

Transcript – Podcast: Episode 1 - Applied Software Development

Host: Dr Tom McCallum, Lecturer and Academic Developer

Guest speakers: Jordan Newlands and Alexander Wedekind, BSc (Hons) Applied Software Development students

Tom:

Welcome, everyone. This podcast is being brought to you today by Moray College UHI. My name is Dr Tom McCallum. I'm a lecturer here at Moray College UHI. And I'm joined today by two students on the new Applied Software Development degree, Jordan Newlands and Alexander Wedekind. Today we're going to be talking about employability and how to earn while you learn. Do you want to say hi guys.

Jordan:

Hello, Hi, I'm Jordan.

Alexander:

Hello I'm Alexander.

Tom:

So great. I'd like to give a bit of background on the degree just for the new listeners out there, who don't know anything about it, and set the scene around what Alexander and Jordan had been doing for the last few months. So the degree started in September 2020. So this, Jordan and Alexander are part of the first cohort of students on the course. And amazingly, we've already got just under a third of our students on placements already in companies throughout the UK. The inspiration for the degree was to focus the skills that employers demanding for software and data related jobs across all sectors of industry. So skills such as team working, agile working practices, communication and presentation, are really in demand by employers out there, not just the technical skills. So from a degree like this, you could become a software engineer, data engineer, go into IT operations, or become a web developer. So there's lots of avenues for growth and job careers out there. We're lucky enough to be collaborating with IBM. So all our students get access to a special tier of the IBM Cloud, and access to a vast range of learning resources, where you can study everything from chatbots to quantum computing. And thanks to IBM, and many other companies across the world, we've weekly guest speakers on everything from the games industry to database architecture and going from India to the USA. These add context and a richness to the learning that makes everything our students learn relevant to their careers. And we'll be hearing a little bit about that today from Jordan and Alex. So the students are working on projects in teams and groups throughout the whole time they're with the course. And these groups are regularly rotated. So they get to know everybody really well on the course. And there's a lively kind of online atmosphere. And the course is online throughout the four years. And we aim to try and get employers local to you. So that, you know, you're not having to necessarily move away from perhaps your rural location. So we're looking for very much remote type careers, or careers located where you are. After just first weeks, we had a huge, fantastic success. Our, our students, we entered three teams, and we won two first places and a second place at the IBM Call for Code competition. It was a spot challenge against 100 universities and over 900 students, and our teams won some fantastic prize money and some placement opportunities. So going really well at the moment, we're having some exciting things going on, and hopefully today, we'll explore some of those with you the listeners. So what do the

students really think of the course? We have people from all sorts of backgrounds. So, Jordan, do you want to tell us about, kind of, what attracted you to software and why you picked this particular course?

Jordan:

Absolutely. So I was previously doing the HNC in Computing but I found it didn't quite correlate to what I was sort of familiar with having done the Foundation Apprenticeship. Like having done that, like I can get an experience in the workplace, so like the, it was just really different when I was learning the HNC it didn't quite match up. So when I heard about the Applied Software Development degree, it just seemed to tick all the boxes for me and I sort of got enticed into it, well not enticed, I was sort of like a dummy tester. And also I really liked how you were like getting feedback before the course even started.

Tom:

So you came from a Foundation Apprenticeship, kind of style course. And this course you found to be very similar. Is that fair to say?

Jordan:

I think so. I think there's a good mix between the sort of theory side of like the HNC and the applied side of the more Foundation Apprenticeship. I think it's a good mix between the two that sort of gets the both the best of both worlds.

Tom:

Excellent. And Alex, you've already had a career and kind of see, you're what I think is known in the business as a career changer. What made you make the change? What- what are your goals? And kind of why did you pick this particular course?

Alexander:

I wanted to change my career, I think just because I've been for 10 years in my current one, and I don't know, I guess I just hit that point that a lot of people do. And I've done that job for a long time. But I kind of fancy a change. This, this course, it kind of seemed to tick the boxes, because I was always interested in things like mathematics, for example. And yeah, those kind of like, like, like, the more precise sciences, those subjects at school, they've always interested me and, and also this, it seemed to incorporate creativity within that as well. So without that kind of, like, creative problem solving, but at the same time, like a mathematical aspect to it, that seemed that seemed to be like just right for me. And then why I picked the course specifically was because I spoke to you on the open day. And at first, I was actually quite worried about starting another course because, because I'm older. So I felt like I couldn't really afford to enrol on something that then didn't result in, like employment somewhere.

