

What is topical/emergent in Employability?

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Introduction

This paper provides a brief introduction to emergent trends related to the Employability Enhancement Theme. It focuses on seven core areas of topicality:

- changing economic environment
- balancing educational purposes and pragmatic work-related outcomes
- employer engagement
- placements
- postgraduate study, early career researcher development, and employability
- the importance of student engagement and self-reflection
- issues related to equality and diversity.

Changing economic environment

In many ways, the changing economic and employment context has given a real sense of urgency to this Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme. As employment is effected by the UK's fiscal situation, the role of the university in enabling students' employability is thrown into stark relief. At least initially, funding cuts leading potentially to higher unemployment at the same time as demanding more of those who remain in work place a premium on the range of attributes Scotland's graduates are able to demonstrate and take in to their workplaces. At the same time, however, degree programmes are not just about producing economically active citizens, but look to provide opportunities which inculcate a range of ways of thinking and life-wide skills.

Additionally, many academics have experienced - and expect to experience - additional burdens; burdens many see could trigger a trade-off between delivering discipline-specific and employability-related opportunities. A key concern over the next year will be the way in which institutions support their core functions in relation to their educative purpose, their research purpose, and their alignment with the needs of Scotland's employers.

Balancing educational purposes and pragmatic work-related outcomes

This is a central academic concern. Research has reaffirmed that, generally, academics' educational focus is on developing their students' critical thinking and, where relevant, 'technical' skills within disciplinary contexts, while government and employers focus on what is referred to as 'human capital' (especially the broad people-skills demonstrated by recent graduates) (Tomlinson, 2008; Cumming,



2010). A recent trend has been to explore this apparent conflict more closely. These explorations suggest:

- employers pay more attention to 'behavioural competence' than academics. Graduate employers, particularly, accept academic credentials as a given. Students are aware of this, recognising that **a degree is a necessary but not sufficient condition for graduate employment**. As well as their subject grades, students increasingly add institutional reputation and 'soft skills' to their understanding of how to gain a perceived advantage in a competitive labour market (Tomlinson, 2008; see also Rothwell, Herbert, and Rothwell, 2008).
- Scottish Universities, like the rest of the UK Higher Education sector, are large graduate employers. The recent shift towards articulating career researcher development also shows that Universities increasingly require applicants for academic posts to demonstrate more than the 'threshold' qualifications.
- taken together, this implies that **there is less conflict between what employers and universities would like to see graduates be able to demonstrate** than is often suggested. However, there clearly remain different perceptions, types of approach, and levels of engagement among academic staff.

The area of most friction, then, is not **what** the university sector would like its graduates to be able to do and demonstrate they can do, but **how** institutions provide both the curriculum activities and the broader opportunities to incentivise student development of a full range of attributes.

Employer engagement

There is evidence from the sector that many employers are willing to be involved in conversations with universities about what they look for in recruits and also how they might assist universities with respect to the development of employability attributes. The processes for enabling this involvement need to be simple, efficient and clear. Employers express difficulty in identifying who they should contact in a given institution. As well as a 'single point of entry', or equivalent, for employer engagement, institutions need to think about activities that develop and value building relationships between the academics who provide the undergraduate programmes, the students who undertake them, and the employers who are looking to recruit. Such activities have time and other resource costs. The central pedagogic 'cost' often involves a shift in how course activities are conceptualised and assessed, primarily from syllabus driven (content-focused), didactic methods to more interactive, process-driven forms of learning, teaching, and assessment.

Just to reiterate, however, the employers are looking at the ability to demonstrate mastery of a body of knowledge as a given. It is not in their interests to impact negatively on teaching in the academic disciplines. In this sense, academia is not in a moral competition with employers about the value of disciplinary experience and attainment. The employers do value the disciplinary experience, but only as part of a larger personal development package. If the way teaching is done or the cues for how learning is best achieved seem either not to provide encouragement or actively negate the development of a range of attributes, though, universities may be doing a disservice to their students.

