Introduction: Employability in Context

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Employability is by no means a new issue for Higher Education (HE); the need for graduates to make an effective contribution to the labour market was highlighted in the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). Subsequently, the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report, 1997) made explicit the importance of education for employability and highlighted the value of key skills development and work experience in developing students’ potential for employment.

These and later developments should be seen within the context of the increasingly strong governmental emphasis on linking higher level learning to economic outcomes, both for individuals (e.g. in respect of figures cited for the ‘graduate premium’ - comparative income levels for graduates and non-graduates over the working lifespan\(^1\)) and in respect of the UK economy as a whole, (see e.g. CVCP/DFEE, (1998):97ff, Elias and Purcell, 2004). Research has been undertaken by a variety of organisations on changes in the workplace and the corresponding need for HE to support the development of ‘critical, reflective and potentially transformative students’ as well as graduates to ‘fit into organisational culture and add value through working effectively with others’ (Harvey, Moon and Geall, 1997).

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\(^1\) Though recent work at the University of Wales Swansea suggests that the much vaunted £400k/lifetime is now something of an overestimate. (See O’Leary, N.C. and Sloane, P.J.: ‘The changing wage return to an undergraduate education.’ At http://cee.lse.ac.uk/conference_papers/20_05_2005/peter_sloane.pdf (accessed 01/05/06)
The term ‘employability’ itself has spawned a wide range of definitions. Watts (2006: 7) suggests these can be considered in terms of those focusing on:

- immediate employment;
- immediate employability (in terms of work readiness and the ability to obtain ‘a graduate job’);
- sustainable employability, the ability not only to obtain that first position, but to remain employable throughout life.

The essence of this has been captured in the Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team (ESECT) definition of employability:

‘a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and to be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefits of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy’ (Yorke and Knight, 2006:3).

ESECT further proposed ‘a considerable degree of alignment between ‘education for employability’ and good student learning (and the teaching, learning and curricula that go with it)’ (Yorke and Knight, 2006:3) as well as emphasising employability as a process rather than a state. Yorke and Knight describe employability as a blend of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs (or legitimate self confidence) and reflectiveness (or metacognition).3 This perspective reinforces the view of employability as a complex and multi-dimensional concept which goes beyond the ‘key skills’ agenda.4 It connects well with the term ‘sustainable employability’ (Watts, 2006) and with the necessary requisites for Personal Development Planning (PDP).

The work of ESECT has been paralleled and followed by a range of funding and other initiatives. These include the Employability Enhancement theme (2004/6) and the strategic project funding for Employability (2007/9) in Scotland; and in Wales since 2003, the focus on employability has been within institutional Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategies. In England the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Scoping Group, (the Burgess Group,5 set up following ‘the Future of Higher Education White Paper’)6, while not directly connected to employability, noted the importance of:

‘engaging students in representing their own learning, in creating customised information about their learning and achievements and communicating this information to different audiences with different needs and interests’. (2004:22)

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2 The term ‘skills’ is used, partly at least in the recognition that academic staff themselves generally talk the language of skills, In doing so the concerns within ESECT, to try to talk of ‘skilful practice’ are also valued, not least to get away from the simplistic connotations of skills.

3 Also known as the USEM model.

4 We do not seek to generate more lists of ‘skills’ that employers claim to seek. Some further discussion of these can be found in ‘Pedagogy for Employability’ (HE Academy, 2006).

5 http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/

6 http://www.dfes.gov.uk/
Today there is increased emphasis on progression within vocational learning contexts in higher level learning programmes. This can be seen in developments in England (see www.hefce.ac.uk) such as:

- Foundation Degrees;
- Lifelong Learning Networks, facilitating approaches to support vocational learners’ progression into and through Higher Education, and thus to widen participation in higher level learning;
- the HEFCE initiative on ‘engaging employers’.

In order to support implementation, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) have offered guidance to universities on how they might embed employability within their institutional strategies and how this might translate into provision for students at course level. This includes, for example, the National Qualifications Framework (QAA, 2001a) and the Code of Practice on Career Education, Information and Guidance (CEIG) (QAA, 2001b). In the former, the Level H descriptors (honours degree level) clearly outline the qualities and skills necessary for graduate employment, whilst the latter is more explicit about seeking to help institutions ensure:

‘both that they are meeting students' expectations in respect of their preparedness for their future career, and that they are producing graduates equipped to meet the demands of the employment market of today and tomorrow.’ (QAA, 2001a:4)

As identified above, Personal Development Planning (PDP) is a key contributor to student career development skills. The original guidelines on HE Progress Files (QAA 2001c) defined PDP as ‘a structured and supported process to develop the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their own learning and achievement and to plan for their own personal educational and career development’. The QAA Code of Practice for CEIG reinforces this by emphasising the need for students and graduates to ‘develop the skills to manage their own career including the abilities to reflect and review, to plan and make decisions to use information resources effectively, to create and to take opportunities, and to make provision for lifelong learning.’ (QAA 2001b:4) Both highlight the importance of supporting and connecting PDP and career development work. As documented elsewhere, (Ward et al, 2006) it is expected that the process of PDP, when implemented effectively, will support effective learning, provide a context within which graduates may recognise, record, and from which they may later provide evidence of their possession of the skills, qualities and capabilities that employers claim to seek, and inculcate the processes of self-management that will support ‘sustainable employability’ (Watts 2006).
The Case Studies

The collection of case studies is drawn from a broad range of HE provision covering the areas of Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance and Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism. Whilst many of the programmes are vocationally oriented, many may not have tightly defined career progression routes that often follow on from specialist qualifications in areas such as Law or Education7. As the case studies demonstrate, institutions and programmes are addressing the issue of employability in a broad and rich range of ways. However, they are all heavily influenced by the perspectives on employability of the ESECT team, and closely aligned to ‘sustainable employability’.

