

Thinking strategically about employability and graduate attributes: Universities and enhancing learning for beyond university

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'There is no debating that a major responsibility for the smooth integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, lies with higher education institutions (HEIs).'
(Pukelis et al, 2007)

Introduction

This discussion paper accepts the following premises:

- Employability is about the development of a range of attributes and skills at university that can be transferred into situations beyond university study. 'Careers' is a subset of employability.
- The graduate attributes agenda incorporates the employability agenda.
- The assertion that 'colleges and HEIs should explicitly take account of their learners' future employment needs (including the generic skills and abilities needed in the workplace) in developing the curriculum and in the teaching and learning methods used' has an educational impact on programme and course design (Scottish Funding Council, 2009). This impact can be seen as positive (for example, by broadening the ways we encourage learning at university we broaden engagement with the subjects being studied) or negative (for example, by engaging with the employability agenda we are allowing an ideological position antithetical to university and disciplinary study to determine what we include in our curriculum).
- On occasion opportunities to develop employability attributes are best provided outside of the curriculum (and the teaching and learning methods used within it).
- To maximize the opportunities for undergraduates to develop attributes relevant after university, academics, educational developers, administrators and employability coordinators (or their equivalent) have to collaborate at both a strategic institutional level and local disciplinary level. This requires effective inter-professional working.
- The employability agenda is and has been full of ambiguity concerning both the definitions and the mechanisms most likely to lead to the outcomes employers and government analysts seem to be suggesting as important.
- The Scottish higher education sector has engaged with this agenda and has at least six intersecting strands of activity: graduate attributes for employability; work-related learning; work-based learning; entrepreneurialism; careers; and personal development planning (PDP).

- Undergraduate and postgraduate students engage with different strands at different times in their university careers, depending on their own needs, intentions and perceptions of relevance of the strands within the period of study.

For those institutions that place improved employability at the heart of their approach to enhancing learning and teaching, three questions need to be asked:

- 1 When do disciplinary approaches enhance employability attributes?
- 2 What employability attributes are unrelated to undergraduate study? What should we do about these? Should we recognise these? (If so, how?)
- 3 What practical enhancements can we make to our students' learning, teaching and assessment opportunities as a consequence of our answers to questions 1-2, above?

A few of the challenges to the employability agenda

Confusion, ambivalence and definitional ambiguity amongst academic staff	Student resistance and non-engagement	Difficulties associated with inter-professionalism between academics, careers and employability advisers/coordinators	Variety of needs employers' list not always realistic request of the universities
		and educational developers	
Ideology and associated priority mismatches Behind all of this is one fundamental question: what is a university education all about?			

So why bother?

- The key message from employability initiatives, work-related learning initiatives, work-placement initiatives and PDP initiatives is that enhancing opportunities to develop work-related learning and employability enhances learning of the subject being studied.
- Well-designed opportunities resultant from these initiatives focus on reflective practice, encourage resilience, help students make meaning of and in a range of situations (that is, broader than the immediate classroom), and expose students to unfamiliar settings and assist them through the related anxiety. All of these are related to positive retention outcomes.
- In many cases a degree is a necessary but not a sufficient route to graduate employment (Tomlinson, 2008; Brooks and Everett, 2009).
- The recent economic downturn, mass higher education and widening access have made the labour market for graduates more competitive (Tomlinson, 2008).

Recent conceptual models for mapping employability attributes

For ease of discussion, this paper draws on four current (2009) publications to underpin possible discussion about curriculum and broader strategic enhancement:

General model

CBI and Universities UK (2009) *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the world of work*. In this document, employability 'skills' are defined as: 'A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy'. The skills then described include self-management, team-working, business and customer awareness, problem-solving, communication and literacy, application of numeracy, and application of IT, underpinned by a 'can-do' approach and demonstrating relative innovation, creativity, collaboration and intellectual risk taking.

Research-oriented model

Vitae (2009) *Researcher development framework consultation*. This provisional document is particularly useful in the context of research-teaching linkages as it provides an idea of the attributes currently valued by employers of career researchers, that is, universities. It is also a useful guide for the broader attributes potentially valued outside of the university. In its taxonomy, as well as knowledge base and cognitive skills, it includes personal qualities, self-organisation, career development skills, professional conduct, project management, communicating effectively, working with others and leadership, relating to the broader context, and application of research and knowledge exchange.

Employability-oriented model

Ruth Bridgstock (2009) offers a slightly different conceptual model of the components for career management, where implicitly employability is the driver of the undergraduate experience:

- intentional and reflexive career management for employability
- employability skills (including self management and career building skills)
- underpinning traits and dispositions (for example, openness to experience intrinsic career motivations)
- discipline-specific skills
- generic skills
- self management skills.

