

# Learning & Employability

SERIES TWO

3

## Part-time students and employability

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Brenda Little and ESECT colleagues



## 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.

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

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## I. Introduction

This guide considers the issue of employability from the perspective of part-time students on undergraduate programmes. It builds on other guides in this series – in particular *Embedding employability into the curriculum*. That publication took as its starting point that ‘the complexity of employability and the variety that exists in curricula in UK higher education mean that no single, ideal, prescription for the embedding of employability can be provided.’ (Yorke and Knight, 2004, p.2).

It is of course the case that, in many higher education institutions, part-time students are taught alongside full-time students, the only difference being the rate at which they complete modules and accumulate credit points. So one might wonder why, if we are looking to embed employability into a curriculum that is delivered on the same basis to full-time and part-time students, we need to consider part-time students and employability as a separate issue.

Moreover, part-time students will for the most part already be employed (on a full- or part-time basis) and one might argue that employability is thus less of an issue for such students. This would, however, imply a rather narrow view of employability as ‘just getting a job on graduation’. Part-time students may well be looking to gain career advancement within (or outside of) their current employment situation as a result of their higher education experiences, or to move into a different occupation altogether. Such considerations may well affect how they engage with the taught curriculum in terms of developing both subject specific expertise and more general personal attributes. Part-time students’ access to, and engagement with, co- and extra-curricular activities might also contribute to their employability.

Like others in the series, this Guide adopts a working definition 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, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

In this guide we do not replicate the curriculum considerations covered in the ‘Embedding employability’ guide: rather, we look at findings from some recent studies of part-time students and highlight aspects that could have a particular bearing on employability within a higher education curriculum.

## 2. Part-time students in higher education

In 2002/03 part-time undergraduate students accounted for just over one third (34 per cent) of all UK undergraduates (Table 1). However, part-time students represent only about ten per cent of first degree students. The vast majority of part-time students are classified as studying at 'other undergraduate' level rather than first degree level: for example, all Open University undergraduates are classified as studying at 'other undergraduate' level, even though a large proportion will ultimately graduate with a first degree. In 2002/03, 78 per cent of part-time undergraduates were studying on 'other undergraduate' programmes.

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
First degree	980,805	111,615	1,092,420
Other undergraduate	130,505	454,125	584,630
<b>All undergraduates</b>	<b>1,111,310</b>	<b>565,740</b>	<b>1,677,050</b>

**Table 1: UK undergraduates in higher education institutions, by level and mode of study, 2002/03.**

Source: HESA Reference Volume, 2002/03, Table 1.

Note: The Higher Education Statistics Agency uses the term 'first degree' to denote the bachelor's degree, and the term 'other undergraduate' to cover the wide range of other undergraduate programmes (like foundation degrees, higher national certificates, higher national diplomas, certificates and diplomas of higher education, professional qualifications at undergraduate level, credit-bearing modules at undergraduate level).

We should also recall that there are significant numbers of undergraduates studying in further education colleges. For example, in 2001/02 there were some 148,000 higher education students in further education colleges in England (Little *et al.*, 2004, Table 5), representing about 11 per cent of all undergraduates: of these, the majority (70 per cent) were studying on a part-time basis, and most were studying on programmes other than first degrees. In Scotland, figures for 2000/01 show some 72,000 higher education students in further education colleges, representing a third of all higher education students in Scotland: once again, the majority (almost 60 per cent) were studying on a part-time basis (Gallacher, 2003, Table 2).

## Part-time students and employability

As noted above, the part-time undergraduate population is not evenly split between first degree and 'other undergraduate' programmes, nor is it evenly spread across the higher education sector. In some institutions (notably the Open University and Birkbeck College of the University of London) all their undergraduate population will be studying on a part-time basis (though in terms of time commitment, some may be seen as equivalent to full-time students). Only a very few may be doing so in other higher education institutions. At first degree level, part-time students are much more likely to be found in post-1992 universities than in other institutions<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, the full-time first degree student population is much more evenly split between old and new universities.

