e-Portfolios: evaluating and auditing student employability engagement

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**Introduction**

This project builds on existing work carried out by the Department of Criminology and Sociology at Middlesex University in embedding employability in students’ programmes of study via students’ development of an e-portfolio personal narrative. With a better-defined narrative of their journey, students will be able to maximise the skills and capabilities acquired throughout their undergraduate studies in the development of their professional career.

**Aims and objectives**

- to embed employability further into the curriculum;
- to help and support students develop their own narrative in order to develop their employability potential;
- to increase students’ employability rates.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) employability framework specifies that employability requires reviewing how students, staff, and employer engagement (among other things) are developed by curricula and extra-curricular activity. This project develops mapping and evaluation tools, plus open source portfolio tools to be made available to other HEIs, making it possible for them to tailor development and auditing of their own students’ employability narratives utilising the open source tools and guidance developed by the project.

The project’s resources thus meet the goals of:

- supporting others to use the HEA employability framework;
- developing approaches to evaluate and measure the impact of employability practice. While the work is based around Criminology and Sociology teaching; its development takes into account practice within other disciplines (see methodology below);
- engage staff and students with employability as the development of the portfolio structure will involve a collaborative effort between staff and students.

The employability agenda requires not just skills acquisition, but a more ambitious attempt to integrate learning into the student’s agency and construction of a ‘project’ beyond the university, which considers students as the actors who ‘construct’ what employability means. The Middlesex e-portfolio addresses this by requiring students to construct an employability narrative allied to an employability skills audit.

Middlesex University’s Criminology and Sociology Department is in the process of developing the e-portfolio as a central tool to horizontally link the concept of employability into core modules across the three years of undergraduate provision. In doing so, students become the authors of their personal programme and narrative. This project utilises empirical research and evaluation in order to develop tools applicable to extending this work to a UK-wide audience and across different settings within the Higher Education (HE) sector. In this it recognises the growing concern with employability across different institutions and investigates and analyses the ways that employability skills and educational provision can be mapped and audited in line with the HEA four-stage framework; focusing primarily on stage two – review and mapping; stage three – action; and stage four – evaluation and the development of tools and resources that facilitate these stages, and HEI evaluation of employability auditing practice and provision.
The project’s overall aim is the development of open source evaluation and auditing tools, freely available to the wider HEI sector that will encourage engagement with the HEA employability framework.
Methodology

The project adopts a mixed methods approach by combining development of software tools and portfolio templates with empirical work to inform resource development. In doing so, it addresses the needs of evaluation and auditing tools for both internal and external audiences acknowledging the limited timescale of project commencement in February 2015 and completion by 30 June 2015.

The research consists of a case study on the implementation of staff and student employability auditing via the implementation of a student e-portfolio and the evaluation and mapping tool draw on research conducted with both students and staff. Two staff focus groups and a student focus group have been conducted. We have been working on this project in close collaboration with students from the first year who have been the first to be introduced to the e-portfolio scheme as well as the student learning assistants (SLAs) who have been heavily involved in the design as well as the delivery of the e-portfolio to the first year students. The whole project is defined by its student-led approach in order to best translate their needs in terms of employability.

We have also worked in collaboration with academic staff as well as the employability services at Middlesex University. Focus groups presented a great opportunity for a discussion on employability to take place. As identified by Bryman (2012), one of the key advantages of focus groups is that it allows for the different members of the group to bounce off ideas from each other “unlike in the one-to-one interview where interviewees are rarely challenged” (Bryman 2012, p. 503). This proved to be very productive in a discussion that is increasingly central to the development of academia:

*The focus group offers the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it.*

(Bryman 2012, p. 504)

The two focus groups guide focused discussion on three main aspects:

- defining ‘employability’: defining employability in and across the different focus groups highlighted the concept as still amorphous in the way it should be conceptualised, measured (or not) and evaluated;
- embedding employability;
- staff–student employability interface.

We dedicated more time in the second focus group more specifically on the issue of embedding employability into the curriculum. Following completion of the focus groups we proceeded to a thematic analysis of the data and identification of key themes to inform conclusions.

We also have conducted a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews with academic staff in universities in the London and Greater London area. The semi-structured qualitative approach was intended to obtain information on how staff interpret employability and implement it within different institutions. However, in exploring what is happening in terms of employability in the London area, it was preferable to conduct one-to-one interview in order to get a more in-depth
overview of the situation from the point of view of the participants (Bryman 2012, p. 470). The interview schedule focused on the defining employability and embedding employability.

In developing the evaluation and mapping tool, we have also produced a review of the literature on the question of employability contained within the next section. It is essential to ground our evaluation and mapping tool into the current discussion (Flick 2014) that is emerging but as stated above increasingly central to academia and its transformation in line with the structural constrains of the labour market.
Embedding employability: a preliminary assessment

The HEA employability framework specifies that employability requires reviewing how students, staff and employer engagement (among other things) are developed by both curricula and extra-curricular activity.

A central theme in the current focus on employability is that this is not simply about getting a job, but requires wider effort to support the development of critical, reflective abilities in a way that makes the experience of learning empowering and enhancing (Harvey 2003). Developing confidence, agency and active learning requires mapping educational provision against the required graduate knowledge, skills and attributes (Cole and Tibby 2013, p. 13). The employability agenda requires not just skills acquisition, but a more ambitious attempt to integrate learning into the student’s agency and construction of a ‘project’ beyond the University that considers students as the actors who ‘construct’ what employability means.

The literature on employability identifies that employability is more than just pushing students towards specific jobs and actual employment; it involves development of a range of skills and knowledge. But the literature also shows that there are varied perspectives on how this should be done.

Defining employability

Harvey (2001) and Lees (2002; cited in Harvey 2003) identify a range of different definitions of employability. While the term has gained common currency within higher educational discourse, various definitions of what constitutes employability emerge in the literature. However, the HEA has attempted to define both the term and the concept through a series of publications (Robinson 2006; Yorke 2006; Yorke and Knight 2006). While space does not allow for exhaustive critical discourse on the nature and meaning of employability, a brief overview of some of the core definitions applicable to this embedding employability projects is useful to define the context in which the Middlesex e-portfolio work is being carried out.

This project considers employability as incorporating both skills and practice and the means through which students might demonstrate both an understanding of employability skills and their acquisition of such skills. However, the project is also concerned with how staff can identify and pursue an employability agenda as well as audit and evaluate the extent to which students are acquiring specific employability skills. Yorke and Knight’s (2006, p. 3) definition of employability as incorporating “a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” is relevant. This identifies employability as going beyond mere subject specific skills and incorporating personal attributes that may not be an automatic consequence of learning by academic study (discussed further below). Harvey (2003, p. 3) argues for the importance of viewing employability as not just about getting a job while noting conversely that, “just because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic.” Harvey argues that effective employability requires learning employability skills with the emphasis less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. Thus Harvey contends that, “in essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner” (2003, p. 3).