Recent graduate model

Celia Popovic and Carmen Tomas (2009) drew up the following list, following interviews with graduates concerning skills they needed to develop when they reached the workplace:

- literacy, especially writing for diverse audiences
- personal attributes, particularly assertiveness
- people-related skills
- social networking skills
- dealing with difficult situations and recognizing what to do when a theoretical model fails
- career-related: finding out what career they don't want, understanding the profession they might want, knowing how to go about finding the information.

Re-organizing the curriculum?

Some of the basic decisions which need to be made at a strategic level are:

- How will central quality enhancement approaches be one of the drivers for engagement with the agenda?
- Should the institution focus on **academic champions** who drive the agenda at a local level, supporting them through learning and teaching development type funds? Or should it invest in **special interest groups** in which a requirement is that academics drawn from across campus work collaboratively with colleagues in careers and employability? Or is it most effective to do both?
- How will recognition and reward systems support the implementation of changes to the curriculum concerning work-related learning?
- What processes will be put in place for effective employer engagement?
- How can professional bodies be engaged with to inform disciplinary-oriented practices?

The key decisions which need to be made at programme design level are likely to be:

- identifying when it is most effect to **embed** opportunities likely to fulfil the employability agenda
- **embedding** these across the different levels of study
- identifying where **add-on** courses would deliver what can't be embedded
- planning for **just-in-time** employability opportunities
- utilizing PDP to encourage mapping and critical reflection on the range of opportunities with which a student engages (including extra-curricular activity)
- considering other methods of scaffolding student learning, especially workplace-based learning.

Current projects and their outcomes which help in making these decisions include the following:

General

QAA Scotland website, Employability Enhancement Theme:

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/Employability/publications.asp.

SHEEN Employability Resources for Higher Education in Scotland: www.netvibes.com/employability.

SHEEN Sharing: <http://sheensharing.wordpress.com>.

HEGESCO (2007) *Report on the Large-Scale Graduate Survey*:

www.decowe.com/en/hegesco-final-reports.

McIlveen, P et al (2008) *Career Development Learning & Work-integrated Learning in Australian Higher Education: A Discussion Paper*, Australian Learning & Teaching Council: <http://eprints.usq.edu.au/4255>.

A useful discussion paper (Australian context but the principles are similar to the Scottish context).

Work-related learning projects (including both curriculum development and placements):

University of Glasgow, Aiming University Learning @ Work: www.gla.ac.uk/services/aulw.

Glasgow Caledonian University, Real WoRLD Project: <http://www.gcu.ac.uk/realworld/>.

Personal development planning

QAA Scotland (2009) *A toolkit for enhancing personal development planning strategy, policy and practice in higher education institutions*: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/PDP/PDP_Toolkit_Final.pdf

Higher Education Academy (2006) *Learning and employability: personal development planning and Employability*:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/employability_enterprise/web0368_learning_and_employability_series2_pdp_and_employability.pdf

Placements

Hoyland, N et al (2009) JiSC Report on using technology to support placements:

www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/elearningcapital/helppfinalreport.pdf

Employer engagement

Hogarth, T et al (2007) *Employer and University Engagement in the Use and Development of Graduate Level Skills*, Department for Education & Skills Research Report RR835A at:

<http://aces.shu.ac.uk/employability/resources/RR835A.pdf>

Overview: The Intersecting Strands – managing the web of opportunities at university

This complex diagram attempts to give a flavour of the context in which attributes are acquired and developed. In the diagram, grey represents the primary (but not exclusively) areas of involvement for academic staff; blue for employability advisers and careers officers; yellow for educational developers; pink for the students. The importance of collaborative work between academics, careers and employability advisers, educational developers and student engagement is clear. What is solely 'owned' by the academics is only part of the diagram. It is of course a highly contentious diagram, but useful for pragmatic purposes when considering strategic policy design at an institutional level.

Under-graduate course of study	Curriculum design support from educational developers?		Work-related learning through placements related to the subject area	No formal engagement by academics with careers/employability advisers?		
	Learning and teaching contexts:	Work-related learning opportunities in the curriculum: (eg simulations; courses/modules concerning generic attributes linked back to the programme of study)		Or interactions with careers/employability advisers with opportunities embedded into curriculum?		
	Research-teaching linkages	Assessment and feedback	and not related to the subject area	Entrepreneurialism	Careers	PDP
Professional development (where relevant)						
Student attitudes towards the development of attributes for employability						
Student engagement with PDP to bring coherence and critical reflection to range of experiences						
Co-curricular activity	Membership of student societies	Work-related learning through part-time employment	Third sector voluntary work	Entrepreneurialism	Opting into PDP	
Careers Office	Career-specific 'mindedness' development		Support for placement	Interactions with employers	Involvement with PDP projects	
Serendipity	Social networks		Unexpected opportunities			

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- Tomlinson, M (2008) 'The degree is not enough': students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability, in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol 29, no 1, pp 49-61.
- Vitae (2009) *Researcher development framework consultation* (incorporating UK Grad Programme and UKHERD), available at: www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/161261/Researcher-development-framework.html.

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