

Briefings on Employability 7

A subject community
perspective on
supporting the
development of
employability

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Introduction

This short Briefing is for subject centre managers and directors, who are invited to develop it into a briefing suitable for their academic communities. **To help with this we've identified 'tags' to show where the name of the subject area could be inserted, and those places where you might want to insert your own material.**

It comes from HEFCE's enhancing student employability co-ordination team (ESECT), working with the LTSN Generic Centre. Their website (www.ltsn.ac.uk/ESECT) has an employability area which is rapidly becoming populated with resources – for example, on assessment, employability and the first year experience, personal development planning, curriculum design, and work placements.

This approach – providing subject centres with generic notes on employability for customisation – has been discussed with representatives from the great majority of centres and then developed and refined with their advice. ESECT will, of course, be happy to comment, if asked, on particular developments of these base materials.

In customising these materials you might want to have other ESECT/Generic Centre *Briefings on Employability* that are closely related to this one.

- *A briefing for heads of department and heads of school*
- *A briefing for pro-vice-chancellors*
- *The contribution of learning, teaching, assessment and other curriculum projects to student employability*

You will find a lot of common ground between these base notes and the heads of department briefing. However, their briefing is about thinking *generally* about developing an emphasis on employability in a department. Useful though that is, specific advice on promoting employability in, for example, an economics, psychology, education or accountancy programme is still needed.

Much the same is true of the pro-vice-chancellors' briefing. It has a great deal to say about strategic issues and change management. That too is relevant to subject communities but it cannot meet their need for subject-specific, customised advice.

The briefing for projects is a succinct set of suggestions about ways in which innovative projects can contribute to the development of student employability without compromising their original aims and without much extra effort.

The hope is that these notes will be the start of a number of subject-specific briefings. ESECT is happy to advise on your plans to do this, on drafts, and on complementary developments. ESECT will also keep subject centres updated on employability matters and is willing to help subject centres share materials and ideas.



It would be understandable if you felt that employability is another demand on scarce time and that it cannot be a significant priority. However, the view that ESECT takes of employability is that it is a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. These are achievements that most academics *either* value in their own right *or* are necessary for academic success. Put it another way: when higher education promotes these achievements, it contributes to student employability.

More prosaically, employability is being associated with the widening participation policy and will be included in the HEFCE briefing on the preparation of new widening participation policies. It is also a concern of the National Disability Team (NDT). It is noticeable, too, that the sorts of actions that enhance student claims to employability are similar to those that many universities and colleges are taking to improve retention *and* which they highlight in their teaching and learning strategies.

A concern for employability goes with the grain of LTSN, ILTHE and HEFCE thinking.

What this paper does (and does not)

This employability briefing has been produced to support academic staff who teach (**name LTSN subject area**) and who wish to think about and implement approaches that will support the students they teach in developing those skills, qualities and capabilities that will enable them to gain employment and be successful.

It seeks to emulate the ‘guide for busy academics’ approach taken by LTSN Generic Centre and others: a short paper emphasising key points and issues, and drawing upon a wealth of detailed material that readers are encouraged to explore and interrogate in more detail. It provides one contribution to supporting those members of (**name the subject community**) who wish to engage in debate, and support action, on employability.¹ ESECT is also encouraging subject communities to share their own work on employability related matters, to offer material that may have applicability more widely and it will be producing a limited number of items in response to need articulated by Subject Centres.

This paper is in four ‘bite-sized chunks’ so you can make use of it in its entirety or in single sections, depending on your ideas about the needs of your constituency. Thus:

1. **‘Shared Understandings of Employability’** might help you make the case which connects employability to the core business of most academics – learning and teaching.
2. **‘Enhancing Employability’** through the Subject Curriculum might help colleagues to consider some of the factors worth thinking about when they come to develop employability related curricula.
3. **‘What does this mean for developing practice?’** offers a step-by-step checklist to curriculum planning and implementation for employability.
4. **‘Responding to the Sceptics’** offers some answers to those who say ‘yes, but ...’ whenever employability is mentioned!

There are many other Generic Centre/ESECT publications that can support and inform your work on employability. They are listed at the end of this briefing. In late 2003 and early 2004 a series of ‘toolkits’ will be produced to help the different groups with an interest in enhancing employability throughout higher education to act effectively. Copies will be available from the Generic Centre/ESECT website as they are produced.

1. Shared understandings on of employability

To re-iterate, ESECT has described employability as 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.'

