

Learning and teaching: enhancing student achievement through employability

Topic paper 3

1. About student achievement and employability

Amongst the challenges facing today's higher education institutions, providing students with good opportunities to achieve, both academically and professionally, is of paramount importance. Alongside academic skills, today's higher education providers are required to prioritise and promote students' employability skills and their ability to articulate the knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and enterprise and entrepreneurship skills that are valued by employers.

Student employability and the steps higher education providers take to improve the employability of their students and graduates have emerged as important areas for discussion both within higher education institutions (HEIs) and the wider society (CBI, 2000).¹ In the UK, and in the broader European Higher Education Area (EHEA), student employability is high on the educational and political agenda. This is illustrated in the following quotation from the Higher Education Funding Council for England:

Embedding employability into the core of higher education will continue to be a key priority of Government, universities and colleges, and employers. This will bring significant private and public benefit, demonstrating higher education's broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development. (HEFCE, 2011, p.5).²

On a global level, developments such as higher fees, and higher participation rates, have impacted on students' expectations of course content and quality, and their awareness of the challenges and opportunities in the broader economic climate that graduates are faced with.

2. Ten questions for Thai higher education providers and national authorities

In view of the importance now attached to employability in modern higher education systems, it is reasonable to reflect on how well prepared Thai higher education is to meet the challenges it faces. Participants at the 'Towards good governance and reform in higher education' conference may wish to consider and reflect on the following questions, all of which can assist in assessing the stage of development at national level and at institutional level with regard to the student employability agenda:

- a) What planning do universities undertake to support student employability? Do they have a strategy?
- b) Would universities value some training and development to develop such strategies?
- c) How far do the curriculum portfolios of universities reflect the needs of employers?
- d) Do all study programmes provide opportunities for work experience placements/internships?
- e) What initiatives are there (at university level and at national level) to support universities in enhancing the achievement and employability of students and graduates?

¹http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1051530/cbi_edi_education_skills_survey_2011.pdf

²HEFCE (2011) *Opportunity, choice and excellence in higher education*. Bristol: HEFCE.

Available from: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2011/strategy.html>

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- f) What practices do universities use for developing students' skills relevant to employability and the workplace?
- g) What services do universities make available to students to support career planning and job seeking and for improving access to the job market?
- h) In what ways and with what success does higher education interact with the vocational education sector?
- i) How effectively do universities link with professional bodies and employer organisations for the purpose of improving graduate employment opportunities?
- j) What arrangements/structures are in place (in universities? At national level?) for tracking and measuring graduate employment outcomes? Do HEIs set targets and monitor them? Is there a national survey?

3. Employability: what it is

The UK Higher Education Academy, a national body whose purpose is to support higher education providers in the enhancement of learning and teaching, has published a helpful document for HEIs wishing to put in place a framework for designing and developing their approach to employability (HEA, 2013).³ For the HEA, employability:

- is a lifelong process;
- applies to all students whatever their course or mode of study;
- is complex and involves a number of areas that interlink;
- is about supporting students to develop a range of knowledge, skills, behaviours, attributes, and attitudes which will enable them to be successful not just in employment but in life;
- is a university-wide responsibility;
- is about making the components of employability explicit to students to support their lifelong learning.

4. Employability: what it is not

For the HEA, employability is:

- not about replacing academic rigour and standards;
- not just about preparing students for employment;
- not the sole responsibility of the Careers Department;
- not something that can be quantified by any single measure.

5. Definitions of employability

Not surprisingly perhaps, there is no shortage of definitions of 'employability'. For Yorke, employability is recognised as:

'a set of achievements, understandings, and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen career, which benefits themselves, the community, and the economy' (Yorke, 2004).⁴

Another useful definition is provided by Hillage and Pollard (1998):⁵

³https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/4_8_employability_framework_0.pdf

⁴<http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/What/>

⁵<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RB85.pdf>

'In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively, employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment'.

6. Do we need an Employability Strategy? If so, why?

From a UK perspective, it is now taken for granted that in a modern university an employment strategy (or framework) is not only good practice but is necessary. Most, if not all, higher education providers have such a strategy or framework, or have employability embedded or incorporated in another strategic document, such as a learning and teaching strategy, or a research and enterprise strategy, or even both.

