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# Enhancing employability:
# a long term strategic challenge

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## Introduction

Enhancing graduate employability is of increasingly central concern to all higher education institutions. However, developments in this area have tended to be fuelled by short-term initiatives, often supported by funds attracted from sources external to the institution(s) where they are taking place. Although such initiatives can be extremely useful in kick-starting activity, they can be of limited impact if they are perceived as marginal. This case study outlines how the University of Newcastle upon Tyne has attempted to e to a strategy-led, rather than project-led, approach to enhancing graduate employability by fully integrating project activity to ensure 'fit' with institutional, regional and national priorities. It also identifies evaluation strategies and critical success factors at both institutional and academic School level for this integrated approach in a changing environment where new challenges such as widening participation and an increased emphasis on enterprise and entrepreneurship must be also addressed.

Enhancing graduate employability is of central concern to all higher education institutions (HEIs), not least because of:

i.    the publication by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) of employment performance indicators and benchmarks for HEIs
ii.   the implications of government targets for 50% of young people entering higher education
iii.  the publication and implementation of the QAA Code of Practice for Career Education, Information and Guidance
iv.   the recommendations of the Harris Review of HE Careers Services, taken forward at a national level by a Joint Implementation Group.

In responding to such drivers for change, many institutions have undertaken a multitude of short-term initiatives, some of which have been funded by government bodies such as HEFCE, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES formerly DfEE) and the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI). The Universities UK report entitled *Enhancing employability, recognising diversity* (Harvey et al, 2002), however, stresses the need to shift the sector's thinking and action on employability away from these short-term, one-off initiatives which often have limited impact, as they are perceived as bolt-on or marginal, and to move towards a longer term strategic approach. Such an approach needs to be:

- informed by the realities of widening participation and social inclusion, and recognise the diversity of students;
- flexible, allowing each institution to adopt responses appropriate to the context in which they operate;
- holistic and based on close collaboration between higher education institutions and employers and their representative bodies.

This case study outlines how one higher education institution – the University of Newcastle upon Tyne – has responded to the challenge of enhancing graduate employability. The case study will focus on the move to a strategy-led, rather than project-led, approach and the role of a central support service in supporting educational developments in the curriculum.
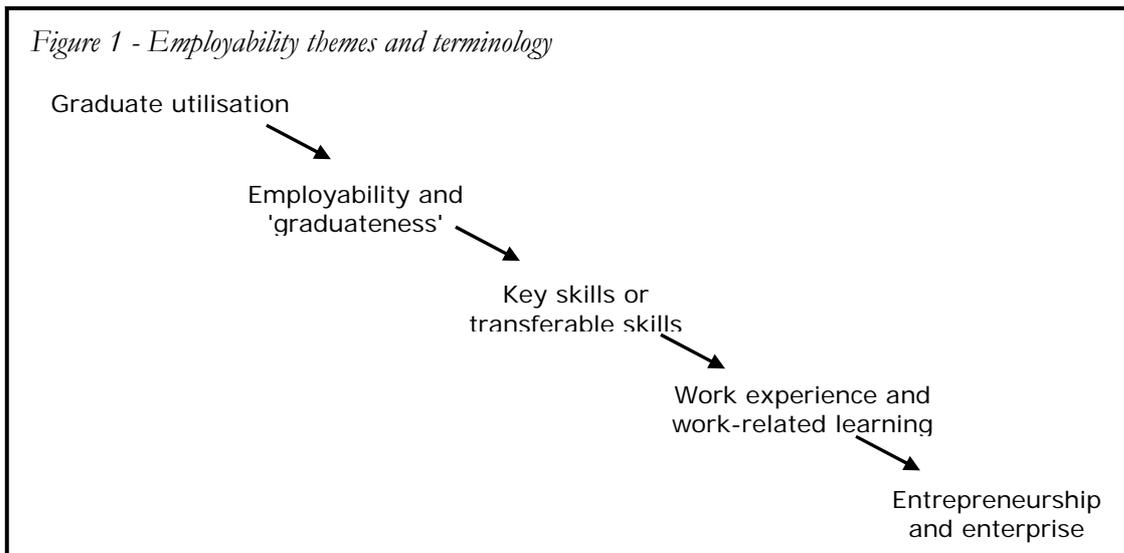
## Changing terminology

One of the greatest challenges has been dealing with the changing themes and terminology that have characterised the employability agenda. The University of Newcastle has sought to provide a useful definition of employability, notably the *capacity to move self-sufficiently into and within the labour market, to fulfil potential through sustainable employment*. Such a definition includes notions of moving not only into a first job or further study, but onto longer-term employment too, implying an ability to manage one's career and continuing professional development. The reference to the fulfilment of potential implies that our graduates should enter high quality, challenging employment that enables them to apply the knowledge and skills they have gained at university.

