

Briefings on Employability 3

The contribution of learning,
teaching, assessment and
other curriculum projects to
student employability

Peter Knight and ESECT colleagues



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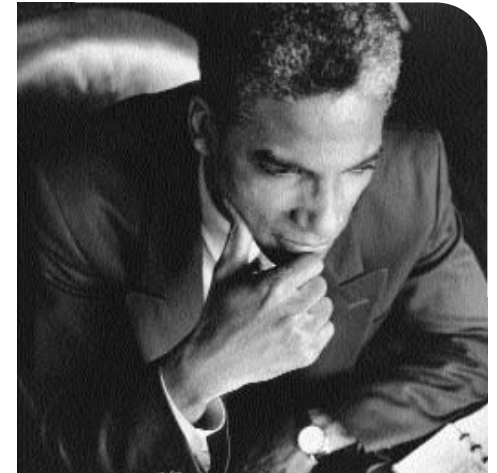
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Making the tacit explicit

If enhancing student employability is one of the main aims of your project, this briefing paper should help you to achieve these aims. If your project has different aims, this briefing may persuade you that with very little, if any, extra time or effort, you could add 'enhancing student employability' to your range of outcomes. This may extend your project's appeal.

It is likely that your project already has a slew of goals, objectives and deliverables. It is probably well under way and, even if you wanted to add new ones, you are unlikely to have resources, time or scope to do so. The last thing you want is someone advising you to change what you're doing, commit to new objectives and pledge more deliverables.

That's not our intention.

What we are suggesting is that good learning, teaching and assessment projects will, in the nature of things, be developing practices that are also likely to help students make good, well-founded claims to employability. We invite you to highlight your project's contribution to employability.

This briefing, then, is an invitation to make explicit things that are likely to be tacit: to make much out of what you are already doing.

It rests on the four claims:

1. Caring about good learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum is consistent with caring about enhancing student employability.
2. Good learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum practices foster achievements valued in the labour market.
3. We should be clear about the contributions that our projects may make to student employability.
4. It helps to concentrate on promoting a few valued achievements well.

We will take each claim in turn before making suggestions about what you might choose to do, if you are persuaded. The last section tells you where you can find out more.

Employability comes from good learning (and vice versa)

1. Caring about good learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum is consistent with caring about enhancing student employability

Higher education teachers often see 'employability' as an intrusion on the proper concerns of academic life.

Our main claim is that a concern for employability aligns with a concern for academic values and the promotion of good learning. We do not mean this in a trivial sense but argue that promoting employability means highlighting, and then taking seriously, goals of higher education that have often been left to look after themselves.

Consider Box 1 below, which summarises what researchers have found when they have asked what employers want in new graduate employees.

Box 1: Typical findings from research into employers' 'wish lists'

Lee Harvey and colleagues (1997) found that employers want graduates with knowledge, intellect, willingness to learn, self-management skills, communication skills, team-working, interpersonal skills.

Research reported by Mantz Yorke (1998) found that small enterprises especially valued skill at oral communication, handling one's own workload, team-working, managing others, getting to the heart of problems, critical analysis, summarising, and group problem-solving. Valued attributes included being able to work under pressure, commitment, working varied hours, dependability, imagination/creativity, getting on with people, and willingness to learn.

John Brennan and colleagues (2001) highlighted the significance of: initiative; working independently; working under pressure; oral communication skills; accuracy, attention to detail; time management; adaptability; working in a team; taking responsibility and decisions; planning coordinating and organizing.

Such research underpins our description of employability as a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations..

Surely, these are achievements which most academics value, either in their own right, or which are necessary for academic success.

We can stand this on its head and say that when higher education promotes these achievements, it contributes to student employability. The Sunday Times quotes the head of the policy unit at the UK Institute of Directors saying that:

The view of our members is that, providing that a course is intellectually demanding, it will turn out people with potentially employable skills... Classics and Medieval History turn out people with super brains and the employer can be satisfied that someone has stretched themselves. (11 May 2003: 13)

2. Good learning, teaching assessment and curriculum practices foster achievements valued in the labour market

The achievements listed in Box 1 are most likely to be promoted by a variety of often innovative learning, teaching and assessment methods – for example, group work, presentations, case studies, peer-and self-assessment, problem identification, lifelike assessment tasks, simulations, work-based learning, writing for a variety of audiences in a variety of styles, web designs, and so on. This can be put more strongly: unless students experience such kinds of learning, teaching and assessment approaches, it is hard to see how higher education contributes to the achievements valued by employers.

It is worth taking, say, ten of the achievements listed in Box 1 and doing two things:

- Asking what sort of teaching, learning and assessment methods are likely to promote each of them.
- Noticing when any of these methods is prominent in your project: in those cases, you have the basis of a claim to be promoting student employability.

It is likely that the methods you have identified include many that are routinely recommended in standard works on good higher education practice. Why? Well, largely because the sorts of achievements that employers value are generally valued by academics and because academics also want students to understand the material and the subject area. It is well-established that understanding, as opposed to retention of information, is most likely to arise as a result of really engaging with the material – taking what have been called 'deep' and 'strategic' approaches. The methods you probably identified do exactly that – they encourage engagement and, in the process, promote understanding and other achievements besides.

