

Employability cross-country comparisons

Tamsin Bowers-Brown & Lee Harvey – Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University.

Summary

Employability and its relationship with higher education has become a more prominent issue over the past few years, and this is seen not only in the UK. Global economic factors mean that graduates are not necessarily restricted by national borders in their search for employment and there is an increasing necessity for a model of generic skills that are recognised not just nationally but internationally. In this article, Tamsin Bowers-Brown and Lee Harvey from the Centre for Research and Evaluation at Sheffield Hallam University report on some of the employability measures adopted by higher education institutions outside the UK.

The White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education' asserts the government's desire to widen participation in higher education to 50% of those aged 18-30. The result of this will be an increase in the number of highly-educated people seeking work in the graduate labour market. The government believes that this increase in participation is fundamental if the UK is to compete in a global knowledge economy.

However, the widening of participation does not automatically guarantee that the students graduating will be work-ready or have gained the necessary employability skills to participate in the graduate labour market. The knowledge economy is dependent on life-long learning and higher education is a key player. Graduates will be expected to gain the skills that will help them to remain employable throughout their working life. As Teodorescu states:¹

"Throughout the developed world, the emerging knowledge based economies will be increasingly dependent on constant and lifelong learning and training. The new graduates will have to be self sufficient, self directed, lifelong learners; understand when they need information and what kind of information they need."

Improving employability

The employability agenda has been addressed in different ways by different higher education institutions and some have been quicker than others in adopting measures to help students move easily from higher education to employment. There have been numerous approaches to improve the employability of students such as embedded skills, additional core-skills, work-experience and evaluation of what has been learned.

Harvey suggests that there are four broad areas of activity that higher education institutions are engaged in to help develop student employability:^{2, 3}

1. Enhanced or revised **central support** (usually via the agency of careers services) for undergraduates and graduates in their search for work. To this can be added the provision of sector-wide resources.
2. **Embedded attribute development** in the programme of study often as the result of modifications to curricula to make attribute development, job seeking skills and commercial awareness explicit, or to accommodate employer inputs.
3. Innovative provision of **work experience** opportunities within, or external to, programmes of study.
4. Enabled reflection on and **recording of experience**, attribute development and achievement alongside academic abilities, through the development of progress files and career management programmes.

Institutions are now seeking to develop employability attributes as an explicit and embedded part of academic learning rather than a bolt-on provided by the careers service. As Yorke & Knight claim:⁴

"'Employability' is not something static but something that a person can grow throughout life. Furthermore, older undergraduates — who are often to be found on part-time programmes — will already have developed many of those achievements that employers value, although they may not fully appreciate how much they have to offer."

In the 21st century job patterns have changed and the concept of a job for life is one that seems a thing of the past. Generic attributes have become a requirement for graduates who wish to remain employable throughout their working life.

There are many initiatives and processes in the UK to improve students employability, yet the issue of the expansion of higher education is international and so too is the employability agenda. Global economic factors mean that graduates are not necessarily restricted by national borders in their search for employment. Increasingly, it will be necessary to have a model of generic skills that are not just nationally but internationally recognised. This is something that the current Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) research project being undertaken by the Centre for Research and Evaluation at Sheffield Hallam University and the Centre for Research into Quality at the University of Central England will explore further. In particular, one aspect of the research will explore whether careers services cater for developing employability attributes that will be relevant to international students in their home country.

Cross-country comparisons

The issue of employability linked to higher education has been encouraged in the UK for many years and to a much greater extent than in most other countries. Australia and Canada are among those who have also encouraged employability development in higher education for more

than a decade. As Little notes, the term 'employability' is not widely used outside the UK.⁵ Although the relationship between higher education and employment is now at the forefront of higher education policy in a number of countries, it is virtually non-existent in others.

Evidence shows that some countries have taken greater steps towards incorporating the employability agenda within the higher education system than others. Although what is expected of a graduate is similar throughout the world, there are differing methods of ensuring that this is achieved. In certain parts of the world it is apparent that higher education institutions regard a university qualification as sufficient evidence of graduate employability. Other countries have developed wide ranging steps to incorporate measures such as work-based learning and graduate attributes into the university curriculum. Table 1 shows some of the employability measures adopted by higher education institutions outside the UK.

Table 1: International comparisons of employability measures in higher education.

Country	Strategy
Australia	There is a generally accepted set of graduate attributes. The delivery of these attributes is either through stand-alone courses or they are embedded in the curriculum. Since 1998, all Australian universities have been required to specify their generic graduate attributes in Quality Assurance and Improvement plans. A Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) runs nationally for students in higher education at the beginning and in the final year of a bachelors degree. This enables measurement of the growth in their skills over the duration of the course. Skills that are monitored include critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal understandings and written communication.
New Zealand	The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was developed in consultation with specialists from education and industry. Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) develop standards and national qualifications for specific industries and professions, setting national skill standards for their industry.
Canada and USA	<p>The Corporate Council on Education, a programme of the National Business and Education Centre in Canada, produced a document entitled <i>Business and Education Best Practices Handbook</i>. The handbook includes what the Council sees to be the critical skills required of the Canadian workforce. The skills are categorised into three broad categories: academic skills, personal management skills and teamwork skills. Under these headings come more specific skills: communication, thinking, learning, positive attitudes and behaviours, responsibility and adaptability and working with others. Several Canadian universities have introduced these outcomes into their careers programmes.</p> <p>Little investigated the situation in the US and Canada and found that work-based/related learning and portfolios were the preferred method.⁵ At Kalamazoo College in southwest Michigan, completion of a portfolio is a graduation requirement for all students.</p>
Denmark	Denmark is making a number of changes to its higher education organisation, partly as a result of the Bologna process. For example, a

