



Embedding skills and employability in higher education: an institutional curriculum framework approach

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of her institution.

Summary

This article discusses one institution's response to the curriculum change imposed on higher education institutions (HEIs) through policies and strategies to develop gradueness, enhance employability, widen access and improve retention. It sets out a 'skills and employability curriculum' framework for programmes, including practical examples, and considers some of the challenges facing this holistic approach to a potentially fragmented area of policy development.

Keywords

employability, key skills, Progress Files, curriculum change, personal development planning

Biography

Dr Sue Bloxham is Deputy Director of the Centre for the Development of Learning and Teaching, St Martin's College with particular responsibility for promoting skills and employability. She has taught Social Science in higher education for 20 years, including many years' involvement in innovative practice and action research to improve learning and teaching. Sue is an ILTHE accreditor.

Introduction: the context for curriculum change

Curriculum change has been forced on higher education institutions in an unprecedented way over the last decade. Central to these external pressures has been the demand, articulated in the Dearing Report (1997) and confirmed in the recent White Paper <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestrategy/>, that HE should respond to changes in the UK labour market and therefore graduates should be equipped with the skills and attributes to be effective in the changing world of work.

Additionally, the national priorities for learning and teaching in HE (HEFCE Circular 02/24 (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2002/02_24.htm)) create pressure for significant curriculum change in relation to widening participation and improving retention, as well as enhancing employability. They actively encourage good and innovative practice in support of high quality teaching and learning.

These imperatives have been reflected in a plethora of policies such as Progress Files http://www.itsn.ac.uk/application.asp?app=resources.asp&process=full_record&id=316, Benchmarking statements, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and programme specifications with a focus on 'outcome-based curricula' and specifically identifying generic or transferable skills (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/nqf.htm>).

While one can argue that widening participation and improving retention are not explicitly about students' skills and employability, Purcell et al (1999) indicate that graduates from lower socio-economic groups are more likely than affluent students to get poorer quality jobs. They conclude that HEIs could improve the employment potential of such students by articulating, and helping students to articulate, the qualities they develop on their courses, improving guidance activities and building key skills into the curriculum.

Furthermore, emerging research on retention supports this link between retention and skills. Warren (2002) makes a case for an 'holistic curriculum response' to supporting diverse and non-traditional students which includes the embedding of skills in subject-based teaching and other forms of academic support. However, as Gibbs (2003) argues (http://www.ncteam.ac.uk/resources/project_briefings/index.htm), introducing these features into an HE institution is a 'complex, problematic and very drawn out process' involving all levels of staff.

Thus, the focus of this article is how to provide an holistic and integrated response to these demands for curriculum change. It outlines one institution's approach to tackling this challenge via the development of a 'skills and employability curriculum' (SEC) framework.

The institutional context

St Martin's College (SMC) is a College of HE located primarily in North Lancashire and Cumbria. It has 7,000 FTE students. The College offers courses in arts, humanities and social sciences and it is a major national and regional provider of professional teacher education and non-medical health-related education. The College's mission includes a strong regional focus and a concern to strengthen access, equality and opportunity.

The Skills and Employability Curriculum

SMC adopted a 'Skills and Employability Curriculum' (SEC) in 2002. SEC presents course teams with a framework of generic learning and support that students should be offered at the different levels of their programme regardless of the mode of study or nature of the subject matter. It broadly outlines the requirement for induction, study skills, key skills, Personal Development Planning (PDP), Progress Files and personal tutor support. The full curriculum framework can be viewed at: http://www.cdl.t.ucsm.ac.uk/good_practice/policy_documents/

The notion of providing a curriculum framework to be embedded in courses is based on the principle that students and staff place more value on activities where they form a seamless part of their programmes. Consequently, the curriculum has been left purposefully broad for programmes to interpret in the light of their subject matter, student needs, professional demands and benchmarking requirements.

For example, the College has not developed a standard approach to Progress files. Programmes can implement the policy in ways that 'fit' with their existing systems: for example programmes for pre-registration nurses are working towards integrating their Personal Academic Development Record with a final assessment task which records their achievement over the course and preparation for their continuing professional development. The undergraduate teacher education programmes have created a Personal and Professional Development Record that incorporates broader PDP with existing target setting and recording procedures such as graduates' 'Career entry profile'.

Role of support services

Although it is very much in its infancy, SEC is designed so that programmes, rather than central services, take responsibility for ensuring that students are offered provision such as PDP, careers guidance and information-seeking skills as an integral part of their course. This is considered more cost-effective, increases student participation and allows for subject-focused provision.

Clearly, support services are absolutely crucial to successful delivery of the curriculum, and collaborative work between these services and individual courses is vital. Thus, while taking a curricular approach, programmes continue to draw on the expertise of specialists. For example, library staff have developed online and classroom-based information handling programmes for integration into relevant modules. Furthermore, there are clear quality standards for careers provision that must be monitored and met through this integrated delivery (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/COP/COPcex/contents.htm>).