In order to retain and enhance competitive advantage for its graduates, the University recognised the need to further develop its work to provide students with 'a degree plus'. In addition to the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge, students need to develop *employability skills*, which may include:

- **cognitive skills** – higher level intellectual or academic skills (e.g. interpreting, analysing)
- **subject-specific skills** – practical or professional skills related to the degree subject (e.g. design skills)
- **key skills** – personal skills and qualities which are generic to a range of both academic and employment settings (e.g. enterprise, teamwork, planning and organising) and the skills required to manage ongoing career development (e.g. self analysis, networking).

For the University of Newcastle the overarching agenda – effective graduate utilisation – has remained the same. Implicit within this agenda is the need to enhance the employability of all the institution's graduates. *Figure 1* demonstrates the iterations that have taken place under this broad agenda.



*Figure 1 - Employability themes and terminology*

Graduate utilisation

Employability and 'graduateness'

Key skills or transferable skills

Work experience and work-related learning

Entrepreneurship and enterprise

The terminology used for the skills agenda has also been through several iterations. All of the following have been used at some time within the University: career management skills, core skills, employability skills, enterprise skills, key skills and (personal) transferable skills. The University has tried to avoid the tendency to become fixated on the terminology and has stressed that it is the underlying principles of learning and development that are of central importance. Teaching and learning strategies should aim to develop students' skills to help them to become better (and more independent) learners, which will, in turn, improve their employability. Of course, implementing such strategies is not always simple but describing the approach in this way has helped in challenging the perceptions of some academic colleagues who, in a research-led institution, did not always see the 'employability' agenda as a priority.

## Context for Change

To understand the context in which the University of Newcastle operates, it is important to take a historical perspective of developments. The University was not involved in the *Enterprise in Higher Education* initiative in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and therefore suffered from having to start from a relatively low base compared to those institutions that had been involved. The need for change was recognised by one of the seven faculties and a year long, pilot project was proposed and funded by the University. The project was led by a department from within the faculty, and supported by the Careers Service and the academic function from within the Staff Development Unit. The pilot was followed by two years of project-led initiatives, supported by funding drawn down from internal and external sources and expanding the work undertaken in one faculty to embed personal transferable or core skills in the curriculum across the rest of the University.

Towards the end of the two years, an internal review of the Careers Service recommended that financial reserves were redirected from a Careers Adviser post to create a new post to drive forward the key skills agenda and build closer links with academic departments. A unit in the Careers Service – the Academic Development Unit (ADU) – was subsequently established around this post as external funding was secured. The unit's aim was to *'enhance the employability of the institution's graduates by working in partnership with academic staff and other appropriate stakeholders'*, which was in line with the repositioning of the Careers Service and the leading role it had played in the employability agenda to date. The funding situation, however, meant that the developments over the next couple of years continued to be project driven on a short-term basis.

The appointment of a new Director for the Careers Service, aligned to strong leadership from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, resulted in a shift in approach. The changes over a three year period have seen the implementation of a strategy-led approach to enhancing graduate employability, strongly driven by the institution's teaching and learning strategy. The experience and expertise gained over the previous four years provided the basis for the shift which otherwise might not have been possible.

Short-term development projects remained a central element to engendering institutional change and the ability to attract external funding to support the implementation of innovative curriculum-based approaches to enhancing employability was crucial. However, the projects and availability of funding were no longer driving the agenda; instead the University became more concerned with policy and practice. Consequently the ADU and wider Careers Service continued to expand the range of core services available to its academic, employer and student customers, in line with the Service's forward vision and strategy. New services were created to develop work-related learning activities in the curriculum and use labour market information to ensure a more market-led approach to curriculum development.

As ever, times change and the University is now in a period of major internal restructuring which involves reducing the number of Faculties from seven to three, and the number of its academic departments from 70 plus to 27 Schools. The central support services are also being streamlined and the Careers Service has played a significant role in influencing the changes. The Director chaired the 'Student and Curriculum Services Review' group and was then seconded to project manage the restructuring process for a short period, whilst the Manager of the Academic Development Unit played a leading role in preparing the successful business cases to establish a Centre for Academic Development and an Enterprise Centre. Although details have yet to be finalised, the restructuring will present new opportunities to build on the Careers Service's existing reputation for innovative work and the provision of support to academic colleagues in developing a curriculum which contributes to the aim of enhancing the employability of the institution's graduates.

