Learning & Employability

Employability: judging and communicating achievements

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Learning and Employability Series 1 and 2

The Learning and Employability series is primarily intended for staff in higher education institutions who are considering the enhancement of student employability. The publications will also be of interest to colleagues new to the area as well as those who are already engaged in developing employability and who wish to broaden their understanding of the topic.

In response to demand we have updated and reissued a number of titles from the first series of Learning and Employability, originally published by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT). We welcome suggestions for new titles in the series: email **employability@heacademy.ac.uk**.

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The Learning and Employability series is being extended by the Higher Education Academy and will reflect changing challenges and priorities in the relationship between higher education and the many work opportunities likely to need – or benefit from – graduate or postgraduate abilities.

The views expressed in this series are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy.

Introduction

This Guide is for colleagues who are responsible for programmes and who need to ensure that those programmes make a clear contribution to student employability. It is also for those who work with programme leaders, particularly for educational developers. It is probably goes into more detail than senior policy-makers want.

The main idea is that employers value achievements that we find it hard to assess in traditional ways. The argument is that we need a more differentiated, programme-level approach to assessment. This involves disrupting the assumption that assessment has to be about measurement and numbering and substituting the view that assessment is about judgement, which can take many forms.

Preview of the main points

1. Curriculum goals should be assessed because that which is assessed gets taken seriously. That which isn't, doesn't.

2. Different views of employability imply different learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment approaches. This paper concentrates upon employability as the development of complex achievements. Other definitions are not excluded, but they are not central to this paper.

3. Many of the complex achievements that teachers and employers value can only be reliably and affordably assessed on a pass/fail basis. Even then, costs may be greater than a programme can afford.

4. Students need to be 'knowing students' in order to benefit from assessment arrangements that sustain complex learning.

5. Students can be helped to develop claims to those complex achievements that cannot, or ought not to be, assessed by more traditional means.

6. Portfolios are one way of helping students to make claims to complex learning achievements.

7. Self- and peer-assessment should be included in a programme assessment plan.

8. The assessment of competence, particularly of fitness to practise, is expensive. It needs to be addressed through a *programme* assessment plan.

1. Premises

We may plan a fine curriculum and try very hard to implement it faithfully, only to find that what students experienced was rather different. Typically any such mismatch takes the form of aims, such as promoting autonomy, creativity, critical thinking or understanding, being frustrated by assessment arrangements that somehow encourage students to play safe, to rehearse any party line they can detect and to stockpile information in preparation for examinations.

Assessment drives the understood curriculum:
• It tells students what the aims of the curriculum really are, because 'what matters' gets assessed;
• It tells them how to work, because it seems sensible to prefer ways that pay off in terms of good grades;
• It tells them when to work, because tasks that are not assessed give students implicit permission to work longer on their part-time jobs or to spend more time enjoying themselves.

This Guide suggests ways of bringing the curriculum goal of enhancing student employability closer into line with course and programme assessment practices.

2. Employability

The word 'employability', in the context of higher education, implies ability to be employed in a 'graduate job', something rather different from actually being employed. Figure 1 summarises five common descriptions of 'employability' and adds notes on the assessment implications of each.

Each definition of 'employability' has value in some circumstances but the Learning and Employability series concentrates on the fifth, which is most firmly based on research evidence about what employers value.

When employers are asked what they look for when hiring graduates, they are inclined to say that

• having a good degree is necessary but it is little more than a ticket to compete for a job;
• chances are improved when applicants have credible claims in respect of 'key' or 'transferable' skills;
• what they are really looking for – what they use to choose amongst the skilful graduates – is something more complex.

Figure 1. Five meanings of 'employability' and some assessment implications

What is employability?	Notes	Assessment implications
Getting a (graduate) job.	Employment figures are taken as a robust indicator of employability.	No particular implications, as long as HEIs' assessment practices do not impede students in getting jobs.
A consequence of 'having' key skills.	The Dearing Report said all students should develop four 'key skills'. Others have been added. There is some scepticism about the whole 'key skills' enterprise (see the companion Guide, *Employability in Higher Education: what it is – what it is not*).	The search is for reliable and valid ways of certifying things such as communication, numeracy and problemsolving. Measurement theory demands repeated, high-quality judgements before achievement is warranted. Arguably, such achievements are too complex for affordable and reliable measurement.
A likely effect of having had good work experience.	Work experience consistently correlates with success in the labour market.	See section 7. Reliable and valid assessment of workplace performance is expensive. Formative, conversational assessment is cheaper but cannot contribute to warrants of achievement.
A product of skilful career planning and interview technique.	Employability is in part about knowing the rules of the job-seeking game. Most of the unemployed graduates interviewed in Skills *plus* project had fallen down here.	Assessments that help students to identify and then present their achievements effectively are invaluable. This says less about assessment methods and more about making the rules of the learning and employment games very clear.
A mix of cognitive and non-cognitive achievements and representations.	See, in this series, the following Guides: *Employability in Higher Education: what it is – what it is not* and *Embedding Employability in the Curriculum*.	Understanding can be assessed reasonably reliably, and often affordably. Skills present problems (see above), although simplified skills can be reliably assessed. Beyond that, assessment may be best treated as an aid to learning and claimsmaking: thought needs to be given to letting go of trying to certify complex achievements.