Also relevant to our discussion of employability is the context in which an employability agenda exists within higher education, the core aspects of which the HEA summarizes as follows:
employability refers to the potential a graduate has for obtaining, and succeeding in, graduate level positions. There is a need to recognise that the co- and extra-curricular achievements of students contribute to a graduate’s employability;

employability is taken to be a more complex construct than those of ‘core’ or ‘key’ skills. It connects with a range of discourses and has many facets.

‘Skills’ as a term is useful because of its significance in political and employment circles. However, there is a danger that the ‘skills’ notion is employed reductively and in a simplistic and unhelpful manner, focusing disproportionately on job-specific skills rather than transferable skills. The use of the terms ‘skills’ thus risks being simplified as relating to core job functions rather than the development of transferable skills that will increase the likelihood of graduates being employable in a range of different areas.

An earlier definition of employability provided by Yorke identifies it as being “based on ‘complex learning’, (not a simplistic understanding of ‘core’ key’ or ‘transferable’ skills) and is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the gaining of employment, which is also dependent on the state of the economy” (2006, p. 2). Employability is, thus, socially constructed and its definition and implementation needs to adapt to students’ needs and contemporary economic realities.

**Graduateness versus employability?**

Emerging from the employability literature are concerns about the manner in which employability is implemented in practice. Teichler (1999) argues that higher education is gripped by:

> perennial debate about the extent to which the institutional fabric of higher education, i.e. the institutions as well as their departments and programmes, and the substance and processes of teaching and learning should reflect the future occupational roles and tasks of graduates. (Teichler 1999, p. 170)

Harvey (2003) identifies that employability should not be something distinct from learning and pedagogy but is something that emerges from good learning. Yet the introduction of volunteering and placement initiatives are core ways through which HEIs address the employability agenda potentially with a disproportionate focus on measuring graduate employment rather than actual employability. Put another way, HEIs frequently measure post-qualification employment as an outcome rather than assessing the extent to which graduates acquire skills consistent with future employment prospects. Hope and Lim (2013, p. 3) identify the potential for there to be “contradictory aims of the university as a site of ‘human capital’ in terms of increased productivity and earning capacity and as a site of academic autonomy.” Accordingly, graduateness and employability need to be considered as separate paradigms within the employability debate.

Glover, Law and Youngman (2002) identify that while ‘graduateness’ consists of the skills knowledge and understanding that graduates posses, employability relates to the extent to which graduates are prepared to enter the national or international workplace. Accordingly, there is a distinction between ‘hard’ (subject specific) and ‘soft’ (core, transferable) skills and also a distinction in how and where they are obtained during university education. Cole and Tibby identify that “definitions of employability have shifted from demand-led skills sets towards
a more holistic view of ‘graduate attributes’ that include ‘softer’ transferable skills and person-centred qualities” (2013, p. 9). These softer skills should be developed in conjunction with subject-specific knowledge, skills and competencies but the extent to which this takes place on undergraduate programmes is questionable. Allan (2006) argues that soft skills cannot be taught in the same way as hard skills. Undergraduate degree modules arguably concentrate on hard skills; thus Criminology and Sociology undergraduates (the core targets of the Middlesex programme on which this employability project is based) are routinely taught skills in criminological and sociological thinking and analysis; often heavy on theory rather than practical application to future careers. While such students may also be developing soft skills; the development may be incidental to their core subject-specific study and may not be recognised either by students or staff. Thus, the core challenge for embedding employability projects is how to link pedagogical approaches with experiential learning and soft skill development.

Emerging from the literature is the notion that discipline-specific consideration is integral to the development of employability. Lindblom-Ylanne et al. (2007), in assessing the influence of discipline on teaching, contend that variations exist in university teachers’ approaches, such variations being influenced by discipline. They argue that teachers who teach in ‘hard’ disciplines such as physical sciences apply a teacher-centred approach to teaching whereas teachers in ‘soft’ disciplines such as Social Sciences and Humanities take a more student-centred approach. Their underlying research hypothesis is that teaching approaches are discipline specific, something they contend can be empirically tested, with the implication that teaching approach can significantly impact on skills development. Lindblom-Ylanne et al. argue that teacher-centred tutors “see teaching mainly as the transmission of knowledge” (2007, p. 285). Thus there is an emphasis on organising, structuring and delivering content in a way that is easy for students to understand. Lindblom-Ylanne et al.’s assessment of previous research into discipline and teaching style concluded that “pure hard” knowledge can be described as cumulative in nature so that “teaching content is linear, straightforward and uncontentious. Instructional methods are mainly mass lectures and problem-based seminars” (2007, p. 287). By contrast, “pure soft” knowledge is “holistic and qualitative in nature ... [involving] more face-to-face class meetings and tutorial teaching including discussions and debates” (2007, p. 287). However, the lecture–seminar paradigm continues to dominate in subjects such as Law and Criminology with the likely consequence that soft skill development is not explicitly addressed, measured or evaluated.

Tymon (2013) identifies a “missing perspective” in the employability debate, noting from a study of student perspectives, that students expressed a narrower view of employability than the wider literature suggests. Tymon’s (2013) study showed that this was particularly marked with first and second year students commensurate with a wider possibility that employability becomes something that students only directly engage with in their third year. Even then, they may only do so in terms of graduation and subsequently seeking employment. Harvey (2003, p. 5) notes that recent graduates often find it difficult to adjust to the demands of work and the different culture of the workplace and that it has become almost a mantra for employers to complain about the failure of universities to prepare graduates for work. Yet, this also raises questions about the nature of employability within higher education and the extent to which students are encouraged to reflect on their own individual skills, the transferable nature of those skills and to develop an effective ‘toolkit’ for skills application to other settings. Literature suggests that students have difficulties in articulating their acquired skills in any meaningful way that is relevant to their planned employment (Wye and Lim 2009). But, crucially, students
also require information on how their skills can relate to the website and opportunities to reflect on skills development allied to teaching and learning.

Within the employability literature, Rothwell et al. (2008) identified a lack of student confidence concerning their likely success in the job market. Tomlinson (2008) identifies employability as being about the notion that degree credentials and degree success (combined with such factors as the status of the degree and the awarding institution) are determining factors in likely job success. Thus, students arguably buy into a notion of 'graduateness' equating this with employability within a hierarchical job market. While it should be noted that Tomlinson's study also identified that students have some general awareness of the skills that they are developing (and degree and module narratives frequently indicate the jobs that relate to teaching), employability also requires that students develop 'tacit knowledge' the procedural everyday knowledge that “is usually not taught and often is not even verbalized” (Sternberg et al. 2000, p. ix). Thus, communication skills, writing skills and exercising judgment become important parts of employability but may not be directly addressed by university teaching and assessment; this raises questions concerning the extent to which students engage with these issues.

