

Creative Employability: The LSFMJ Student Lounge

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Abstract

The Student Lounge website, created during lockdown, was a response to the need for a more visible student skills and opportunities focus, as well as a response to the impending regulations from the Office for Students to deliver an employability-centric and quality Higher Education experience leading to good graduate outcomes. Created in collaboration with, and for, Film and Media students, the project aimed to foster a new culture and heightened visibility of employability within the school through a visual, creative method. I presented this project at the RAISE Conference in September 2022.

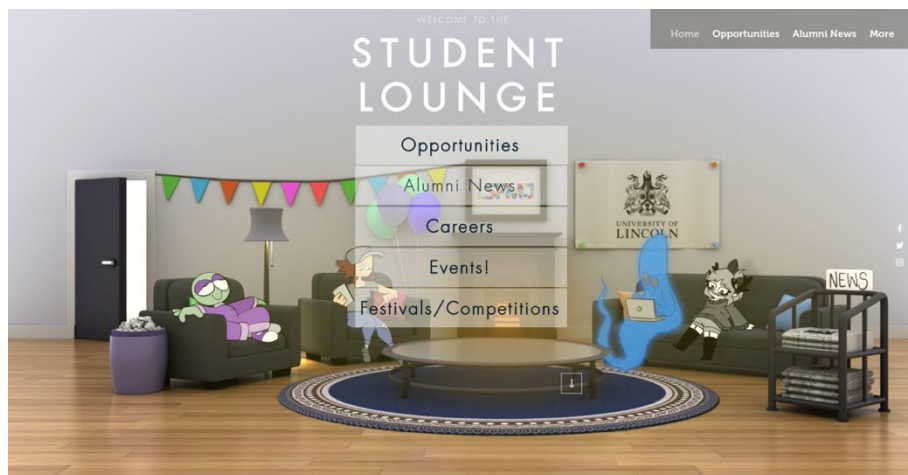
This article will discuss the challenges and context of the Student Lounge and will explore its inception, development and impact within the School of Film, Media and Journalism at the University of Lincoln.

<https://www.lsfmjstudentlounge.com/>

Keywords: LSFMJ Student Lounge, Employability, Opportunities

Summary

My project, which was presented and discussed at the RAISE conference in 2022, is an employability-focused digital space for students within the Lincoln School of Film, Media and Journalism. This space is an animated website that students access via their Blackboard module sites, and directly, in order to view current opportunities for work placements, experience, events, festivals and careers initiatives. Via a user-friendly blog, students can scroll through various news and opportunities that interest them and click for contact details to find out more. The Student Lounge, created in 2021, has become the key site for employability within our school and its footfall has increased since its inception, with many students checking in regularly to find out the latest updates and events that are taking place on campus and nationally. The aim of the Lounge is to foster an understanding of the importance of employability in Higher Education, and to make students aware of how accessible opportunities for work experience and internships are to them. Key employability-focused staff members have access to the site to enable updates to remain relevant and regular. I also circulate Lounge highlights to all students in our school to ensure their continued engagement.



Project Background

We have an intrinsic ability to adapt within the worlds we create and shape, suggests Kolb, and to learn within our worlds; this learning is reinforced by “the texture and feeling of human experiences” (2015, 1-2). Experiential learning links learning in Higher Education with personal development and employability (4) and has become a core value within the sector. Whilst employability has always been a focus within Higher Education, the pressure building around new regulations has led to tensions between the idea of fostering the individual, creative development of learners and getting them into the workplace after graduation. In recent years, these debates over “work-ready” graduates and the position of HE institutions as “highly integral to economic prosperity” have exploded (Tomlinson, 2017). In 2021, as universities began to emerge from lockdown, Lord Wharton, Office for Students’ Chair, stated in his annual review that universities must meet the “baseline requirements” to avoid “pockets of poor-quality provision”, whilst in early 2022 the Office for Students announced its thresholds for the HE sector. Employability has become regulated; at WONKHE’s The Secret Life of Students Conference in February 2022, Nicola Dandridge argued that such regulation was wholly legitimate.

