# On employability

Lee Harvey

## Summary

This paper encourages us to think of employability as an ongoing developmental process that doesn't stop once the graduate is employed. It is argued that employability is much more than the acquisition of key skills or getting a job - it is about developing graduates as critical, empowered learner.

## Keywords

employability; access; recruitment; critical learning; lifelong learning.

## Biography

Professor Lee Harvey is Director of the Centre for Research and Evaluation at Sheffield Hallam University. He is the editor of Quality in Higher Education, an international journal. He is also a member of the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination team (ESECT). Lee is currently Vice-Chair of the European Association of Institutional Research (EAIR), a member of the Council of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) and member of the Board of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Lee has wide experience of social research as a research methodologist and more recently as Director of the Centre for Research into Quality at the University of Central England. Lee has also been a quality advisor to numerous higher education institutions in the UK, New Zealand, Denmark, Australia, Brazil, Chile and Sweden. Published books include: *Transforming Higher Education* (1996), an exploration of the connections between the drive for quality and the reforms in teaching and learning, and the higher education-employment interface, and *Critical Social Research* (1990).

## Introduction

Employability tends to have a variety of meanings in use, ranging from the employment rates of graduates from an institution to a characteristic of an individual graduate.

It is important to dispense with the notion that employability is a measure of institutional performance. Measuring employability by whether a graduate obtains a job of a specific type within a given period after graduating is used as an indicator of institutional performance but it is a poor and misleading indicator. It only relates to the employability of new (full-time) graduates and is irrelevant as an indicator of the employability development of those already in work. Whether a graduate gets employed in six months from graduation depends on a range of factors including the graduate's age, gender and ethnicity as well as external economic factors, which may be sector- or region-specific, including the somewhat quirky recruitment practices of many employers.

## Employability and skills

Employability is about the potential of the individual, usually couched in terms of the propensity of students to obtain (and retain) fulfilling work. Or put another way: do graduates have the attributes that will make them employable? There is an implicit 'magic bullet' theory of employability that underlies much of the discussion of graduate employability —

especially when it is linked to institutional performance. The notion is that the institution provides employability development opportunities; the graduate engages with them and gets 'employability' which is the gateway to employment. This model presumes that employability is something that can be acquired. It also presumes that what is acquired is a set of skills.

The equating of employability to skills was a part of the agenda of the 1990s and one expressed clearly in the Dearing Committee report (1997). However, a closer reading of Dearing suggests that employability is more than obtaining key skills: the high priority placed on work experience is indicative of something deeper. It is unfortunate that academics in many areas tend to equate employability with skills development. It is more unfortunate that they decry employability because they want no part in 'skills training'. Current approaches to employability have gone beyond the skills agenda. The emphasis is not so much on employability as something acquired through skills as on employability as a range of experiences and attributes developed through higher-level learning. Employability is not a 'product' but a process of learning.

## A model of employability

A rather more sophisticated model of employability is as follows. The institution provides a range of implicit and explicit opportunities for graduates. These usually include job-getting knowledge and abilities, such as labour market information, interview techniques and *curriculum vitae* writing. In the past this has tended to be the province of central services, such as the careers service.

A second strand of opportunity is the development of a range of attributes, which may be implicit or explicit. These include the very important higher-level attributes of analysis, critique, synthesis (which is why employers recruit graduates); interactive skills such as team working, communication skills and inter-personal skills; and personal characteristics, which range from flexibility and adaptability, through self-organisation and time-management to risk-taking and problem solving. While higher-level intellectual skills and many aspects of communication skills are embedded in the curriculum, the tendency in the past has been to treat the other factors as something to be bolted-on to the curriculum, if dealt with at all.

A third set of characteristics is to do with encouraging students to want to continue to learn and to reflect on their learning and experiences. This has hitherto been a rather nebulous element of the opportunities afforded students. The higher profile of work experience and the growing acceptance that it is the learning from work experience rather than the experience *per se* that is important, has led to a more reflective approach. This has spread, in some institutions, beyond the work experience embedded in the programme of study to include extra-curricular experience. The development of personal development planning and progress files adds to this.

## Integration into the student experience

The student engages with these opportunities but comes armed with a range of extra-curricular and life experiences, which mediate the nature and extent of the engagement. Furthermore, the opportunities provided by the institution do not sit in a vacuum. There is a pedagogical process that facilitates the engagement. Hitherto, this has been characterised by fragmentation and lack of clear integration into the curriculum. Increasingly, the shift is to a holistic approach that tries to make links between central services, work experience, embedded curriculum development and reflection on learning. Instead of compartmentalising aspects of employability, there is a growing tendency to co-operate and provide a more seamless integration into the student experience.

There is a lack of consistency across the sector and some institutions are far more advanced in their strategic thinking on this than others. Furthermore, the subject discipline plays a big part. In some areas, it is easier to integrate employability in the curriculum than in others. However, it is a mistake to assume that just because a programme of study is highly vocational it develops employability. If the graduate does not want to pursue the vocation, has the programme developed his or her employability? Is a nursing student any more likely to be a trainee manager with a multi-national retailer than a Geography graduate?

Different subject disciplines provide different employability development opportunities but the key is that employability must be seen as a process of student learning not as the simplistic acquisition of skills that can be 'ticked off'. All attribute development is continuous and gradual. It is not sensible to talk of having communication skills or not having them, or being a team worker or not being one.

## Conclusion

In the end the graduate engages and brings extra-curricular experiences to bear and reflects on and articulates his or her abilities. Employability is, thus, more about ability than it is about being employed. It is about developing as a critical empowered learner.

The next stage, of getting a job, is about taking the ongoing employability development and engaging with the employer recruitment process at one point in time. Employability continues to develop because the graduate, once employed, does not stop learning. Indeed, the graduate needs to think in terms of lifelong learning. Success or otherwise in obtaining a job depends on the wider economic context, which affects the availability of jobs and the recruitment practices of employers. These can be peculiar and very few employers have recruitment processes that are entirely free of some elements of bias, based on class, age, gender, ethnicity or the subject of study and the institution attended. There are laudable attempts to try and make recruitment fairer but there is a long way to go.

At root, employability is about learning, not least learning how to learn. Employability is not a product but a process of learning for life. It is not about training for a job; rather it is about empowering learners as critical reflective citizens.

## References and weblinks

Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. (1997) Higher Education in the Learning Society. Chaired by Sir Ron Dearing. London: NCIHE (**http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ncihe/index.htm**)

Employability Performance Indicator, Fifth QHE 24-Hour Seminar: Employability (**http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/cre/publications/epioutcomes.pdf**)

Emplopyability section of LTSN Generic Centre website (**http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=17224&amp;**)

Enhancing Employability, Recognising Diversity, Lee Harvey, William Locke and Alistair Morey (**http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/employability**)

Employability section of UUK website (**http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/employability**)

Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team website (**http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=17641**)

Graduate's work: a guide to future employment, Sheffield Hallam University (**http://www.uce.ac.uk/crq/publications/gw/index.html**)

Harvey, L. and contributors (2003) Transitions from higher education to work (**http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/cre/publications/d1transitions%20.doc?app=resources.asp&amp;process=full_record%A7ion=generic&amp;id=246**)