

Employability Strategy 2003 – 2006

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1.0 Introduction

This is the second University of Exeter Employability Strategy and covers the period 2003-04 to 2005-06. The institution has moved a long way since the Employability Strategy 2000-03 was approved in May 2001. There has been an increase in resource and activity in this area and greater support from academic Schools. It is now appropriate to reflect upon the achievements and consider how we would like to develop activity in the future.

This strategy sets out an holistic, institution-wide approach to enhancing the employability and personal development of our students. Graduate employability is a product of all the ways in which the institution interacts with students, and it is important that all staff feel some ownership of the employability agenda. This will affect the institution's approach to developing and implementing the strategy, recognising and disseminating existing good practice, and encouraging innovation.

To pay attention to employability does not suggest that subject teaching is anything but central. Generic skills are usually best developed through application in a context. It is important that those who teach the subjects are conscious of these issues, but also that the environment and support structures are in place to underpin and consolidate this learning. It is important to acknowledge that the employability of our students is also developed through their work place, voluntary work and social life experiences. Students need to be supported in the process of evidencing and articulating these experiences to make themselves more employable, usually through the process of Personal Development Planning.

The objectives of the Employability Strategy 2003-06 can be divided into three main areas:

- 1) To ensure that all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study maintain and develop the incorporation of employability skills and attributes to enhance academic learning and encourage students to be more employable.
- 2) To establish effective mechanisms between employers, external agencies and the University to determine their mutual employability needs and promote opportunities to students.
- 3) To develop a coherent approach to supporting staff involved in delivering employability skills and related activities to students.

These are outlined in more detail in Section 8.0.

2.0 National Policy Context

Employability is a Government concern for at least two reasons. First, the government believes that a good supply of highly-skilled graduates is essential for national economic and social well-being. Second, it is important to its widening participation agenda because if it succeeds there will be more graduates looking for 'graduate-level' jobs.

As a result of the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, the Government's Skills Strategy will be published later in 2003. This will ensure that education and training responds effectively to demands from employers. The White Paper also stresses that

Tertiary qualifications bring real skill benefits which employers are prepared to pay a significant premium for.

An important trend in recent years has been the development of explicit institutional strategies, and the expectation of both funding bodies and Government that these strategies should be published, and lead to action. Institutions are expected to have strategies for teaching and learning, research, widening participation, employability and managing student retention. HEFCE also expects institutions to respond to performance indicators and national benchmarks. Furthermore these strategies are expected to articulate with each other. The employability strategy needs to be compatible with the teaching and learning strategy, since employability has implications for both what is taught and how it is taught, and most of the work on enhancing student employability is necessarily delivered by teaching in some form. At the same time the widening participation strategy brings an increased diversity of students, with different cultural expectations and role models for employment. Some will need more support and others less, but if the widening participation strategy is not reflected in appropriate modification to curriculum and teaching practice, the results will appear as poor retention, completion and graduate employment rates.

A further important development relates to Postgraduate research students. HEFCE's draft proposal for 'Improving Standards in Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes' 2002, makes explicit reference to employability skills in relation to the training programmes that Universities would be expected to provide for all research students. A full consultation on the proposals is planned for April 2003, but HEFCE is already suggesting that such training could form part of a set of core standards, achievement of which would be a necessary condition for funding.

3.0 Regional Policy Context

The 2003 HE White Paper makes it clear that Regional Development Agencies are to have greater influence over the match between regional economic needs and the work of Universities. One dimension of this is likely to be the encouragement of programmes in areas related to regional needs, and of curricula that help graduates to be employable in regional industry and business. RDAs also have the potential to build bridges between the employer community and Universities for mutual benefit. Alongside them, the new Sector Skills Councils are intended to help to clarify the long-term human resource needs of the various economic sectors. Both can help in addressing the long-standing problem of inadequate dialogue between the worlds of employment and HE.

The Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action and the Regional Economic Strategy map the skills base and shortages, and propose strategies for development. The on-going development and implementation of both of these documents will need to be considered as the Employability Strategy progresses.

4.0 The role of employers

Employers potentially have an important role to play in helping frame and deliver the employability strategy. They can advise on emerging and current skill and knowledge needs, provide placements and work experience and paid work for the students who need to work while studying. However, local employers can sometimes be more strongly focused on the short-term needs of a particular firm or industry than the longer-term factors which will make a graduate employable, and they may not be representative of employers at the national level which recruit many graduates. Furthermore, employers are not a homogenous group, and it is difficult for a few willing ones to represent the vast range of employers who recruit, or might recruit, graduates. Government hopes that the creation of a number of strategic Sector Skills Councils will provide a channel for employer voices to be articulated more clearly.