As institutions adapted to the pandemic in 2020, and we became more proficient at teaching and learning online, there was a need to reimagine spaces and opportunities for our students. Watermeyer states that the pandemic “quickened the inevitability of technological change” and acknowledges that the resulting digital disruption was challenging for academics and students alike (2021, 638). Certainly, the pace at which we had to adapt was taxing, but the need to ride the wave of digitisation was essential and HE institutions have responded. Digital platforms were used to develop interview techniques as well as teaching at Deakin University (Coldwell-Neilson, 2021), whilst Norwich University of the Arts developed a Profile digital tool for students to build their CV and experience within. NUA also developed an Ideas Factory, a creative consultancy for live work experience, and similar initiatives have become increasingly popular now across UK institutions. At Lincoln, our Careers team has developed a number of digital initiatives, including a job

vacancies board: CareerLinc, and digital interviews, whilst our former School of Film and Media (now Film, Media and Journalism) houses New Media Lincs, a production company offering live work experience to our students.

I took up the role of Acting Deputy Head and Employability Lead of Lincoln School of Film and Media in September 2020 and saw an opportunity to develop something meaningful for our students within the digital space. Spaces are important, within and outside of the curriculum; they enable learners to develop their confidence, to recognise their abilities and to “make sense of their lives” (Middleton, 2018, 10). The Student Lounge was intended to be a space in which to hang out, browse opportunities, news, festivals, events, and careers advice. It would also, crucially, make employability more visible to our students at a time when OfS nationally ramped up the need for such visibility. Employability should not feel forced; it should be a natural transition from creative learning and self-actualization to the creative workplace.

Discussion

This project was not intended to be merely a one-stop job shop; the challenge was to begin to change the culture of employability and of opportunities within the school of film and media at the University of Lincoln during and beyond the pandemic.

We are a creative school, and it was important that this project was undertaken in an innovative, collaborative way. I had led the BA (Hons) Animation programme before and during the pandemic and had forged some strong working relationships with my students during this difficult time, as we all began to adapt to our new digital learning environment. One animation student in particular, James Pearson, had become highly proficient at creating short hybrid animated videos for the university to help ease anxiety for new starters and to guide students through health and safety regulations during COVID. I discussed the idea of creating a digital Student Lounge with James and he was eager to become involved. He designed the lounge website, which I oversaw, over a period of seven months and he, along with two of his peers, created three diverse animated characters to place into the lounge to demonstrate the different learning styles of students. As McCaffery (2000) explains, a “one size fits all” approach is not effective within education; it was vital that the project appealed to all learners by addressing Equality, diversity, and inclusion. Whilst communicating with each other online proved more time consuming during the process of the website development, the Lounge was successfully created and ready to launch by May 2021.

As we emerged from lockdown, we engaged with employability-focused events in the school such as Industry Week, our Careers Readiness programme, and an Employability Pitstop. The Student Lounge began to be advertised at our live events, it gained traction and its student footfall increased exponentially. I showcased the site at various staff meetings and introduced it to students across our courses. I invited specific staff members to become editors on the site, such as our Director of New

Media Lincs. The Student Lounge quickly became the location for such opportunities, as well as for national online events, campus guest speakers, careers initiatives and festivals. The site was malleable, which has proven to be important, as I have edited, added, and adapted tabs to include an alumni news section for success stories. This was a valuable addition and enables students to read about and follow in the footsteps of leavers who have entered the creative industries; alumni speakers are a vital element to the HE experience because they help to inform and alleviate the anxieties of students who realise that they, too, can enter the workplace with the right skills.

The project is not without its challenges: these have largely focused on staff and time resources. The student stories blog remains underdeveloped because of this and requires an extended team to help update this and other sections, beyond the two of us who regularly edit the site. The site designer has graduated and is now working in the animation industry (the site project became part of his portfolio of work), and I intend to add his success story to the Lounge in the near future.

