

Learning & Employability

SERIES ONE

Employability in higher
education: what it is –
what it is not

Mantz Yorke



Learning and Employability Series 1 and 2

The Learning and Employability series is primarily intended for staff in higher education institutions who are considering the enhancement of student employability. The publications will also be of interest to colleagues new to the area as well as those who are already engaged in developing employability and who wish to broaden their understanding of the topic.

In response to demand we have updated and reissued a number of titles from the first series of Learning and Employability, originally published by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT). We welcome suggestions for new titles in the series: email employability@heacademy.ac.uk.

Titles currently available are:

SERIES 1

- Employability and higher education: what it is – what it is not** (Mantz Yorke)
- Employability: judging and communicating achievements** (Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke)
- Embedding employability into the curriculum** (Mantz Yorke and Peter Knight)
- Entrepreneurship and higher education: an employability perspective** (Neil Moreland)
- Employability and work-based learning** (Brenda Little and ESECT Colleagues)
- Pedagogy for employability** (The Pedagogy for Employability Group)

SERIES 2

- Work-related learning in higher education** (Neil Moreland)
- Employability for research postgraduates** (Janet Metcalfe and Alexandra Gray)
- Employability and part-time students** (Brenda Little)
- Ethics and employability** (Simon Robinson)

The series editor is **Professor Mantz Yorke**.

The Employability Research and Publications Advisory Board reviews all Higher Education Academy Employability publications, and comprises **Professor Mant Yorke** (Chair), **Professor Peter Knight** (Open University), **Professor Lee Harvey** (Sheffield Hallam University), **Brenda Little** (CHERI), **Professor Kate Purcell** (University of the West of England), **Jane Artess** (Graduate Prospects), **Rob Ward** (Centre for Recording Achievement) and **Val Butcher** from the Higher Education Academy.

Copy-editing has been undertaken by **Dr Donald Millar** (formerly of the University of Leeds) and **Peter Thomas**.

The Learning and Employability series is being extended by the Higher Education Academy and will reflect changing challenges and priorities in the relationship between higher education and the many work opportunities likely to need – or benefit from – graduate or postgraduate abilities.

The views expressed in this series are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy.

1.	<u>Introduction</u>	2
2.	<u>Preview of key points</u>	2
3.	<u>Higher education and the economy</u>	3
4.	<u>What do labour markets want of higher education?</u>	4
5.	<u>Unpacking employability</u>	5
	5.1 Employability is not the same as employment	
	5.2 Employability as curricular process	
	5.3 Employability as achievement (and potential)	
6.	<u>A definition and an elaboration</u>	8
7.	<u>Alternative approaches to defining employability</u>	9
8.	<u>Is it inevitable that employers will be dissatisfied?</u>	10
9.	<u>The risk of being simplistic: core, key and transferable skills</u>	11
	9.1 Core and key skills	
	9.2 'Transferable' skills	
10.	<u>Employability is complex</u>	13
	<u>References</u>	15
	<u>Notes</u>	18

1. Introduction

This guide is intended to serve two purposes. First, it makes a case for employability as a set of achievements which constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition for the gaining of employment (which is dependent, *inter alia*, on the contemporary state of the economy). Employability is, on the analysis presented here, considerably more complex than some proponents of ‘core’, ‘key’ and ‘transferable’ skills have suggested, and is strongly aligned with the academic valuing of good learning. The second purpose is consequential, in that this publication has considerable implications for curricular activities in higher education, which are the subject of other publications in the Learning and Employability series.

The relationship between higher education and the economy has, for a long time, been a topic of debate, and the historical perspective is outlined in Sections 2 and 3. Sections 4 to 6 discuss the concept of employability, with a preferred definition being put forward in Section 5. Section 7 suggests that, whilst employers might ask for multi-competent graduates, some aspects of employment-related capability can only be developed in the employment context: work placements of various kinds during a higher education programme may however make a significant contribution. Sections 8 and 9 together constitute a challenge to simplistic thinking about skills.

The hard-pressed academic who is concerned to ‘get the flavour’ of the argument may find sufficient for immediate purposes in Sections 5, 8 and 9.