Tom:

Yeah

Alexander:

You know, like, so yeah, I didn't want, there's- there's many different things that I could have done, but I didn't want to do a degree just for fun. I didn't want to do like, I don't know, I don't know, an arts degree or an upholstery degree or something and then go back into my previous career, the point was to change career. And from, from our conversation, it seemed like the degree was very,

very much focused on like a practical application of skills rather than academic knowledge in isolation. So that's, so it kind of solved, it kind of solved all my worries that I had beforehand.

Tom:

Perfect. I honestly haven't coached Alex to answer these questions. But that was really good. Thank you. So obviously, I set out the context at the beginning and said, you guys have been working in teams. Jordan, do you want to go first in? How was that to begin with? It seemed like a bit of a struggle. But do you? What do you think were the benefits of just going full kind of tilt into that team working now that you, you're, you're doing, you're actually unemployment?

Jordan:

Yeah, absolutely. At the start it's a struggle, but as with everything, it's just, you just have to get yourself familiar with it. And that's the best way to learn is to dive straight in. Having done it now for quite a few spins, lost count, I think we're a lot more sort of comfortable with working in a team and we all sort of know each other a lot more. I think at the start, there's a bit of nerve, but now, now, we've all sort of know each other. We've all used to working in teams, doing the daily stand ups, it's really routine now. That's exactly what happens in industry so it's perfect.

Tom:

And Alex, what's your experience been?

Alexander:

It's been, yeah, it's been good. It's been like, because it's quite new, everything that I'm doing here, because it's so different from what I've done for the last 10 years. Like I find it like easy to lose my way sort of thing. So I get caught up in all these new tasks and skills that I'm trying to learn if that makes sense. So as an example, in the job that I'm coming out of because I've done it for a while, like it's easy to focus on teamwork and staff interaction because the actual job part of it, it kind of becomes second nature, done if for so long. Whereas because this is all quite new, so things like teamwork and communication that you're normally quite good at you kind of like all of a sudden you start struggling, because, because you're somewhere else, where everything's difficult and new.

Tom:

Yeah, no, great. It kind of, how did, did you find that the, the fact that, the communication was online and not, I know your kind of your current job is very face to face. How did that play into your challenges of actually kind of kind of getting to know people on the course?

Alexander:

I think in terms of making a connection with the other students, I think, I think the challenges were minimal really. I mean, I know it's difficult because, because we haven't really been able to meet anyone online- in, in, in real time, like we haven't been able to. We were going to have a week at the induction at the beginning of the year, we haven't really been able to do that due to circumstances. So I think, I think all the students, like, I think everyone jumped into it really well. There was like, like, these days, the way that we communicate on the cross, it's quite familiar to us. We've all used social networks before to communicate. And this it, but it hasn't really been a struggle. So yeah, I think yeah yeah.

Tom:

Yeah I know that kind of, obviously, we're all working in a different way, because of COVID. And it was just honestly, we couldn't have planned COVID to kind of happen and make our course online, we planned for it to be online. So I think that hopefully, kind of came across and meant that you guys might have had a slightly easier time than perhaps people transitioning from a face to face to an online, you know, it was always the plan to do it this way. And the benefits of that, obviously, for you guys. For those listening is that, you know, many tech jobs now are remote. And therefore, you're learning, you, those skills that you need to use to be able to communicate with a team based out of London, out of India, out of the USA. So and hopefully, that's coming across and you're, you're developing those nicely. So just moving on, I spoke at the bit about kind of how we use the industry speakers to give you kind of, to take the academic stuff and the practice and around teamwork, and the technical skills that you're learning in class, and kind of get a real sense of, well, what's, what's the practical use of them? What is the, you know, are these things for real? Is what my lectures are telling me real and true and useful? Have you been surprised at the variation of what you've been kind of been surprised by kind of a singular message around teamworking? That all the guest speakers I think have given you. But also that perhaps there's more to software than just games? So perhaps, we'll go to you, Jordan, what have you thought of the guest speakers? Have they been useful to you and your learning journey so far?