This fits neatly with the complex outcomes of Employability that employers value. Many lists have been produced based upon varying levels of investigation and research into what employers value in graduates (see, for example, Harvey *et al.*, 1997; Brennan *et al.*, 2001.) In their Salaries and Vacancies Survey (2002, personal communication), the Association of Graduate Recruiters focused on the issue of skills. The list used had been developed over the years to include most of the skill areas that employers have sought to one degree or another to a greater or lesser extent. A list of nineteen 'skill' areas was offered and recruiters were invited to rate them on a scale of 1-7 according to their level of importance. The 'top ten' were:

1. Motivation and enthusiasm
2. Interpersonal skills
3. Team working
4. Oral communication
5. Flexibility and adaptability
6. Initiative/productivity
7. Problem solving
8. Planning and organisation
9. Managing own development
10. Written communication

There are two important points here:

- ▶ Some of these 'skills' are better defined as attributes or attitudes or other valued personal achievements.
- ▶ They are also valued by many if not most academics either in their own right or because they are necessary for academic success. As Harvey (2003: page 6) has noted:

Despite concerns that some graduates are not work-ready, employers repeatedly say that they do not want 'trained' recruits. They want intelligent, rounded people who have a depth of understanding, can apply themselves, take responsibility and develop their role in the organisation. Employers want graduate recruits who are educated and can demonstrate a wide range of attributes, not least the traditional high-level academic abilities of analysis, reflection, critique and synthesis. Employers do not want graduates trained for a job, not least because jobs change rapidly. Although they may want new recruits to add value rapidly, employers wanted graduates because they can potentially do more than add value

Such perspectives challenge the idea that it is 'employability versus education'. Rather, 'employability is enhanced by good learning, and can be incorporated without damaging the subject specific dimensions of learning. Indeed, for many years some HE programmes have regarded the development of such qualities and capabilities as an intended outcome (appropriate material from subject benchmark statements or work already undertaken within the subject community might be added here).



2. Enhancing employability through the subject curriculum

There is no one 'right way' to foster employability through the curriculum; it all depends upon systems, circumstances and context. (Medicine may be very different from Law and different again from English **different examples may be more appropriate for your audience**). Each brings particular challenges, and, while this might sound like more work – and perhaps more challenging work – it emphasises the active professional role and opportunities we all have.

'Employability' means rather different things to different people. These different understandings are associated with different thinking about the best place to focus attention when we try to enhance higher education's contribution. Three of these foci, which are not mutually exclusive, are **(You may want to offer a commentary on these alternative perspectives in the light of your subject community)**.

Focus 1. Student performance. Bennett *et al.* (2000) for example, have gone beyond more conventional lists including, for example, 'communication', 'problem-solving', 'independent learning' and 'team/group work', in order to identify four management skills that can be applied across a range of contexts:

- Management of self,
- Management of others,
- Management of information, and
- Management of task.

The purpose in using such a categorisation is twofold: 'firstly strengthening learning within HE – such skills are fundamental to, and underpin, academic study; secondly providing learners with opportunities to enhance and develop employability skills and attributes and encourage life-long learning.' Dunne (2003)

Focus 2. Curriculum models and structures. The emphasis here is on finding ways in which particular attention can be paid to the all-round development of students. The Skills *plus* Project (Knight and Yorke, 2002) for example, in developing the USEM Model, ascribed a central importance to students' beliefs about themselves and their ability to make a difference. Thus the **E** – for Efficacy – was central to the other aspects of the model: **U**nderstanding of subject, **S**kills and **M**etacognition (defined in terms of strategic thinking, applicability to the task in hand, and personal self-awareness). Harvey (2003) has provided an extensive summary of curriculum and co-curriculum projects to enhance student employability.

Focus 3. Lecturers' and learners' beliefs about the difference higher education can make to employability. If teachers and learners believe that many of the attributes employers value are down to fixed personality or have been shaped before entry into higher education, then higher education has limited power to enhance employability. This leads to the argument that changing attitudes is fundamental to enhancing employability (Knight and Yorke, 2003). Dweck (1999) has developed similar strong claims about students' – and others' – success in a range of fields, emphasising the importance of a malleable theory of self in admitting the possibility that attributes can be developed.

Knight and Yorke (2003) further emphasise that people tend to be more effective in what they do, the more they have the following (additional) characteristics:

- A belief that they can often (but not necessarily always) make a difference (self-efficacy)
- They have developed 'learned optimism' in their approach to life rather than 'learned helplessness'
- They are motivated and determined in what they do.

