

Certifying Students - a crazy idea?

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Introduction

- LSE and York developed two very different IT certificate programmes for students. These programmes were designed to:
 - ensure students acquired the IT skills they needed for their coursework and future careers
 - provide the students with recognition for training undertaken and/or skills obtained
 - increase our students' job prospects by providing them with evidence of IT competence for prospective employers
- We'll show how our certification programmes have developed to meet the needs of all three interested parties: students, IT trainers and employers

History of Certification at York

- **Early 1990s:** Increasing recognition that many students arriving at the University had problems with information handling and IT. As a direct result the Iliad for University programme was set up in 1994 as a pilot collaborative project between the Library and Computing Service to bring all incoming students up to a basic level of IT competence. The impetus for its development came from staff working in the 2 services, rather than from a top level strategic move.
- **Early 1990s:** Academics at York began to think that student community work should be recognised and investigated external funding, which was eventually received from the North Yorkshire Skills Council and HSBC.
- **1996: Dearing Report** The University showed more interest in student skills after the Dearing Report and made top level decisions that it wanted to be involved with providing and recognising extra-curricular activities.
- **1998:** The York Award was established and consisted of a University certificated programme of transferable skills training, allowing students to build a skills portfolio, including IT competence.
- **2001:** Iliad for Workplace courses developed and piloted.

Reporting Structure at York

- Iliad Programme Manager initially reported to a Steering Group, who reported to Teaching Committee. The Steering Group comprised Librarians, The Iliad Programme Manager, Head of Computing Service and User Support Group, York Award and Careers Service.
- More recently, a Board of Studies for Supplementary Programmes has brought together the non award bearing programmes within the University. This Board of Studies reports directly to Teaching Committee. Iliad Steering Group has been disbanded.
- The programme is annually reviewed by Teaching Committee.

Development of the Iliad Programme

Iliad for University – IT for Higher Study

- Initially a major programme available to all Departments at the beginning of the academic year, using Computing Service and Library tutors to train over 600 incoming students in 5 sessions.
- Open assignment, gaining a certificate and points towards the York Award
- By 2008, numbers had fallen to below 80, with few completions.
- In 2009, the programme was revised and moved into the VLE. It is available to all students in all years and has been widely used.

Iliad for Work – IT for the Workplace

- 4 courses: Office Skills (Word and Excel), Working with Databases, Web Page Design and Graphics using PaintShop Pro. Cost: £15.50 for each course.
- The course content was developed from our own experience and other qualification systems (eg CLAIT Plus, ECDL Advanced), not from employers.
- 100-120 students per year.
- Office Skills consistently the favourite, closely followed by Web Page Design. This year, Databases made a surprise jump in the stakes.
- High percentage of overseas students.
- Evaluations show that the courses are very popular.

The Exam

- Each course has a 2 hour closed exam. Students are allowed to take in workbooks –example to be provided.
- Accrues points towards the York Award.
- 85% take exam, first time pass rate: 90%.
- Written feedback is given.
- Students are allowed to retake once if they fail, second time pass rate: 100%.

The Certificate

- Each certificate details the skills learnt.
- University of York endorsed, with Registrar's signature.

Conclusions from the York experience

- Students want concrete proof of skills learnt to show employers and are prepared to spend money to get this.
- Students want to accrue points towards the York Award – for some this might be an easy option.
- According to York's Careers Service, evidence shows that it is the combination of academic study, work experience and leisure interests that help to develop the range of skills and competencies that employers seek

History of Certification at LSE

- **2001** – LSE introduces a home-grown LSE student certificate program to encourage students to attend training and get the IT skills that they need.
 - Students must attend training workshops and actively participate in the training. Attending a suite of related courses makes a student eligible for a certificate of attendance in that subject
 - Huge success - training bookings jumped by 250%
- **2003** – LSE introduces the ECDL qualification for staff and students
 - Free training materials are provided and the logbook and tests are offered at cost
 - Two thirds of students never complete (71 out of 213 complete)
- **2006** – Introduced all four ECDL Advanced exams
 - Free training materials and again offered at cost
 - 90% of those registered never completed (3 out of 32 registrations)
- **2007** – Changed LSE certificate programme to Certificate of Achievement, to better meet the goals of students wanting to prove their IT skills to employers and to meet our goals of improving their skills, including the ability to retrieve what they had learned in order to pass a skills quiz
 - Based on attending a number of courses and passing a multiple choice skills quiz in Moodle
 - Students have 2 hours to answer approximately 50 questions.
 - Not invigilated.
 - Pass rate is 85%.
 - Number applying for certificates dropped off considerably – nearly 80% (down from 191 to 42) - BUT number of students attending training stayed high.