**Student engagement**

Considerable anecdotal evidence exists that students consider explicit skills development in such things as communication to be of low value and arguably demeaning. Prensky (2001) identifies contemporary students as "digital natives", noting that they are the first generation to have grown up surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones and other digital media. Specifically he states that, “today's average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV).” Consequentially, they have a different thinking and learning style and different brain structures to previous generations but also have a different appreciation and understanding of the skills needed in an employment setting. Modern students may, therefore, have considerable difficulty with text-based learning and the volume of reading required in subjects like Law and Criminology. As a result, lectures would appear to be counterintuitive to students not used to sitting and listening to a 'static' lecture and then following this up with reading heavy text, notwithstanding any difficulties that students generally have with maintaining attention over a 50-minute period (Nurse 2010). However, contemporary students may consider themselves to be fluent in communication skills such as sending emails or engaging with social media and resistant to any perceived need to learn these skills or audit the extent to which they have developed them in a way acceptable to the employment world. Harvey (2003) identifies that there are potential problems with students’ transition from their everyday world and undergraduate study to the world of work and to the changed demands of communicating and engaging with a professional environment. How to achieve such engagement and provide for a smooth transition from study to work is a core challenge of the employability agenda.

While contemporary students are familiar with the use of technology and particularly social media and online profiles, for them, these are primarily leisure and social communication tools rather than employability and 'professional' ones. Thus, while higher education staff may embrace such tools as personal development planning and the use of electronic portfolios, questions remain about the extent to which students buy into the use of these mechanisms as core skills development or audit tools. Critical thinking research, for example, has identified that
students require dedicated practice and effort in order to develop skills and attributes not routinely designed into academic programmes (Paul et al. 1997). Evidence also exists that students, with multiple demands on their time, do not routinely buy into initiatives that have no immediate or tangible “benefit”. Gibbs and Simpson allude to this by identifying that within standard assessment regimes students may become “cue seekers” (2004, p. 5) developing learning approaches tailored to the demands of the assignment. In addition Black and William (2001) argue that “teachers’ feedback to pupils often seems to serve social and managerial functions, often at the expense of the learning function”, so that assignment marking becomes process-driven rather than student driven. Where assignment questions are known from the outset of a course students are effectively not taking the whole course but may focus on those elements of the course perceived to be relevant to the assignment. Nurse’s (2010) research into critical thinking among Law and Social Science undergraduates identified that students are dismissive of non-assessed tasks and largely view the academic stage of their degree as something to be passed en route to learning the skills required to succeed in a job. Similarly, Gibbs and Simpson suggest that students are “strategic in their use of time and ‘selectively negligent’ in avoiding content that they believe is not likely to be assessed” (2004, p. 6). Thus although not all learning outcomes are met, a student may well still pass a course even though their learning is incomplete if they have learned how to complete the essential tasks required on a course.

Applying this educational discourse to the employability agenda indicates that employability activities that fall outside of the curriculum, risk being marginalised by students. But, this also identifies that employability benefits need to be sufficiently clear to students that they understand what skills they are acquiring (and where/when) and can incorporate employability understanding and practice into their academic development. Doing so requires some dedicated attention to mapping and auditing employability in a way meaningful to both students and staff.

Mapping and auditing employability

Consistent with Paul’s (1993) notion that the development of specific (critical thinking) skills requires dedicated effort, so too does the development of employability skills. However, noting Harvey’s (2003) contention that this is not done automatically through higher education provision, employability development also requires mapping to establish when, where and how employability occurs within curricula. It also requires some form of auditing and evaluation of employability skills development and this is integral to this project. De la Harpe et al. (2000) suggest that there exists a worldwide concern that undergraduate programmes do not produce graduates with appropriate life-long learning skills necessary for their careers while Medhat (2003) suggested that “there is a chasm between what industry wants and what universities provide.” More recently, however, Hope and Lim (2013, p. 6) identified a concern that the employability agenda had both swung too far towards (unpaid) placement-related activity and had been poorly implemented to the extent that “academic learning is being increasingly driven by the agendas of employers in order to produce ‘work ready’ students.”

Cole and Tibby identify that “defining and embedding employability remains challenging” (2013, p. 9) thus a processed approach to employability incorporating discussion and reflection, review and mapping, action, and evaluation is required. To take from York and Knight (2006, p. 8), distinct categories of skills need to be mapped, specifically:
personal qualities;
core skills;
process skills.

These distinctions reflect Ryle’s (1949) conception of ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how and the HEA have produced a fairly comprehensive list of 39 skills across these categories that are useful in informing how various employability skills can be mapped and audited (Yorke and Knight 2006, p. 8). However, mapping and auditing these skills requires making decisions about whether employability skills are developed at course level, at module level, via extra-curricula activities or by a combination of these mechanisms. Given the earlier discussion of student buy-in and attitudes towards ‘non-essential’ study, consideration also needs to be given to the extent to which employability skills are assessed or to how students are able to engage with employability concerns. Thus a curriculum audit becomes a necessary tool for identifying the extent to which employability is:

- a factor explicitly appearing in a module;
- linked across different modules in a way that appears coherent;
- duplicated across modules and is a good fit with other aspects of the curriculum;
- consistent with development of core skills development in a way that allows students opportunities to combine aspects of their learning in order to deal with complex and unfamiliar problems.

However, in addition to these issues, auditing employability also first requires consideration of whether employability is:

- provided for across an entire degree programme in a systematic and co-ordinated way;
- offered at module level and/or is linked to module-specific learning outcomes;
- reflects students existing employment experiences including any part-time work;
- is the subject of a specific module such as a placement or volunteering module.

This latter consideration is one that gives rise to both ethical and practical considerations. Burke et al. (2000) identify some evidence that student performance is adversely affected by the need to undertake part-time employment thus ‘imposing’ employability on students via volunteering and work experience practice is potentially problematic and counter productive. Within higher education, employability linked placements and work experience programmes have become relative commonplace in recent years. However, the space that such practices enjoy within an overall academic workload and students lives and the extent to which they constitute actual employability rather than non-specific work experience, and/or graduateness, is dependent on the extent to which such programmes are effectively embedded into pedagogical approaches. There is also a need to consider the extent to which such actions privilege those students already equipped to deal with the post-university world, and perhaps disadvantage students already in employment.
Hope and Lim (2013) identify that many placements and internships risk being, in reality, unpaid work experience of questionable benefit to students. The reality of contemporary students, particularly inner city, ethnic minority students, is that many are already in employment and need to juggle study with existing work demands. Westerbergh and Wickersham (2011) identify that many students cannot afford the loss of income associated with unpaid internships. Allen et al. (2010, p. 1) also identified that minority ethnic and disabled students’ experience inequality of access with regard to opportunities to take up formally supported placements. Various literature also alludes to the ‘whiteness’ of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society institutions such that minority ethnic students experience not only lack of equality in accessing such institutions, but also do not identify with their aims and activities (see e.g. Nocella 2012). Placements within such organisations are thus often not easily accessible to, nor desired by, minority ethnic students. In addition, Hope and Lim (2013, p. 8) identify that optional placement modules (arguably the norm in Criminology and Sociology) are not equally available to all students and that students who engage with these modules tend to be a self-selecting group. The socio-economic status of minority ethnic students means that they are potentially marginalised where employability options rely on unpaid work or work carried out in addition to existing commitments and study challenges. Thus an ethical issue is potentially raised not only about the manner in which employability modules privilege the already motivated and arguably ‘advantaged’ student, but also about the ethics of placement and employability related module activity that amounts to unpaid work experience.