Jordan:

Yeah, definitely. I was just surprised, like, there's such like a range of different people from all different backgrounds. It's really interesting to learn about how, like, all the opportunities in this field, it's just, it's so wide. It really has something and yeah, as you said, teamworking, it's, it was the message, as you said, across every single one of them, so it just sort of reinforces the fact that pick the right course, I know, in a way, but it's really it's really sort of reassuring to me.

Tom:

And what, how about you Alex, have you found the kind of, what impacts have the guest lectures had on kind of your learning and your outlook of what kind of things are possible for you?

Alexander:

They, I thought they were great in terms of in terms of giving me like, sort of like a view into an industry that I don't have any experience of I've never, never been in tech. So having somebody that's actually worked for years, talk about things like how do they like to interact with their employers and their customers and their employees? And how do they like to hire people? How would they like people to communicate those kinds of things, they're, they're good to hear. So, so quite surprised. I like the variety of applications. Like for example, there was one, there was one guest lecturer that, that dealt with the AI chatbots

Tom:

Yep, in, think that was Dr. Mike Grindle in using chatbots in health situations.

Alexander:

Yeah, yeah. And I was and that that latched onto what I've done in quite a major, I was quite surprised that I wasn't I wasn't expecting to find, you know, such a strong link there between, between software programming and what I'd done in the past. But yeah, that was that was really interesting.

Tom:

I think one of the things that we really want to kind of bring out on the course in terms of employability is the fact that software is an enabler for all industries. So like, you've got a big background, in another area, Alex, and you can take now take the knowledge of tech, and think, OK, well, what problems did I have in my previous career that I can now find solutions for? And I think that's the really exciting bit. You know, and why it's really good to have that outside perspective. So what, what for you, at the beginning, I laid out some of the skills that the we thought you guys would be, would be picking up? From hearing the guest speakers, and from kind of speaking to, add interviews, what are the things that come across to you from employers, as the kinds of you know, we haven't really spoken too much about tech skills. And yet everybody wants to do kind of a course like this. That's the only thing they think about. So what, what kind of things would you say that you've picked up are important to employers, and that you're learning on this course? I hand over to Jordan.

Jordan:

Yeah, I think that's like, like a misconception I had was that it was all about sort of the skills and like your ability to do X and X framework or whatever. But really, it's a lot about sort of your attitude to sort of working and sort of learning to work as a team. Importantly, sort of communication I think is a lot more important, like the ability to like learn new skills as well, like, the field where it's constantly changing, there's no point mastering something for just to be end up needing to do something else later on, if that makes sense. I think that's a really big one. Especially like the agile and the, like, some of the tools as well like the like JIRA, for example. Or Bitbucket, sort of they sort of, are really core, like, team working skills that are pretty much used in every business. I know that really helped me during my interview, getting like the placement, like that was amazing, like no other course, like a typical, like HNC, HND, degree, like, there's no teamwork element really, or if there is it's really minimal. So having like the whole course developed around this idea of like teamworking and, and sort of building projects really helped me I think.

Tom:

Cool. And how about you, Alex?

Alexander:

Yeah, pretty much what Jordan said he's really summed that up. That was, that was really good. Yeah.

Tom:

I know at the beginning Alex you, you, you were struggling with your- we get it all the students to do a personal development plan of kind of looking at the types of jobs, that are you saying, you know, I have no idea what I want to do. Do you feel that having the guest speakers and seeing the kinds of things perhaps, that Jordan and some of the other students are doing? You know, you're starting to think more OK that sounds interesting. That sounds like a good area to work. You said, So would you say if you had to now, now you go can go back to your development plan and say, actually, I kind of have a better idea of what kind of jobs I would like to go for now.

Alexander:

Yeah yeah, I think so, yeah, I think that was definitely due for an update the guest speakers have helped a lot and, and of course just the way that the course is set up. Because I remember, before I enrolled, you said that it was project based, rather than academic worked base. But I didn't, I didn't quite realise how much the course was, like, a mock setup of a real working environment that I

didn't expect. And that was, that's really quite helpful. It really shows me like how we're working with so it gives me, yeah, that it does help me a lot to like, you know, know what I should be going for big as we're like, sort of experiencing the projects the way they would be in, in a real working environment.