3. What does this mean for developing practice?

If the curriculum we offer is to provide opportunities for the development of the skills of 'management', student self-efficacy, metacognition and other complex achievements which employers value and our students need in order to manage their own careers, we will need to (This is a general list which assumes very little work has been done, so it won't be true for many Subject Centres and communities. You may therefore want to offer a commentary on these alternative perspectives in the light of your subject communities or work already undertaken).

- a. Value explicit approaches to promoting employability, such as work-based or work-related learning, or career management provision, where relevance and meaning is already - or can be made - very clear to students and staff and outcomes easily articulated to potential employers
- b. Beyond this, audit what we already do in the broader curriculum, preferably in terms of the core of a study pathway rather than at the level of individual modules. Knight and Yorke (2003) claim that a major goal of the curriculum is to develop subject understanding, named skills, efficacy beliefs and metacognition. All four matter. Yorke (2003a) Appendix 1 provides a structure for doing just that, while Knight (2002) gives some examples of the process in action. There are further examples in Dunne (2003) and Knight and Yorke, (2002).
- c. Make sure that the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that are implemented are consistent with curriculum objectives, not least by creating opportunities that support the sorts of learning we intend to happen. In the development of employability, how we do things, and how we ask students to do things, are as important – perhaps more important – than the stated objectives of a particular module.ⁱⁱ
- d. Make sure that students are 'tuned in' to their learning intentions and to the significance of aspects of learning. They should also have a perspective on their achievements, and a clear idea of actions necessary for improvement. Formative assessment can play a key role here. Students need to understand that the goals of a programme are wider than academic achievement alone, and to appreciate ways in which the work they do could support claims to employability.
- e. Understand more about the career destinations of our graduates, not only their 'first destinations' six months after graduation but in terms of their longer-term career paths. See, for example, the survey of graduates done by the Centre for Higher Education Research Information three to four years after graduation (Brennan *et al.*, 2001) and Purcell and Elias' work (2002) on graduates seven years on.
- f. Recognise the increasingly uncertain and less supported career trajectories many of our graduates are likely to encounter – see, for example, Hawkins and Winter (1995).
- g. Finally, provide students with opportunities (and support) when reflecting on – and documenting – their achievements inside and outside the programme of study, thereby raising their capacity to represent their achievements to others. It is vital for universities, including careers staff, teachers, student unions and others who advise students, to help them **to translate what they do during their undergraduate years into a language that appeals to employers**. The processes of Personal Development Planning are likely to be important here, though employers are unlikely to want to see the records or Portfolios that accompany the process.



Responding to the sceptics

(You will recognise the 'yes buts..' from your own community better than we will, so may be more appropriately seen as a template to which you add others you know about).

Yes but...	However
Our students get jobs, indeed they already have jobs, so what's the issue?	We are talking about employability rather than employment. They don't necessarily have the kinds of jobs as undergraduates which they will aspire to as graduates
Work Based Learning is <u>the</u> answer	It's certainly important, and we know employers value it in graduate applicants. But not all courses provide such opportunities, and not all undergraduates take advantage of them. Understandably really, as a placement year might threaten increased debt and put you out of educational and social step with your friends and peers. Finally, WBL can offer 'an experience' but one that does not always add much to the student's development.
Careers Services can do this.	Careers Services are very important but don't always have the resources to give sustained attention to all students. Furthermore, they may not have the power or influence in the institution to get the message across.
Widening participation is the big priority	That's certainly important in policy terms. But so is employability. And they are related. We need to ensure good levels of student retention and completion in order to help our applicants see that HE offers a good opportunity in terms of future employment prospects and access to 'graduate jobs.'
Time is precious. We need quick fix add-ons, not slow grow programme redesigns	Yes, that's true. But we are not necessarily talking about wholesale re-design, more a matter of auditing, fine-tuning and highlighting what is happening where. And add-ons are important too!
Employability is equated with training, erosion of subject time, low standards, betrayal of academic values	Anything but – if you subscribe to the ideas presented here!

References

and related publications on the Generic Centre/ESECT website

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NOTES

ⁱ The ESECT perspectives paper *Transition into Higher Education: some implications for the 'employability agenda'* (Yorke, 2003a) suggests a considerable degree of congruence between actions to improve student retention and those concerned to enhance student employability.

ⁱⁱ This relates well to the discussions on Curriculum Alignment with which many academic staff have recently become engaged (www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre > curriculum).