Employability is important because highly skilled employable graduates are essential for national and regional economic and social well-being. In forward-looking higher education systems it is now widely recognised that graduates need to develop employability and career management skills in order to enter and/or thrive in a global knowledge economy. In any national context, even where the job market works reasonably well or where employers may be broadly content with the learners they recruit from HEIs, an almost universal complaint from employers is that many graduates have a deficiency in the 'soft skills' regarded as necessary in today's graduates. The view is also frequently expressed that they are unable to demonstrate sufficiently well that they have the skills and attributes employers are seeking.

It is no longer enough for graduates to have a good degree. Global economic uncertainty, and economic crises in most regions across the developed world, means that the competition for graduates has intensified. The need for an Employability Strategy is made even more obvious in times of economic recession. Governments the world over are investing in efforts to transform or reform higher education systems. They wish the university curriculum to foster in graduates the skills and personal qualities needed to both compete and collaborate in a global knowledge economy and global market place

Some examples of Employability Strategies of UK universities can be found at the following links:

<https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/governance/files/2014/11/Employability-Strategy.pdf>

[http://web\(anglia.ac.uk\)/anet/student_services/public/ARUEmployability%20Strategy-2011-2014.pdf](http://web(anglia.ac.uk)/anet/student_services/public/ARUEmployability%20Strategy-2011-2014.pdf)

<http://www.brad.ac.uk/careers/media/academicdevelopment/documents/Employability-Strategy-Revised-September-2014.pdf>

7. A vision for your university's graduates: a UK example

One of the questions that arises in discussions regarding graduate employability is that of the characteristics that a university wishes its students and graduates to develop during their time at university – characteristics that can help them to prepare for and be successful in their future careers. In higher education systems across the world that are becoming increasingly diverse, whatever the mission, norms, and values of any given university or higher education institution, it is incumbent upon the institution to communicate to all of its stakeholders – students, staff, funding and regulatory bodies, employers and professional bodies – the vision it has for its students and the distinctive characteristics it wishes them to develop.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions:

- does my university have a publicly available statement that communicates the values, skills, and characteristics it expects its students to develop?
- If so, what are they? If not, how would you describe these expectations?

To assist consideration of this matter, an example drawn from practice in the UK is used. The University of Greenwich, in common with most universities in the UK, makes publicly available its vision for its students and graduates. You can find this at the following link: <http://www2.gre.ac.uk/about/faculty/eddev/support/graduate>

The *Greenwich Graduate Attributes* statement, makes explicit the 'behaviours, values, skills, and dispositions' that it expects its students to develop. There are three components:

- Creativity and Enterprise:
 - problem solving;
 - ability to generate new ideas;
 - communication; use of ICT;
 - ability to seize and shape opportunities after graduation
- Scholarship and Autonomy:
 - informed understanding of discipline or profession;
 - independent thinking;
 - ability to draw connections with disciplines and professions beyond their own;
 - and intellectual curiosity and resilience.
- Cross-cultural and International Awareness:
 - ability to engage with diversity;
 - move fluently between cultural and political contexts;
 - value the ability to communicate in more than one language.

8. Employability skills: using 'tool kits'

Given the changing nature of labour markets, there is a good deal of evidence that shows that if individuals want to secure good careers, and progress in employment, then employability skills are crucial. For examples of how such skills are conceptualised, you might wish to consult the Employability Strategy of Anglia Ruskin University in the UK (see link on page 3 above). That university's strategy is of particular interest since it contains 'A skills toolkit' and an 'Employability audit toolkit', either or both of which you may find useful if used and applied in the context of your own university. Why not take these resources back to your own university to assist in the development of your own higher education institution's approach to student employability?