Regardless of where and at what level part-time students are studying, a further – and perhaps rather obvious point – to make about such students is that they are much more likely (than their full-time counterparts) to be in their mid to late 20s and early 30s when they begin their higher education studies (see Table 2 below for details). Whereas the vast majority of first year full-time undergraduates (73 per cent) are aged 20 or less, only six per cent of first year part-time students are in this age group. The majority of part-time undergraduates (68 per cent) are 30-plus when they start their studies. Recently, there has been a growth in the number of younger students (18–25 year olds) in the Open University: in 2003/04, they accounted for a fifth of new student registrations.

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
20 and under	270,525 (73%)	15,545 (6%)	286,170 (44%)
21–24	44,275 (12%)	32,400 (12%)	76,675 (12%)
25–29	18,355 (5%)	40,890 (15%)	59,245 (9%)
30+	36,375 (10%)	189,975 (68%)	226,350 (35%)
<b>Total (known ages)</b>	<b>369,530</b>	<b>278,910</b>	<b>648,440</b>

**Table 2: Age of first year undergraduates (UK domiciled), by mode of study, 2002/03 (column percentages)**

Source: HESA Reference Volume, 2002/03 Tables 1b and 1f.

Part-time undergraduates are also more likely to be female: almost two thirds (64 per cent) are women (HESA, 2004, table D), reflecting in part the continuing gender-related nature of certain subjects. At first degree level, the most popular subjects for part-time students are subjects allied to medicine (taken by 27 per cent of part-time students) and business and administrative studies (taken by 12 per cent). At 'other undergraduate' level,

if one discounts the 'combined studies' subject grouping (into which category most OU students will be placed), then 'subjects allied to medicine' is once again the most popular subject category for part-time students (taken by 16 per cent).

Part-time students are also much more likely than full-time students to be working whilst studying. Whilst accepting that part-time term-time working is now the 'norm' for large numbers of full-time undergraduates – with some recent national surveys putting the figure at around 58 per cent of the first degree population (for example, Callender and Wilkinson, 2003), the majority of part-time students are likely to be working on a full-time basis whilst studying. The recent national study of part-time students in higher education found the vast majority (83 per cent) were in employment, with 65 per cent working full-time whilst studying (Woodley, 2004).

A less obvious difference between part-time and full-time first degree students is their entry qualifications. Detailed analysis of HESA data comparing highest entry qualifications to undergraduate programmes – undertaken as part of a study on vocational routes to higher education (Connor and Little, 2005) – found some interesting differences between full-time and part-time students. For example, whilst the majority (70 per cent) of full-time students on first degrees had the standard entry qualifications (A-levels/Scottish 'Highers' etc.) less than one in five of part-time entrants did so. On the other hand, part-time students were much more likely to have previous HE or other higher level qualifications as their highest entry qualification – almost 30 per cent, compared with only 7 per cent of full-time students having such prior qualifications. Finally, part-time students on first degrees were also much more likely than full-time students to have professional qualifications (15 per cent, compared with less than one per cent of full-timers): see Connor and Little, Table A2, for details. Furthermore, part-time students very often have significant work/life experiences which are not formally 'recognised' in terms of specific qualifications.

The final point to make about part-time students is that they are not a homogeneous group, despite the commonalities exhibited by part-time students (for example, they are more likely to be older than full-time undergraduates; more likely to be studying for first degrees in 'new' rather than 'old' universities; more likely to enter first degree programmes with a range of different entry qualifications, often already at higher education level). We need to note wide variations amongst part-time students in respect of, for example, what they are studying; why they are studying; what qualifications they are aiming to achieve; and what levels of employer and/or family support they have for their studies. Such diversity makes a consideration of employability for part-time students problematic: taking diversity of what they are studying as an example, we can see that employability in the context of a narrowly-focused professional accountancy course might look rather different from employability within a more general programme.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002/03, of the 91,000 part-time first degree students studying in England, almost 64,000 (70 per cent) were studying at 'new' universities. At 'other undergraduate' level, the situation is reversed – with over 60 per cent of the 400,000 part-time students studying at 'old' universities. (A large proportion of these will be Open University students, plus part-time students in the 'continuing education' departments in 'old' universities.)