5.0 University Policy Context

The approach taken by the University needs to balance the individual's academic attainment, and skills and personal development with the needs of graduate recruiters. It is important that a coherent and institution-wide approach is taken to the development of student employability in order to enhance the student experience. This Strategy therefore articulates with the other relevant University Strategies:

University Strategy 2001-2006 and beyond

The agenda for the development and implementation of an 'Employability Strategy' which aims to enable students to develop their personal & key skills and attributes to enhance their academic learning, encourage lifelong learning and fulfil their personal aspirations, is central to aims 10 and 31 of the University Strategy 2001-2006.

- aim 10) In **learning and teaching** our aim is to offer excellent and lifelong opportunities to a wide spectrum of students. We will promote a learning culture that enables students to gain a powerful grasp of their chosen discipline and to develop their intellectual capacities and transferable skills, in order that they fulfil their personal aspirations and graduate as responsible, questioning and productive members of any society.
- aim 31) We will develop our 'employability strategy' and will ensure that all graduates of the University, at whatever level, are equipped for a future of lifelong learning which embraces and welcomes change and development. All modules will identify the key skills that are developed, and the assessment of key skills will become an integral part of all programmes.

Learning and Teaching Strategy 2002-2005

Aim 3 of the Learning and Teaching Strategy 2002-2005 is 'To progress further development of personal and key skills and employability within the curriculum'. Personal Development Planning (PDP) will be rolled out to Schools by 2005, and all students should have opportunities to develop Personal and Key Skills with the curriculum. The embedding of Team Development and work experience and work-related learning modules and materials within programmes of study is to be encouraged and supported.

Both programme specifications and module description forms require reference to Personal and Key Skills, as set out in the TQA Manual. In addition, all programme specifications are commented on prior to accreditation committee by both the Employability Co-ordinator and a Careers Advisor.

Strategy for Business Relations, Community and Knowledge Enterprise 2003-07

Employability remains central to the new Business Relations Strategy 2003-07. This strategy highlights the importance of developing an institution-wide approach to placing students and graduates in businesses across the region and increasing the retention of our graduates within the region. Mechanisms for the support of innovation and entrepreneurship amongst the students are also to be supported.

Distinctive Features document

The Distinctive Features document includes marketing objectives for continuing the high level of employability and access to employability skills training and/or experience for all undergraduates. In addition, enhanced employability and career progression of graduates of postgraduate programmes is aimed for.

QA Precepts document on Career Education, Information and Guidance (CEIG)

The work of the Employability Group is central to the successful delivery of many of the aims of the QA Code of Practice Precepts document for CEIG. The first QA for CEIG will take place in the Michaelmas Term of 2003 and will be held every 6 years subsequently.

Levels and Awards Framework

The embedding of the development and assessment of the skills necessary for employment (key/transferable skills, now referred to as Personal and Key Skills), is central to all credit level and qualification descriptors described in this document.

Widening Participation Strategy 2003-04 to 2006-07

The University needs to ensure that it can react to the differing needs of a more diverse student body to enable the continuation of our high retention and completion rates. The Institution also needs to adopt a supportive approach to students who increasingly need to work long hours to support themselves while studying, and encourage these students to

make the best use of those experiences whilst balancing the effect this could have on their studies.

Measuring graduate employability is not simple. The traditional measure is the proportion of graduates who are in employment six months after graduation. While many graduates are relatively easy to trace, many move or are unwilling to respond to enquiries. The time it takes graduates to find employment varies according to subject and there is also a question about what constitutes 'appropriate' employment. As the labour market becomes more complex and volatile, the notion of a "graduate job" becomes more difficult to define. Increasingly, graduates spend some time in temporary jobs, for personal reasons or to test out options before undertaking a particular career. As a result of these difficulties, HEFCE and Government sought an improved measure for employability, but after some debate and research concluded that, despite its shortcomings, a refinement of the traditional First Destination Survey was the approach most likely to generate reliable and valid data. From 2003-04, the FDS will become the *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey* which will provide more detailed information. Consideration needs to be given as to how we measure the success of the quality of employability-related initiatives against graduate employment rates. The new structure of examinations at the end of both semesters may discourage students from applying for graduate jobs in the spring, which may effect the statistics as more may be applying for posts after completion of their courses.

6.0 Employability at the University of Exeter

Having one central contact, the Employability Co-ordinator who oversees the whole agenda, has enabled greater inroads into Schools than was previously possible with a more fragmented approach. In addition, the support of Senior Managers, particularly the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Learning & Teaching) and the Undergraduate Dean, has been imperative for the agenda to move forward.

The involvement of academic Schools is vital to the continued success of the employability strategy. The work of the network of Careers and Employability Tutors is crucial to the dissemination of information to both students and staff. It is therefore vital that whoever is in this post is sensitive to the agenda and supportive. It is important that the role is not seen as purely 'administrative' which could result in the marginalisation of the agenda, but that it is recognised as an innovative and development role that is central to much of the work of the University. One of the main tasks of the Careers & Employability Tutors is the completion of the annual Careers & Employability Audit. The Employability Group uses this to assess the impact of the strategy across the institution. The results also help the Careers Advisory Service and the Employability Group to identify gaps in provision.