## Implementing an Employability Strategy

The development of the University of Newcastle's *Employability Statement and Strategy* reflected the University's commitment, as stated in the 1999-2004 Institutional Plan under its principal objective for teaching and learning, to:

> "Offer education which meets the most stringent tests both as to quality and standards to an increasing number and range of people*, enhancing the employability of our students*, and contributing to regional, national and international needs for high-level skills and knowledge".

> Extract from the University of Newcastle's Institutional Plan 1999-2004.

The statement and the strategy set out in a broad way how this agenda is being realised currently, and how implementation could be enhanced even further in the future. It takes into account that the University needs to ensure that its graduates find employment, acquire the ability to manage their careers, continue to learn, and make the maximum contribution to their chosen field of work which utilises their Graduateness to the full. Once fully adopted across the University, it should also ensure that the first and subsequent destinations of graduates, especially their quality of employment, are enhanced from their already high current levels.

The University recognised it had a good record in this regard, and much excellent practice was already in existence. Implementation of the strategies outlined in *Figure 2* is, in many instances, already clearly evident. Even where it is not, acknowledgement needs to be made here that not all strategies will apply to all academic programmes, and each will select, use and customise both strategies and programmes to suit their context.

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Figure 2 - Employability statement and strategy

**Employability Statement**

The University of Newcastle upon Tyne is committed to enhancing the employability of all students, including postgraduate taught and research students. This commitment will be demonstrated within a framework of promoting equality of opportunity, according to the University's Equal Opportunities Policy.

**Key Strategies and Programmes of Activity**

The institution aims to achieve this through the implementation of a number of key strategies and related programmes of activity. The key strategies are outlined below:

(i)     Embedding higher level key skills in the academic curricula
(ii)    Increasing and enhancing opportunities for work-related learning
(iii)   Preparing for work in a global economy
(iv)   Delivering effective careers education, information and guidance
(v)    Recording academic achievement and personal development.

Extract from the University of Newcastle's Employability Statement and Strategy, 2002

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## Evaluating the Strategy

Evaluating the success in implementing the *Employability Strategy* is of central importance. The adopted evaluation process provides means by which the University develops a forward strategy of work and a framework against which impact and performance can be measured at each process level. Three process levels have been defined – institutional, School and student development – and outcomes identified at each level.

**At an institutional level**, the University expects that:
- recognition exists externally and internally at all levels for the work undertaken on employability initiatives
- employability strategy becomes mainstreamed and there is evidence of a sustainable strategic approach in the institution
- continued success is experienced in winning resources to deliver.

**At a School level**, more and better activity will be demonstrated by:
- evidence of Schools owning curriculum change by integrating employability-related initiatives (see *Figure 3*)
- number of Schools migrating towards 'expert' increases year on year (see *Figure 4*).

The University strives to embed employability-related initiatives within the curriculum, whilst recognising that certain activities need to be delivered centrally by support services (e.g. Careers Service, student-led Education Unit). Progress towards this end position of such developments being embedded in the curriculum can be measured by mapping activities onto the following matrix.

Figure 3: Ownership and integration matrix
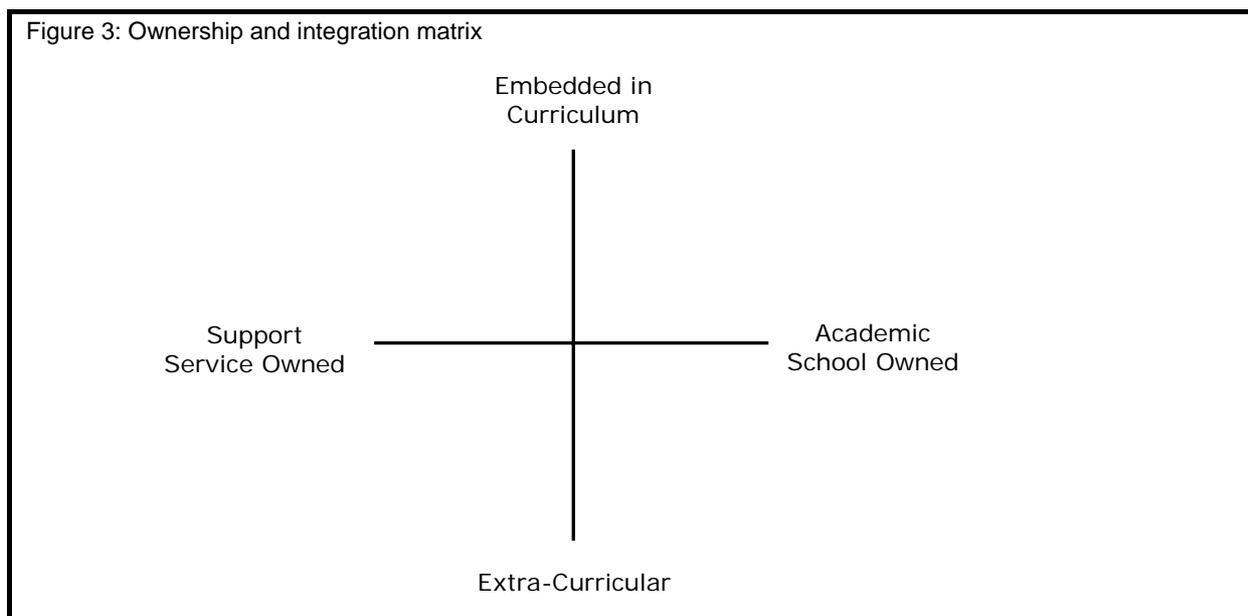