2. Preview of key points

- The relationship between higher education and the economy is longstanding.
- Employers generally see a graduate’s achievements related to the subject discipline as necessary but not sufficient for them to be recruited. In some employment contexts the actual subject discipline may be relatively unimportant. Achievements outside the boundaries of the discipline (such as the possession of so-called ‘soft skills’) are generally considered to be important in the recruitment of graduates.
- ‘Employability’ refers to a graduate’s achievements and his/her potential to obtain a ‘graduate job’, and should not be confused with the actual acquisition of a ‘graduate job’ (which is subject to influences in the environment, a major influence being the state of the economy).
- Employability derives from complex learning, and is a concept of wider range than those of ‘core’ and ‘key’ skills.
- The ‘transferability’ of skills is often too easily assumed.
- There is some evidence to suggest that references to employability make the implicit assumption that graduates are young people. The risk is of not considering employability in respect of older graduates, who have the potential to bring a more extensive life-

experience to bear.

- Employability is not merely an attribute of the new graduate. It needs to be continuously refreshed throughout a person's working life.

3. Higher education and the economy

The connection between higher education and the economy is long-standing. In its review of higher education four decades ago, the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) opened its presentation of four aims for higher education with the following:

We begin with instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour.
Robbins (1963, para 25)

The Report placed this aim first in order to counter the risk that the importance of higher education for the economy might have been ignored or undervalued, and it went on to offer the view that few would enter higher education without an eye to subsequent employment. The much more recent Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) drew particular attention to the vital role that higher education plays in a modern economy. Global competitiveness, it asserted, required that:

Education and training [should] enable people in an advanced society to compete with the best in the world (NCIHE, 1997, para 1.11).

The employability of graduates¹ has become an aim that governments around the world have, to varying extents, imposed on national higher education systems. This interest in employability reflects an acceptance of human capital theory (see Becker, 1975). Under human capital theory, the task of government is to foster conditions that encourage growth in the stock of human capital, since this is seen as vital to the performance of knowledge-based economies in a globalised society. A report from the Treasury puts it succinctly:

Human capital directly increases productivity by raising the productive potential of employees. [. . .] Improving skills and human capital is important in promoting growth, both as an input to production and by aiding technological progress. This has been recognised both in endogenous growth theory and also in empirical studies comparing growth in different countries (HM Treasury, 2000, pp.26, 32).

A previous Secretary of State for Education and Employment has claimed that a failure to develop people has contributed to the UK's 'productivity shortfall':

In part [the shortfall] reflects lower investment in physical capital. But in part it also reflects less investment in human capital – a less well-educated, less well-trained workforce (Blunkett, 2001, n.p.).

One important source of knowledge growth is the learning-by-doing that takes place in innovative workplaces (HM Treasury, 2000, p.45). Another is the higher education system. The higher education system is subject to governmental steer, one form of which is to give an emphasis to the enhancement of the employability of new graduates.

Some commentators have questioned these assumptions, asking whether human capital is the key to economic well-being (Morley, 2001) and whether 'employability' is anything but an empty concept. Even if the concept has value, there are questions whether higher education can develop employability as governments suppose (Atkins, 1999). Although these challenges have force, the notion of employability has far too much face validity for politicians to abandon it.

4. What do labour markets want of higher education?

When trying to appreciate higher education's potential for contributing to economic well-being it is helpful to distinguish between the formation of subject-specific understandings and skills² and the promotion of other valued skills, qualities and dispositions. Whereas the world of employment has, by and large, been satisfied with the *disciplinary* understanding and skills developed as a consequence of participation in higher education, it has been less happy with the development of what have been termed 'generic skills', such as communication, team-working and time-management.

Harvey *et al.* (1997) showed that employers in the UK tended to value generic skills more highly than disciplinary-based understanding and skills. Whether the disciplinary aspect was being taken for granted by respondents to their survey is unclear. As Brown *et al.* (2002) quote one human resources manager:

Academic qualifications are the first tick in the box and then we move on. Today we simply take them for granted. Brown (*et al.* 2002, p.19).

For some employers (the computer industry and social work provide two contrasting examples), disciplinary knowledge and understanding are vital. Indeed, in the field of information technology, accreditation by major companies is competing with awards from higher education (Adelman, 2001), corporate universities are growing in the USA, and the NHSU³ may have been a straw in the wind for the UK as well. For other employers, a general 'graduateness' (HEQC, 1997) appears to be deemed to be sufficient, which should be understood to include the possession of general dispositions, qualities and skills. (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996, noted that for many years over 40% of advertisements for 'graduate jobs' had been more or less indifferent to applicants' subject of study.) In

these circumstances, the message seems to have been ‘give us a bright and engaged graduate, and we will build specific expertise for this organisation on top of that’.

This is consistent with the views of Reich⁴ (1991, 2002). In his more recent work, he argued that advanced economies need two sorts of high-level expertise: one emphasising discovery and the other focusing on exploiting the discoveries of others through market-related intelligence and the application of interpersonal skills.