Conclusions from the LSE experience

Students

- Want recognition of the work they've done outside of their degree programmes BUT they don't want to spend a lot of time or money to get certification.
- Motivation to study for and complete a certification outside of a structured programme may also be a factor in low completion rates
- There is no more drive to complete a more valuable or expensive certification than a free one

Training department

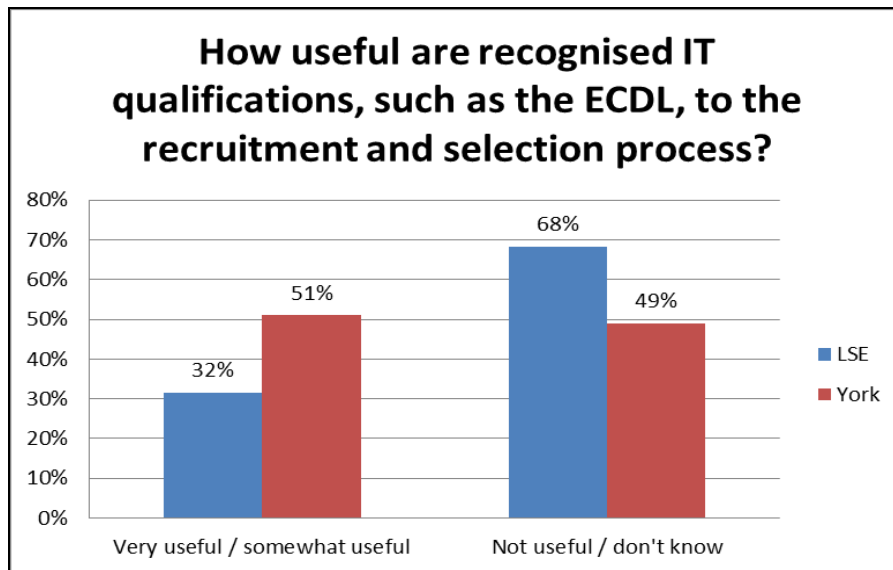
- A low-key, light touch approach, with a low admin overhead, is an effective way of incentivising students to dedicate time to improving their IT skills
- The admin overhead for ECDL and ECDL Advanced programmes makes them unattractive options, considering the student response to these initiatives

Meeting the objectives of students and training departments, but what about the employers?

- In 2010, LSE and York contacted employers in their areas to ask about certifications
 - LSE contacted 137 UK employers of LSE graduates
 - York contacted 50 SMEs in the York area

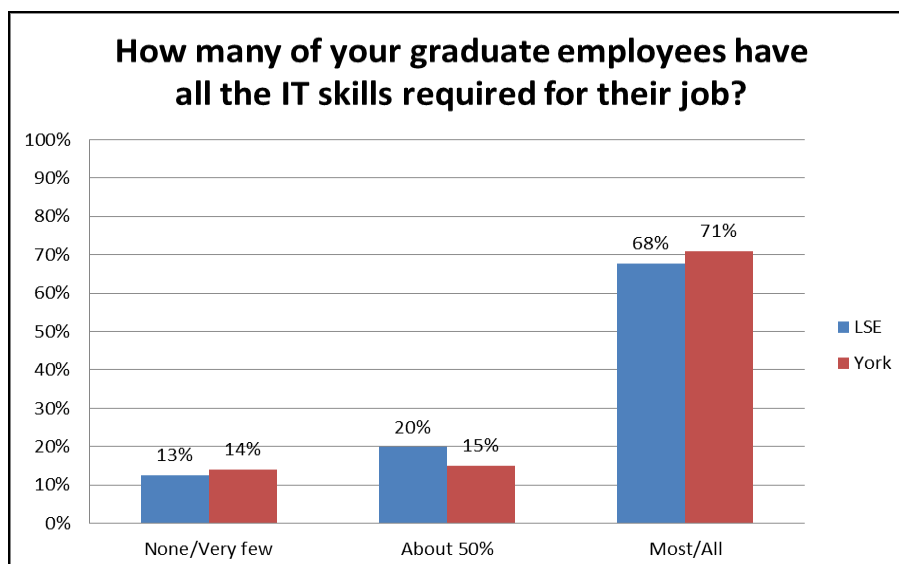
How useful are certifications?