There are additional benefits from engaging with employers. Through such engagement, if a wide range of employers is included, academics come face-to-face with the sheer diversity of graduate recruiters. If facilitated effectively, this can break down barriers to dialogue concerning what academics **are doing** and what employers **think they are doing**.

Moreover, being exposed to employer diversity provides a useful foil to over-dependence on general skills statements produced by government policy bodies and educationalists. While documents such as



the CBI's *Future fit: Preparing graduates for the world of work* are important for a sector-wide strategy, they tend to universalise the range of attitudes and needs employers have in terms of who and how they recruit. Educational analysis about the potentially super-complex or sophisticated environment in which students might find themselves post-university provides a useful way of understanding the importance of critical thinking (and being) as an outcome of degree study. Employer engagement, however, can help to temper idealisations or misconceptions about future work-lives and introduce elements of the practical, sometimes mundane or routine realities, to assumptions about student futures. In this respect, the work of Alan Brown at the University of Warwick is instructive. Even graduate recruiters, he notes, do not reduce what and who they are looking to employ down to a homogenous mass of critical high achievers. Employers instead look to a tripartite division of 'top talent', 'worthy conscientious', and 'steady' (Brown, 2010). Engaging with employers allows for a more nuanced understanding of the range of attributes and dispositions students can articulate depending on the nature of the career they wish to pursue.

In developing approaches to employer engagement, then, institutions need to:

- 1 acknowledge and respond practically to the importance of clear signposting to employers as to who to contact in the institution concerning their involvement
- 2 recognise that employers can offer more than just placements:
 - institutions can develop relationships in which employers feed into curriculum design
 - employers can give feedback to students on areas of attribute development that academics might feel less confident about. (This can help overcome some of the problems raised by not being able to offer students an authentic, work-place experience)
 - employers can show students how to 'do' knowledge transfer in a non-academic environment.

Placements

There is now an increasing emphasis on placement forming a component of an undergraduate education. Institutions recognise the resource difficulties associated with this. Central to effective placement experience is the provision of well-organised, meaningful placements that enlist formal reflection on what has been learned and, where possible, how this relates to what the student is learning in the context of their degree studies. Institutions and the subject areas housed within them need to make strategic decisions about the type and length of placements they can realistically offer. That placements do more than just the development of attributes useful for after university, is also becoming clearer. Recent work by Peter Green, for example, at the University of Ulster has suggested that in a field such as Business Studies completion of a placement year on average improves the final classification of award achieved by the students from 2.2 to 2.1 (Green, 2010; see also Bullock, Gould, Hejmadi and Lock, 2009).

Though informal work-experience and part-time work are of value, research suggests that they are not as efficacious for developing the range of employability attributes as formal learning experiences (Van der Heijden, Boon, Klink and Meijs, 2009). Having said this, however, the attributes acquired through part-time work, if explicitly reflected upon and formally recognised by a university as important, clearly have the potential to enhance graduate attributes and the associated desirable attitudes and personal qualities for employability (Muldoon, 2009).

Another emerging trend relating to the opportunity for offering student placements is student internships within the universities in which they are studying. Where these are offered they have traditionally been offered as extra-curricular activities. There are, however, growing opportunities for students to be used by universities as institutional research assistants. Given the growth in the emphasis on institutional



research on the student experience through surveys (such as the First Year Student Learning Experience Survey and the National Student Survey), but also through local action research on pedagogy as part of learning and teaching enhancement funded projects, both undergraduates and postgraduates can be provided with work-placements. Additionally, as the research-teaching linkages enhancement theme has demonstrated, course design can also integrate the simulation or actual provision of discipline-specific research assistant 'placements'.

Providing students with the opportunities to undertake placements takes not just organisational time but also time to persuade the students of their merits. Another factor that has to be taken into consideration by institutions considering placements is how to respond to student resistance. One study (Bullock, Gould, Hejmadi and Lock, 2009) suggested that central concerns for those students' who opted not to take up the opportunities for placements were:

- a focus on managing the transition into university life and not wishing to make that harder by needing to engage in a placement programme
- responsibilities to commit to their student accommodation in advance
- social commitments to their flatmates and friends
- uncertainty about the nature and demands of placements
- the perceived commitment of their lecturers to them doing a placement (lack of encouragement by academic staff has weight in the students' decision making-process)
- costs related to doing the placement.

