Embedding employability into the curriculum

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In partnership with:

REGENT’S UNIVERSITY LONDON
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Abstract

The impact at Regent’s University London (RUL) of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Strategic Enhancement Programme (SEP) on *Embedding employability into the curriculum* is that employability now forms part of everyday life at RUL, and this is reflected at both strategic and operational levels. Professionalism & Employability is one of RUL’s five strategic goals, and graduate attributes, including employability, is one of six themes in the Learning, Teaching & Assessment Strategy for 2015-2020.

To achieve employer-engagement in curriculum activities at the operational level, a variety of activities is underway, including employer placements, internships and business projects, alongside dissertations. In addition, students and alumni benefit from a comprehensive careers service. The RUL’s aim is to help students develop the necessary skills in order to find, credibly apply for, and land a job; whether it is an internship, a part-time role, a graduate trainee scheme or full-time employment. Initiatives include:

1. Careers Advice Services: To provide information, advice and guidance to support students in making appropriate decisions on a full range of learning and work opportunities.

2. Personalised careers guidance: Through one-to-one appointments with a careers advisor to build on knowledge gained and make genuine progress towards the achievement of a suitable role in the chosen field.

3. Employability skills workshops: Run on a regular basis and cover a variety of topics from job search strategies, CV writing, cover letters, online application forms, preparing for assessment centres, interviews, networking and using social media.

4. Events: Organised throughout the year using a range of formats such as company presentations, panel discussions and networking events.

5. Professional Skills module: RUL’s first example of fully embedding a credit-bearing Professional Skills module into a programme curriculum.

6. Online support: Sets of online support to help embed employability into the mindset of today’s online smartphone generation.

7. University Skills Award: Groundwork completed for establishing a Skills Award for students undertaking employability-related support activities during their degrees.

8. Capstone options: An expansion in the number of degree programmes that offer business projects as the capstone alternative to the traditional dissertation.

These examples illustrate the breadth and depth of impact that the HEA-SEP is having at both strategic and operational levels. Some of these initiatives were already underway, some were nascent and some are completely new, and the programme has helped catalyse significant
progress in this key area for enhancing the student experience. The HEA Framework for Employability has also proved to be a valuable approach for pulling together the various strands of activity, to identify gaps and to assess progress and status.

**Introduction**

RUL has established a range of strategies and plans to enhance student and graduate employability. A primary aim is to further embed employability-related activities and initiatives that cater for our diverse international community. An area of focus for the initiative concerns employer engagement in curriculum activities and how this can best be achieved. The initiative, as part of the HEA’s SEP, has provided an opportunity to review existing employer engagement activities at RUL, assess and identify particularly fruitful activities, such as the expansion across degree programmes of the use of consultancy projects as an alternative to the well-established dissertation.

A key aim has been to enhance learning and teaching, in part through employer engagement, in selected portions of the curriculum. The objective has been to further enhance the existing provision of student support in this field through the even deeper integration of employability-related initiatives into the curriculum of degree programmes across RUL, by sharing that best practice with the project network group and to learn from other successes in the higher education sector, as a foundation for new initiatives that will help further enhance graduate employability both here at RUL and across the higher education sector. An area of particular focus has been on how best to achieve employer-engagement in curriculum activities. Various strands of activity have been identified as best practice, including employer placements, internships, consultancy projects and liaisons with the relevant industry sectors.

**The HEA employability framework**

The HEA Employability Framework (Cole and Tibby 2013) has proved particularly useful in managing the programme and, for example, helped identify the need for the development and validation of two credit-bearing Professional Skills modules and in the foundation work undertaken for a Skills Award.
The Framework highlights an iterative and ongoing process of discussion and mapping to spot opportunities for action, followed by an evaluation period before starting again and building further.

**Stage 1 - Discussion & reflection:** This SEP has been particularly attractive for several reasons. Employability is at the core of the RUL mission: “Developing tomorrow’s global leaders, through the provision of a high quality teaching environment to develop internationally aware, innovative and employable graduates.” Having established a comprehensive package of activities with a focus on graduate employability, the SEP offered us the chance to both share with, and learn from, our colleagues across the higher education sector. Having employability at the centre of RUL’s strategy (along with Academic Excellence; Internationalism & Global Perspective; Professionalism & Employability; Management & Sustainability; Public Benefit) gave us specific opportunities to enhance our own approaches and is of course most welcome, as was the chance to share ideas across the network group and beyond that into the sector as a whole. Other attractions included the prospective participation in funded projects to enhance the evidence base and the benefits of potentially showcasing best practice via a HEA enhancement conference and other channels. This project focus has been on embedding employability into the curriculum via employer-engaged initiatives and, with the international student population at RUL of 140 countries represented, it also captures elements of the HEA’s other two 2014-2015 Strategic Enhancement Programmes, Internationalising the curriculum and Engaged student learning. As an independent, not-for-profit, higher education provider across a range of subject disciplines from Business to Humanities, Languages to Management, Psychotherapy to Social Sciences, and with an international cohort of students and alumni, RUL offers a platform to explore a variety of aspects concerning embedding employability into the curriculum.

