Embedding employability in higher education for student success

Stuart Norton, Academic Lead - Employability
With debate currently taking place about reforming the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE) combined with the focus on employment in the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), now is the time to take stock on employability in higher education.

In this article, Stuart Norton, the HEA’s Academic Lead on Employability reflects on the proposed changes to the DLHE and the introduction of the TEF. He discusses the importance of employability metrics, explaining how the HEA’s Embedding Employability in Higher Education framework can build on current institutional approaches in order to develop a more consistent, comprehensive and cohesive approach to employability.

The government’s White Paper; ‘Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice,’ together with the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), sets out government plans to reform higher education in England, with likely implications across the whole of the UK HE sector and perhaps even internationally. Embedding employability is a key driver of student success, but do providers truly offer a structured and consistent way of embedding employability in policy and practice?

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Within both the White Paper and TEF Consultation it is evident that there is a very strong emphasis on career readiness and employability threaded throughout. However, it is apparent that the language and discourse remains one of ‘skills’. While higher and softer skills are identified within the White Paper, the HEA advocates the need for this language to be broadened beyond that of skills. Why? As it is typically recognised that employability, outside of academic papers, has been either ill-defined or not defined at all. If we want students who not only have the necessary knowledge and ‘skills’, but who are well-rounded, confident, resilient, self-aware and capable of critical thinking, we perhaps need to reconsider our approach to employability, and that starts with the adoption of the necessary discourse.

Let’s be clear; employability is not only about getting that first job. It’s beyond that simple measurement of employment. It needs to be about the capacity to have numerous jobs, build a career, for some to start their own business – and certainly to continue to develop as successful individuals in whatever areas they decide to pursue.

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DLHE, TEF & employability metrics
While the consultation conducted by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the DLHE is currently open for consultation, DLHE, in its current form is primarily a static measure of employment; whether a student has a graduate job six months after graduation. This is not a measure of employability.
We do not know if employability is to be considered a metric within the TEF in the future, but if it were, how could this be best defined? Would it not be just as important to consider how institutions are embedding employability and providing information on the distance travelled by institutions?

Apart from the highly skilled job metric which is being proposed in the White Paper, we do not know if any other metrics related to employability will be adopted in the future. However, at least HEIs and other providers will be able to submit additional evidence in support of their TEF submission. This is why an effective qualitative narrative that will support any submission needs careful consideration. **There is no panacea to improve DLHE scores - the core metric of employment - instantaneously.** Any changes to curriculum and initiatives will invariably have a two or three year cycle, particularly if initiatives are truly embedded within the curriculum through all levels. Therefore, a bespoke evidenced narrative offers an avenue for HE providers to clearly inform their TEF submission. This not only provides an opportunity for an improved offering for students, but will highlight to those assessing the TEF submission the direction of travel by the provider. This is essential in order to approach the intricacies of embedding employability throughout learning and teaching practices. Only a qualitative narrative can provide the context for the additional metrics and indicators already suggested, as well as other important areas, for example scenario based learning or reflective practice. **A narrative allows for this individualisation as well as ownership of the discourse, and student trajectory,** and I would argue is essential to provide the colour and richness of detail necessary that can sit alongside the simple snapshot in terms of employment statistics.

Assuming there is agreement across your institution to compile such a narrative, firstly you must answer a few fundamental questions. What does employability mean to you? If you were to write down what employability is, would there be a shared view? Is it the same in your department, across the school, faculty or institution? What does employability look like for your graduates? Is it the same for business, social work, fine art, engineering, criminology or sports?

I would argue that meaningful metrics and indicators around how institutions are embedding aspects of employability should be considered, and that these should be used as part of a narrative, supported by relevant figures, to provide a clear account of their commitment to improving employability. As a starter-for-ten, why not consider measuring the percentage of students:

- that have access of opportunity to placements
- that can access a range of work-related learning opportunities, for example: placements, internships, simulations, case studies and live briefs
- accessing career guidance and advice at level four, five, six and beyond
- who are engaged in institutional employability-related awards or institutionally endorsed extra and co-curricular activities.

Clearly this list is not exhaustive but is a catalyst for discussion as to what areas should be considered within a broader view of measuring input and output activities, as well as access of opportunity for improving employability. This is fundamentally important for HE providers and I think that it’s essential that this is captured within the TEF.

**The TEF and submission of additional employability evidence**

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Recommendations

There are already many fantastic examples out there, in all institutions, but how does this become the norm? How do you get consistency? How do you raise standards across all programmes? Do you provide opportunities to learn from each other? I am not advocating a one size fits all model or tick box exercise here. Employability needs to be embedded, so you need senior support, you need registry, student union and employer support, and it needs to be ingrained in institutional processes to ensure this work engages all staff and to ensure that all students are receiving similar opportunities and experiences.

The HEA's approach to employability

Based on research and extensive experience, the HEA, in consultation with the sector, has developed an approach to employability designed to help you engage all staff and stakeholders more effectively through a common process. The Embedding Employability in Higher Education Framework highlights the process, principles and premises underpinning employability and the elements which contribute to and support it. It is intended to support practitioners, managers, and planners in their thinking and discussions, enabling decisions to be made in an informed way. Drawing on academic research and best practice, the framework enables an inclusive approach. Empowering staff to truly own their approach to employability is critical. Why? Because employability is something that is crucial to all students. All staff should be encouraged and supported to apply an innovative, responsive and student-centred approach to embedding employability and incorporating techniques that foster independence as well as lifelong learning. Collaboration with stakeholders is essential to inform design, content and delivery of programmes of study that support and enhance employability. The HEA framework acts as an ideal vehicle to support this process and through our consultancy services, we can help you to successfully embed employability across the curriculum.

Embedding the Employability in Higher Education Framework within your existing university curriculum design and review processes will, I believe, take your approach to employability to the next level, in the process supporting students to enhance their immediate employment prospects and their longer term employability. It will also ensure that you are TEF-ready by unpacking your programme and providing that clear narrative to support your submission.

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Introducing the HEA's embedding employability in higher education framework

The Higher Education Academy’s framework for Embedding Employability in HE has been developed in conjunction with the sector and provides the basis for collective action on employability right across an institution, using a common process to achieve a common purpose.

The inner circle of the framework highlights the ten areas of focus that are integral for graduate employability. The areas of focus are encircled by a four-stage cyclical process that is key to embedding employability across an institution and at a programme level. The outer circle of the framework contains the three principles that underpin employability.

To download this and the other frameworks contained in our frameWORKS series, go to: www.heacademy.ac.uk/services/consultancy#section-best-practice
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