Tom:

Yeah, now I mean that's, that's definitely one of the aims is to essentially replicate the workplace in kind of, in a way that that's amenable to you guys learning the skills you need to and giving you a chance to fail and succeed and to do some interesting things. As we said, like the Call for Code project, and IBM did another one called Master the Mainframe that I think most of the students took part in. So we're able to take on both kind of, some projects for learning, but also take part in some really cool competitions. And for you guys to test your test your mettle against everyone around the world, which I think is pretty awesome. So Jordan, you managed to get an internship, you're, you're kind of first person to test the water with our model of earning and learning. How did you get it, you know, do you, what part did the course have to play in kind of you getting that? And are you enjoying it at the moment or is it a bit of a struggle?

Jordan:

That's a great question. Really good question. So originally, like, I started looking for something to do over the summer. So, you know, just like a, just like a wee three month placement over the summer. That was like my intention. But then I was sort of, when I was like searching and I think this one, its from HIE I think, can't remember wherever I found it. But it just it really like, like I was looking through the list and this one just shine, like really shined out as like a, like a big glowing, it just sort of seemed to, like be made for me, like all the skills, and it just seemed to really, don't want to reuse the phrase, but ticked all the boxes, just seemed perfect for me. The only, only issue was that it was like a 12 month one. But then I started thinking about like the course and the way it's structured and just realised that maybe, maybe that wasn't like miles away. Like maybe it was an option. So I was speaking with my lecturers, you and-

Tom:

And Douglas

Jordan:

Yeah, exactly. And now, I managed to, after some interviews and sort of talking about my experience on the course and sort of what I've done previously, how I was able to get a graduate placement in my first year of a degree, that speaks for itself.

Tom:

Excellent. See you, now you are earning and learning. And normally, when people are doing that they're doing effectively their, their course. They have perhaps two days out of their job where they go into university and they study. You, you, how is what we all doing in your placement different to that?

Jordan:

Yeah. So this is a very different approach. Instead, instead of sort of, like the normal Foundation Apprenticeship approach where you're doing certain day's work and certain days learning, it's a lot like right now my current week looks like I'm basically full time at my placement. And I'm basically I'm able to write up about sort of the stuff I'm doing and learning about for the course, and sort of

link it, to sort of what I've learned previously, and so learn from that. So it's really quite good in that sort of I can experience that full time and then still sort of catch up and sort of lectures. And it's it's definitely demanding, I think it's definitely worth it.

Tom:

But it doesn't feel like you're doing kind of two things, you know, hopefully the majority of it is the working and then you're just reflecting on that. And to show that you're picking up skills through that work.

Jordan:

Exactly, it's much better sort of, well integrated and sort of thought out, definitely.

Tom:

Cool. And in terms of your, I know, I think you mentioned earlier, Alex, that one of your your goals out of learning on this course is that to try and kind of start earning as quickly as possible. And to hopefully get kind of a placement or an internship. So, you know, I know you've obviously got your, Jordan came in with some technical skills already. You're starting from kind of scratch as it were. So it might take you a bit longer. You know, I presume you know, you've got a pretty positive outlook that you'll get there in the end and perhaps maybe kind of end of second year, you might be looking to, to get an internship, some placement work?

Alexander:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think I think I'm like, I'm being well prepared for that. Especially with like a strong focus on teamwork. So yeah, yeah.

Tom:

Cool. So, just kind of genuinely then just a few, few words on how's the course kind of met your expectations in terms of its relevance to industry in terms of employability, giving you the skills to get a job, has it fulfilled its remit for you? Would you say it's been a success for you. So over to Jordan.

Jordan:

I think for me definitely. I mean, I've got a job so! Yeah, I think without the course I certainly wouldn't be where I am right now. So I think that's definitely a positive.

Tom:

And Alexander?