Note: *The darker the shading, the more appropriate it is to give priority to formative assessment to support claimsmaking because it is harder to see how reliable, useful, affordable and valid assessments could lead to generalisations about competence and performance – to certificates and warrants.*

Consider the three lists in Exhibit 1, which are fairly representative of what researchers find that employers say.

Such research underpins our description of employability as

a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

Now, if employability is 'being attractive to employers' and if that means 'degree and skills and what is in Exhibit 1', then a conclusion is that higher education is firmly in the business of promoting complex learning – in other words, its goals are necessarily more fuzzy and extensive than many might acknowledge. Elsewhere we (Knight and Yorke, 2003b) have described employability as a blend of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs (or legitimate self-confidence) and reflectiveness (or metacognition). Notice that some of these elements resist conventional, measurement-driven assessment approaches. This is a central point. Insofar as employability involves the promotion of achievements that cannot be specified completely and unambiguously, it cannot be measured, although local judgements can be made and others, such as employers, might choose to generalise from them.

Exhibit 1. What employers value in new graduates.

Peter Hawkins and Jonathan Winter (1995) highlighted 'career management skills and effective learning skills': self-awareness; self-promotion; exploring and creating opportunities; action planning; networking; matching and decision-making; negotiation; political awareness; coping with uncertainty; development focus; transfer skills; self-confidence.

Lee Harvey and colleagues (1997) found that employers want graduates with knowledge; intellect; willingness to learn; self-management skills; communication skills; team-working; interpersonal skills.

John Brennan and colleagues (2001) found that UK graduates considered the top ten competencies required in current employment to be: working under pressure; oral communication skills; accuracy, attention to detail; working in a team; time management; adaptability; initiative; working independently; taking responsibility and decisions; planning co-ordinating and organising.

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3. Judging achievement

Assessment is often a high-stakes business, by which we mean that it is vital that judgements have considerable public significance, as with examinations and graded

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coursework. When achievement is to be warranted – to be publicly certified or attested – then the judgements need to be reliable. Some achievements, especially those connected with understanding and the more straightforward skills, can be fairly reliably assessed in much the same way that they are currently assessed. Practice might be improved by refining the assessment tasks; writing programme assessment plans to ensure that these learning outcomes are repeatedly assessed throughout the programme; developing assessment criteria which students have and understand, and which assessors use; and making resources available for double marking of all summatively-assessed work, with the exception of work which leads to clear right/wrong answers.

Measurement theory suggests that much higher education assessment practice, which attends to complex achievements, cannot deliver the certainty it feigns. This is:

• Partly a funding problem (measurement of any except the simplest things is expensive);
• Partly an orchestration matter (greater certainties would be possible if there were programme assessment arrangements that generated multiple estimates of programme learning outcomes);
• Partly a matter of pragmatics (how much assessment is it reasonable to impose on learners and teachers);
• Partly an epistemological fact (some things resist measurement).

It is therefore timely to re-appraise 'assessment'.

The problem for high-stakes assessment is that it does involve trying to generalise from performance on a couple of tasks in one course. However, in social science there is a widely-held view that generalisation requires multiple judgements, made by more than one observer, using indicators that are understood by them and by the students, and which the observers are skilled in using in a consistent manner. This is inconvenient because it is expensive and difficult to come up to these standards. If we understand 'assessment' to mean high-stakes measurement for the purposes of warranting, then there are problems with seeing how we could assess some of the notions of employability in Exhibit 1, let alone how we could afford to do it.

The less that assessment practices conform to the demands of measurement theory, the less reliable are any predictions about future performance, especially when it comes to performance in quite different contexts. This helps to explain why employers are so often disappointed by graduates. Universities and colleges often suggest that graduates have certain achievements to their credit but base their judgements on scanty evidence which is often associated with 'tame', rather artificial tasks done in academic surroundings.

Yet complex achievements are assessable, although they may resist (affordable) measurement. Apart from the scientific approach to judgement (measurement), there is a legal approach (weighing evidence and claims) and an artistic one (connoisseurship). Many interesting results of higher education cannot be well captured by the measurement

approaches developed in natural science, but they can be reached by other approaches. If we adopted either of those other approaches:

1. Judgements would be based on appraisal of evidence of achievement.
2. There would be indicators to inform the identification of common features of better and worse performances.
3. Those judging would be familiar with the indicators, as would the learners who create the evidence.
4. If the stakes were high, perhaps because a licence to practise rested upon the outcome, several expert judges would review many pieces of evidence, taking particular care over boundary decisions (Pass/Fail). If the stakes were lower, as when creating feedback to help further development, assessment could take any form likely to create useful and informed suggestions. Given the relative costs of formative and summative assessment and the difficulties high-stakes assessment has with complex achievements, the effect would be to prefer low-stakes approaches to judging many achievements.