He suggested in his earlier work that these professionals, whom he described as ‘symbolic analysts’, shared a series of achievements. Symbolic analysts, he said, are imaginative and creative, have at their fingertips relevant disciplinary understanding and skills and the ‘soft’ or generic skills that enable the disciplinary base to be deployed to optimal effect. Higher education’s key contribution to national prosperity lies in development of graduates with such achievement at their disposal. This means that undergraduate programmes should be concerned with four areas in particular:

- abstraction (theorising and/or relating empirical data to theory, and/or using formulae, equations, models and metaphors);
- system thinking (seeing the part in the context of the wider whole);
- experimentation (intuitively or analytically); and
- collaboration (involving communication and team-working skills).

Educational institutions are not always successful in preparing learners for the complexity inherent in the two main sorts of activity that Reich attributes to symbolic analysts’ role. Learners are often expected to learn what is put in front of them and to work individually and competitively, and subject matter may be compartmentalised. Plainly, the education of symbolic analysts – who are likely to be those at the leading edge of economic developments of one kind or another – requires that institutions make a particular effort to foster the achievements that Reich highlighted.

Higher education is, however, not only about the education of symbolic analysts. There are other ways in which it can contribute to economic development. As well as preparing graduates and diplomates for employment-related roles of various kinds (and definitely not only that of the symbolic analyst), it has an acknowledged role in lifelong learning – for example, in educating further the middle manager so that he or she can manage more effectively, in ‘upskilling’ the teacher or process worker, facilitating the development of active citizenship, and so on.

5. Unpacking employability

There are many interpretations of ‘employability’. Those identified by Pierce (2002) and through ESECT’s work are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Pierce, 2002	ESECT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduates obtaining jobs (measurable to some extent through first destination surveys) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting a (graduate) job
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students being prepared for employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possession of vocational degree
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students gaining work experience (formal or informal, structured or not) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal work experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational [relevance] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good use of non-formal work experience and/or voluntary work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students becoming equipped with a defined range of skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possession of 'key skills' or suchlike
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skilful career planning and interview technique
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mix of cognitive and non-cognitive achievements and representations

In this Table, there are arguably three superordinate constructs of employability that map somewhat fuzzily on to the listed items:

- employability as demonstrated by the graduate actually obtaining a job;
- employability as the student being developed by his or her experience of higher education (i.e. it is a curricular and perhaps extra-curricular process); and
- employability in terms of the possession of relevant *achievements* (and, implicitly, potential).

Each is discussed in turn.

5.1 Employability is not the same as employment

In the UK, a key performance indicator is the proportion of graduates obtaining jobs (HEFCE, 2001) – any jobs, rather than what would normatively be accepted as 'graduate jobs'. However, as Purcell and Elias (2002) point out, graduates from different disciplinary backgrounds tend to differ in the time they take to get a 'graduate job', and for some the period of searching may take much longer than a few months. Local and regional fluctuations in economic buoyancy are superimposed on the national economic position, making employment in any case a problematic indicator. Their data show that, although the number of graduates entering the labour market has increased dramatically over the

last 25 years, these patterns are not recent creations caused by over-supply – getting a graduate job has, for some time, been an irregular and sometimes slow process. The Linke Report from Australia is worth quoting at length on the issue:

Whether at the aggregate level or by field of study there are serious problems in attempting to interpret institutional differences in graduate employment. There is clearly a need for a better understanding of the relative impact of regional economic, institutional, field of study and individual background factors on initial employment patterns before any meaningful interpretation could be made of institutional differences. And even then it would be necessary to monitor trends over time rather than rely on data from a single year. None of this, however, is to deny the potential value of employment data at the system level, where it has an obvious and essential role to play in both economic and educational planning. [...] Rather it suggests that as yet little meaning can be attached to differential employment status of graduates in terms of specific institutional factors, and therefore this data does not yet provide a useful indicator for institutional comparisons (Linke, 1991, Vol. 1, p.89).

The argument – and the problems – seem to be as valid today as when the empirical research was being undertaken for this report.

However, employability implies something about the capacity of the graduate to function in a job, and is not to be confused with the acquisition of a job, whether a 'graduate job' or otherwise. (Of course, all things being equal, the more employable graduates should be quicker to settle into graduate jobs.)

5.2 Employability as curricular process

It is a mistake to assume that provision of experience, whether within higher education or without, is a sufficient condition for enhanced employability. To have work experience, say, does not, of itself, ensure that the student develops (further) the various prerequisites (cognitive, social, practical, etc.) for success in employment. The same argument applies to whole curricula. The curricular process may *facilitate* the development of prerequisites appropriate to employment, but does not guarantee it. Hence it is inappropriate to assume that students are highly employable on the basis of curricular provision alone: it may be a good harbinger but it is not an assurance of employability. Employability derives from the ways in which the student learns from his or her experiences. This points towards the third of the superordinate constructs noted above.