	Danish Qualifications Framework has been developed, part of which requires the research-based bachelor and master's degree courses to have a clearer competence profile.
Finland	The measures are similar to those offered by UK careers services. Staff and students are encouraged to see the importance of improving employability. The careers service at the University of Helsinki encourages measures to be incorporated into the syllabus and student's personal study plans.
South Africa	In South Africa there is a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which higher education institutions have to comply with. The NQF uses outcomes-based education, and there are two kinds of outcomes - critical and specific. University degree programmes have to demonstrate that they conform to minimum requirements set by the NQF for the critical outcomes which include (amongst other outcomes) contributing to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the society at large, by making it the underlying intention of any programme of learning to make an individual aware of the importance of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Reflecting on and exploring a variety of strategies to learn more effectively. II. Participating as responsible citizens in the life of local, national and global communities. III. Being culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts; IV. Exploring education and career opportunities and V. Developing entrepreneurial opportunities.

The way forward

The last five years have witnessed an accelerating pace of engagement with employability within the academy. Initial piecemeal accommodation of employability through skills modules has developed into a more diverse array of opportunities. In some institutions, they have been developed into an integrated, holistic strategy, most recently linked to learning and teaching policy.

Indeed, it is this integrated approach and the clear emphasis on learning that have moved employability into centre stage. Evidence from the UK suggests that the way forward in employability strategies within higher education is through this integrated approach. The necessity for higher education institutions to share experiences in developing further employability initiatives is fundamental if we are to avoid reinventing the wheel and seek to create a joined-up approach to employability development in higher education.

It does seem as though some central spur is needed to get this process moving forward in a significant way, whether this is driven by government, funding councils or other quality quangos. The government agenda has been significant in the UK, reinforced in the Dearing Report and its aftermath. However, it is Wales that seems to have the most strategic approach as a result of outcomes of an audit and subsequent requirement for clear employability-development plans by the funding council. The Welsh

experience shows that initial requests for reporting employability-development opportunities and plans to improve them resulted in rather haphazard approaches, but feedback and repeated requests for updating over three years has led to a much more structured, strategic and integrated approach to embedding employability. A similar experience seems to be occurring in Australia. The first stage resulted in 'essentially rhetorical' submissions as part of the required Quality Assurance and Improvement plans. However, most institutions are now moving towards a more strategic approach to embedding and focusing on outcomes assessment. The South African developments (Table 1) echo this process. Similarly, the development of qualifications frameworks has also raised the employability issue and this takes a particular form in parts of Europe, such as Denmark, where it is linked to the development of bachelor-masters qualifications, which requires a reassessment by commerce and industry of their own assumptions.

One development, from Australia, is the introduction of the Graduate Skills Assessment. It is a moot point whether this is a good strategy. On one hand it might focus attention on employability development. On the other, it may detract from academic learning. In Brazil, for example, there are national subject final-year tests in some discipline areas that are primarily used to assess the quality of institutions (rather like a higher education version of the standard assessment tests in the school system in the UK). Anecdotal evidence suggests that employers are using these, rather than the graduate final examinations and award, as the basis of selection and recruitment.

The key concern in any development of employability, as the debates and reticence in some parts of Europe attest to, is that too much attention will be placed on developing work skills. The key is to see employability not as training or as developing 'core' skills for employment, but as the holistic development of the individual. The focus is on developing critical reflective practitioners capable of learning and continuing to learn in whatever area of activity they pursue after graduation, be it paid work, self-employment, voluntary work or other activity.

References

1. *Building Lifelong Learning Opportunities in the Knowledge Society: Implications for the Academy*, D Teodorescu, 2003. Paper prepared for the EAIR-AIR Joint Seminar 'Workforce Development and Higher Education'. www.eair.nl
2. *Enhancing Employability, Recognising Diversity: Making Links between Higher Education and the World of Work*, L Harvey, W Locke, A Morey, Universities UK, 2002. www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/employability/
3. *Transitions from Higher Education to Work*, L Harvey (with advice from ESECT and LTSN Generic Centre colleagues), 2003. www.shu.ac.uk/research/cre/publications/d1transitions.doc

4. *The Undergraduate Curriculum and Employability*, M Yorke, P Knight, 2003. www.ltsn.ac.uk
5. *International Perspectives on Employability*, B Little (Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, the Open University), with advice from ESECT and LTSN Generic Centre colleagues, 2003. www.ltsn.ac.uk