A major objection to this position is the claim that students will not take this formative assessment seriously; nowadays they are so instrumental and preoccupied with their part-time employment that they will only do the minimum to get their upper second class degree, so the suggestion that assessment systems should make more use of low-stakes procedures looks otherworldly. The fear is that whatever is touched by low-stakes assessment alone will be ignored. Four responses are:

• Students are more likely to take low-stakes, formative assessment seriously if they understand the purposes. This is not a matter of telling them once but of saturating programme and module handbooks, as well as teachers' discourses, with messages about the importance of formative assessment.
• Low-stakes tasks are taken seriously when they are preludes to high-stakes ones. Set two lowstakes tasks, telling students that the third task in the sequence will be of a similar sort and will be for high-stakes purposes.
• Low-stakes tasks can be done in class as seminar activities. For example, students come to class with a one-page plan of a paper, which is then reviewed by two peers.
• Formative assessment is valuable in its own right. A recent review concluded that formative assessment improves learning; if best formative assessment practices were adopted in mathematics it would raise 'average' countries such as England and the USA into the top five. The effect size of 0.7 is '... amongst the largest ever recorded for educational interventions' (Black and William 1998: 61).

The claim is that alternatives to the measurement model of assessment are available for summative and formative purposes, although the costs of maximising reliability mean that there is much to be said for using them for low-stakes formative purposes.

How does this come together in an approach to the assessment of employability? We

suggest that teams look at programme specifications and put the learning outcomes into one of three groups:

- Those that can be readily assessed for high-stakes purposes – recall of information, routine application of formulae and procedures.
- Those that, for a variety of practical, theoretical and ethical reasons, virtually defy high-stakes assessment – legitimate self-confidence, taking responsibility, willingness to learn.
- Those which can be judged in a tolerably-reliable way *if* sufficient time and money is invested in them – assessments of workplace competence, portfolios, performance in groups.

This is the basis of a differentiated approach to assessment.

4. Orchestrating the assessment of employability at programme level

In order to see better how employability might be assessed, we exploit this more differentiated view of assessment. Recall that some of the objections to formative assessment have just been addressed.

Biggs (2003) has been influential in his advocacy of constructively aligned curricula. The basic idea is simple and powerful: students have the best chance of learning when curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment are pointing in the same direction: when they are aligned. The 'orchestration' or 'tuning' approach described here involves making a series of small changes to a programme to enhance the contribution that assessment makes to the enhancement of student employability.

Typical moves are:

1. As we have just suggested, take the outcomes of learning identified in the programme specification and identify those that can readily be summatively assessed – knowledge and understanding goals are often assessed in this way. Then identify those that call out for formative assessment approaches. Re-examine the residue, making an economic judgement about the assessment arrangements that would be implied, and whether the programme can afford to warrant their achievement.

2. With some programmes, all of the modules that lead to the award are prescribed. Where this is not the case, the next step is to identify the combinations of modules that students most commonly take for the award: you are identifying the main pathways they take towards the award.

3. Once pathways are identified, approach the leaders of pathway modules and ask them to refer to the programme specification and identify, say, the three outcomes that get sustained attention in each course. They will no doubt say that their work touches upon many outcomes, but the aim here is to identify those that are most seriously addressed.

4. Collate the returns and, if need be, negotiate with course leaders to tune the programme for:
    • Gaps – programme outcomes that are not addressed.
    • Redundancies – outcomes that get too much assessment attention.
    • Bunching, where all the attention to an outcome is at one level and there is no obvious educational rationale for that being the case.

5. Now ask leaders how the assessment arrangements touch the three key module outcomes.

6. Collate the returns, again looking for gaps, redundancies and bunching in terms of
    • Assessment of learning outcomes – are some outcomes missed or over-addressed?
    • Task variety – are essays over-used, for example?

7. Again, follow this with negotiations to achieve a better orchestration of assessment tasks and the learning achievements to which modules give priority.

8. It is essential that those teaching on the programme know what is being addressed and where, and that the material they give students explains how the module and its learning intentions relate to the programme and its learning intentions. For example, a module handbook should state that, say, three outcomes identified in the programme specification will get sustained attention, and remind students of where they can refresh their memories of what the specification says.

9. Students need to be 'knowing' students – they need to know what they are supposed to be learning, how, how their achievements will be judged and for what purposes. This usually entails rewriting programme and module handbooks and ensuring that parallel guidance purposes, whether for academic or career purposes, also carry the same messages. To do this, programme teams have to produce a coherent and convincing account of their programme.

10. Students need to learn ways of representing their achievements to employers and graduate schools.

The following sections develop the last two points.