The QAA Codes of Practice for both CEIG (QAA, 2001b) and Postgraduate Research Programmes (QAA, 2004) suggest that there are a variety of responses to the question of ‘how’ to deliver employability. Yorke and Knight (2006) suggest five ways in which employability is located in, or could be developed through, the curriculum:

1. Employability through the whole curriculum
2. Employability in the core curriculum
3. Work-based or work-related learning incorporated as one or more components within the curriculum
4. Employability-related module(s) within the curriculum
5. Work-based or work-related learning in parallel with the curriculum

These approaches are often found in combination in courses, and Yorke (2004) is keen to point out that a variety of approaches are likely to work very effectively in tandem. Many of the case studies illustrate this point, notably those from Worcester, Sheffield Hallam, Oxford Brookes, Ulster and Leeds Metropolitan Universities.

The range of approaches identified in the case studies can also be defined as including:

- Structured and well-founded whole institutional (Bournemouth) or whole subject-area initiatives (Tourism at Leeds Metropolitan and Bedfordshire, Business Studies at Ulster). The Bournemouth case study also provides a clear acknowledgement of the challenges that might be faced in such approaches, for example concerns about bureaucracy, pressure on resources, innovation fatigue and a failure to acknowledge existing good practice.

- The development of new and innovative approaches to employability learning. These include a demand-led approach for purely work-based learners at Sunderland; Nottingham Business School’s sponsored two-year in-company work placements; Aston Business School’s in-depth preparation of students for...

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7 Accountancy is an important exception here.
their placements and the sustained encouragement of reflection on such experience; ‘co-operative education’ at Auckland University of Technology and Unitec; ‘virtual group working’ at the University of Abertay, Dundee, and involvement of the local community shown by the coaching and sports academies development work at UWIC). Some of these have important implications for curriculum design. Sunderland in particular emphasises the necessity of taking very different approaches to curriculum design, student support (including peer support) and assessment, with an emphasis on unlocking the learner’s tacit knowledge, personal development, and on effective relationship building between staff and students.

- Delivery through existing or new modules:
  - where employability features explicitly in single dedicated modules (career planning for Hospitality and Tourism at Oxford Brookes, in tourism and management at Bath Spa – where the use of innovative assessment techniques and employer involvement also features), or in a combination of modules with clear and progressive links, as an ‘employability strand’ within a programme, for example, in the evolution of employability at London South Bank, work-based learning at Ulster and in the tourism curriculum at Leeds Metropolitan and the University of Bedfordshire.
  - via an opportunity (or opportunities) to bring together and reflect upon a range of experience seen for example, in the languages department at Sheffield Hallam, the integrated approach of Auckland University of Technology and Unitec, and the post-placement experience at Aston.
  - by infusing employability into existing programme provision (‘integrated embedding’ in Business and Technology at Sheffield Hallam and the ‘framework’ modules at London South Bank).

Showing creative use of ICT, there are good examples of providing online support and information for students such as the placement planning scheme at Ulster, the provision of industry specific careers information and guidance at Northumbria, online discussion facilities at Abertay and the promotion of discussion on professionalism as a stimulus for student reflection and planning at Gloucestershire.

Many of the case study examples emphasise the importance of ‘real world’ challenges, whether through off-campus learning or by importing such experiences into the curriculum via ‘real world’ activities or consultancy. For example, an emphasis on making more in terms of student learning from what might be termed conventional workplace learning opportunities, such as more structured and extended preparation for, and reflection on placement experience at Aston Business School and Brighton, and for study and work abroad in languages at Sheffield Hallam. Related to this, and to the integration of employability, PDP-inspired approaches to enable students to derive most benefit from their experiences also feature strongly with examples at Gloucestershire, Worcester, in Business and Technology at Sheffield Hallam and in Tourism at the
University of Bedfordshire. Though recognised as a continuing challenge, in a number of the illustrations this provides a central strategy for helping students to make the most of their experience in a holistic way.

As will become clear on closer reading of the case studies, a broad range of perspectives on employability and ways in which it has been be effectively incorporated within HE curricula are given within this text. The earlier chapters provide examples of institution-wide and whole course developments, and the later chapters cover implementation within individual modules and the provision of learning relating to the ‘real world’ within the curriculum. Nevertheless innovation and imaginative development are common to all, and it is hoped that this collection will inform and stimulate further creativity in this fundamental aspect of student learning.

References:


QAA (2001c) Guidelines for HE Progress Files. Gloucester: QAA.


http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/measuringachievement.pdf#search=%22burgess%20group%20scoping%20report%22