### 3. Employability and higher education

In *Embedding employability into the curriculum* (Yorke and Knight, 2004), stress was placed on the considerable degree of alignment between 'education for employability' and good student learning (and the teaching, assessment, and curricula that underpin the learning). The USEM approach to employability (in that publication and elsewhere) embodies this alignment. In essence, employability is seen as being influenced by four broad, inter-related components:

- Understanding of subject and broader situations.
- Skilful practice – with the implication that such practice relies on an awareness of, and responsiveness to, the context (in contrast to narrowly-conceived notions of 'key' or 'core' skills).
- Efficacy beliefs, students' self-theories and personal qualities – with the emphasis on students having malleable (rather than fixed) self-theories.
- Metacognition – incorporating elements of 'learning how to learn', reflection in, on, and for practice, and a capacity for self-regulation.

(See Yorke and Knight, 2004, pp.4–6)

An argument in *Embedding employability into the curriculum* is that good curriculum designs should 'continue to help learners construct understandings of the subject matter and maintain the more recent interest in developing a number of skilful practices . . . they will also show care for the development of positive efficacy beliefs, metacognition and other complex achievements that employers value' (ibid, p. 6). Notions of positive efficacy beliefs are informed by Dweck's (1999) work which highlights the advantages of a learner having malleable (rather than fixed) self-theories. With malleable self-theories, learners tend to see tasks as opportunities for learning rather than opportunities for (just) performing tasks and demonstrating narrowly-focused competencies.

Whilst there is not a great deal of research evidence directly relevant to the concern to enhance employability, some conclusions can be drawn from social and cognitive psychology, as follows:

- Development takes time – months and years.
- Development takes practice.
- Students need to hear, repeatedly, what it is intended that they learn in order to understand what that learning means, to know ways of judging what they have achieved, and to see how to improve.

What do we know about part-time students that might have a general bearing on such considerations? What can we learn from recent studies of part-time students?

## 4. Part-time students' motivations to study

First, we know something about part-time students' motivations to study, and what such students bring to their studies, which may affect how much they engage with the curriculum on offer. A survey in 1998/99 of some 6,000 part-time students from six higher education institutions found that students' reasons for studying varied between subjects: for example, technology students expressed the strongest career motivations for study. Variations in the reasons for studying were also strongly related to age, with the majority of younger students (those aged under 30) citing mainly career-based reasons, whereas the majority of older students (aged over 49) cited personal interest (Brennan *et al.*, 1999).

How might such motivations impact on students' engagement with a higher education curriculum, and our four inter-related employability components of understanding, skilful practice, efficacy beliefs, and metacognition?

### 4.1 Understanding of subject and broader situations

A Scottish study of part-time students (Schuller *et al.*, 1999) found that part-time students were more motivated than full-time students, brought more experience to bear on their studies, were able to teach each other more, and absorbed less unproductive energy on the part of the teacher. However, part-time students were also 'time poor' with the vast majority combining study and full-time employment, and the time they had available for study was necessarily limited. Thus they had less time than their full-time peers to explore and develop ideas and skills. Certainly, time considerations can cut across aspects of teaching and learning considered to be 'good practice'. For example, McDowell's (1993) study of part-time students (within a single higher education institution) found that, since there was much material to be covered in less contact time (and the amount of material may have been exacerbated by professional body requirements), participatory approaches to learning had been abandoned owing to pressure from students. In McDowell's study, some of the part-time students described their learning as being about 'the transfer of the knowledge, facts, techniques or information needed to pass the course, from the lecturer to the students' (*ibid.*, p.191). However, an emphasis on (just) acquiring (new) knowledge might work against other important considerations relating to good learning, for example, enhancing personal understanding and interpreting knowledge within specific contexts, and enhancing each others' learning through team-working. These same students considered that the best use was not necessarily made of their everyday (employment) experiences. Thus, arguably, opportunities to shift those students' orientations to study from extrinsic/instrumental perspectives to more intrinsic motivations were not taken.

Such observations might imply that (some) part-time students tend to take an instrumental and strategic approach to studying. Certainly, Schuller and colleagues found that part-time students' strategy was to merely 'pass' their course/s rather than aiming for the highest grades (Schuller *et al.*, 1999).

However, it must be noted that such strategies are not confined to part-time students. A recent study (involving seven UK universities) of full-time undergraduates and their take-up of paid work during term-time (Van Dyke *et al.*, forthcoming) noted some academics' concerns that full-time students' approaches to studying were becoming more instrumental.