5. 'Knowing' students

Students come to class with learning histories that have shaped their beliefs about the rules of the academic game, particularly beliefs about what learning is, what teachers do and what assessment is for. Many innovative teachers have found that students resist academic practices that do not conform to those expectations, partly because they do not understand the good sense behind them. The approach to assessment and employability that has been outlined here is sufficiently distinctive to need full and repeated explanations if students are to understand, follow and appreciate the new rules of the assessment game. It is necessary to explain at least three things very clearly:

1. Why there is such an emphasis on formative assessment.
2. Why students should expect to undertake peer- and self-assessment. Formative assessment works well when it creates thoughtful feedback on improving performance, especially when feedback is related to assessment criteria that are known, understood and used. The practices of judgement learned through an active engagement in peer- and self-assessment contribute to student employability and are a basis for self-regulation and lifelong learning.
3. That formative assessment will not work unless students and teachers take it seriously. Teachers might want to reinforce the principle by requiring students to provide evidence that they contributed criteria-related feedback to others on a specified number of occasions during the course.

These explanations should go in the course handbook and, ideally, be closely related to the course assessment plan.

Many students will resist attempts to involve them in novel practices – for example, self- and peer-assessment: some because they lack confidence and dislike the uncertainty that comes from unfamiliar practices, and others because they feel that they have paid a great deal to be taught and expect the tutor to do the marking and not shuck it off on to other students.

They are least likely to be upset by the idea of peer- and self-assessment if they are introduced to it in Year 1, understand the purposes and benefits, and see others taking self- or peer-assessment for granted. Yet it takes persistence and a coherent curriculum to form the learning communities and cultures that embrace new approaches to assessment, teaching and learning, as Mentkowski and colleagues (2000) show. When this sustained, programme-level action is not possible, teachers may still innovate in individual modules, while being prepared for objections from students who prefer the familiarity of established methods and are suspicious of new ones.

6. Portfolios, PDP and assessment

It is quite common in the professions to consider portfolios when judging fitness to practise, for appointment or promotion. Students or applicants will usually select from their collection of material those items that can be presented as good evidence to support their claims to the achievements that define competence or higher grade performance. Teachers in higher education are also increasingly expected to produce portfolios in support of their claims to achievement (Wright and Knight, 1999) and most postgraduate programmes validated by the Higher Education Academy require teaching portfolios.

David Baume (2001) has produced a briefing on portfolio assessment for the Generic Centre and its website holds a number of documents on good practice in personal development planning (PDP) and the creation of portfolios.

Portfolios are notoriously difficult to assess reliably, although Baume and Yorke (2002) describe an approach to doing so. Five sources of difficulty are:

1. The claims to achievement and the evidence used to support them tend to diversity. Greater convergence, which is necessary for reliable and efficient grading, requires indicators that helpfully describe and illustrate the assessors' expectations. The price is that these measures can curb students' creativity, limit flexibility and reduce students' feelings of having some ownership of the PDP process and the portfolios it produces.

2. Even when indicators are helpful, there will be considerable variations in the evidence presented. The variations may represent different degrees of achievement, but they will also represent different circumstances of achievement and different judgements of how best to make the claim to success.

3. There will always be differences in weighting between elements of claims to achievement. For example, there are some thirty elements to an English specification of teaching competence. It is unlikely that claims will treat them all equally. The more that assessors have to judge how to respond to such imbalances, the more elusive is reliability.

4. Portfolios tend to be long. Long documents are costly to assess. Costs multiply if grading is more complicated than pass/fail.

5. The reliable assessment of portfolios demands expert judges who are well-trained in using indicators in consistent ways. However, the more complex the assessment task – and portfolio assessment is as complex as it gets – the more elusive is reliability, and the higher the training and quality assurance costs.

The more that reliability is emphasised, the more assessment costs soar and the more

students' freedom to develop their claims is curbed. In the context of assessment for employability, the suggestion is that portfolios should only have formative purposes. Exhibit 2 contains some notes for those wanting to use them summatively.

When used formatively, portfolio-making is treated as an opportunity for PDP. What

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Exhibit 2. The summative assessment of portfolios

If you want to get reliable grades from portfolios:

1. Invest resources in the summative assessment so that graders can be well-trained, portfolios can be independently graded by more than one assessor, and there are resources for thoroughly resolving differences. This implies not using a lot of tutor time on other summative assessment tasks in the same course, unless the contributory judgements are just 'sufficient for progress to the next stage' or 'not ready to progress to the next stage'.
2. Ensure that there are clear indicators and plenty of examples of good practice, available to students and teachers. The tighter the brief, the easier it is to get reliability (but the harder it is for students to develop the claims they want to make in valid ways). However, the danger in tightening the brief is of creating an approach that students will see as a strait-jacket.
3. Encourage or require students to discuss their portfolio claims with each other before submission. This will clarify understanding of what is required and make reliable grading easier.
4. Reduce the number of decision points. 'Pass/fail' grading (one point) is cheaper than 'distinction/merit/pass/fail/non-redeemable fail'. Grading on four elements of a portfolio is cheaper than grading on twenty-four. In all cases, detailed assessment attention might be concentrated upon borderline and failing portfolios so as to help the students to improve to an acceptable level.
5. Consider grading only the claims, which can be set out as a one or two thousand word preface to an annotated file of evidence. Sample the evidence for appropriateness but only look in any detail where there is cause for concern.
6. Look over the portfolios to ensure that they pass the threshold of adequacy but do not grade them. Set students whose portfolios are adequate a separate task, perhaps under exam conditions, that capitalises on the learning that the portfolios represent. Good portfolios should support better performance on this task than those that showed minimal effort. Those producing inadequate portfolios are not given their grades until their work is judged adequate.

Consult Baume and Yorke (2002) for an account of attempts to improve the reliability of portfolio assessment.

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follows is a summary of the ways in which portfolios are used developmentally in one social science department.

Students start with the programme specification, which explains the programme's learning intentions. They begin by adding to the standard list the outcomes of learning that they value and can document on the basis of what they have done in school, in their part-time and vacation jobs, and through their leisure activities. They then review this new set of outcomes and do two things: identify the sorts of claims to achievement they can make in respect of each outcome on their lists; and identify areas for development and consider ways of doing something about them. The portfolio they create and develop throughout the programme has three main parts, described in the course handbook as:

Section 1: claimsmaking. First, there are your claims to achievement, which will be written in continuous prose, highlighting the points that you think present you to your best advantage. Although you will inevitably refer to your cv and say something of the courses you have done, jobs you have had and qualifications gained, this section is about making claims based on those experiences and achievements …

Section 2: associating claims with evidence: The second part, which may be best presented as a table which you create and maintain in electronic form, should list your achievements – such as practical, intellectual and key skills – say a little about each and refer readers to the evidence that fleshes out the claim …

Section 3: the evidence. The third section is likely to be a box or a more sophisticated filing system containing the evidence you want to use in support of your claims … it is important that employers – and you – are able quickly to understand which claims are supported by one or more items of evidence and why. For example, you might have put a particularly good essay in your file because it shows high academic achievement, good presentational skills, ICT skill and numeracy. In which case, make sure there is a note explaining how this item is to be read as evidence of the claims you are basing upon it.

This claimsmaking enterprise rests on the programme assessment plan in that:

• Students need to be quite skilful at reflecting on their own learning and achievements if they are to appraise their attainments and plan for future learning. If this is not encouraged by programme assessment practices, students will generally be disadvantaged.
• Students need to be familiar with the programme learning indicators, to have seen examples of their use in practice and to have a good, experience-based understanding of what they mean, as expressed by the grade indicators.
• Each of the foregoing points assumes an experience – probably a substantial experience – of peer- and self-assessment.

- Students need evidence of achievement, particularly in respect of those outcomes of learning that the HEI does not warrant. This means that they need to do tasks that support development in those areas and that provide feedback both on performance and also for improvement.
- There need to be plenty of tasks with formative assessment purposes in order to support development.
- Portfolio development is integral to the curriculum. That means telling students that it is an important curriculum activity, giving them guidance on creating and maintaining a portfolio, providing tutor support and guidance, creating opportunities for learning conversations around portfolios, and aligning this part of the assessment system with the HEI's academic and personal guidance systems.

This portfolio work, if well-planned, should help students to develop claims to achievements that a department does not summatively assess, help them to review all their learning, and prompt them to identify areas and opportunities for development. However, enthusiasm for progress files, portfolios, dossiers etc. has not always been shared by students. Unless students are enrolled in a programme culture that values and supports portfolios, resistance and indifference are likely to follow.

7. Assessing competence and work-based learning

Employability is often associated with competence, particularly when an employer advertises for someone with particular achievements – for example, in operating Linux software, in teaching children with special educational needs, or in post-partum care. Although there is a history of treating competence as a stable set of distinct but generic elements, researchers such as Michael Eraut (1994) have a lot to say about the degree to which it is content-specific, situationally-variable and holistic rather than an agglomeration of separate skills. As with the notion of employability itself, definitional matters have ramifications for assessment, as Figure 2 shows.

When the stakes are high, as they are when fitness for practice is at issue, then high levels of reliability are needed. This is not always easy to achieve because it depends on repeated assessments of the elements of competence in different settings and using a variety of authentic assessment tasks. Different assessors should be involved. They should understand and use the same criteria. Their consistency should be monitored and disputes should not be settled by splitting the difference between two assessors' marks.

However, as definitions of assessment move from the first row of Figure 2 to the fifth, complexity and cost increase as well, and curriculum designers have to think in terms of programme, not module, assessment plans. Direct summative assessment of

Figure 2. Assessment implications of varying views of competence

Concept of competence	Assessment implications
1. Competence is having sufficient knowledge	Assess knowledge. Better still, assess understanding, although this is harder to do reliably.
2. Competence is being adept at problem solving	Assess quality of solutions to well-defined professional problems. Better still, assess quality of suggestions about illdefined situations (problem-working, which is more authentic than problem-solving).
3. Competence is having clinical practical skills	Assessment of individual skills through objective structured clinical examination (OSCE). Better still, observation of skills in authentic settings.
4. Competence is being effective and efficient in practice	Judgement on the basis of evidence of effective and efficient practice 'in the wild'. Will include observation, peer-appraisal, appropriate performance indicators and, perhaps, portfolio claims to achievement.
5. Competence is tantamount to effective and reflective practices	As above, plus evidence of reflection, perhaps in the form of evidence of continued learning within an area of specialism.

competence, as it is defined in rows 3, 4 and 5, is expensive, which is why it is so tempting to use the simpler methods listed in rows 1 and 2, even though they only give evidence about impoverished concepts of competence. The temptation is to make the easily assessable important, regardless of whether what is important is easily assessable.

We might sidestep this problem by turning high-stakes assessments of competence into coaching or formative ones. It is cheaper and appropriate where 'fuzzy' or 'soft' achievements are concerned.

However, it is seldom realistic to say that workplace learning will only be assessed formatively.

Alternatively, we might have high-stakes assessments but treat them as purely local verdicts, not general warrants to competence. (A series of local assessments might, over a programme, be sufficient for some generalisation about competence.) The snag is that many HE programmes need to produce warrants in the form of statements of fitness to practise, which also limits the use they can make of the cheaper options of assessing knowledge or skills proficiency. Although professional bodies are often prepared to negotiate about the interpretation of their regulations for registration, departments can often find themselves severely constrained by the rather quaint ideas about assessment held by some professional bodies. The best advice on meeting professional bodies' requirements is likely to come from subject associations and from the relevant Higher Education Academy Subject Centre.

When summative data are wanted, then the costs will be high. Eight contributions to tackling the provision of summative data are as follows.

1. Establish a programme assessment plan. The savings may not be obvious because they will stem from reduced uncertainty for all concerned.
2. Invest in materials that explain to students, employers, assessors and others how achievements are being understood and assessed, what competent performances will look like, and how assessors will make their judgements. This helps all concerned by reducing misunderstanding and confusion.
3. Make sure that students know the rules of the game, have plenty of exposure to examples of competence and follow a well-designed professional programme. It is easier to assess competence when the curriculum routinely promotes it and students know what the curriculum is doing.
4. Invest in coaching and assessment training for staff. The more that teachers are agreed on what would count as evidence of competence, the more efficient and effective the system. However, 'staff' in this context includes workplace assessors and those departmental colleagues who liaise with them. Not only is it expensive to train workplace assessors and often hard to get them to agree to be trained, it is also expensive to establish quality assurance systems to make sure that comparable standards are being similarly applied across a range of settings.
5. Aim to have few assessment decision points by, for example, preferring pass/fail judgements to percentage grades. More-than-competent performance can be appreciated without having to put numbers on it.
6. Where competence is established, stop summatively assessing and concentrate on other areas of concern. Again, that is no bar to giving less formal feedback to encourage a move from competence towards excellence.
7. Provide plenty of formative tasks that lead to fewer, sharp, high-stakes tasks upon which judgements of competence are based.
8. Encourage a claimsmaking approach, in which learners are themselves responsible for producing evidence of achievement.

These eight suggestions comprise a systemic approach to the assessment and promotion

of competence which is a model for the assessment of employability in general. There is no avoiding the fact that the assessment of competence is expensive (unless competence is defined in Figure 2, row 1 terms). For example, it is said that a major bugbear in the assessment of competence is establishing the validity of claims to achievement coming from work experience or other activities outside of higher education. Agreed. Point 4 above alludes to the costs of making sure that judgements *within* a programme are sound. When it comes to appraising claims made on the basis of extra-curricular activity, it is common to require students to produce portfolios to support the claims and/or to viva the student. Both are expensive.

A differentiated programme-wide approach to assessment can cope with expensive elements, such as the assessment of competence and claims based on workplace learning, because the programme team can decide to use cheap assessment approaches in some modules in order to free up the resources to invest in expensive assessment practices in others.

Further advice can be found in Gray's (2001) Generic Centre paper on the assessment of work-based learning.

8. Suggestions for action

Teachers and module team leaders could:

1. Reconsider the balance between formative and summative assessment purposes.

2. Consider extending the range of assessment methods.

3. Network – with Higher Education Academy Subject Centres, professional associations and other interest groups in this country and overseas as they have good sources of ideas that can be borrowed and customised.

4. Hold on to the idea that many of the assessment problems you would like to solve are either not solvable or most sensibly tackled at system level. Teachers are prone to feel guilt (Hargreaves, 1994) but this is seldom appropriate here because solutions often lie outwith their power.

5. Aim to extend the range of assessment methods in use and concentrate them on directly assessing a few – three or four – achievements per module.

Programme leaders could:

1. Make programme assessment practices a priority for departmental attention over, say,

the next three years.

2. Review the amount of assessment on a programme, looking at the range of methods and the balance of formative and summative assessment. It is not unusual to find considerable imbalances.