It is clear that how universities deal with these concerns will be not only institutional but also discipline dependent.

Postgraduate study, early career researcher development, and employability

Employability has not been absent from the postgraduate agenda, with over a decade of skills training being offered for both taught masters and research degree students.

The postgraduate community is also clearly affected by changes to the economic environment. The higher education sector in Scotland seems to be in the midst of a paradoxical situation. This situation has two apparently conflicting aspects: one in which candidates weighing up the costs of undertaking postgraduate study against the economic benefits of entering the workforce potentially means fewer candidates applying for postgraduate study; at the same time as another, in which recent graduates delay attempting to gain employment by entering masters or PhD programmes.

Simultaneously, the strengthening of a career-wide approach to personal and professional development for researchers (as emphasised through initiatives such as the UK GRAD Programme and Vitae) means that those postgraduates who are research-focused cannot afford to ignore the need to develop a range of attributes.

One central consequence ensues from all of this: enhanced approaches to employability and employer engagement need to be maintained and enhanced in postgraduate programmes of study in order to:

- emphasise the value and transferability of a masters qualification or a PhD into the workplace to both students and potential employers
- continue to develop the attributes of recent graduates (that is, avoiding de-skilling after first degree experience)

- ensure that more research-focused students are encouraged to build a repertoire of associated postgraduate attributes.

With respect to postgraduate research students, research has noted that in the debate concerning postgraduate skills and attributes, the voice of the students themselves has been 'largely muted or ignored' (Cumming, 2010, p 408). This is of interest, when one realises that at least some students express a depth of support for the graduate attributes agenda and its relationship to their potential employability (Manathunga, Lant and Mellick, 2007). One potential trend is the inclusion of this voice in the design of postgraduate supervision.

Another is how to explore the impact of the context in which the postgraduates study on their ability to transfer the attributes they acquire to contexts outside a particular discipline setting. This exploration challenges dependency on fragmented lists which attempt to describe what individual students should be able to do by the end of a PhD, and refocuses the conceptualisation of the postgraduate as someone who can perform effectively as appropriate to different situations. Such a conceptualisation has been labelled 'contextual performance' (Cumming, 2010). It centres on the idea that research supervision is a complex relationship in which context, curriculum and pedagogy (and their associated values) play a role. From this, it is concluded that simple 'bolt-on' supplementary approaches to attribute development are less effective than those that take a more holistic approach to postgraduate attribute development. For a case study of a more holistic approach see Manathunga, Lant and Mellick, 2007. The significance of this is plain: if supervision becomes conceptualised in these terms, then lessons learned in the implementation of employability attribute development within undergraduate programmes will have adaptability to the research skills agenda. From this another way forward is closer collaboration between those who manage postgraduate skills, those involved in enhancing research-teaching linkages, and those who are engaged in undergraduate employability initiatives.

The importance of student engagement and self-reflection

A key requirement that employers speak of is graduates' ability to reflect on and evaluate their own work performance and that of others. It is a key skill that may not be fully encouraged in the university setting, where teacher-led feedback tends to be the practice. Indeed, such a system could be considered as inadvertently designed to stifle and remove student initiative, confidence and capability in being self-reflective.

More appropriately, it might be addressed by ensuring that the feedback processes involve students themselves, and not just staff, in the evaluation process. This does not necessarily mean that students will set grades for either themselves or peers. Rather, it could involve students in learning to reflect on and prepare a commentary or short presentation that evaluates their work against a set of criteria applied to any assignment or study activity. For best effect, it might most beneficially be applied to early activity within a course and frequently at appropriate stages of study within courses and throughout the duration of the entire programme.