Alexander:

Yeah the other courses like it addresses so much more than I thought it would. Yes. There's like Jordan mentioned earlier, there's so much more to this than just learning a set of technical skills. And, and it's good that all those things are in the course. So all these things like, like teamwork, communication, and just, just all the different examples of like how technology is applied in so many different fields, like the kind of problems that people are finding solutions for. Like a good example would be the spot challenge that you mentioned. And we were looking through, through what the options that we had as a team and what other teams were doing. I guess there's so many solutions. So yeah, there's yeah, there's also just being able to think of what solution, of what problem, needs to have a solution found in the first place, that's an important part.

Tom:

Part of the design thinking.

Alexander:

Yeah, yeah. Like, like a lot of things that I would never have thought that, that they would, that they would be addressed. And yeah, so yeah, it's quite good as with a lot more, a lot more in here, like a lot more relevant skills than just, just technical skills.

Tom:

So we mentioned a couple of times, this IBM spot challenge. And I think that was really interesting, because we integrated that, obviously into our working week. In terms of the course last semester. Do you guys just want to talk about the products that you, what the challenge was, and what products you came up with? And also kind of why do you think that you guys did so amazingly well, after just kind of eight weeks on the course. So Jordan, do you want to

Jordan:

That's a great question, don't have a solid answer to it really. I know, I know me and Alex, think we worked together, we did the same solution for the Call for Code. So I don't know. Alex, if you got any ideas there?

Alexander:

I think it was just our all-round approach to it that helped. So I think it was like, the fact that the like, how well how well our application worked in the end wasn't that important, more the fact that we proved the concept of it, we proved that it was possible. And then I think what really made a difference was things like, like we went out of our way to, to find local charities.

Tom:

So what was the application you came up with, in the end?

Alexander:

The application was something that, that users can use to track their environmental choices, the environmental impact of their shopping choices. And they'll be rewarded with- for that with credits that they can plant trees with. You know you get like the tree planting charities and we found we actually found a couple of charities that were quite excited about it. And they were they had they had API's that we could use and, and one that was quite local to this area, specifically, was the Trees for Life charity, they're Findhorn based. They were they were like, they were quite happy about it, to work with us. And I think having that having that made a difference. You know what like, it was, it was like, although we'd only been there for eight weeks, we had quite a professional approach to it. That makes sense. I think we kind of like we kind of like, surprised ourselves in that way. Yeah. Yeah. The way we approached it was quite professional, even though we've only been here for a short while. That was I think that's what made a difference.

Tom:

Yeah, I think from just looking at as an outsider, kind of looking at what you guys were doing, I think your approach of you how you spend your time, the fact that you're communicating well over kind of Slack, and putting kind of coming up with kind of wireframes and kind of thinking about how the user experience would be, you know, these are all kind of project based skills which you, were you

when the result came, you know, I think, well, certainly from the outside, I think everyone was pretty shocked at how well you guys did you just because, you know, it had only been eight weeks. And I think the, the approach of thinking about a product, thinking about what, what the actual business case is for the product really came through in all the presentations. So again, that's about, you know, we spoken about employability, but there's also the ability to create your own products, hopefully when you leave this course. So you do you think, you know, with a few more competitions like that in the future, there could be a budding startup in the future for you, Jordan?

Jordan:

See where it goes. I'm sure it wouldn't be. I'm sure if we put our mind to it. I'm sure any of us could do that if we wanted. Absolutely. I think I think one of the key things circling back to that was like were design thinking sort of like, a lot more planning. So I went into it as like how it all work. Like for me, I don't think obviously, none of us were expecting to win. I certainly wasn't. But I saw it as a great opportunity to develop an app and get it sort of released. I think that was just a valuable experience in itself. But then sort of finding out that we ended up sort of taking a prize that was that was just fantastic. It was a really great all round experience. And just really, I know for myself, I think the whole course sort of just sort of got lifted knowing that.

Tom:

So absolutely. So that's all folks. That's all we have time for today. A huge thank you to Jordan and Alexander for joining us today. I hope you've, we've given you a good idea of you know how the course is geared towards employability and hopefully you too if you if you're thinking about a career in tech or just wanting to pick up some digital skills to add to your to your kind of existing career. You know, there's an ability for you to to earn and learn as well. To listen to more podcasts or to find out about any of the courses mentioned today in today's podcast, visit www.moray.uhi.ac.uk. Thank you very much for listening.

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