Robinson (2005, p. 6) identifies that ethics can (and should) be related to employability and embedded in the curriculum in variety of ways but argues chiefly for this to be by way of:

> practice reflection;
  • professional learning;
  • the non-professional curriculum.

Hope and Lim (2013) argue for an ethical approach on the part of staff by considering the extent to which credited placement and work experience modules incorporate notions of best practice and incorporate issues such as employment rights and conditions and equality. Students should also be encouraged to think ethically about their employment choices and the e-portfolio being developed by Middlesex University as part of this project incorporates reflection on ethical practice. Reflective practice is integral to development of employability skills. Robinson identifies that ethics can be developed into personal development planning (2005, p. 17) and that within volunteer modules ethics and values can be explicitly developed.

**Embedding employability**

Analysis of the literature on employability identifies considerable challenges in sufficiently embedding employability into academic programmes that it coherently links teaching and learning with subject-specific knowledge and transferable skills. Crank (2007) argued that academic criminal justice is normatively organized, mirroring the normative focus of the public sector criminal justice apparatus. He contends that as a result criminal issues are described in terms of liberal or conservative crime control values within the classroom and this can impact on teaching approaches. Thus Criminology taught during the tenure of a Conservative
The government is likely to adopt a liberalist tone reflecting the dominance of this ideology in Government policy whereas during Labour’s tenure Criminology might adopt a social constructionist approach (Lea and Young 1993). Hussey and Smith (2002) suggest that learning outcomes are “used to specify precisely what a student shall know or understand, and what skill or capacities they will have at the end of a specific period of learning” (p. 223). They suggest that a precise vocabulary can be developed identifying what is both taught and learned in a session. Lectures, however, are often used as a standard method of delivering content within the Social Sciences even though the precise learning content and method of delivery may not be appropriate to the required learning outcomes or facilitate further learning. Bowers (2006) concluded that generic teaching strategies generally do not teach transferable skills such as critical thinking. While teachers in certain subjects may feel that they are teaching critical or analytical thinking skills, in reality what is happening is that the student is often being trained to either disregard their previously held natural way of making judgements or is being trained to understand a correct or standard way of thinking inherent in the discipline. Paul (1993) identifies that all human thinking is inferential in nature. As a result, what teachers may consider being poor reasoning on the part of undergraduate Law or Criminology students may, in fact, simply be an inability to apply the students’ underlying inference model to a specific problem. Paul further argues that where students have learned the appropriate facts it may be possible for them to correctly answer exam questions and appear to be students with good reasoning skills. However, the student asserting the correct information with confidence is often mistaken for a student with good reasoning skills. Thus the potential implication of the Lindblom-Ylanne et al.’s assessment of teaching processes is that discipline-specific approaches dominate teaching such that these differences in content and focus aside, teaching becomes standardised within a discipline. This being the case, an assessment of teaching styles and context becomes important to ensure students’ needs are met via context-appropriate teaching and that employability becomes effectively embedded.

Biggs (2003) uses the term ‘constructive alignment’ to discuss the importance of coherent curriculum design. This requires coherence in relation to the detail of learning and employability, in particular:

1. Are there clear scheduled learning activities that relate both to acquiring employability skills and the module learning outcomes?
2. Are the tasks that students undertake linked coherently to module learning intentions?

Yorke and Knight (2006, p. 12) argue that, “a curriculum for employability will have assessment arrangements that differ from those often found in mainstream academic programmes.” The implication is that mainstream assessment practice is focused predominantly on summative assessment criteria that serve institutional requirements for academic progression and measurement rather than the needs of wider employability skills development. Arguably, there is a need to distinguish between hard academic skills (essay writing, referencing, demonstrating subject-specific theoretical knowledge) and ‘soft’ employability skills (listening, global awareness, self-management). The latter skills are no less important for students’ development, but are generally poorly served by ‘standard’ academic assessment techniques and processes.

Bransford et al. (2000) argue that Internet-based electronic learning environments provide an ideal learning environment that allows people to learn through practical work, by receiving feedback and by refining understanding and building new knowledge. Textbooks date quickly (especially in Criminology where references to case law and legal systems quickly become
obsolete) whereas electronic web-based software such as Moodle allows connection to real-world problems and real-time events. Spurlin (2006) identifies that research has shown that students prefer courses taught using computers and that incorporating technology into a course results in greater learning. She also identifies studies that show that "technology-enriched courses positively affect students’ personal and intellectual development” (2006, p. 2) albeit few studies have determined whether technology has a positive effect on how well students learn.

Thus analysis of real-world problems and understanding of the reality of criminal activity should be an integral part of Criminology teaching if students are to learn how to successfully apply their knowledge and develop long term understanding of how theoretical conceptions relate to the real world. But in addition, students need to understand the skills they are developing and how they can be applied to careers in not just specific criminal justice system jobs, but also in a wider policy analysis and practitioner world.

Pitler et al. (2007) identify that use of technology allows students to better understand new material where it is integrated into their note-taking processes, for example, by using tablets, digital recording devices and other electronic word processors to make contemporaneous notes of classroom discussions and to develop these in their own way. Orey (2001), in his discussion of cognitive processing, identifies that students sometimes experience difficulties in absorbing information so that problems exist in transmitting information from short-term to long-term memory. Thus students may initially understand a concept or topic while it is being discussed, but fail to commit it to memory and develop appropriate learning. Orey suggests elaboration as the primary means of material being learned, identifying this as an active process on the part of the learner (2007). Thus the learner must be actively engaged with the material, not necessarily physically, but actively relating any new piece of information to other ideas that they already know. Technology can be an integral part of the elaboration process. Biggs identifies that teaching and learning activities in many courses are restricted to lectures and tutorials: “lecture to expound and package, and tutorial to clarify and extend” (2003, p. 3). Yet such methods may be inappropriate to develop retention of information and skills in long-term memory, although technology can assist in this process.

**Embedding employability: some provisional conclusions**

While this does not purport to be an exhaustive analysis of the employability literature, its targeted analysis of contemporary thinking on employability identifies a number of challenges in relation to embedding employability into criminology and sociology programmes.¹

This project is largely concerned with curriculum auditing; testing where and how employability-related learning is incorporated into curricula and where gaps in doing so might exist. The literature suggests that employability does not happen in ideational isolation. Instead, embedding employability into degree programmes requires dedicated effort, an appreciation of the different skills that students need to acquire, and auditing evaluation and assessment.