5.3 Employability as achievement (and potential)

The student exhibits employability in respect of a job if he or she can demonstrate a set of achievements relevant to that job. The Business Studies graduate who has a vestigial grasp of quantitative techniques would not, for example, be appropriate for a market research post in which statistical analysis would figure strongly. He or she might, however, make a valuable contribution in human relations. This illustrates the context-dependence of employability. A repertoire of attributes and achievements may have a general value, but may well prove insufficient for some specific situations⁵.

On the perspective being taken here, employability is a (multi-faceted) characteristic of the individual. It is, after all, the individual whose suitability for a post is appraised⁶.

6.A definition and an elaboration

In this guide, and in others of this series, the following working definition of employability is being used in the light of the position taken in the preceding section. Employability is taken as:

a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

There are a number of points to be made regarding this working definition.

1. It is probabilistic. There is no certainty that the possession of a range of desirable characteristics will convert employability into employment: there are too many extraneous socio-economic variables for that (e.g. national, regional and/or local economic health, and the demand/supply ratio for the characteristics in question).
2. 'Skills' and 'knowledge' should not be construed in narrow terms. The richness of these concepts is elaborated below, and in the companion guide, *Embedding employability into the curriculum*.
3. The gaining of a 'graduate job', and success in it, should not be conflated. Higher education awards describe the graduate's past performance but some achievements vital for workplace success might not be covered, not least because of the difficulty of placing a grade on aspects such as drive, co-operative working and leadership. Large organisations may be able to fill in any gaps by recruiting through assessment centres, which use a greater range of (expensive) assessment techniques.
4. The choice of occupation is, for many graduates, likely to be constrained. They may have to accept that their first choice of post is not realistic in the prevailing circumstances, and aim instead for another option that calls on the skills etc. they have

developed. (Note here the value to the graduate of adaptability and flexibility.)

5. It may not be possible to maximise the benefits to all interested parties. The employer's interest in appointing a graduate implies its self-interest in maximising the benefit. The returns to the individual and the community are, from the employer's perspective, second-order, and the contribution of the individual appointee to the economy as a whole will be diffused to the point of invisibility (though, of course, human capital theory would expect economic benefit from the totality of appointments made by employers).

7. Alternative approaches to defining employability

Hillage and Pollard (1998) work towards a definition that is broadly similar to that adopted above. In the context of this guide, their account is taken to refer to what is needed to secure 'graduate jobs'.

Employability, to them, is about three abilities:

- gaining initial employment
- maintaining employment
- obtaining new employment if required.

In the context of this guide, this point can be taken as referring to 'graduate jobs'. They summarise this by saying that employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment (Hillage and Pollard 1998, p.2).

Brown *et al.* (2002) criticise this view as being ideologically loaded, arguing that it does not acknowledge that the condition of local, national and international labour markets is a powerful determinant of graduates' success. It seems, however, that they are confusing employability and employment. This could stem from Hillage and Pollard's use of the ambiguous term 'capability'. 'Capability' can suggest, first, 'potential' or 'necessary characteristics' or, secondly, getting employment which then attests to possession of those characteristics. Hillage and Pollard seem to be covering both, Brown *et al.* seem to have taken the second, and this guide leans towards the first.

Following Brown and colleagues' argument through, the individual's characteristics affect the extent to which – in the abstract – they may be employable, but the labour market and other considerations affect the probability that the graduate will be successful. They express this somewhat differently. They see employability as a combination of the absolute and the relative: the absolute dimension relates to the individual's characteristics, the relative dimension relates to the state of the labour market. Following Hirsch (1977)', they point out that, where many possess degrees, a degree confers no positional

advantage in the labour market: ‘at best, it enables the individual to stay in the race’ (Brown *et al.* 2002, p.9). To which the riposte, following Evelyn Waugh, might be ‘Up to a point, Lord Copper’, since the institution a graduate attended has a positional value. As Hesketh (2000) points out, some employers have a list of institutions from which they prefer to select graduates – and criteria such as the match of a curriculum to the employer’s business and the reputation of the institution can affect the graduate’s chances. Further, when a high proportion of the population has a degree, selection procedures can call into play criteria that reproduce a (maybe implicitly) preferred composition of the organisation’s workforce (see Brown and Scase, 1994, p.130ff.).