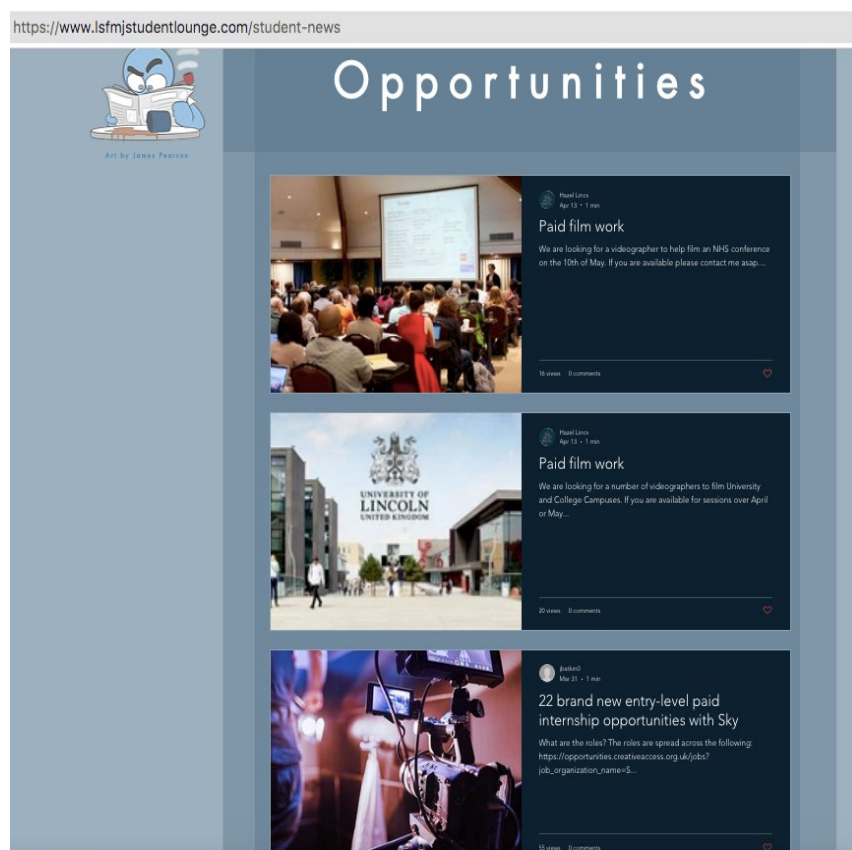
Outcomes and Impact

The Student Lounge has proven largely successful since its launch in May 2021, evidenced by its footfall.

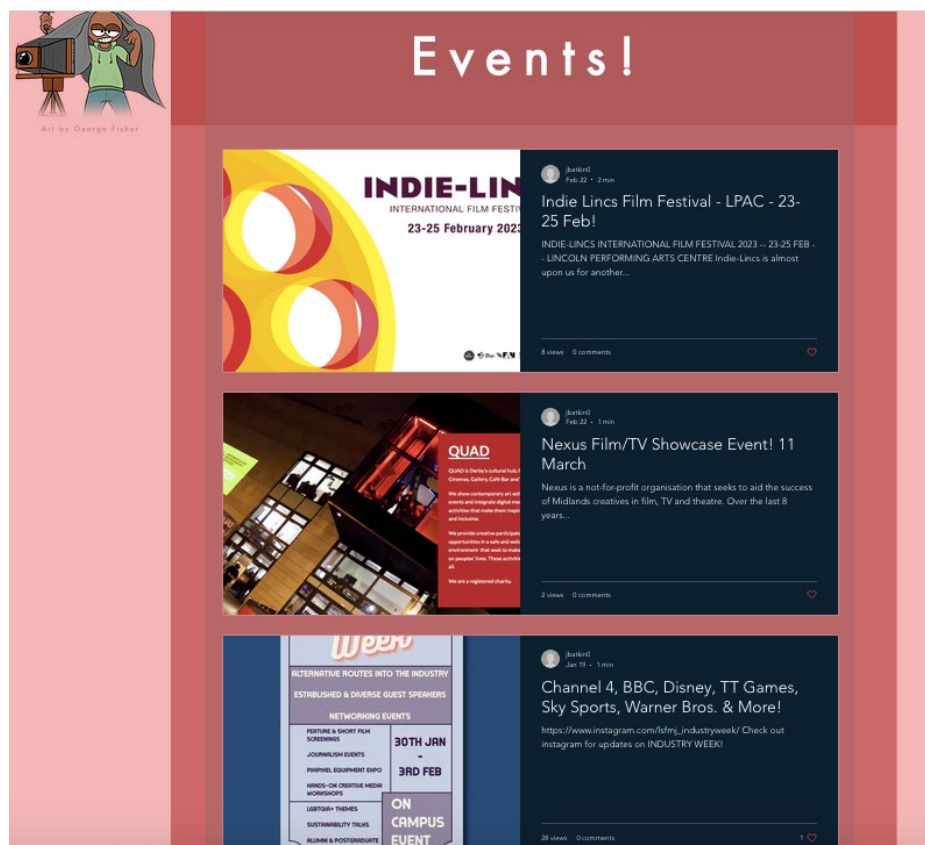
At its launch, it received 37 post views, rising to 175 site sessions and 195 post views by February 2022, and its footfall continues to be healthy. A recent example of the success of the Lounge and its footfall among our students was a post about a number of paid internships, which received over 52 views within a short timeframe.