The University will need to consider how its employment-related services and graduate performance can both be developed and marketed effectively. Figure 1 shows the links between employability initiatives and personal development at every stage of the student life cycle. This will become increasingly important as fees are levied for courses. The University promotes the integration of Personal & Key and employability skills into the curriculum through the Prospectus, school handbooks, employability and PDP websites and other publicity material. Continuing to raise the profile of the employability agenda to both students and staff within the Institution and externally to other interested parties remains a high priority. This will be achieved through, for example, publication of material on the LTSN website, participation in national debates on employability, publication of research in journals and materials for students. The University's employability work will need to be regarded as core rather than as a marginal element of its strategy in the future.

The development of individual student's potential will take place through integrated curriculum projects and the opportunity to have valued experiences as an addition to the curriculum. These may be through the voluntary work opportunities facilitated by the Guild of Students, or through opportunities from the Careers Advisory Service.

Personal Development Planning

The institution is working towards national targets for PDP. All students should complete self-appraisal forms and development plans, at least annually for Personal Tutorials by 2004-05, in line with QAA recommendations. PDP will underpin the process that enables each individual to reflect on their developing skills, knowledge and capability, to record and

consciously develop these qualities and thereby enhance their employability. PESCA may become a mandatory element of some programmes of study; in most cases, PESCA will be offered on a voluntary basis as a support for personal development planning and student appraisal.

One of the key factors for the success of the Employability Strategy is the work of the Employability Group (Figure 2). The membership of this group has grown over recent years to better reflect the diversity of internal agencies whose work impacts upon developing the employability of our students. The Deputy Vice Chancellor (Learning & Teaching) chairs the group, and the Employability Co-ordinator reports annually to Learning & Teaching Committee, the Business Relations Strategy Group and Student Affairs Committee on the work of the Employability Group.

7.0 Barriers and risks

The major problem is the short-term nature of funding which means that long-term planning for both posts and projects is difficult and means that some Schools do not want to get involved for fear that funding will cease and their efforts at embedding initiatives will come to nothing. The Employability Group needs the support of the wider University to continue to support and develop good practice and embed it in Schools and student support services.

The consequences of *not* supporting employability co-ordination and development will be that:

- (a) The University Strategy, Learning and Teaching Strategy, Business Relations Strategy, and more specifically, Employability Strategy will not be delivered effectively or comprehensively.
- (b) The University of Exeter will be missing the opportunity to lead the field nationally, and become a centre of excellence in the areas of employability and Personal Development Planning.
- (c) The University of Exeter will be out of line with national recommendations for an institution-wide, strategic and holistic approach to employability.
- (d) It will be more difficult for the institution to keep pace with and implement changing policy agendas.
- (e) It will be difficult to meet the QAA Precepts in Careers Education, Information and Guidance.

We are currently ahead of the field and provide advice and guidance to other HEIs on a regular basis.

Definition of Employability at the University of Exeter:

'The establishment of clear mechanisms by which students can develop their abilities to use and deploy a wide range of skills and opportunities to enhance their own academic learning and enable them to be more employable'.

8.0 Summary of Aims & Objectives 2003-06

Aim: To establish the University of Exeter as a nationally recognised Centre of Excellence for Employability providing one of the best environments for student development.

Objectives:

- 1) To ensure that all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study maintain and develop the incorporation of employability skills and attributes to enhance academic learning and encourage students to be more employable.**
 - i. To influence the University culture to ensure that employability is considered at every level within the University structure.

- ii. To ensure that all undergraduate programmes of study maintain and develop the incorporation of employability skills and attributes .
 - iii. To integrate Personal Development Planning into UG programmes of study and personal tutorials in line with national targets by 2005.
 - iv. For Research Postgraduates; To provide training programmes to develop a range of skills and knowledge consistent with the Joint RC/AHRB skills statement, including skills for employment, and to provide mechanisms to monitor the development of these where appropriate.
 - v. To provide resources for the evaluation and development of personal, key and employability skills for Taught Postgraduates
- 2) To establish effective mechanisms between employers, external agencies, the wider community and the University to determine their mutual employability needs and promote opportunities to students.**
- 3) To develop a coherent approach to supporting staff involved in delivering employability skills and related activities to students.**
- i. To maintain, promote and disseminate good practice.
 - ii. To support staff in Schools, central administration and the Guild who are involved in delivering employability related activities to students.
 - iii. To ensure that the Employability Strategy is reviewed annually and keeps up to date with Government, regional and University policy where appropriate.

Equal Opportunities Statement

The University will encourage all students to undertake the opportunities to develop employability skills and personal attributes regardless of race, gender, age, nationality, sexuality or disability.

Dr Dawn Lees
Employability Co-ordinator
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