But ultimately, such time pressures (and relatedly, demands of employment) might outweigh part-time students' initial motivation to study such that they withdraw from higher education altogether. A study of undergraduate non-completion found that for part-time students, the most cited influences on withdrawal were the demands of employment and of dependants, whereas full-time students tended to cite their wrong choice of subject and lack of commitment (Yorke, 1999).

## 4.2 Skilful practices

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McDowell's study related orientations to study with students' reasons for study: an intrinsic orientation was linked to an expectation of learning something of fairly immediate use in their current (or future) job, whereas an extrinsic orientation was linked primarily to a broader desire to gain qualifications required for career progression (McDowell, 1993). However, McDowell found that students' orientations did change during the course of studies: those who had begun studying primarily as a way of achieving a recognised qualification nevertheless found that they were learning much which helped them develop personally and which enhanced their abilities to do their current job. The study of part-time higher education in Scotland (Schuller *et al.*, 1999) found that such personal development considerations tended not to play a big role in shaping students' initial demand for higher education: rather, such students tended to recognise the contribution that higher education was making to their personal development only after they had started to study. There is, however, evidence that some part-time students may see an explicit emphasis on skills development as a waste of time, and resent having to demonstrate abilities and skills which they feel they use every day at work (McDowell, 1993, p.190).

Findings from a survey of foundation degree (FD) students' perceptions of their programmes seem to raise some similar concerns (Yorke, 2005). The following quotations (which are not broadly representative of FD students' experiences) demonstrate that they perceived a lack of flexibility in acknowledging what they had brought to their studies (*ibid.*, p.16):

Far too much emphasis on key skills – after several years' experience and high level of competence, more emphasis should be placed on areas a student doesn't know rather than what he does . . .

[Male, aged 40-plus, on a part-time, Science-based FD programme]

The construction of a CV and a personal profile or personal development programme attracted particularly sharp criticism. Regarding the construction of a profile, one student commented:

This is a repeat of the tasks and too much like NVQ. I have completed an NVQ Qualification previously and found it boring. TOO SLOW!! and repetitive . . .

[Female, aged 40-plus, on a part-time FD programme in Education]

These comments suggest that tutors need to guard against assuming that academic practices and activities that seem to have real value from a provider's perspective on curriculum design and student learning are not necessarily viewed in the same light by learners themselves.

However, McDowell also found that for other part-time students, having their pre-conceived notions of higher education challenged and changed by the nature of their course was seen positively. Further, part-time students valued the development of their capability in report writing, research methods, critical thinking and analysis, and in putting forward an argument or viewpoint (arguably the more traditional academic achievements). Whether part-time students' developing capabilities can be drawn upon by their employer may sometimes be open to question, as the following quotation from the above-mentioned survey of foundation degree students illustrates:

Although I have almost completed my first year, I am not being allowed or given the opportunity to put into practice or use my new skills. This is due to the lack of [awareness] and understanding shown by my 'qualified' counterparts who understand little of the idea behind the FDA programme. I feel as if the 'qualified' staff are showing resentment at what they perceive as a threat!

[Mature female, full-time, on a FD programme in Health and Social Care]  
(Yorke, 2004, p.422)

## 4.3 Efficacy beliefs, students' self-theories and personal qualities

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As noted earlier, part-time students are likely to have a wider range of entry qualifications than full-time students, including previous higher education qualifications and professional qualifications. It is likely that for some part-time students there has been a time gap between achieving these prior qualifications and embarking on their (new) higher education studies. This is in contrast to the vast majority of full-time students who will have progressed (more or less) straight from completing A levels (or their equivalent) to higher education. The Scottish study found part-time students to be less sure of themselves academically than full-time students (even though they were more motivated). Such findings argue for careful handling of learning and teaching strategies, at least in the early stages of a programme of studies –especially in relation to activities which provide ample opportunities for formative feedback to part-time students (arguably) lacking confidence in their own academic abilities. Of course, this is not to say that part-time students continue to lack confidence, as the following quotation from an internal survey relating to Classics at the Open University<sup>2</sup> illustrates:

The confidence and skills I gained through the OU were invaluable and have certainly contributed to my career development.

