultural awareness and mediation to ensure clear and appropriate communication and understanding.

Even more enlightening was the realisation that when I was giving verbal examples of what employers would be looking for in a CV or an application form, and in particular, examples of the formulaic written expressions usually required, the BSL translation changed not only the formulaic language but also the English modelling of the answer. So, for example, when I was giving verbal examples of how to evidence Creativity and Team work, I said:

'The degree programme has given me the ability to generate innovative ideas for reports and projects.'

The BSL Gloss, what the student saw in BSL (via the interpreter) was:

> LINK CREATIVITY TEAM WORK MEix BEEN MEix GIVEN DEVELOP IMPROVE EITHER REPORTS OR PROJECTS IDEAS HOW? ixDEGREE THROUGH BEEN

The literal back-translation of this; how the student would translate the BSL back into English would be very possibly the following:

> 'Together creativity and team work for me have given me the (ability) to develop, improve reports or projects. How (have I gotten these skills)? By getting a degree.'

2 UCLan's centre for Careers, Employability and Enterprise.
3 This did exist prior in a different format.
4 Name fictionalised and permission given by individual.

What the student was receiving in BSL was not English structure, and so when Greg reproduced this in his own written English, it did not resemble the language of the examples given. The result was a better understanding of what was required but still a poorly written CV.

As a result, I developed a number of written examples to demonstrate the way to present and convey evidence of specific skill sets. I also took their written examples and rewrote them to show how they should be written in a CV. This visual and hands-on practice proved invaluable over the course of our career coaching sessions. In addition it was necessary to work closely with the interpreter to ensure that they fully understood the employability terminology and the importance of trying to emphasise how the evidence should be written down. As Farrar (2007) explained:

> Interpreters and communication support workers need to know the word but also to have a clear understanding of its meaning. Only then can it be spoken, interpreted, comprehended, absorbed and internalised (p.238).

This was not a quick fix-it remedy. Career coaching with Greg lasted for over 12 months. The experience led us to organise a student event entitled 'Filling in the Flamin' Form' where we distributed tailor-made resources for the deaf students; a visual, plain English Skills Dictionary, a plain English Employability Booklet, Tips and Hints for Getting a Graduate Job. We also had an interactive session modelling the work being undertaken with Greg. Students benefited greatly from this session and have asked for more events to be delivered. For Greg, his search for (graduate) employment goes on. Nevertheless, he is more independent and he is better able to complete his own CV. Here is an example of Greg's revised CV extract following our work together:

> **Organisation Skills:**
>
> Effective organisational skills and self-motivation, which is demonstrated by my ability to continually meet deadlines, achieve good grades and balance the university course with part-time job as well as a dissertation project for the past two years. In my job, this skill is required when organising event such as play-schemes and day out trips for children.

Conclusion

Feedback from the Employment Opportunities Group, Deaf Futures events and individual career coaching sessions demonstrate the need for specifically tailored support for deaf undergraduates, for whom employability is a key issue. There are incredible barriers for deaf students to overcome in the pursuit of finding and securing employment. Added to this are the difficulties highlighted relating to literacy, formal writing and understanding employability skills. This in turn impacts on their abilities to decipher job specifications, complete application forms and compile CVs. Cross-cultural issues also need to be considered as deaf and hearing world norms are different. Both the deaf applicant and the hearing interviewer/ employer need to be aware of these issues and take them into consideration.

At its most basic, the project illustrates the need for higher education institutes to engage with their deaf students in the pursuit of employment opportunities. Finding a job for a deaf student or graduate is not the same process as for hearing students. Placement teams, career advisers, disability advisers and course leaders need to be addressing the employability skills agenda and work experience opportunities for their deaf students. More specific training for students, extra intervention in negotiating placements, awareness training for employers (and placement teams) will all contribute to a better experience. Hopefully, the Deaf Futures network will continue to discuss these issues on-line and disseminate good practice across the sector, so that deaf graduates and undergraduates have equal access and opportunities to secure employment.

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