**Stages 2 & 3 - Mapping & actions:** As a result of the mapping, several initiatives emerged and the following examples of the resources enhanced give a flavour of the activities undertaken:

a) **Professional services:** There are already several strands of activity related to embedding employability into the curriculum underway at RUL. These include work placements, consultancy projects and enterprise initiatives, as well as a comprehensive programme of support from the University’s Careers & Business Relations
b) **International Partners’ Conference:** This initiative also fitted perfectly with the RUL International Partners’ Conference in January 2015 [http://www.regents.ac.uk/about/international-partnerships/international-events/international-partners-conference-2015.aspx](http://www.regents.ac.uk/about/international-partnerships/international-events/international-partners-conference-2015.aspx) where the theme was “The Impact of International Education on Employability”.

c) **Employability research:** Employability research is a key area of focus for several academics at Regent’s University London and has resulted in numerous publications in academic journals, at international conferences and through modern media. As examples of the focus on pedagogy, relevant recent examples by the lead author include journal articles, book sections and conference contributions as listed in the References section.

Other initiatives are highlighted in the following section.

**Stage 4 - Evaluate:** Some examples of recent employability-related initiatives include a set of online models that help us embed employability into the mindset of today’s online smartphone generation of students; our first example of fully embedding a credit-bearing Professional Skills module into the curriculum of a programme; further developments in establishing a Skills Award for students undertaking employability-related support activities during their degrees; an expansion of degree programmes that offer business projects as the capstone alternative to the traditional dissertation. The work at the university has been across academic and service areas in support of a shared goal to “Enhance the employability of Regent’s graduates”. The SEP has allowed for a more cross-institutional approach that has brought key staff together with a shared goal. Further details on some of these examples include:

1. **Digital literacy:** Flexible, bite-sized and popular support for staff to enhance their digital literacy is in place and proving successful. The aim is to encourage staff to use technology-enhanced learning and so develop the digital literacy of students. An example is a phenomenally successful ‘12 Apps of Christmas’ MOOC, a digital learning and teaching enhancement initiative that attracted sector-wide attention.

2. **Professional Skills modules:** Two credit-bearing Professional Skills modules written into the curriculum of a postgraduate programme gained validation and commendation in 2015. These modules bring together the careers service and academic department. The programme reflects current industry requirements of a graduate work force, is delivered by the career service advisors, experienced workshop facilitators and industry professionals who offer one to one coaching. Risk management is exemplary and support mechanisms for staff and students are in place with a number of ‘gateways’ to access support.

3. **Skills Award:** This award validates and recognises extra-curricular activity that supports the development of specific employability skills. A working group, including experienced academic and careers staff, have run focus groups with students to ensure it responds to their needs. The groundwork of award policies and protocols has been established for progress toward the institution’s validation process.
4. **Alternatives to dissertations:** Many programmes are adopting business projects into their curriculum as the capstone alternative to the traditional dissertation. A project typically has students working in small teams, often selected to maximise diversity and so enabling diversity competence, to run a consultancy project with industry partners. Partners are found through staff and student contacts and returning clients, so the programme is diverse, global and sustained. Now that a programme has been running these for five years, a longitudinal research option exists to capture impact and evidence of successful employment of graduates who studied on this module. Work has already been published on this consultancy model (O’Leary 2015).

5. **Online portal:** The HEA also funded a specific research project on the development of a tool or resource to support the 2014-2015 Strategic Enhancement Programme Embedding Employability into the Curriculum. Further details in the following section.

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**Online portal**

The work on the virtual portal has resulted in a prototype of a model to enhance the engagement of students in the wide variety of employability support services available both within a higher education institution and elsewhere. This Employability Strategy Model (ESM) is available for use online via a smartphone, tablet or computer and offers a student, or graduate, a chance to determine their existing level of suitability for a desired role and provides advice on the options available to enhance their capabilities and understanding. As such, it provides a modern and user-friendly route into the world of employability-related services in higher education and beyond.

Prior research (O’Leary 2012) has shown that the benefits of providing employability-related support can be summarised in terms of the 3C’s of Content, Capability and Character:

- **a) Content** - accumulation of relevant knowledge and information networks.
- **b) Capability** - direct application in a relevant employer context.
- **c) Character** - working alone and in teams.