Students have fed back that the Lounge is a useful resource for them, and that they find its design both fun and inclusive; the Lounge

has been created as a safe space for all students to access. Harnessing digital literacy whilst also engaging with employability is an innovative form of pedagogy



(Marshall, 2015, 13). The idea of a lounge itself, within which sit three animated 'students' beside a welcoming fireplace, creates a sense of belonging and comfort for its visitors and the familiarity of the same room and students at each return emphasizes this. The Lounge, designed by, and for, creative students, has become an established space to visit on a regular basis, with site traffic data evidencing the return of such visitors. The site has been embedded into Blackboard module sites, so that every student can access the space regularly and with ease.



Another challenge of the project has been the idea of changing the 'culture' of how students view employability. As can be seen in the image above, the footfall within the Events page is considerably smaller than that within the Opportunities blog page, with the exception of the teasers for our annual Industry Week, which proved popular among students and achieved a good level of site traffic. The Lounge offers work experience, internships and graduate jobs as standard, but it also asks students to consider activities and talks, with which they can become involved. Extra Curricular Activities are closely tied in with employability: Griffiths et al argue that such engagement can help to highlight a student's distinctive qualities in the job market (2021, 1294), and explaining the importance of this to students can help them to see the value in the culture of extra curricular events. This is something that we need to do, more overtly, within HE. Charles Handy's presentation at the WONKHE conference (Handy, 2022) discussed the need to personalise employability, for it to

be present within and beyond the curriculum, and for students to realise they are gaining transferrable skills each day of their studies.

Student feedback also highlighted a desire to see more student news being updated on the site, the opportunity of watching recordings for those students off campus, such as online masterclasses, and to feature more film opportunities that may extend beyond the county. To develop the Lounge, more staff resources are needed, to enable it to grow into a detailed and regularly updated site for students to fully benefit from.

Currently the Lounge is valuable in its advertising of job opportunities and innovative activities that are led by New Media Lincs, such as immersive theatre experience days, and extracurricular master classes for cinematography led by Film Production staff. In addition, it promotes guest speaker talks across the school, our annual international Indie-Lincs Film Festival, and Industry Week.

The aim is for the Student Lounge's purpose to extend being about more than job opportunities - it is also about fostering a positive culture of thinking about the creative industries, and about the importance of identity. We hope to grow the student footfall across all areas of the Lounge as we begin to shape their understanding of the value of extracurricular activities and events, and for students' understanding of employability and work experience during their studies to be reflected in future graduate outcomes data. The challenge, here at Lincoln and elsewhere within the HE sector, is to encourage learners to understand the culture of employability and the value of work experience for future employers who are the "gate keepers" of industry; it is clear that employers perceive such experience as "advantageous and to reflect proven worth and performance" of graduates (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021, 392).

Conclusion

As Employability Lead, I was keen to develop a visual and creative space that was not inhibited by an over-abundance of corporate text, in order for this space to appeal to film and media students. No such space had existed before that tapped into employability in such a direct, visual way. I can report, after nearly two years of its launch, that the Student Lounge has created an informative channel with which to communicate opportunities to all students and, in doing so, has improved their experience.

The Lounge site has been showcased and shared with colleagues across the school and beyond it to College Teaching and Learning and Lincoln Academy of Teaching and Learning (LALT) colleagues, as an example of best practice. It has also been platformed to external colleagues at the RAISE conference, who commented positively on its innovation.

We continue to develop our commitment to employability within Film, Media and Journalism through work placements, internships and events, and the Student Lounge has enabled these to be promoted in a way that is inclusive and efficient. This project has addressed the need for easy accessibility to creative industries opportunities, as well as beginning to cement employability as a culture within our School, and it has been used as a tool during our Career Readiness Talks to all students, to continue to raise awareness about its value. It is not an isolated innovation; the Lounge complements and promotes the good practice of employability that our programme leaders, module co-ordinators, New Media Lincs and industry week leads are engaging with on a daily basis.

Employability is at the core of HE and universities are striving to meet and exceed expectations; the pandemic has necessitated a more digital route to opportunities, events and portfolio-building and we have seen this developing across the sector. We all need to continue to build digital platforms that engage our learners to meet this need, within an increasingly hybrid world of teaching and learning. Student engagement with employability remains strong within our School; the importance of fostering confidence, agency, and curiosity of learners (Harrington et al, 2021, 136) is at the heart of what we do at Lincoln, and projects such as the Student Lounge have become part of that journey.

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