Hence Brown and colleagues offer a different definition of employability: The relative chances of finding and maintaining different kinds of employment. (Brown *et al.* 2002, p.9).

The Access to What? Project (Blasko *et al.*, 2002) shows that these relative chances are not the same for all students with equivalent qualifications – some groups face systematic labour market disadvantage. By the same token, though, the programme choices that students make, and their aspirations, also affect their relative chances. UK initiatives to widen participation in higher education recognise that it is important to inform choices and aspirations, preparing those from disadvantaged groups to compete effectively in the labour market.

Brown and colleagues’ definition does, however, imply some detachment from a major (some politicians might say ‘the key’) task that faces higher education – that of helping students to maximise the chances that they will succeed in the labour market. Higher education can contribute significantly to Brown and colleagues’ ‘absolute’ dimension of graduate employability, even though its contribution to the ‘relative’ dimension is necessarily indirect.

8. Is it inevitable that employers will be dissatisfied?

The grumbles of employers about the quality of graduates have been longstanding, though the evidence on the issue is uneven (Hesketh, 2000). Less well researched is the extent to which graduates may be dissatisfied with their lack of preparedness for the world of work. Initial findings from a survey of new graduates funded by HEFCE suggest that they experience difficulty with verbal⁸ communication, time management and ‘task juggling’ (Leon, 2002)⁹.

The dissatisfactions exist in relation to the transition between two kinds of culture, and may persist however much higher education is prevailed upon to address the ‘employability agenda’. The reason for this view is that much employability-related learning

occurs at the workplace, and not in a higher education institution. There are, of course, various approaches to bridging the gap, such as sandwich programmes and periods of work experience – but to exploit these to the full requires a degree of engagement by both employers and higher education that may not be achievable in practice.

The best that can realistically be achieved may be for higher education to facilitate the development in students of the understandings, skills and attributes that will help them to make a success of their careers. There comes a point in students' lives when they have to make a step-change: higher education can take them so far, but then they have to deal with the challenges that employment throws up. The situation is a bit like a rocket-powered aircraft being lifted by a conventional one up into the stratosphere so that it can maximise its performance at altitude without a prohibitive expenditure of fuel to get there.

This view implies that there will, in most cases, be a discrepancy between what employers would ideally like (a graduate perfectly attuned to their needs) and what higher education can reasonably supply (a graduate prepared, in both senses of the word, to learn what the employer wants, and to perform accordingly). The corollary is that the employer has to expect that the graduate will need to be inducted into the particular organisational culture and given the support to succeed¹⁰.

9. The risk of being simplistic: core, key and transferable skills

This section addresses in general terms what the achievements of highly employable graduates are. Other guides in this series offer more detailed suggestions.

9.1 Core and key skills

In recent years, much has been made of the desirability of students acquiring skills. Despite having a fairly wide view of employability, the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) chose to focus attention in its recommendations on the key skills of communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn. An inspection of Dearing's key skills shows that the first three are qualitatively different from the last. The first three can be seen as practical abilities that can fairly directly be demonstrated with degrees of skilfulness, whereas the last is primarily a self-enhancing ability that stands in a meta-relation to skilful practices in the workplace¹¹.

The Dearing approach to key skills is symptomatic of a widespread failure to underpin key skills with theory. Various lists of skills appear in the literature relating to employment¹², but

they seem to have been produced on an ad hoc basis. Wolf (2002, p.117ff) traces the public emphasis on skills in higher education back to 1989, when Kenneth Baker¹³ delivered a speech to the Association of Colleges in Further and Higher Education. Even though Baker himself seems to have forgotten 'core skills' (the preferred terminology at that time) fairly quickly, others in the business world and the political process pressed ahead in advocating them. The National Council for Vocational Qualifications built into a competence-based approach to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) curricula its own list of six core skills which it envisaged as being achievable at a hierarchy of levels, with assessment becoming more technically accurate as a result¹⁴. However, a range of theoretical objections and problems in implementing these core skills, inter alia, gradually discredited the NVQ approach.

The Review of qualifications for 16-19 year olds (Dearing, 1996) mutated core skills into key skills, and led to qualifications that were supposed to overcome the long-asserted failure of young people to develop into fully effective employees. These key skills, it turned out, were also not without their difficulties. However, with problems of implementation necessarily showing up some time after promotion, it is perhaps not surprising that the notion of key skills migrated into the Dearing-led review of higher education that subsequently took place.

9.2 'Transferable' skills

In the 1980s attention was given to 'transferable' or 'generic' skills. The basic idea was that skills learned in one context could fairly readily be transferred to another, and this is captured in a definition put forward by the then Training Agency, which saw transferable skills as:

the generic capabilities which allow people to succeed in a wide range of different tasks and jobs¹⁵ (Training Agency, 1990, p.5).