## 4.4 Metacognition

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We see this as incorporating elements of 'learning how to learn', reflection in, on and for practice, and a capacity for self-regulation. Some of the findings mentioned above have already hinted at areas which might need attention in relation to part-time students: for example, their notions of what academic learning is, and what it is not; and the missed opportunities to capitalise on everyday employment opportunities as a way of providing a vehicle for encouraging reflection on, and for, practice. Of course, this is not to say that all part-time students hold such views and experience such missed opportunities. In fact, McDowell's study found courses from a range of subjects (management, health studies, education) that were designed and delivered on the basis of a belief that the best way to enhance students' future contributions to their professions was to concentrate on aspects designed to enhance personal development (such as self-awareness and self-confidence), skilful practices in relevant contexts, abilities to learn independently and so on. It may be that the ability of academic staff to 'tune' the curriculum more towards an individual learner's personal development (whilst still covering the required subject content) may be

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<sup>2</sup> Undertaken for Open University's Careers Service

constrained by the fact that the programme is primarily designed to meet an external body's own requirements (in professional accountancy courses, for example). We suggest that careful design of (formative) assessment tasks could help redress the balance.

## 4.5 USEM and implications for part-time students

For those delivering higher education curricula to part-time students, some lessons can be drawn from the foregoing:

- Tutors should try to make time for early conversations with part-time students about their prior learning experiences and their motivations for current study as one way of identifying appropriate routes to positive learning outcomes for the diverse student cohort. Tutors also need to be aware of their institution's careers services and learner support services so that, at an early stage, they point students to sources of specialist help that might inform their module/pathway choices within programmes.
- Early engagement with issues relating to self-efficacy beliefs should be emphasised, such that learners can be encouraged to see tasks as opportunities for learning (rather than as performance-oriented opportunities) and to develop a belief in their ability to be effective when faced with novel challenges.
- Explicit references to skills development and skilful practices need to be set within the broader context of enhancing academic skills, and alongside the construction of personal knowledge.
- Attention should be given to trying to develop student-centred approaches to learning (and assessment tasks supporting learning), such that students' existing (employment-related) skills are acknowledged and built-on (where possible) rather than (just) re-confirmed (or worse, ignored).
- Some emphasis should be placed on formative methods of assessment that provide opportunities to give constructive feedback to students on a range of aspects of learning: for example, acquisition and construction of personal knowledge; development of skilful practices in context; and development of the capacity to learn from misunderstandings and mistakes.

However, we recognise that the above might apply equally well to full-time students (and in many instances, part-time students are taught alongside full-time students). Thus such lessons should not be seen in isolation from the more general aspects of good practice in embedding employability within the curriculum.

An implication of adopting a broad approach to employability is that it has to be interpreted, and acted on, in a manner appropriate to the context. This is where informed professional judgement is important.

## 5. Employment-related gains from higher education studies

We noted earlier that employability should be conceived in broader terms than 'just' securing employment on graduation. For part-time students, obtaining a job on graduation will not be an issue as the majority are already in employment whilst studying. As we know, part-time students' reasons for study do include those related to career advancement. Even if career advancement was not a prime reason for embarking on higher education, studies of part-time students attest to the employment benefits of their study, as the following comments taken from internal OU surveys of graduates show:

Doors suddenly opened. They (employers) were impressed by someone studying in their time away from work and keeping a job as well.

I am told by the director of IT that the fact that I had studied for a degree . . . had been a factor in my selection for promotion to head of IT development as it showed that I was ambitious and was taking steps towards my own personal development.

McDowell's (1993) study noted that several students had, whilst studying, achieved promotion at work and that they attributed this largely to the confidence and communication skills they had developed during their studies. The study by Brennan *et al.* (1999), which involved several higher education institutions, reported substantial economic benefits from part-time study, but some students were more likely to benefit than others. Men were more likely than women to report that their course was crucial or helpful to career changes, to have gained substantial increases in income, and to have gained greater managerial responsibilities. At the same time, ethnic minority students reported lower income increases than white students, and ethnic minority graduates were less likely to experience career changes but more likely to regard their course as crucial or helpful in making those changes. Older students had less career-orientated reasons for study and enjoyed significantly less benefit from study in employment terms. In general, the study by Brennan *et al.* found that part-time students with employer support were more likely to experience employment-related benefits of increased income, greater managerial responsibilities, and career changes.