13% said MCAS/MOUS, 7% said ECDL Advanced, 2% said ECDL (LSE data only)



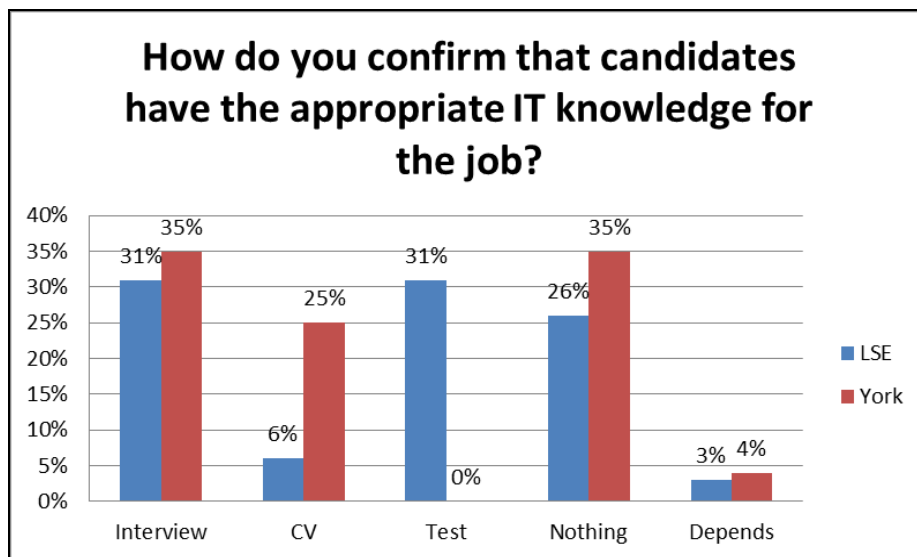
Does this mean all the student have all the skills required?

Quite a few do, according to hiring managers



How do employers check for IT skills?

How you interpret the results is an open question. However, between 26% and 35% do nothing at all, with only 31% - 35% relying on the interview



What do employers think we can do to better prepare students for work?

Roughly a quarter of respondents to LSE said "...improve their Excel skills and get them involved in practical or work-based use of IT"

Do the certificates meet the needs of the employers?

Not in the way we intended:

- The certificates themselves are of little value to employers
- But the process of gaining them is valuable in that students have practical application of skills
- Certificates encourage skills gain outside of a degree
 - York award consists of a practical and cohesive skills test, based on a real world scenario
 - LSE award assesses whether students can retrieve information they previously learned
- Both encourage students to attend training and fill in skills gaps

What are the lessons learned?

- Certification is useful, but maybe not in the way it is traditionally thought of.
 - For students, it recognises their work and improves confidence, while encouraging them to improve their IT skills
 - For training departments, it provides a way of incentivising training to increase participation and learning amongst those who think they don't need training
 - For employers, it can ensure practical skills and, if employers and training departments are able to work closely together, it can ensure the required skills are prioritised in training departments
- For LSE, putting quotes about Excel skills ("Advanced Excel skills are prized and rare in the general population") on plasma screens around the School led to a jump in Excel bookings
 - In 2007-2008 5 out of 7 Excel courses were in the top 10 most popular courses, but after the advertising (2008-2009 and 2009-2010), all Excel courses were in the top 8
 - 2008-09 and 2009-10: 42% of certificates were for Excel (offer certificates in Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access and Web Design)
- Certificate programmes should be useful to all participants and the delivery should be tailored to meet the objectives of all involved.
 - One size doesn't fit all
 - You can do much with little resources if you take the time to find out what is required, desired and needed

How does this link to Conference themes?

- In accordance with LEAN principles:
 - In house certification is more time efficient than national certifications such as ECDL, as the training is tailored and doesn't include unnecessary items
 - In house certification is cheaper than national certifications, it does not involve costly administration overheads
 - In house certification adds value to academic degrees