In an early discussion of transferability, Bridges (1993) differentiated between skills that were essentially context-independent (the use of word processing, say) and those that were context-dependent¹⁶. Context-dependent skills can be exemplified by behaviour that might be appropriate in one context (for example, challenging received wisdom in higher education) but that might not be well received in another (challenging an employer's way of going about things). Far from transfer being a simple translation, its potential applicability required an appreciation of how the change in context might impact. In the same vein, a recent analysis by Hinchliffe (2002) insists on the importance of developing situational understandings that are (at least potentially) able to cater for the unpredictability of happenings in the world.

Consideration of context-dependency led Bridges to a further category of skills which he

termed ‘transferring skills’ – higher order skills that enable the person ‘to select, adapt, adjust and apply [his or her] other skills to different situations, across different social contexts and perhaps similarly across different cognitive domains’ (Bridges, 1993, p.50). He points out that the exercise of ‘transferring skills’ involves very sophisticated personal/intellectual achievements that are much more attuned to professional behaviour than ‘the atomistic list of "competencies" towards which we are sometimes invited to direct our enthusiasm’ (ibid., p.51). This is another way of describing metacognition or self-regulation.

Whilst much writing on transferable or generic skills contains little more than ‘wish lists’ constructed by interested parties, it is worth drawing attention here to two approaches which do try to make connections between employability and theories of learning: Bennett and colleagues’ (2000) model linking

- disciplinary content
- disciplinary skills
- workplace experience
- workplace awareness
- generic skills

and Knight and Yorke’s (2002, 2004) USEM model which interrelates

- understanding
- skills
- efficacy beliefs, personal skills and qualities
- metacognition.

More is said about these models in the guide, *Embedding employability into the curriculum*.

10. Employability is complex

The position taken in this guide is that employability goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills, and is evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience. Notice that the commonly used terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘skills’ are not used. They have been replaced by ‘understandings’ and ‘skilful practices’ respectively, in order to signal the importance of a rich appreciation of the relevant field(s) and of the ability to operate in situations of complexity and ambiguity. There is a parallel here with Stephenson’s (1998) suggestion that the capable person can work effectively on unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar contexts as well as on familiar problems in familiar contexts (which is really a matter of routine).

Given that this account of employability stresses complexity, it follows that a pedagogy for employability (and the associated assessment)

- (a) needs to take the inherent complexity of the construct into account, and
- (b) will be promoting similar achievements to those that teachers in higher education tend to value.

Aspects of curriculum practice are addressed in the companion guides.

Much of the discussion of employability implicitly refers to the full-time student who enters higher education at around the age of 18 and who graduates at the age of 21 or 22, and deals with matters beyond the boundaries of the subject discipline(s) concerned. For older students (many of who will opt to study part-time), employability may take on a different colouring, since they may well have experienced employment and/or voluntary work prior to (or whilst they are) engaging in higher education. For them, the emphasis that they give to employability may be on the development of subject-specific understanding to complement what they have already learned about employability in general¹⁷. There is also a need to acknowledge the employment-relevant learning that ostensibly full-time students derive from part-time employment as they seek to fund their passage through higher education¹⁸.

Students, therefore, will develop their employability in ways that reflect their particular circumstances. It might be hoped that they would become 'capable' in the sense outlined by Stephenson (1998):

Capable people have confidence in their ability to

1. take effective and appropriate action,
2. explain what they are seeking to achieve,
3. live and work effectively with others, and
4. continue to learn from their experiences, both as individuals and in association with others, in a diverse and changing society. [. . .]

Capability is a necessary part of specialist expertise, not separate from it. Capable people not only know about their specialisms, they also have the confidence to apply their knowledge and skills within varied and changing situations and to continue to develop their specialist knowledge and skills . . . (Stephenson, 1998, p.2, minor presentational changes made).

Stephenson's words point beyond employability at the moment of graduation towards employability in the context of lifelong learning (a point that is implicit in all the definitions of employability discussed above). Though contemporary attention is focused on the transition between higher education and employment, it is important to remember that – as RSPCA stickers in the rear windows of cars provide reminders in respect of pets – employability, for most people, is for life.