3. Look for consultancy/evaluation help on the design and management of assessment systems. There is a place for workshops on topics of interest but there is, we suggest, a massive, unmet need for consultancy support. Educational development units, the Academy Subject Centres, subject and professional associations and national quality enhancement agencies, such as the Academy, can all help here.

4. Get some programme-wide criteria in place to help thinking about assessment. Concentrate on identifying the sorts of performance associated with, say, a lower second class degree. Don't take these indicators too seriously but treat them like a 'starter culture', a way of developing conversations about what is involved in assessing learning. They can be the beginnings of a common assessment language.

9. Questions

Question. What does the assessment of employability mean for assessment practices?

Suggestion
• Using a wide range of assessment methods.
• Orchestrating assessment arrangements so that they inform us about a wide range of achievements.
• Taking a more planned approach to assessment, for example by ensuring that module practices are better integrated with the programme specification.
• Ensuring that assessment practices dovetail with learning tasks and teaching sequences.
• In short, arranging things so that students experience coherence, rather than disarray, and breadth of engagement, rather than narrowness.

Question. What strengths are there in current assessment practices?

Suggestion
The past fifteen years have seen the use of a wider range of assessment methods, which in turn has encouraged a wider range of achievements. Admirable as these developments are, they tend not to be joined-up, so student assessment experiences can be uneven. In some subject areas practices remain quite traditional, touching a narrow range of achievements. Another strength is that students continue to take assessment seriously and are generally

motivated to do well when the stakes are high.

Question. Where do current practices fail?

Suggestion
Where the range of methods is too narrow, the range of learning intentions promoted by current methods is often too limited, the workloads on teachers can be excessive and alignment with teaching and tasks is not always good. The course/programme fit may not be as close as it could be.

Current practices do not, generally, support PDP and claimsmaking, nor do they routinely create feedback to students that is couched in terms of course and programme learning indicators.

They perpetuate the unhelpful view that assessment means measurement.

Question. How do assessment practices need to evolve in order to accommodate the employability agenda?

Suggestion
The answer is implicit in the response to the last question and detailed suggestions for course and programme leaders have just been presented.

Arguably, if assessment is to support employability and other complex learning intentions, the most important thing is for there to be a change of thinking – a recognition that assessment, as described here, is not what it is often assumed to be (i.e. 'measurement').

Question. What is going on that might help or hinder this?

Suggestion.
Hindrances for teachers include innovation fatigue; the allure of research; lack of resources; lack of educational consultancy support; wariness of the term 'employability'; high-choice modular programmes; a belief that assessment=measurement; a lack of cross-departmental thinking; weak traditions of departmental leadership; league tables; confusing of employment indicators with 'employability'; the growing 'casualisation' of academic employment; and the cost of coping.

Hindrances for students are the experience of very different assessment cultures; their frequently fragmented experience of programmes; the need to do paid work; the psychological allure of playing safe; the instrumental need to get a 2:1; and, for some from non-traditional backgrounds, the strangeness of it all.

Opportunities for all include the requirement that PDP be available to all students by 2005; the beginnings of a move away from highly modularised curricula; the range of work now being done on programmes and coherence; the professionalisation of teaching, notably in the Academy for the Advancement of Learning in Higher Education; increased rewards for good teaching; and the subject-based resources, events and guidance provided by the Academy Subject Centres and subject associations.

Learning more

This Guide draws heavily on the 2001 pamphlet *Skills plus: assessment and employability* (**www.heacademy.ac.uk/945.htm**). It anticipates some ideas that will be in Knight, P. and Yorke, M. (2003a) *Assessment, Learning and Employability.* Buckingham: the Society for Research in Higher Education and the Open University Press.

The Higher Education Academy's Assessment Series is a useful and accessible set of booklets on assessment matters (**www.heacademy.ac.uk/2835.htm**).

John Biggs' work on constructive alignment takes a line similar to one developed in the Skills plus project – Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (2nd ed). Maidenhead: Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press. His work has been very influential.

David Gosling and Jenny Moon (2001) give clear advice on the design and use of learning outcomes, which guide low-stakes judgements and determine high-stakes assessment – *How to Use Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria*. London: Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer.

For a useful guide to common assessment practices, see Hounsell, D., McCulloch, M. and Scott, M. (eds.) (1996) The ASSHE Inventory (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh and Napier University) and at **www.heacademy.ac.uk/2835.htm**. Also Brown, G., Bull, J. and Pendlebury, M. (1997) *Assessing Student Learning in Higher Education.* London: Routledge.

Two further sources are as follows:

On assessment-as-learning: Mentkowski, M. and associates, (2000) *Learning that Lasts: integrating learning development and performance in college and beyond*. San Fancisco: Jossey-Bass.

On self-assessment: Boud, D. (1995) *Enhancing Learning through Self-assessment,* London: Kogan Page.

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Black, P. and William, D. (1998) Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education,* **5** (1), pp.7-74.