The Anglia Ruskin strategy document cites research by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UK Commission, 2009)⁶ which describes the following employability skills:

- Self-management – readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, resilience, self-starting, appropriate assertiveness;
- Time management, readiness to improve own performance based on feedback/reflective learning;

⁶<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-commission-for-employment-and-skills-annual-report-2009-to-2010>

- Team-working – respecting others, co-operating, negotiating/persuading, contributing to discussions, and awareness of interdependence with others;
- Business and customer awareness – basic understanding of the key drivers for business success – including the importance of innovation and taking calculated risks – and the need to provide customer satisfaction and build customer loyalty;
- Problem solving – analysing facts and situations and applying creative thinking to develop appropriate solution;
- Communication and literacy – application of literacy, ability to produce clear, structured written work and oral literacy - including listening and questioning;
- Application of numeracy – manipulation of numbers, general mathematical awareness and its application in practical contexts (e.g. measuring, weighing, estimating and applying formulae);
- Application of information technology – basic IT skills, including familiarity with word processing, spreadsheets, file management and use of internet search engines.

Underpinning all these attributes, the key foundation must be a positive attitude: a 'can-do' approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen. Employers also value entrepreneurial graduates who demonstrate an innovative approach, creative thinking, bring fresh knowledge and challenge assumptions.

The Anglia strategy also describes how students will gain employability skills, and where that university's students will experience employability. This is presented as three strands:

- the academic strand (source of the experience: the curriculum);
- the personal strand; (source of the experience: extra-curricular activities);
- the employability strand (source of the experience: work experience).

9. Delivery and support

If national authorities and universities are to take steps to improve and enhance student employability and employment outcomes, then action must be taken to ensure that arrangements are in place, both at national level and institutional level, to provide the necessary infrastructure.

As noted earlier (section 1), there are important questions to be addressed relating, for example, to national initiatives, to services made available by universities, and to engagement with employers through links with industry, business, and the professions. All if this is necessary for successful delivery and support.

National level support for employability

Any national system will need to develop its own 'solutions' and infrastructure, and this needs to be built up through time. In the UK for example, as noted earlier in this topic paper, the funding council for higher education and the government expect universities to make arrangements to embed employability into core activities. It forms part of the conversations held annually between the funding and university leadership. Each year, an annual survey is undertaken by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) that measures, for each HEI, the percentage of first degree graduate leavers who are working, studying, or seeking work, six months after graduating. This survey, the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey enables benchmarking, target setting and, for internal planning purposes, the



use of key performance indicators (KPIs).⁷ It facilitates the monitoring of institutional performance. Other national bodies include the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), a professional body for careers and employability professionals working with higher education students and graduates and prospective entrants to higher education.

For enhancement purposes, the Higher Education Academy provides a range of services, resources, and small-scale funding for projects. Reflecting national priorities, it has student employability as one of its principal focal points in supporting the HE sector.

For quality assurance purposes, the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education undertakes an institutional quality review of each higher education provider, normally every five years, and student employability is one of the themes that is subject to quality audit. Of particular interest to review teams are higher education providers' innovations in promoting the employability and entrepreneurial skills of students, and how employers are involved in the delivery and development of the curriculum. Review outcomes are made public.

Institutional level support for employability

Typically, a UK university will have in place an infrastructure that will include a Careers Service, or Careers and Employability Service. Many will also have in place a cross-university network of faculty-level employability coordinators or champions, normally at the level of senior academic. Institutional responsibility will be held by a Vice Rector/Pro Vice Chancellor or Director. Employability will be a key priority for the governing council, which itself will contain strong external representation from business, industry and the professions, and for higher level academic governance bodies, such as Senate or Academic Board.

Services and support that students can expect to receive from their university will include:

- advice with careers planning and access to the job market,
- work experience and internship opportunities;
- student volunteering schemes, employment skills training;
- access to recruiter job database;
- and credit-bearing employability training.

Each university will have innovations and initiatives that are context-specific. The University of Greenwich, for example, uses the Greenwich Employability Mapping Tool (GEM), that is designed to support study programme teams and ensure that employability attributes and skills are embedded into programmes.⁸ Edge Hill University takes steps to ensure that Personal Development Planning (PDP) is incorporated in all study programmes. All UK universities will have structures and arrangements for securing employer and external stakeholder engagement in support of the objectives of their employability strategy. This is discussed in the next section.

10. Relationships with employers (industry; business; and professions)

⁷<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats-dlhe>

⁸<http://blogs.gre.ac.uk/vc/2014/02/11/improving-student-employability/>

Employer engagement is an essential ingredient of a successful employability strategy. Here, there are two questions that any university should ask of itself:

- how does this university use externality in developing and delivering initiatives that enhance student employability?
- how actively does this university and its faculties engage employers/industry representatives in the development, design, and review of higher education provision?