This was extended further (O’Leary 2013) where an initial employability model is presented. This is not intended to provide absolute answers, but to raise issues and provoke debate to help identify areas of strength and areas for further development. It is therefore an aid to decision-making rather than a definitive and conclusive statement of fact. For the new model, it was anticipated that it should be a modern, attractive and user-friendly tool that could be readily used on an institution’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to direct students to the appropriate sources of employability-related support. As such, it should help catalyse the engagement of both students and staff in enhancing student and graduate employability. In such a way it provides a framework for provoking further discussion and debate about employability and career development, among students themselves and between students and academic/professional staff. In the three-by-three matrix developed (Figure 2) of Student Capabilities (Introductory; Established; Advanced) versus Role Requirements (Introductory;
Experienced; Leadership), each position indicates a proposed strategy and action plan to achieve success. The new model is the ESM.

The model can be accessed through an 'Employability' link on the university website or intranet while the model itself provides ten key links; the first can be a short video about, and description of, the model itself and how to use it, while the other nine relate to each of the nine boxes on the model. The link to each box reveals a suggested plan about next steps. For example, toward the bottom left of the grid, it will be necessary to develop the capabilities rating, \( c \), and the role understanding rating, \( r \). Therefore, appropriate suggestions will be made and links provided to access materials and arrange meetings. At the other extreme, toward the top-right of the grid, the emphasis is more on targeting specific roles and refining \( c \) and \( r \) as appropriate.

**Next Steps**

Inclusion in the core team for this key HEA initiative has proved to be a valuable enabler for further embedding employability into the curriculum and has reinforced the need to maintain Professionalism & Employability as one of RUL’s five main strategic goals, alongside Academic Excellence, Internationalism & Global Perspective, Management & Sustainability and Public Benefit. Therefore, the University continues to highlight a primary focus on embedding employability into the curriculum.
Employability has now also become one of the seven themes in the new Learning, Teaching & Assessment Strategy 2015-2020:

a) Personalised study and close contact with academics.

b) Teaching qualification.

c) Learning resources and digital literacy.

d) Electives including languages in the curriculum.

e) Graduate attributes and employability.

f) Inclusive teaching.

g) Physical learning spaces.

The lessons learnt highlight the importance of institutional buy-in and cross-functional working between academic and professional staff. Embedding employability into the curriculum is now a key element in both the university’s mission statement and also in its learning and teaching strategy. It can also be expected to be part of the university’s DNA and will inform activities across the organisation in the short and longer term. The key message for others is that projects such as these can have a full spectrum of impact, from localised modular curriculum application to institutional-wide policy and practice, and help bring together and harness the expertise of academic and professional staff to enhance the student experience.

References
The author has produced the following reference materials:

2016


- **Conferences**: Several relevant conferences targeted including these being organised by Higher Education Academy and Chartered Association Business Schools. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events-conferences/event/inspire-%E2%80%93-sharing-great-practice-arts-and-humanities-teaching-and-learning & http://charteredabs.org/events/learning-teaching-student-experience-2016/

2015


2014

- **Book**: O'Leary, S. (2014), Consultancy projects as an alternative to dissertations; an example of good practice in higher education, in Owens, J. and Tibby, M. (eds.), Enhancing employability through enterprise education: Examples of good practice in HE (p.33), The Higher Education Academy, York. [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Enhancing%20employability%20through%20enterprise%20education%20good%20practice%20guide.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Enhancing%20employability%20through%20enterprise%20education%20good%20practice%20guide.pdf)

- **Conference**: O'Leary, S. (2014), Incorporating employability into degree programmes by using consultancy projects, Global Internships Conference, University of Toronto. [https://custom.cvent.com/4DEBAA36F39472096C8FAF3F2988A51/files/c41ccd69e55743a8bfef20a542e4f192.pdf](https://custom.cvent.com/4DEBAA36F39472096C8FAF3F2988A51/files/c41ccd69e55743a8bfef20a542e4f192.pdf)

2013


2012


Other useful references include:


Barnett, R. (2014), Conditions of Flexibility: Securing a more responsive higher education system, Higher Education Academy, York. [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/conditions-flexibility-securing-more-responsive-higher-education-system](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/conditions-flexibility-securing-more-responsive-higher-education-system)


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Driffield, N., Foster, C. and Higson, H. (2011), Placements and degree performance: Do placements lead to better marks or do better students choose placements?, ASET Annual Conference, Aston University, Birmingham.


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www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/EE_wbl_report.pdf

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2013/17_Oct_emp_conf

http://dl.njit.edu/mnj/Education-to-Employment_FINAL.pdf


https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Enhancing%20employability%20through%20enterprise%20education%20good%20practice%20guide.pdf

Quality Assurance Agency (2012), Enterprise and entrepreneurship education: Guidance for UK higher education providers, Gloucester.
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/enterprise-guidance.pdf

http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/3680/1/JSBED.new_era_paper.pdf?origin=publication_detail


www.wilsonreview.co.uk

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