This might mean that student assignments or group projects are broken down into small elements, so that students can become engaged in early and continuous self-reflection on their work. Electronic support through discussion forums and message boards may be particularly helpful for this approach. Large cohorts of students, on occasions in the high hundreds, can be managed as small groups through setting up small group work with an electronic communication platform to support this. Such a process provides diagnostic support for staff and students. For an example of practice that addresses self and peer formative group assessment and feedback, utilising virtual learning environment support, see the Glasgow University level 1 project with around 700 biology students, available at: www.reap.ac.uk/assessment/pilotsGUBio.html.

Issues related to equality and diversity

Two topics are surfacing with respect to equality and diversity:

- the first relates to equality of access to placements and the impact of increased competition between universities in and beyond Scotland. There seems to be an emerging trend of increased diversification in the university sector at the same time as equality evidence concerning student disadvantage suggesting this will be detrimental to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Arguably, those institutions with the most 'intellectual and cultural capital' will be able to provide their students with the best placements and employability training, thereby maintaining disadvantage
- the second relates to equality and diversity legislation, which requires public sector organisations to ensure that 'suppliers' are equality and diversity compliant. How this is interpreted asks institutional placement officers, particularly, to be aware of the impact of students finding themselves in a discriminatory workplace.

Implications?

Some of the implications of these apparent trends in terms of institutional responses to this variety of topics seem to be:

- 1 Identifying academic champions who are prepared to discuss with employers what is possible and to raise consciousness among colleagues concerning the potential benefits of employer engagement.
- 2 Exploring forms of continuing professional development for academics that range from:
 - raising consciousness concerning pre-existing good practices in both work-related learning in the curriculum and work-based learning through placement
 - workshops illustrating how and when it is relevant for employers to be involved in curriculum design or assessment practice across the levels of undergraduate and postgraduate study
 - support concerning how to design placement-based formative and summative assessment
 - opportunities for academics to visit employers
 - how to encourage and value student involvement in the processes of design and delivery of employability related opportunities
- 3 Growing partnerships between university careers officers, academics, employers and student bodies.
- 4 Matching 1-3 with the student body through student engagement processes in institutions.
- 5 Encouraging university equality and diversity officers to discuss the impact of legislation on placement experience.

Projects to watch out for

Learning to Work Two: see Placements projects announced by the Scottish Funding Council:

E-Skills Triple 'e' Placements Programme:

Partners: Edinburgh Napier University-led consortium of universities and colleges and E-Skills Sector Skills Council

This is a pan-Scotland project which will match students of any discipline in participating universities and colleges with business and information technology placement opportunities provided by 250 E-Skills Sector Skills Council (E-Skills) employers.

Third Sector Internship Project:

Partners: Queen Margaret University and the Open University-led consortium of universities and Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO)

This project will develop a national framework for managing and delivering a diverse range of quality internships tailored to the needs of third sector employers and full-time, part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students of any discipline at universities across Scotland.

Embedding Work Placements in Taught Masters Programmes:

Partners: Universities of Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Stirling

The project aims to meet student demand for workplace experience opportunities by tapping employer potential to provide and benefit from opportunities to have taught masters programme students undertake their dissertation in a workplace setting or in a consultancy role.

Education into Enterprise:

Partners: Adam Smith College-led consortium of colleges (east and west) and one university with the support of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce (SCC), Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (ASSC) and local Councils for Voluntary Services

Education into Enterprise aims to develop curricula which do not currently include accredited work placement opportunities to make this option available to students enrolled in HE courses at participating colleges and university.

Final publications from AUL@W: www.gla.ac.uk/services/aulw.

The Warwick Institute for Employment Research is a useful resource: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier.

As well as the Scottish sector's SHEEN Employability Resources website (www.netvibes.com/Employability) Alan Brown's blog is also a useful, regularly updated resource on careers, learning and identity: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/people/abrown.

Caveat to all these observations

The higher education sector in Scotland, like elsewhere, is not homogenous. Institutional mission and position within the sector mediates the level to which these observations are relevant. Employers are also a diverse group and the process of identifying employers who are interested and committed to university involvement is a time resource heavy one.

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