3. We should be clear about the contributions our projects may make to student employability

When employability is presented in this way, many academic colleagues rightly say that they've been doing these things for years. Good!

This means that many academics are enhancing student employability through their teaching. These approaches are also consistent with the recommendations attached to other initiatives: widening participation, making the curriculum more accessible for students with special needs, and personal development planning.

So, there is a serious presentational problem if we do not tell others about what we are doing. Employers may not immediately appreciate what good, modern higher education contributes to employability. Colleagues in other departments and faculties may not know. People working in careers services may not have got the message, which makes it hard for them to advise students on career possibilities. And it may be that the message is not understood by all those who teach on a programme, which means that it is likely to be inconsistently communicated to students.

It is also vital that students recognise what they have been learning. There is quite a lot of evidence that they are often not prepared to translate their experience of 'doing a degree' into the language of achievements valued by employers. When employability-enhancing elements are only tacitly present, students' claims to employability are seriously compromised.

If your project fosters achievements valued by employers, does it also ensure that learners know this?

4. Concentrate on promoting a few valued achievements well

If you give teachers in higher education a list of the outcomes that employers value, you will usually find that they say that their project, module or programme promotes some of them: in other words, they are already contributing, probably unwittingly, to students' employability.

Sometimes they identify many such outcomes. However, there is research suggesting that it is better to concentrate on a few aims, outcomes or achievements, rather than lots of them. Assessment, learning and teaching arrangements can be more purposeful when there are few, rather than many, aims.

We have found that colleagues are usually prepared to identify two or three achievements to which they give sustained and systematic attention and to accept that lots of other outcomes are likely to be caught up in their wake. It takes a little time to get used to the idea of identifying target achievements and recognising that many of the others will be 'inadvertently' promoted, but our experience is that colleagues find it a helpful approach.

Once the main claims are identified, teachers then need to make sure that students are bombarded with them – in handbooks, in assignment specifications and in classes.

When teachers are not explicit about the achievements they really concentrate upon, they may not tackle them systematically enough.

Some implications for projects

1. Look for matches between your goals and the achievements employers value
2. Highlight the two or three strongest matches
3. Tell people about them – and about the ways in which you promote those achievements
4. Amend your project description accordingly

Finding out more

The LTSN Generic Centre and ESECT website (www.ltsn.ac.uk/ESECT) has an employability area which is rapidly becoming populated with resources – for example, on assessment, employability and the first year, personal development plans, curriculum design, and work placements.

Two popular works aimed at students are:

- Hawkins, P. and Winter J. (1995) *Skills for Graduates in the 21st Century*, Cambridge: Association of Graduate Recruiters. This is a general view of what employers value.
- Speakman, Z. Drake, K. and Hawkins, P. (2001) *The Art of Crazy Paving*, London: Student Volunteering UK. This shows how out-of-class work, particularly voluntary work, can strongly enhance claims to employability.

Beyond projects

Projects can do wonders for student claims to be highly employable. So too with the co-curriculum, voluntary work, careers guidance and individual modules.

And a basic ESECT idea is that well-conceived undergraduate programmes can do more. A challenge for the medium-term is to see how projects can become better integrated with programmes so that their impact is perpetuated.

Notice, too, that some groups face persistent disadvantage in the labour market. Innovative higher education can help them to make stronger claims to employability but that may not be sufficient to secure fairness of employment outcome. Some universities and colleges have developed institutional policies that assure additional help for students in these groups. A summary of good practices is in John Brennan and Tarla Shah's (2002) *Access to What? How to convert educational opportunity into employment opportunity for groups from disadvantaged backgrounds. Interim report on phase 2*. London: The Open University Centre for Higher Education Research and Information.

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Graduate Prospects

The Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) is grateful to Graduate Prospects for sponsoring the publication of this guide.

Formed by Universities UK (formerly CVCP) in 1972, Graduate Prospects is now a multimillion-pound turnover business in the graduate and postgraduate recruitment market. Each year its trading arm covenants its surplus to the charity (HECSU), which in turn redistributes around £1m of funds back into the HE sector in general and the careers services in particular.

Graduate Prospects not only supports financially the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) but works in partnership to produce careers information products for students and graduates, and engages in robust and relevant research, such as *Careers Services: Technology and the Future* (2001) and *Careers Services and Diversity* (2002-3).

Graduate Prospects produces the Prospects Series of commercial publications, and the sector's leading graduate employment website, www.prospects.ac.uk (3,727,060 page impressions, 227,637 unique visitors – March 2003 ABC-E audited). The website is also home to the UK's official postgraduate database of 17,500 taught courses and research programmes, as well as Careers Advice for Graduates, careers information, advice materials, and information about part-time and temporary vacancies.

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To find out more about CSU, visit www.prospects.ac.uk

LTSN Generic Centre

Assessment, widening participation, e-learning, employability – these are just some of the issues which concern everyone in higher education today. No one person or institution has all the answers, and yet plenty of answers are out there. Within the UK's higher education institutions, there are some excellent learning and teaching practices. Many of these practices are common to a number of subject disciplines and are easily transferable. The LTSN Generic Centre aims to broker this expertise and promote effective practices in learning and teaching across all disciplines.

The LTSN Generic Centre team is just one part of the much larger Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). This larger network includes 24 Subject Centres whose role it is to address learning and teaching issues specific to their subject areas.

To find out more visit our website at www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre