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¹ While criminology and sociology is the focus of our research and this project, it should be noted that the principles discussed draw on other areas such as Hope and Lim’s (2013) work on arts placements. This work is also intended to be applicable to other subjects and the wider higher education environment.
methods that are tailored to the specific needs of a student body and a subject-specific curriculum.

Hooper and Reiber (1995) identify that ‘technology in education is often perceived in terms of how many computers or videocassette recorders are in a classroom and how they might be used to support traditional classroom activities’. Thus the focus is on reinforcing or maximising the efficiency of traditional methods of teaching (lectures and seminars) rather than on utilising technology to develop the most appropriate learning environment for students. By contrast, Biggs’ ‘constructive alignment’ (2003, p.2) perspective suggests a need for a coherent learning environment which incorporates specific learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes. The e-portfolio developed in conjunction with this project in intended to make use of technology to develop an environment that maximises students’ opportunities to reflect on learning activities and extra-curricula activities and to for both staff and students to audit the skills being developed.
The Middlesex e-Portfolio Project

The Middlesex University e-portfolio project has consisted of mapping of the various skills and capabilities students are developing and the portfolio appears to be a welcome addition to programmes in Criminology and Sociology. Each module leader identified a series of skills and capabilities that were added to the Moodle page of each module in order to initially guide students. It is important that students see the connections between a module’s content and the way they can create their portfolio; which is also linked to a linkedin profile. To embed it into teaching and learning practices and make it relevant, and as such also attractive, for students has been a key feature of the project. In addition, we are including the alumni aspect by linking their profile to other staff’s and students’ linkedin profiles. In summary:

- The e-portfolio is being developed using the Mahara e-portfolio platform, and is integrated into virtual learning spaces (Moodle) for all modules and linked to a LinkedIn community involving students, alumni and a range of key stakeholders, including academics, employers.
- The e-portfolio has been rolled out to all first year students.
- Students are positioned at the centre of this project and are contributing artefacts such as video and audio clips to share their individual experience with others. Student Learning Assistants (SLAs) are involved supporting students develop their online portfolios. Existing services provided by the employability centre and Learner Development Unit are embedded into portfolio activities. A team of SLA’s are working on developing the e-portfolio and maximise its embedment into the different modules, i.e. skills audit questionnaires; skills and capabilities matrix; informative videos (narratives from other students...). Over the summer SLA are leading a number of projects including:
  - The skills matrix project. The project lead Lea Stundner, Senior SLA, Science and Technology says “the skills matrix is a great tool to easily identify a student’s skillset. It will help students to record evidence of how they acquired/used skills and function to prepare students to answer standard interview questions".
  - Tricia Hague, Senior SLA, Arts and Design, is leading a project to create ‘a day in the life’ practitioner/alumni experience videos. She says the project ‘aims to motivate students by helping them to visualise their lives post-study’. She plans to give a few criminology and sociology alumni a Go-pro camera to record reflection of their day. These are used to create a series of vlogs and videos demonstrating different employability options and career avenues.
  - How do we capture student attention and encourage regular portfolio updates? Oliver Garner, SLA, Arts and Design, leads a project that attempts to use visual prompts to highlight skills and remind students to update their portfolios.
  - Both Oliver and Trisha have started to capture student stories in two-minute bite size videos and digital stories. Currently they are interviewing students with work placement and voluntary experience. Students asked to share how they secured these posts and tips for making the most out of work opportunities available at the university and in the local area.
Yusaf Ejaz Mohiuddin, SLA, Criminology and Sociology, recently joined the portfolio team. Yusaf leads a project that looks at organising work experience for students interested in a teaching career.

- A group of first year students are also being involved in this development with the SLAs.
- The technology allows students to store a lot of data throughout the three years. They can present these stored information to different people including to employers and with this kind of technology students have the flexibility to present their work differently according to whom they have to present it to.
- The introduction of the e-portfolio has seen a strong collaboration of different services across the university where the Employment Office and the Learner Development Unit have been working with academic members of staff to develop best practice when it comes to embed employability further into the curriculum. Inter-services collaboration. It is also important that the portfolio is to be developed in collaboration with different services within the university in order to best cater for students’ needs. This represents a unique aspect of the e-portfolio and the general commitment to further embed employability into our curriculum. In turn, core skills are linked the different services through the e-portfolio which connects all of the services together. For instance, the academic writing unit (The Learner Development unit) are developing learning units (e.g. on essay writing and reading comprehension) that are to be integrated to the portfolio.

So far the main questions raised were in regards to its sustainability especially in relation to the assessment process in order to create greater connections between the work on the portfolio and each module’s content but also to maintain students’ commitment and engagement to their work on the portfolio. In order to address the question of sustainability, we are working on future development for better students’ engagement. This will be done with the continuous dedication to getting students as well as staff involved in this endeavour, as there is an anticipated value in maximising students’ voices in order to sustain and encourage.
Staff Workshops Analysis

The Middlesex employability project takes a robust approach to ensuring its outcomes by directly considering the needs of both internal users (Middlesex students and staff) and external users within other universities and the wider HEI environment. Thus the project involves consultation with Middlesex students and staff engaged in the e-portfolio project and employability agenda and with colleagues at other HEIs in the Greater London area who were consulted in order to assess the needs of external users of project outputs. As part of the project staff were asked to flag up the key skills that can be identifiable for each module as part of the evaluation of employability skills. Two staff workshops were also conducted as part of the project with the aim of identifying from staff:

1. How they define employability
2. How they consider employability can best be embedded within the provision of the department of Criminology and Sociology
3. Barriers to effective employability skills development

The findings of the staff workshops are summarised in the following pages. Eight staff were involved in the workshops, including the Head of the Department of Criminology and Sociology and the School of Law’s Academic Developer who worked closely with Student Learning Assistants (SLAs) and those students who had engaged with the e-portfolio.

Both workshops considered the following HEFCE definition of employability:

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)

Staff were also given an introduction to the Middlesex employability project and the planned use of the e-portfolio as a tool for students to map their employability skills.

Defining Employability

The HEFCE definition provoked considerable discussion among and also identified differences of opinion among staff both about what employability means in a practical sense and how it is implemented.

Staff in the workshops identified that while the HEFCE definition was about skills and developing undergraduates in relation to the types of skills that they would need, there was a need to identify the type of jobs first. However, staff identified that many students do not know what specific jobs they wish to do when they leave University but have a notion of graduate employment that requires refinement. In this respect staff identified that there was
potentially tension between whether not academic staff should clearly identify types of job specific to the different degrees.

There was some criticism of the HEFCE definition as being about economic growth, the ‘usual’ discursive stuff and also about feeding into a wider political context. Staff discussed the appropriation of a narrative – the importance of allowing students to explore their own agency and therefore concluded that there was a need for a more subjective definition of employability than the HEFCE one.

**Skills Development**

Staff in the focus groups identified that the most ‘employable’ graduates may not be the most academic graduates. They also identified that lack of confidence is a significant factor in students’ employability focus. Within discussions around the employability of criminology and sociology graduates, staff identified that for the most part students were not being taught to actually become criminologists but that teaching should be designed around acquiring knowledge that students can use in future careers.

Staff also identified that the working definition of employability has changed so that there is less of a focus on academic skills and a need for more emphasis on and greater awareness of employability issues. Staff argued that instead, the focus on education, independent learning, knowledge acquisition may be essential to recognise those broader skills as well as the more specific ones, but they should be able to identify as well as communicate them as transferable.

It should be recognized that process skills are ultimately interrelated to core skills and that it is necessary to have the necessary provisions around essential core skills to allow students to have the relevant foundations to develop other skills.

**Embedding Employability and Student Engagement**

Some staff in the focus group questioned whether there was a need to ‘embed’ employability as this implied that employability skills were not already in evidence whereas there was a view that employability was already being taught. The e-portfolio was identified as a tool to highlight what already exists and discussions of curriculum design identified that staff had concerns about adding on top of existing provision and the notion that employability can be reduce to a tick list of skills. Staff identified that within the department there was some explicit thought about how staff could help students with employability while noting that some aspects of employability cannot always be reduced to numbers or measured and that something like ‘developing agency’ was not obviously quantifiable.

There was a consensus among staff that student agency was a significant factor and that students were engaged in a journey during their three years of undergraduate study. Those staff involved in teaching at all three levels were able to see how students matured and developed from 1\(^{st}\) year to 3\(^{rd}\) and grew as citizens, which included developing a wider social concern and responsibility. As an example, staff discussed how they had heard students discussing how they wanted to work with young people and make a difference. In this respect, degree study has allowed students to develop the interest in a particular area and it was important not to generalise on student engagement and student awareness of employability. Some students were perfectly able to articulate their aspirations whereas others were not. Thus there was a need to identify that different students had different needs and understanding. Staff also identified the importance of personal achievement and reflexivity, noting that success was influenced by what best students can achieve with what they came
with which raises questions about how is the degree allowing to best explore and develop what they already had when they started. It is also about life skills and not just about academic knowledge.

### Curriculum Design

Staff discussion identified that an employability agenda was not necessarily about embedding employability within programmes but identifying and making employability skills and issues more explicit while allowing for a more autonomous exploration of these skills.

The ways in which we can make them more explicit:

- Identify key skills and capabilities in each module – using a matrix system for instance against which students can build their employability profile;
- Link more clearly and more explicitly different types of assessments to employability skills. All types of assessments (presentations, essays, examinations…) have employability potential;
- In relation to the latter point, it is important to aim for a diversity of types of assessments across different modules. Different assessments will lead to a greater number of skills;
- Explicitness raises the question of whether or not employability should be one of the key outcomes in each programmes and by extension should be assessed.

Although useful in providing a benchmark to students, audit skills for instance are too objective in their measurement and it is difficult to measure agency, an ethos, for the real world. Employability cannot simply be quantifiable. This is especially the case as employability also involves a process of social and cultural capital acquisition that again is difficult to measure and quantify. This social and cultural capital acquisition is relational as well as longitudinal.

However, this process of reflexivity should be structured and systematic. There should spaces of reflection organised in time as well as practically via different sections in a portfolio. Students should be granted a break in the curriculum to take the time to reflect on their skills and capabilities. This reflection will also allow them to identify targets to aim for. This process of reflection should also be incremental as students are progressing into their degrees and developing appropriate skills. Staff also explained the need for students to engage with their likely future professions skills.

There are more alternative ways to think about employability in a more qualitative and indirect manner and notably in terms of thinking about different types of induction. In this it is about recognising the processional quality of employability. As such from the start, it is essential that we help and support students in feeling at home in a learning environment. The degree to which they will have a positive and rich experience at university is central in their development as a collective and as individuals into employment. Therefore we can explore different types of induction and practices that recognise the experiential and the embodied in gaining the confidence and the ability to articulate their skills and capabilities. It is about their ability to physically feel at ease and embrace the university learning experience and its different spatio-temporal components. It is for instance suggested that workshops around bodywork and rhythm could be introduced in year 1.
Staff concluded that employability is learning about resistance and resilience and for students is also significantly about presentation of themselves and of their work. Also it is necessary to be offering a reflection on the current situation in the labour market which is increasingly defined by its competitiveness especially for graduates.
Findings from the Student Focus Group

Key themes identified in the Students’ Focus Group were as follows:

- The recognition that a good skill set is not reducible to a good degree qualification;
- Students are also aware that in a competitive market grades are not going to be the only indicators and factors in increasing their employability;
- It is felt that at this stage there is insufficient provision from the university to explore this.
- It is about the life experience skills gathered along the way and not necessarily education;
- Again this works as an echo of what was recognised by the academic staff in the first focus group as a journey that needs to be translated and articulated into a reflection and a narrative;
- More explicitness is also required: how different topics/modules are interrelated and are enmeshed in one another and how they matter as whole rather than simply being thrown at the students. It is about being able to make connections. Especially as some modules lend themselves more clearly to obvious transferability (i.e. skills and methods in our module ‘Researching the City’ which directly engages students in using and reflecting on use of research skills). But also in the way academic staff should explicitly identify those skills along the way and recognising the individualities in the classroom as they construct their individual narrative. The construction of this narrative implies collaborative effort to unearth the potential of each and everyone and to recognise their already existing skills but define those skills into the relevant set that will increase their employability. One of the students notably commented:

  ‘I see it in all modules, so the skills are definitely there but each of us has got something unique, I think everybody is unique, no matter where they’re from or what they can do. So the skills are there but we need to kind of know how to develop them further, to have the definite skills at the end.’

In this the e-portfolio offers a platform for reflexivity and to put those skills in exergues through the reflexive process as well as being able to organise them into different sections and categories that have been developed by the students themselves to best reflect their needs.

The reflexive process brings into evidence skills that may not have been identified or overlooked: greater awareness. It also helps in identified what could be done to hone them up and explore different ways in which they can develop further. This can also been a platform offering greater interface between staff and students. Staff can use the e-portfolio to help students identify their skills and build their narratives if students are willing to.

- More opportunities for placements and work experiences along the way – ‘to get out of the bubble’ to be able to apply the skills and to be as a result confronted to the reality of these skills in the world of work. This would allow students to be able to reflect more clearly on the acquisition of skills and capabilities at university. For them it is not simply about the articulation of the skills but their ability to put them into practice in the ‘reality of work’ before they graduate.
Also in line with what was highlighted in the first staff focus group, it is recognised that students need support in building their confidence notably by being supported in identifying the skills that they already have. Beside the question of confidence, the resistance aspect mentioned in the first staff focus group was also discussed here.

Assessment of employability and in this case of the portfolio may not be the preferable option. Students queries how it would be assessed in a way that recognises the different subjectivities, individualities and personal takes on the portfolio? It may be better as a personal space of reflection. The engagement with the task would be different if it is intended to be read and assessed which would defeat the objective of helping construct a personal narrative. A formative assessment centred around feedback would be preferred to sustain an interface between staff and students as positive and constructive aspect of the process.

Further training and workshops are required on the portfolio but also on Linked In. This can be linked to interruptions in the year to allow some space to work on the portfolio. Keeping the e-portfolio is a skill in itself. In turn, these sessions will help reinforce the importance of the portfolio and the importance to keep it up to date throughout the three years. Keeping it updated regularly makes it is less likely that students would miss things out and forget to reflect on important skills and development.

Similar recognition that it must be incremental and not left to the end of the degree to be addressed: not an afterthought

Embedding employability is about integrating employability into the curriculum and requires allowing students to have ownership over employability and their own employability narrative. It is definitely not to be left to an external employment services unit. Some guidance is needed for students but to strengthen engagement with and the value of the e-portfolio student ownership of their narrative needs to be strengthened.
Embedding Employability: Conclusions and Recommendations

From our analysis of the relevant literature, our discussions with staff and students through the interview and focus group process and our practical work with students on the e-portfolio we conclude that:

- The current position and role of HEI’s in relation to employability is adapting to various degrees of resistance from academics.
- Degrees of interpretation exist as to whether or not directly engaging with employability should be the job of academic staff. There is however a consensus that academic skills and capabilities should remain central to the student’s experience. It is about showing that there is indeed an acquisition of skills through the intellectual and academic experience, as well as helping students find ways to translate those skills so that they are able to demonstrate their employability to employers.
- Central to the discussion on embedding employability into the curriculum is the question of resources. There needs to be a concrete recognition of the work done by academic staff in this arena. This should be translated into allowing time for employability activities and providing appropriate human, financial and technical resources.
- One key argument that has emerged from staff discussions is the necessity to have someone within a School or Faculty who has responsibility for employability matters and who is also given recognition within their work programme and duties to carry out the task.
- Employability should not entirely be left to non-academic services such as career or employability offices. It should also be more specifically addressed at departmental level in order to reflect the specificity of the discipline; particularly within humanities or social science subjects where it can be deemed less evident when it comes to think about transferable skills and their applicability outside the degree.

Finally, it is essential to continue and widen the communication between different HEIs in order to share good practice in this area. In this respect, it could be necessary to evaluate good practice in light of the type of institution and the socio-cultural and economic profile of their cohort. As highlighted in our staff discussions, employability is also a question of social and cultural capital and by extension confidence. Future mapping of employability will have to recognise different strategies to address issues related to social and cultural capital and related levels of confidence. In this regard, we have produced a staff employability audit toolkit, contained in the Appendix to this research report. We welcome feedback on this toolkit and look forward to developing it and associated resources in the future.
References


Appendix: Staff toolkit

Embedding Employability: audit and evaluation guidance

A practical guidance toolkit for staff

Employability is a desired outcome of undergraduate study. Increasingly parents and students want to know the likelihood that a particular course of study will result in employment. Most courses embed some notion of employability into their provision and also make employability officers or careers services available to students. But some students face challenges in understanding the specific skills that they have gained during their study and in articulating these to employers.

This toolkit, linked to the use of an open access e-portfolio tool, is designed to enable staff in higher education institutions to audit employability provision and to better support students in reflecting on their employability skills development. In doing so it aims to assist staff in identifying gaps in assisting students with employability auditing and the construction of their employability narrative.

This toolkit is based on research funded by the HEA and conducted by staff in the School of Law at Middlesex University into embedding employability in higher education curricula. This project makes use of an e-portfolio as a tool to allow students to audit and reflect on the development of their employability skills.

The toolkit provides tools for staff to reflect on their current practice and facilitate discussions about student engagement with employability provision within teaching and learning. It also allows staff to identify what issues exist in skills development and how these may be addressed. Alongside this toolkit is another for students in the use of the e-portfolio. We encourage staff adopting the e-portfolio to promote its use to students by circulating guidance on the use of the e-portfolio as a tool that can be used throughout their undergraduate study to audit and reflect on their skills development. Students should also be offered in-house training on the e-portfolio via workshops within allocated periods in the curriculum.

Locating Employability?

- Embedding employability and auditing the extent to which students are gaining or developing employability skills requires dedicated effort. Employability is not an automatic consequence of university study and needs to be distinguished from ‘graduateness’.
- Defining the personal, core and transferable skills that students are acquiring and where and when skills acquisition takes place is integral to student ‘buy in’ of the employability agenda.
- Understanding of specific transferable skills gained during study and an ability to articulate these can greatly influence the future employability of students. Auditing these skills is integral to students’ recognition of specific core, personal and transferable skills.
- Assumptions that a failure to articulate specific skills and competencies is the fault of students need to be addressed. Academic staff should take responsibility for clearly and explicitly identifying the skills that they expect students to develop and empower students to take ownership of their own employability narrative.
- Employability needs to be embedded across programmes at module and program level rather than being the exclusive purview of placement or volunteering modules or consigned to the responsibility of an employability or careers service.
• Employability agendas need to also recognise employability skills development arising from students’ extra-curricula activities, including any pre-existing employment or engagement with student services, committees and societies.

Defining Employability

Define Employment – Students who are unfamiliar with specific or general employment opportunities linked to their program of study should be given clear guidance on how their study can translate into different careers. Guidance should identify both the obvious (e.g. police, probation for criminology students) and non-obvious (e.g. NGO policy jobs, Ombudsman’s investigator/caseworker roles equally applicable to criminology students) with recognition of how their skills can be applied to a range of employment.

Define Employability - Employability is more than just pushing students towards specific jobs and defined employment; it involves development of a range of skills and knowledge. Employability needs to be defined at programme and module level and to be constructed in the context of the specific teaching and learning environment.

Acknowledge existing Employability – students who have existing extra-curricula commitments or responsibilities like paid part-time work, caring for family members and involvement in student or other committees and societies, should have this experience recognised.

Distinguish between Graduateness and Employability – The notion that employability naturally arises from degree level study requires rethinking.

Encourage Reflective Practice – Not all students will automatically engage with employability whereas graduating (3rd year) students will likely engage with the notion of employment albeit sometimes too late. Students should be offered support and encouragement from the first year onwards to reflect on their employability skills development via the use of tools such as the e-portfolio or comparable journal tools which can help achieve this.

How can we make it easier for students to understand employability?

• Use course and module information to distinguish between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ skills.
• Use module narratives and handbooks to explain the skills being developed, distinguishing between core skills, personal skills and transferable skills
• Incorporate skills discussions into guest speaker sessions to provide a real world context for employability.
• Introduce the idea of employability skills at an early stage so that students are able to construct a narrative throughout their three years of undergraduate university study.

How can we make it easier for students to reflect on employability?

• Provide students with tools such as the e-portfolio to create their own employability narrative.
• Provide students with training, mentoring and support in how to construct their narrative and give them ownership over the process.
• Give students access to employability information and debates via information on VLEs, module websites and blogs.
• Provide guidance to students on how employability is a process to be followed through in each year of study.

Mapping and Auditing Employability

• Development of specific (e.g. critical thinking) skills requires dedicated effort, so too does the development of employability skills.
• Employability development also requires mapping to establish when, where and how employability occurs within curricula. It also requires some form of auditing and evaluation of employability skills development.
• A processed approach to employability incorporating discussion and reflection, review and mapping, action, and evaluation is required. Employability is not routinely audited by standard academic assessment and requires its own dedicated assessment or discussion.
• Employability should therefore not be confined to placement or volunteering modules and there should be a clear link between teaching and learning and work experience or placement and employment practice.
• Employability needs to be mapped and audited at both module and programme level and needs to take into account extra-curricula activities that encourage and develop employability skills.
• Successful employability mapping and auditing requires a partnership between staff and students, but students must be allowed to take ownership of their own employability narrative. Tools like the e-portfolio provide an interface between staff and students providing a base on which to develop this partnership.

Employability auditing and mapping issues

Avoid Exclusivity – Employability should not be confined to placements and volunteering modules. Students with limited financial resources or with existing commitments like paid part-time work and family and child care responsibilities can be excluded from undertaking unpaid placements and volunteering.

Recognise existing experience – Employability auditing needs to recognise existing part-time work and other activities that develop core, personal or transferable skills.

Constructive alignment – Employability and teaching and learning need to be integrated.

Ongoing Practice – Employability provision and skills development should be a continuous process requiring review to meet the needs of specific student cohorts.

How can we make it easier for staff to audit employability provision?

• Conduct a curriculum audit (at least annually) in order to identify the extent to which employability is:
  a) a factor explicitly appearing in a module;
  b) linked across different modules in a way that appears coherent;
  c) duplicated across modules and is a good fit with other aspects of the curriculum;
d) and consistent with development of core skills development in a way that allows students opportunities to combine aspects of their learning in order to deal with complex and unfamiliar problems

- Create templates for auditing the specific employability skills developed at module level and complete these at the time module narratives and handbooks are created. Review at least once a year.
- Director of Programmes and Programme leaders to identify core, personal and transferable skills envisaged as programme outcomes and to communicate these to module leaders for approval and amendment. Review at least once a year
- Request student feedback on skills development as part of annual module evaluation processes.

How can we provide structured support for students to audit their employability practice?

- Use dedicated employability websites/VLEs as well as module specific information on transferable skills. Regularly update this information.
- Give students training on use of e-portfolio tools and their use in skills development.
- Provide students with staff and peer support in the construction of an employability narrative.
- Link academic employability provision to employability support services.

Embedding Employability and Linking it to Employment

Embedding employability and recognising difference

Placements and Volunteering - Some students may feel they are expected to undertake placements and volunteering and that they will be judged negatively if they do not. Placements and volunteering should always be voluntary and students’ other employability skills development should be recognised.

Support for Embedding Employability – Staff and students should be given support for embedding employability practice into modules and the teaching and learning environment. There should be a means to recognise innovative and non-standard forms of assessment (e.g. use of social media) which are clearly linked to employability.

Resources for employability - Field trips, use of digital media and non-classroom activities can be an integral part of student engagement and can be embedded into modules and non-module activity as a means of developing employability. Resources should be made available for such activity.

Academic staff, employment/careers staff, support staff and student representatives can aid in embedding employability into teaching and learning and the wider university environment by:

- Collecting monitoring data on the extent to which employability initiatives are embedded into programmes and extra-curricula activity.
- Ensuring staff are provided with appropriate financial, technical and other resources and support to embed employability into their teaching and learning and to facilitate additional activities such as field trips.
Developing clear scheduled learning activities that relate both to acquiring employability skills and the module learning outcomes equality schemes with targets for action.

Developing tasks that students undertake which are linked coherently to module learning intentions.

Where applicable developing employability assessment arrangements that differ from those often found in mainstream academic programmes.

Assessing the impact of any employability initiatives and using the results of any assessment to continually develop and revise employability strategies accordingly.

Employability outcomes

Communication and outcome issues

Discourse - As employability is not regularly discussed and understood within programmes, it may be difficult for staff and students to identify and address employability issues separate from the provision of careers and placement guidance.

Sharing experiences - There should be opportunities for students to share and discuss their experiences and for more experienced students to mentor other students in constructing their employability narrative and auditing their experiences.

Employment versus Employability - There is a need to distinguish between employment and employability, recognising that not all students will immediately enter employment following graduation. There should be mechanisms for students to identify their future career aspirations and to receive opportunities to engage with employability issues and discuss both positive and negative experiences.

How can we encourage students to reflect on their employability skills development?

- Provide internal recognition or academic credit for completion of the employability skills portfolio.
- Provide one-to-one personal development and progression meetings with students where they have an opportunity to discuss their portfolio, skills development and career aspirations with academic staff and/or employment service staff.
- Hold tutorials to reflect on and assess the e-portfolio and encourage staff-student dialogue.

How can we enable students to share their experiences of the e-portfolio and employability skills development process?

- Set up blogs and online forums for students who are involved in portfolio and employability journal projects.
- Provide a mentoring scheme where students share experiences with each other, peer-review their employment skills portfolio and are able to receive mentoring and support.
- Hold seminars and presentations for students completing the e-portfolio in their third year, inviting students new to the e-portfolio project or student journal project.
How can we assess students’ experiences and improve on employability practice?

- Create monitoring feedback forms and online forums with specific questions about employability barriers or challenges.
- Ensure monitoring and feedback mechanisms look in detail at differences in impact and experience across different students groups, such as 1st, 2nd and 3rd years, students on specific programmes and also conduct examination of gender, disability and ethnicity employability issues in conjunction with appropriate support services.
- Provide mechanisms for disseminating feedback to students and other stakeholders including the graduating class and alumni registered with university career services, academics, placement and careers staff, equality, diversity and support staff and student union and relevant student societies.
- Hold regular meetings with practitioner and stakeholder groups to aid in the development of employability practices and provisions within academic programmes and to identify additional needs linked to programmes.
- Feedback any constructive suggestions about changes that will help develop academic employability engagement.

How can we raise students’ awareness of employability issues and our commitments to addressing them?

- Review and evaluate feedback on portfolio development and completion.
- Share key issues with students.

Recommendations from students

- Make explicit how different topics/modules are interrelated and are enmeshed in one another and how they matter as a whole rather than simply being thrown at the students.
- More opportunities for placements and volunteering along the way and not just at third year.
- Build student confidence by recognising the skills students already have and helping them to make appropriate industry contacts.
- Any assessment of employability needs to recognise the different subjectivities, individualities and personal takes that student have on employability experiences.
- Embedding employability into the curriculum requires allowing students to have ownership over it and their own narrative journey.

Links to other useful guidance and information:

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/themes/employability
http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/documents/Staff/HEA-Employability_in_HE%28Is,Isn%29.pdf
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000700.htm
http://niesr.ac.uk/pubs/DPS/dp280.pdf
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