There is no 'one approach fits all' blueprint for engaging with employers. But some of the steps that a HEI can take include the following:

- make potential employers aware of the attributes/skills that your students develop;
- provide opportunities for students to visit local employers;
- develop good lines of communication with local and national major employers of your students;
- invite employers to give talks about employment opportunities and requirements;
- ensure that you know what particular skills, knowledge, and attitudes, your major employers see as important in the next 5 years.

Arguably, the most effective way to support employability through employer links is to optimise the opportunities for 'work based' or work-related' learning activities for each student in each year group. Research has shown that work experience is valued by graduate recruiters and enables students to link their study to the world of work, develop confidence, and enhance key employability skills and attributes.

The University of Chester, for example, has for many years made it a requirement for all second year students to complete an assessed work-based learning module that is focused around a semester-long work placement or internship.⁹ De Montfort University in the UK has as one of the strategic aims of its employability strategy to 'improve employer engagement through development of work-based activity, volunteering, and mentoring'.¹⁰ To support this strategic aim the university identifies several commitments, including: business responsive study programmes for students who are working; placements within the university; external placements; volunteering opportunities; enterprise and entrepreneurship training; and a university-wide Customer Relations Management (CRM) system, to manage and coordinate interaction and links with employers and other stakeholders.

11. Measuring performance: good governance and employability

Facing competition nationally and globally, today's higher education providers are increasingly accountable to various stakeholders for their performance and for the quality of their provision. Governments, funding bodies, quality and accreditation agencies, employers, and students, take a close interest in the performance and effectiveness of universities. The requirements of good governance mean that universities themselves will wish to ensure that they have in place effective and transparent mechanisms and processes for monitoring and measuring performance. Strong governing bodies, with external representation, will wish to call senior university managers to account for trends in performance in key areas of the business, not least student employability and employment outcomes.

⁹<http://www.chester.ac.uk/wblu>

¹⁰[http://www.dmu.ac.uk/documents/dmu-staff/careeremploy/employabilitystrategydmujune2012finalversion\(2\).pdf](http://www.dmu.ac.uk/documents/dmu-staff/careeremploy/employabilitystrategydmujune2012finalversion(2).pdf)

In the UK, all universities will have in place arrangements to measure and monitor performance in this area. Normally, an annual report will be prepared and reported to the Senate and to University Council, to assess progress with the implementation of university strategy and progress against KPIs.

In using KPIs (where possible, benchmarked), any given university's approach will be context-specific. One example of the use of KPIs, for illustrative purposes, is Edge Hill University. ¹¹As part of its annual reporting to top-level internal governance bodies the following performance measures are used:

- Number of students undertaking volunteering opportunities;
- Number of students obtaining part-time jobs through the job-shop;
- Number of students undertaking integrated short work placements;
- Number of students undertaking sandwich placement/study abroad opportunities;
- Percentage of students in employment/undertaking higher study within six months of graduation;
- Percentage of students obtaining graduate level jobs within six months of graduation;
- Number of active employer links.

In this Edge Hill example, faculties and departments are also accountable and responsible for monitoring performance through the normal institutional annual monitoring process.

A university will wish to satisfy itself that it has a cohesive and comprehensive approach to employability, and that it has evidence to support this. Evidence will need to be available to demonstrate that work on employability has been effective. This may be supported by agreed measures of success, by the use of benchmarks of success, feedback from students and external stakeholders. There may be an impact assessment and use may be made of alumni in assessing progress.

12. Concluding observations

For today's higher education institutions, employability should be an essential component of the student experience and universities and other higher education providers should ensure that graduates are well prepared for and supported to succeed in a competitive national and global labour market. National authorities should ensure that higher education institutions are supported and encouraged in their efforts to develop and enhance strategy and infrastructure, and steps should be taken to measure and monitor institutional effectiveness and performance. The graduate workforce has a powerful potential to act as a transformative change agent for the regional and national economy, and for society as a whole. National bodies and the higher education sector can work together to realise this potential.

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¹¹<https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/governance/files/2014/11/Employability-Strategy.pdf>