Reference to employer support for part-time students (in terms of contribution to course fees, time-off for study and the like) reminds us that not all such students benefit from supportive employers with an intrinsic interest in their employees' development.

The study of part-time students in Scotland found that tangible employer support was becoming less dependable and more conditional: employers were more interested in specific rather than generic skills development. At the same time, Brennan *et al.* found employers' support for part-time students varied according to age. Those under 26 were

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the most likely to get time off work and help with fees, and those aged 30–39 were the least likely. That study also found employer support varied by ethnicity (despite the fact that ethnic minority part-time students tended to be younger, and have career-related reasons for study). It also found employer support to be gender-related, with men more likely to gain support.

A more recent study which drew on some limited evidence from part-time students on ‘other undergraduate’ programmes found that employer support varied quite widely and was related to a number of factors, including the extent to which the programme was accepted by the employer (and the industry) as a part of the traditional work-based route to professional accreditation (Little *et al.*, 2004). That study also found that students who had deliberately not sought their employers’ support for their part-time studies – on the grounds that they were pursuing further studies with the express purpose of moving ‘out’ of their current employment – had considered that employer support would not be forthcoming in such circumstances. For such students, access to co-curricular activities such as career development might be especially important.

We would, however, argue that all part-time students might benefit from explicit activities provided by higher education institutions (alongside the formal taught curriculum) which focus on personal and professional/career development.

## 6. What can higher education institutions do to support part-time students?

Our earlier guides have referred to a number of co-curricular activities which give students opportunities to think about employability issues in a focused way, for example personal development planning (PDP) and career development activities. We do not argue for a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to such activities for the undergraduate student population – the more so for part-time students who are a very diverse group studying on a wide range of programmes. But in the following sections, we look at two particular activities (Personal Development Planning and career development) and consider how they might apply to part-time students. We should note that, in many higher education institutions, PDP and career development are viewed as an integrated process rather than separate activities, with careers services (or Centres for Career Development, as some are now titled) taking the lead role in delivery.

Personal Development Planning (PDP) is currently being introduced across all higher education institutions and aims to help students to

- become more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners;
- understand how they are learning and how to relate their learning to a wider context;

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- improve their study/career management skills;
- articulate their personal goals and evaluate progress towards their achievement; and
- encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life. (QAA, 2001)

However, for students – particularly ‘time-poor’ part-time students with busy ‘other lives’ – such seemingly positive purposes may not be self-evident: rather, PDP may be seen as an additional (and unproductive) task.

One way of helping part-time students appreciate the value of PDP may be to encourage them to use PDP to reflect explicitly on the relationships between, on one hand, how and what they are learning through their academic studies and, on the other, their everyday work experiences. For example, at an early stage in their studies, rather than using PDP to demonstrate their existing achievements, they could be encouraged to think about their work-related achievements to date and to identify those aspects which they feel they can use to tackle new learning tasks. They could also be encouraged to use PDP to reflect on the similarities and differences between being part of a group of employees delivering a particular service or product, and being part of group of students charged with the responsibility of running a seminar on a particular topic.

The institution itself may also want to explore the potential for ‘customised’ PDPs for different clusters of programmes, and/or different kinds of employment fields.

Career development activities in higher education institutions tend to concentrate on preparing students for employment, including increasing students’ self-awareness of what they have to offer employers, and improving students’ ability to articulate to employers what they have to offer. However, with most part-time students being in employment, the focus of career development activities for them may need to be shifted away from ‘preparation for employment’ and redirected towards ‘preparation for new job/career advancement’ (either with an existing employer, or with a new employer). Specifically, institutions could:

- ensure that resources for students reflect their varying needs – for example, the language used in publications and websites could place more emphasis on career development and progression, and messages in publications and websites could show the value of PDP for activities like appraisals at work. Publications could also reflect the fact that most part-time students have experience of the world of work but are not always able to reflect on the value of this: tools should be provided to help students do such reflection;
- offer a mentoring service which enables a student who is thinking of career development or career change to talk to another student (or staff member) who works in a similar area. (The OU Careers Service offers such a service, called *Career Links*.)
- explore further the possibility of offering their work experience schemes or

placement opportunities to part-time students who have work experience – but not always the right kind of experience.