References

- Adelman, C. (2001) The medieval guild in cyberclothes: international dimensions of industry certification in Information Technology. *Tertiary Education and Management* 7 (3), 277-292.
- Atkins, M. (1999) Oven-ready and self-basting: taking stock of employability skills. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 4 (2), 267-280.
- Becker, G.S. (1975) *Human capital*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Bennett, N., Dunne, E. and Carré, C. (2000) *Skills development in higher education and employment*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Blasko, Z. with Brennan, J, Little, B. and Shah, T. (2002) *Access to what: analysis of factors determining graduate employability* [A report to HEFCE]. London: Open University, Centre for Higher Education Research and Information.
- Bloom, B.S. (1956) *Taxonomy of educational objectives. Handbook 1: cognitive domain*. London: Longmans.
- Blunkett, D. (2001) *Education into employability: the role of the DfEE in the economy*. Speech at the Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 24 January (mimeo).
- Bridges, D. (1993) Transferable skills: a philosophical perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 18 (1), 43-51.
- Brown, P., Hesketh, A. and Williams, S. (2002) Employability in a knowledge-driven economy. In Knight, P. (compiler) Notes from the 13th June 2002 'Skills plus' conference, *Innovation in education for employability* held at Manchester Metropolitan University. Available at:
www.cardiff.ac.uk/schoolsanddivisions/academicschools/socsi/publications/workinpaperseries/numeric21-30.html
- Brown, P. and Scase, R. (1994) *Higher education and corporate realities: class, culture and the decline of graduate careers*. London: UCL Press.
- Dearing, R. (1996) *Review of qualifications for 16-19 year olds* [Full Report]. London: School Curriculum and Assessment Authority.
- Harvey, L. Moon, S. and Geall, V. with Bower, R. (1997) *Graduates' work: organisation change and students' attributes*. Birmingham: Centre for Research into Quality together with the Association of Graduate Recruiters.

HEFCE (2001) *Indicators of employment*. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England, Report 01/21.

Hesketh, A.J. (2000) Recruiting an elite? Employers' perceptions of graduate education and training. *Journal of Education and Work* **13** (3), 245-271.

Higher Education Quality Council (1997) *Graduate Standards Programme: Final Report* [two volumes]. London: HEQC.

Hillage, J. and Pollard, E. (1998) *Employability: developing a framework for policy analysis*. London: Department for Education and Employment.

Hinchliffe, G. (2002) Situating skills. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, **36** (2), 187-205.

Hirsch, F. (1977) *Social limits to growth*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Holmes, L. (2001) Reconsidering graduate employability: the Graduate Identity approach. *Quality in Higher Education*, **7** (2), 111-119.

HM Treasury (2000) *Productivity in the UK: the evidence and the Government's approach*. London: UK Treasury.

Jessup, G. (1991) *Outcomes: NVQs and the emerging model of education and training*. London: Falmer.

Knight, P.T. and Yorke, M. (2002) Employability through the curriculum. *Tertiary Education and Management* **8** (4), 261-276.

Knight, P.T. and Yorke, M. (2004) *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Leon, P. (2002) Graduates say degrees leave them short of skills. *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (22 November), p.6.

Linke, R. [Chair] (1991) *Performance indicators in higher education* [Report of a trial evaluation study commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2 vols.] Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Morley, L. (2001) Producing new workers: quality, equality and employability in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education*, **7** (2), 131-138.

NCIHE (1997) *Higher education in the learning society* [Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education: 'The Dearing Report']. Norwich: HMSO.

Pierce, D. (2002) *Employability: higher education and careers services*. Abridged version of a report prepared for AGCAS (mimeo).

Purcell, K. and Elias, P. (2002) Seven years on... Making sense of the new graduate labour market. *Graduate Recruiter*, 8 (October), 22-23.

Purcell, K. and Pitcher, J. (1996) *Great expectations: the new diversity of graduate skills and aspirations*. Coventry: Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick.

Reich, R.B. (1991) *The work of nations*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Reich, R.B. (2002) *The future of success*. London: Vintage.

Robbins L, [Chairman] (1963) *Higher education* [Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-63]. London: HMSO.

Stephenson, J. (1998) The concept of capability and its importance in higher education. In Stephenson, J. and Yorke, M. (eds.) *Capability and quality in higher education*. London: Kogan Page, 1-13.

Training Agency (1990) *Enterprise in Higher Education: key features of Enterprise in Higher Education proposals*. Sheffield: Training Agency.

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does education matter? Myths about education and economic growth*. London: Penguin.

Yorke, M. and Knight, P. (Reprinted 2006) *Embedding employability into the curriculum*. York, Higher Education Academy.