Academic Schools can be migrated from a position of 'unaware' to 'experts' on employability-related issues. The process involves moving through four stages within a spectrum as laid out in *Figure 4*. Intervention strategies, developed to support activity and movement at each point on the spectrum, are likely to be different. The model offers a means to assess the current position of a School measured against a predetermined set of criteria and to determine the forward support strategy that could be used to move the School on. The goal is to maximise migration towards the 'expert' state.

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*Figure 4 - Awareness spectrum*

| Unaware ∧ Aware ∧ Experienced ∧ **Expert** |
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At a student level effective mechanisms need to exist whereby the employability of every student is enhanced:

- evidence exists of students developing an awareness and competence in key skills
- increasing numbers of students experience work-related learning as part of the higher education experience
- performance on careers added value measures improves every year.

In addition, the Careers Service has adopted a set of indicators of success, which operate at a personal level and provide immediate measures of the progress. These personal indicators are set out in *Figure 5*:

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*Figure 5 - Personal Indicators*

We have been successful when:

- we feel that we've done a good job
- people contact us about the work we do
- we can influence others
- the work we do is valued
- we win financial resources for our work.
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## Role of Development Projects

As outlined above, much of the change at the University of Newcastle has been underpinned by short-term, externally funded 'development projects'. Many of them were very successful in their own right, driving change both internally and externally.

The Careers Service developed an excellent track record of attracting external funding; at one stage, the Service was responsible for delivering fifteen different projects. However, this level of success brought its own problems. Each project had its own name, specified outcomes and outputs, dissemination and evaluation strategies and financial plan. While the Careers Service's reputation for innovation and success lent credibility to new projects, creating a discrete identity for each one had the effect of distancing it from the Service. With no clear relationship between a project 'brand' and the department or service that was leading on it, beneficiaries of the project were sometimes left confused as to where to turn for help after the closure of the project.

Clearly, something needed to change to rationalise the amount of time and effort spent on project bureaucracy.

## The 'Invisible' Project

An opportunity arose in the late 1990s for the Careers Service to take a strategy-led rather than a project-led approach from the outset of an externally funded initiative. DfES Innovations Fund monies were secured for a single institutional bid, which aligned the 'project' work with institutional agendas and, in turn, regional and national agendas. This had the added benefit of facilitating the process of embedding the work of the project into both academic and support settings from the very outset. In other words, the question of continuation was being addressed from day one of the project.

Furthermore, once the funding was secured time was not spent creating a logo, website or separate project identity.

Even before bidding for money a number of questions were asked: What were we trying to achieve? How could we measure success? Did our objectives fit with those of our academic colleagues? Could they see reasons for working with us? What did the University really want us to do and what support could it provide?

> *"In support of the University of Newcastle's commitment to widening participation and to enhancing student employability, this innovative project aims to enhance the success of a targeted group of students in preparing for, and making the transition into employment, using work-related learning as its central strategy."*

Extract from the project proposal submitted to the DfEE.