ESECT's earlier guide on issues for careers services and careers guidance practitioners (Booth, 2004) noted the potential for the further development of careers services' external role in two specific areas: becoming a source of information about labour markets; and connecting with students' pre-university experience. Information about local and regional labour markets may be particularly valuable for part-time students (who tend to be much less mobile than full-time students). Further, ways of engaging not only with part-time students' pre-university experiences but more importantly, with their concurrent workplace experiences – and helping them consider opportunities for advancement – may be valuable additions to what careers services might offer.

We also need to recognise that many careers services report difficulties in getting students to commit to careers activities. Such difficulties may be more acute for part-time students whose limited time on campus is likely to be taken up with specific activities (like attending lectures and seminars, accessing learning resources, and so on). Part of the answer may lie in higher education institutions ensuring that many of their resources are available to students on-line and accessible at all times. This does not, of course, address the challenge of engaging students in such activities.

This reference to limited time on campus brings us to our final point about part-time students – a large number are learning 'at a distance' and there is no expectation that they will attend at a campus.

## **7. Helping distance-learning students engage with PDP and career development activities**

In this section we present some of the ways in which the Open University tries to engage its 'distance learning' students with PDP and career development activities.

Wherever possible, the OU tries to embed PDP and career development activities into the student learning experience and assesses them. For example, Personal and Career Development in Engineering (T191) covers PDP and career development issues as part of the course. It tries to ensure that the message about employability appears relevant and customised for the individual student (for example, through targeted mailings for some students), and is currently looking at delivering 'career workshops' using on-line conferences.

The OU also tries to deliver the message at different times (during the student's study programme) using different media: targeting the message just at the beginning or end of study is, in a sense, meaningless to the OU student (since it is often difficult to determine, in advance, what the end-point of the student's learning trajectory will actually be). Currently, the OU is exploring the use of e-messaging and the use of a new Customer Relationship Management tool.

The OU recognises that its associate lecturer and tutoring staff are the most important contact for distance-learning students, so it is vital that such staff are aware of the university's PDP and careers services activities, and know how and when to 'signpost' students to use such activities. This is done via staff development activities, a tutor web-site, and the OU's regional centres. In fact, having a regional-centre structure means that the delivery of services can be flexible and local: services are offered by telephone, face-to-face, by email and through web-sites.

## **8. Employability, part-time students and lifelong learning**

Our previous guide on embedding employability into the curriculum ended with a short exploration of how employability and other current various policy commitments (such as lifelong learning, widening participation) were leading towards a re-conceptualisation of the aims of undergraduate higher education in terms of a more generalised capability (and less emphasis on immediate learning of subject disciplinary material). Clearly for part-time students, very many of whom will be studying for career-related reasons (including advancement within their current occupations), a higher education curriculum which places an emphasis on enhancing an individual's capacity to believe that they can continue to learn, that they can make a difference (in their work and other contexts), that they can make linkages between good academic learning practices and 'everyday' practices in the workplace which reinforce each other – that is a curriculum which embraces the broad concepts of employability – is self-evidently a curriculum that is supportive of employability.

## Biography

Brenda Little is a Senior Policy Analyst with the Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI). She is currently a member of the HEFCE-funded Enhancing Student Employability National Co-ordination Team. Her higher education (HE) research interests are primarily in the area of work-based learning, term-time working, graduate employability and HE-employer links. Her current and recent HE studies include an investigation of the extent and impact of debt and term-time work on HE in the UK (for Universities UK); and an investigation of the role and significance of vocational HE in meeting the needs of the economy and employers (for the Learning and Skills Council). Previous studies include a Review of Work-Based Learning in HE (with John Brennan, Director of CHERI); a study of Key Skills developed through Work Placements (for the Council for Industry and Higher Education); and a HEFCE-commissioned investigation into the Nature and Extent of Undergraduates' Work Experience (with colleagues from University of Central England).

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## 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 that has underpinned the work of the Higher Education Academy and ESECT 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](http://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.

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