Brennan, J., Johnston, B., Little, B. Shah, T. and Woodley, A. (2001) *The Employment of UK Graduates: comparisons with Europe and Japan*. London: The Higher Education Funding Council for England.

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Gray, D. (2001) *The assessment of work-based learning*, accessed via
www.heacademy.ac.uk/2835.htm

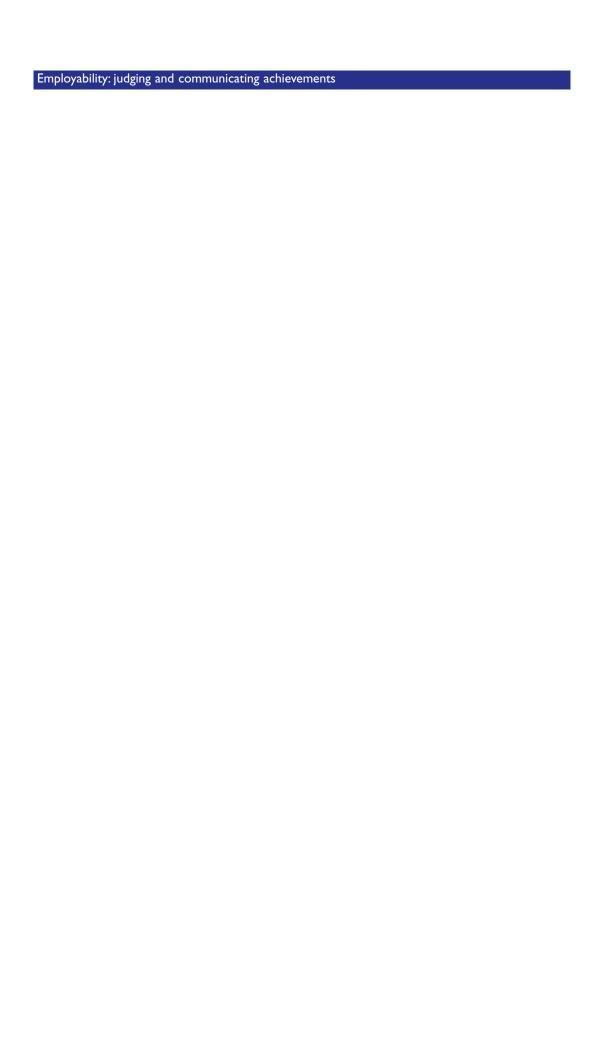Hargreaves, A. (1994) *Changing Teachers, Changing Times*. London: Cassell.

Harvey, L., Moon, S. and Geall, V. with Bower, R., 1997, *Graduates' Work: Organisation change and students' attributes*. Birmingham, Centre for Research into Quality (CRQ) and Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR).

Hawkins, P. and Winter, J. (1995) *Skills for Graduates in the 21st Century*. London: Association of Graduate Recruiters.

Knight, P. T. and Yorke, M. (2003b) *Learning, Curriculum and Employability in higher education*. London: Routledge/Falmer.

Mentkowski, M. and Associates (2000) *Learning that lasts: integrating learning, development, and performance in college and beyond*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wright, W.A., and Knight, P. T. with Pomerleau, N. (1999) Portfolio people: teaching and learning dossiers and the future of higher education, *Innovative Higher Education*, **24** (2), 89-102.

Enhancing Student Employability

There are many definitions of what it is to be 'employable' and views on the processes that develop this attribute. The Learning and Employability Series offers a wide range of perspectives on the employability of graduates, based on the premise that, in higher education, 'employability' is about good learning.

One of many definitions of employability is:

'A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.'

ESECT was an initiative to support the higher education sector in its efforts to develop highly skilled, employable graduates who can contribute effectively to national prosperity in the 21st century.

ESECT consisted of individuals with extensive experience of employability issues. The team comprised representatives of stakeholder organisations including the National Union of Students (NUS), the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) and the Higher Education Academy. It drew on the expertise of key researchers and practitioners in the field including Professor Peter Knight, Professor Lee Harvey, Brenda Little and Professor Mantz Yorke.

ESECT was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England between October 2002 and February 2005.

The Higher Education Academy is progressing the work to enhance the employability of graduates developed in partnership with ESECT.

To find out more visit the Higher Education Academy Employability web pages:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability.htm

esect
**Enhancing Student Employability
Co-ordination Team**

Higher education institutions are coming under increasing pressure to ensure their graduates have relevant employability skills. Institutions are also being encouraged to help students develop enterprise skills so that more graduates have the confidence and knowledge to set up businesses.

Senior managers and academics are looking for support at all levels to embed employability and enterprise into the higher education experience.

The Higher Education Academy is committed to helping institutions improve the employability and entrepreneurship of all students. The Academy has worked with a number of partners to provide a range of tools and resources in these areas.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) to help the sector engage with the employability policy. Its work began in September 2002 and finished at the end of February 2005.

ESECT dovetailed its plans with those of the Academy to provide a one-stop-shop on employability matters. The priority was to strengthen links with others committed to enhancing student employability.

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