Supporting and disseminating the curriculum framework

Writing a policy is the easy part; it is implementation that is the challenge. The Drummond et al (1999) study of 30 HEIs attempting to develop Key Skills Policies suggests that the biggest problem encountered is not appreciating the scale of the task. Furthermore, an effective skills curriculum requires an overhaul of teaching methods in order for the student to have the opportunity to practise and be assessed on this broadened range of capabilities. It also involves a reconsideration of the use of resources, for example a greater role for support services and an enriched personal tutor role.

Consequently, promoting and implementing the policy has involved a range of interrelated strategies:

- Ensuring that new and revised courses include SEC as a threshold standard in order to achieve validation;
- Establishing three Faculty Learning Teaching and Assessment Co-ordinators. Part of their role is to drive this policy forward through the Faculty Learning, Teaching and Assessment Groups;
- Providing staff development including an open workshop programme, bespoke input into department meetings and awaydays, developing the teaching skills of support staff and training personal tutors;
- Offering practical assistance in developing materials, e.g. helping write the framework of a programme's Progress File;
- Providing a 'Course Developers' Guide' and supporting workshops;
- Providing a guide to good practice in assessment including advice on how to align assessment with outcomes, and how to integrate the assessment of key skills;
- Providing funding for curriculum development and innovation;
- Organising 'Learning & Teaching Fest' where innovations and examples of good practice are explained by the staff involved;
- Including SEC in the PGC in Learning and Teaching for new staff.
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Examples of SEC in action

As anticipated with such an 'integrated' policy, the implementation is taking many forms dependent on subject and professional requirements. Many programmes have now developed a level 1 (Certificate level) skills module which links subject-specific knowledge and skills with the development of generic and study skills and the commencement of PDP. In some cases, it includes the personal tutor function.

The opportunity for work experience for students on non-vocational courses is built in at intermediate level with the availability of a 'Learning through work' module which includes various PDP skills in the planning and review stages.

Honours level provides one of the biggest challenges. Students overlook the need for PDP under the pressure of final assessment. Elements of job search have traditionally been offered, usually as 'bolt-on' activities, although the College Careers Service has experience of integrated curriculum provision. However, an innovative core module in Applied Social Science has attempted to integrate career management while providing an opportunity for the students to draw on learning across their programme (capstone module) and meet the requirements for Honours study. The module commences with Careers led activities to help the students identify potential fields of employment which they then research independently. They identify a post in that field and prepare an application, including a CV and a personal statement. These documents form part of the assessment which also includes a critical evaluation of the contribution of their subject discipline to that field of employment. The course concludes with students presenting information about their career choice to the rest of the group, thus providing their peers with further careers information. Thus, the module models:

- active collaboration with the Careers Service;
- largely independent learning appropriate to Honours level, with some tutorial support – low teaching hours;
- Honours level learning outcomes;
- key documents for the student's Progress File;
- active personal development planning.

The first cohort of students were generally very positive (other than the experience of some unhappiness that the presentation wasn't assessed). Many applied for real jobs and courses and commented that the module forced them to be proactive about their futures in their penultimate semester. Thus, it ensures that they are involved in career planning while they still have easy access to the Careers Service. The careers advisers appreciated the efficiency savings of working with whole groups rather than individuals, although it did bring added work for them in shared marking. It also generated extra use of their service as students became more active in their career management. Other subjects are now considering adopting this model in their own programmes. A comment from a student neatly summarises the module:

'Sometimes in seminars you think "what has this got to do with real life" but this module fetched Applied Social Science, life and proper jobs together.'

Problems and challenges to SEC

There are undoubtedly challenges to the strategy. Gibbs asks whether institutions are trying to change their 'teaching goals or (their) ..way of going about teaching'. In a sense, SEC is trying to do both as we cannot successfully implement a curriculum for skills and employability without changes to teaching methods. This is a fundamental change and needs considerable work to communicate the policy throughout the institution and to ensure that it is understood and supported at all levels of staff.

There are other challenges, for example, the issue of duplication at level 1 for students studying joint degrees. Ensuring that skills development is subject-specific is part of the solution but it does not tackle the problem of duplicating PDP where this is built into modules. A free-standing, generic skills and PDP module has been rejected to date because of our desire to fully embed this initiative but the problems of duplication may yet lead to that solution for the modular programme.

Making progress files meaningful to non-professional students and their tutors continues to be a challenge. Undoubtedly, more integration into courses is needed rather than less, with PDP linked to key assessments as in the level 3 social science module described above.

Providing the same levels of provision and access to support services for part-time and distance learning students is also a challenge. Indeed for such students, there is an even greater imperative to lodge this provision firmly within the curriculum because their opportunity to access services in other ways may be very limited.

Conclusion

SEC involves changes to both the curriculum and the role of academic and support staff and is, thus, a major challenge to any institution. Nevertheless, while it is still at an early stage of implementation at St Martin's College, it has the potential to provide an holistic, embedded response to external policy demands and internal initiatives to support a diversifying student community and to prepare them for their future lives.

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