Notes

- 1 The term 'graduate' is used generically in this paper to indicate any student who has left higher education with an award up to and including the bachelor's degree with honours (hence undergraduate diplomates and graduates from foundation degrees are included).
- 2 The reference to 'skills' is made because of its widespread use, although there are some strong objections to the term (e.g. Holmes, 2001; Hinchliffe, 2002).
- 3 This started its short life as the NHS University.
- 4 Robert Reich was Secretary of State for Labor under the first Clinton administration in the US.
- 5 There is analogy to be made with the (now passé) notions of general and specific credit in respect of academic progression: general credit was in some curricular circumstances insufficient, and the student had to have acquired an appropriate amount of specific credit in order to progress.
- 6 Partially hidden here are assumptions about assessment, which is the subject of the guide, *Embedding employability into the curriculum*. Whilst high-stakes assessment attests, more or less well, to students' achievements, those selecting for employment often assume that it predicts workplace performance. The predictive validity of assessment is well known to be problematic, and heed should be taken of the warnings typically given in advertisements for financial services: 'Past performance is not necessarily a guide to the future'.
- 7 The argument can be found in Hirsch (1977, p.41ff).
- 8 The inference is that 'oral' is meant, since students claimed strengths in written communication.
- 9 The questionnaire was sent to 3171 graduates from full-time programmes in a range of subjects, and elicited a 22% response rate. It is probable that time management and task juggling are closely related.
- 10 Hesketh (2000, p.266) makes a similar point.
- 11 Interestingly, Hesketh (2000, p.253ff) provides evidence to suggest that employers may be less concerned with the skills of numeracy and information technology than is implicit in the Dearing Report's (NCIHE, 1997) advocacy of them in respect of curricula in higher education.

- 12 Some appear in *Tuning the undergraduate curriculum*, a working paper for the Skills Plus project, which can be accessed via www.heacademy.ac.uk/945.htm
- 13 Then Secretary of State for Education.
- 14 This was part of a larger movement aimed at establishing outcomes-based education for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). See Jessup (1991) for a description and the guide, *Embedding employability into the curriculum* for an account of attendant assessment problems.
- 15 Note the similarity to the definition of employability offered by Hillage and Pollard (1998), above.
- 16 A similar distinction is drawn between 'near transfer' and 'far transfer'.
- 17 The same general point applies to part-time students, many of whom will be studying in parallel with being in employment. In the Open University, it has been suggested that the bulk of some of its graduates' claims to greater employability may come from their work and life experiences, rather than from their academic achievements.
- 18 CRAC runs the Insight Plus™ programme to help students do this, and Student Volunteering UK does a similar job for those doing voluntary work.

Enhancing Student Employability

There are many definitions of what it is to be 'employable' and views on the processes that develop this attribute. The Learning and Employability Series offers a wide range of perspectives on the employability of graduates, based on the premise that, in higher education, 'employability' is about good learning.

One of many definitions of employability is:

'A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.'

ESECT was an initiative to support the higher education sector in its efforts to develop highly skilled, employable graduates who can contribute effectively to national prosperity in the 21st century.

ESECT consisted of individuals with extensive experience of employability issues. The team comprised representatives of stakeholder organisations including the National Union of Students (NUS), the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) and the Higher Education Academy. It drew on the expertise of key researchers and practitioners in the field including Professor Peter Knight, Professor Lee Harvey, Brenda Little and Professor Mantz Yorke.

ESECT was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England between October 2002 and February 2005.

The Higher Education Academy is progressing the work to enhance the employability of graduates developed in partnership with ESECT.

To find out more visit the Higher Education Academy Employability web pages:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability.htm



Higher education institutions are coming under increasing pressure to ensure their graduates have relevant employability skills. Institutions are also being encouraged to help students develop enterprise skills so that more graduates have the confidence and knowledge to set up businesses.

Senior managers and academics are looking for support at all levels to embed employability and enterprise into the higher education experience.

The Higher Education Academy is committed to helping institutions improve the employability and entrepreneurship of all students. The Academy has worked with a number of partners to provide a range of tools and resources in these areas.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) to help the sector engage with the employability policy. Its work began in September 2002 and finished at the end of February 2005.

ESECT dovetailed its plans with those of the Academy to provide a one-stop-shop on employability matters. The priority was to strengthen links with others committed to enhancing student employability.

Published by:
The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York YO10 5BR
United Kingdom

Tel: 01904 717500
Fax: 01904 717505
Email: enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk
www.heacademy.ac.uk

Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not
Learning and Employability Series 1
ISBN: 1-905788-01-0
Price: £10.00
© The Higher Education Academy, April 2006

All rights reserved. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, criticism or review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, graphic, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, taping or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of the publishers.

To request copies in large print or in a different format, please contact the Higher Education Academy.