The project clearly had its priorities, yet these did not distract the Careers Service from delivering the project as part of an integrated provision of services and activities. On the one hand, the funding allowed the Careers Service to work in partnership with academics and other stakeholders to focus on curriculum-based interventions. Instead of approaching academic colleagues with a request to get involved in a project, the Careers Service could offer internal consultancy support in the form of practical help and, in some cases, financial support for new initiatives in teaching and learning. On the other hand, the Careers Service could offer an effective service to a targeted group of students seeking work experience opportunities and promote the benefits of providing work experience opportunities to employers, especially public and voluntary sector organisations.

Implementing such an approach has not been without its problems. The project aimed, in part, to build on the good practice established by the DfEE-funded *Experience Works* project, which had a very strong 'brand image' and some difficulties were experienced in the shifting away from this. This issue was addressed by trying to think of the project activities as services or support rather than as products. The integrated approach has meant that everything becomes 'Careers Service' branded, reinforcing the fact that a full range of services is on offer to all customer groups.

The boundary between what is part of the project and what is not becomes very difficult to define. Although having members of the Project Team in different parts of the Careers Service was positive in many ways, it did contribute to the confusion about where the project started and stopped. There is undeniably a tension between meeting the targets and expectations that come with the project territory whilst integrating activities into the mainstream. Members of staff directly involved in the project were encouraged to see what they were doing as a way of *adding value* to the work of their Unit so that the blurring of boundaries became a positive thing.

Teams within the Careers Service have, as a result of this approach, become much clearer about their long-term strategies. The project's verifiable targets have in many cases been exceeded and even though the project might have been 'invisible' the added value certainly was not. Consequently, the Service *does* have a central role in the institution, so avoiding the danger highlighted by Baroness Blackstone of being "a Cinderella service, out on the remote edges of Higher Education, with little or no presence or influence in the lives of students and the academics who teach them" (Harris, 2001).
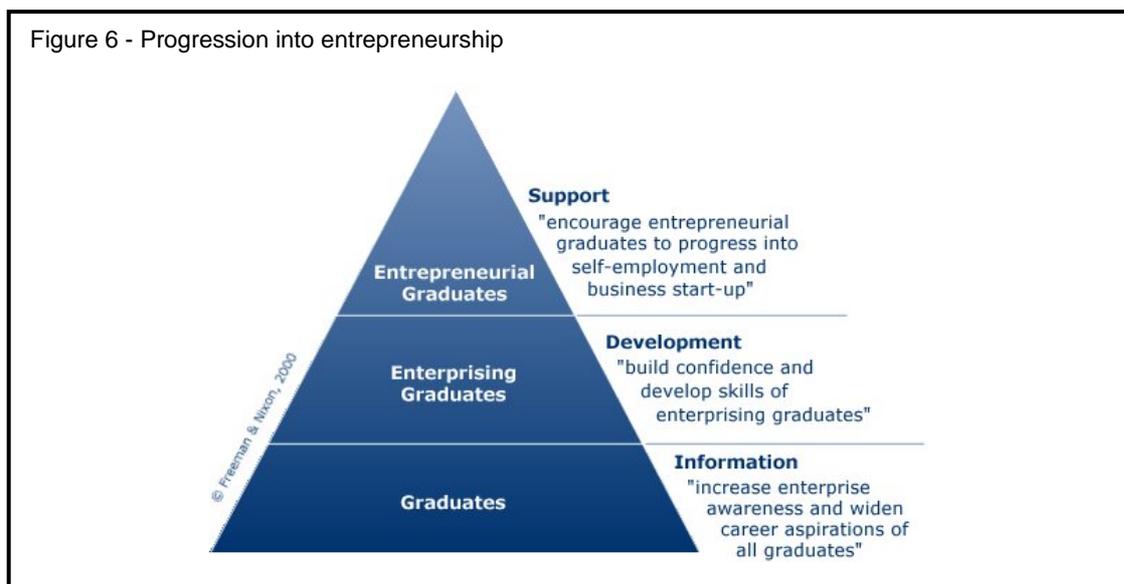
## Responding to a New Challenge

As described above, several themes have evolved under the broad agenda of employability. One of the emerging themes is enterprise and entrepreneurship. Arguably this is not new given the emphasis placed on 'enterprise' throughout the DfEE funded *Enterprise in Higher Education* programme. The emphasis now though has shifted to one of the potential outcomes: graduates entering self-employment and/or starting a business. In terms of the economic agenda for the North East, this theme is particularly important as the region has a very low rates of business start up and graduate utilisation/retention. *Unlocking our Potential*, the Regional Economic Strategy (RES) for the North East, is notable in that one of its six key priorities is 'Placing Universities and Colleges at the Heart of the Region's Economy'. The regional universities are identified as 'a source of new products and ideas' and have a key role to play in responding to the challenges of 'establishing an entrepreneurial society' and 'building an adaptable and highly skilled workforce' (ONE North East, 2000).

In responding to this new challenge, the University of Newcastle recognised that self-employment and business start-up was just one of the career options open to graduates. Hence, the Careers Service took responsibility for this emerging theme to ensure that business start-up was seen as one of the options open to any student or graduate making decisions about their career. Early on in the process a policy and business plan, *Progression into Entrepreneurship*, was developed. Both the policy and plan were signed off at a senior level in the institution where there was recognition of the contribution to be made to the University's third strand activity, i.e. its contribution to economic, cultural, and social development at the local, regional, and national level.

> "As part of the graduate utilisation and retention agendas, the vision for the graduate enterprise strategy is *to develop graduates who can help create a competitive, dynamic and knowledge based economy*".
>
> Extract from the Graduate Enterprise Policy and Business Plan, 2001-06

The business plan revolves around the implementation of a strategy which recognises that not all graduates *are* entrepreneurial, i.e. those who will go on to create new organisations. The strategy, however, encourages all graduates to become *more* entrepreneurial because the skills and experience developed along the way will produce more *enterprising* graduates whose added value skills are applicable to any employment situation or occupational sector (see *Figure 6*).



Figure 6 - Progression into entrepreneurship

© Freeman & Nixon, 2000

**Entrepreneurial Graduates**

**Support**
"encourage entrepreneurial graduates to progress into self-employment and business start-up"

**Enterprising Graduates**

**Development**
"build confidence and develop skills of enterprising graduates"

**Graduates**

**Information**
"increase enterprise awareness and widen career aspirations of all graduates"

With this in mind the Careers Service aims to build *capacity* and *capability* in the institution's graduates by providing:

- *information* to raise awareness and widen the career aspirations of all graduates, who should also experience structured key skills development
- *development* opportunities to a smaller, but still significant, number of enterprising graduates in skills relevant to a variety of sectors and employment situations
- practical *advice* and *support* to entrepreneurial graduates to progress into creating new organisations.

Each of the attendant strategies involves the implementation of a number of interrelated programmes of activity within and outside of the curriculum, which will ultimately contribute to the achievement of the business plan outcomes. In addition verifiable targets relating to these activities are outlined in the Careers Service annual plan, informed by the outcomes specified in externally funded initiatives and other national and regional policy documents. Examples of programmes to build *capacity* include signposting, awareness raising, skill development, coaching and networking. Examples of *capability* building activity include start-up programmes, individual business advice and support, market research and testing, and on-campus support facilities.

The approach is now informing the development at a regional level of a much more strategic and co-ordinated approach to encouraging and supporting graduate start-ups by the six North East universities. Graduate retention and utilisation have long been recognised as key elements in boosting the renaissance of the North East. With one of the lowest participation rates in Higher Education, it is crucial that the region retains graduates who study here and is able to attract others. No analysis of the level of success of *Progression into Entrepreneurship* is yet possible due to the early stage in implementation. However, it is expected that given this approach the universities will be in a better position to access available funding at a regional and sub-regional level.

## Critical Success Factors

The success of these development activities, in relatively short time-scales for curriculum development, can be attributed to several interrelated factors.

**The institutional level:**
- the teaching and learning strategy places high importance on improving the employability of our students
- an employability statement and strategy with attendant resources highlights practical ways for academic staff to implement strategy
- a pool of development staff who are respected by academic colleagues and can provide support for curriculum innovation with credibility and without being seen as tied to a single initiative
- senior management support from both Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Faculty management has created a culture which promotes and recognises innovative practice.

**The School level:**
- 'champions' with empathy for the employability agenda have helped to build an environment receptive to curriculum change
- establishing partnerships with academic colleagues to provide appropriate educational development support
- providing small scale 'pump-prime' funding to assist academics in realising curriculum innovation by, for example, buying-out existing staff time
- embedding project-led developments in the curriculum from the outset to overcome problems of sustainability.

## Conclusion

Enhancing student employability is likely to remain high on the agenda for Higher Education and must be addressed in the context of increasing student numbers drawn from a broader spectrum. Taking a strategic view can help to ensure that project-led activity really is used to stimulate new and innovative approaches by integrating project outcomes into institutional and business plans and programmes from the outset. The experience of the Careers Service at the University of Newcastle of using project-based activity to add value to the mainstream, building capacity and capability, has enabled a move to a position where the strategy drives the projects rather than the projects driving the strategy.

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