

# Defining and Measuring Employability

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**ABSTRACT** *The concept of employability is analysed and the prevailing tendency to create employability measures based on outcomes is critiqued. The outcome approach results in employability as being construed as an institutional achievement rather than the propensity of the individual student to get employment. The operationalisation of employability as a concept is examined and the implicit 'magic bullet' notion of employability-development opportunities is revealed. An alternative, more complex model is outlined but its applicability is subverted by the 'irrational' activities of graduate recruiters, which render useless any employability indicator based on the proportion of graduates obtaining work. An alternative approach, based on an audit of employability-development within institutions, is explored and some methodological pitfalls are outlined. The conclusion suggests that any evaluation of employability needs clearly to indicate areas for internal improvement rather than simply ranking institutions.*

## What is 'Employability'?

Raising the question of 'what is employability?' echoes the early debate about 'quality' in higher education at the start of the 1990s. There was, at that time, much debate about 'what do we mean by quality?' 'Can we define it?' Or 'do we just know it when we see it?' It was a long time, for example, before quality and standards were disentangled. Much time was also spent trying to adapt industrial models to higher education; debating whether ISO9000 was part of, or separate from, TQM.

'Employability' is going through similar processes. Employers' views are embraced by disciples, as TQM was in some quarters of higher education. Mostly, employers and academics still 'talk past each other' and there are endless debates about appropriate language.

Employability processes are also confused with outcomes. Employability-linked learning is likely to continue to be subject to crude measures of outcome, such as the proportion of graduates who achieve a full-time job within a specified period. In the UK, for example, 'first-destination returns' are logged after six months as employability performance indicators and there is considerable pragmatic pressure from government and funding agency circles to 'keep employability simple'. So, in effect, employability is being *de facto* equated with the gaining and retaining of fulfilling work (Hillage & Pollard, 1998).

There are two interrelated problems with such pragmatic measures. First, the insistence that 'employability' should be measured by outcomes in the form of recent graduate employment rates. Second, the tendency to slide into a view that employability is an *institutional* achievement rather than the propensity of the *individual* student to get employment.

## Analysing Employability

If the notion of employability is to contribute to the quality of higher education, it is rather important to disentangle competing preconceptions about what it is, how it might be measured and promoted.

### *Individual Employability*

'Employability' is infrequently explicitly and clearly defined. There are several definitions implicit in the literature. In all cases the core notion relates to the *propensity of students to obtain a job*. However, most explicit and implicit definitions elaborate or overlay this core notion in any or all of the following main ways:

1. *Job type*. For some, employability is about securing any job, given that there is a view (Flanders, 1995) that it is no longer possible to delimit a 'graduate job'. For others, it implies getting a graduate-level job. They may be referred to as 'fulfilling work', or as a job that 'requires graduate skills and abilities' or as a 'career-oriented' job.
2. *Timing*. Is employability signalled by getting a job within a specified time after graduating, or by doing so before there is any need for retraining?
3. *Attributes on recruitment*. Does employability signify an ability to demonstrate desired attributes at the point of recruitment, to 'hit the deck running'? Or, alternatively, is it developmental, indicating the likely ability to develop attributes (rapidly), to 'get up to speed quickly'?
4. *Further learning*. One view of employability holds that 'the degree is not the end of learning' and values graduates who are ready for further development, while another places more weight on achievement at graduation, while recognising the importance of 'willingness to learn and continue learning'.
5. *'Employability skills'*. Employability can be understood as the possession of basic 'core-skills', or an extended set of generic attributes, or attributes that a type of employer (discipline-linked, sector-related, company-type) specifies. Sometimes they get specified in detail or, more often, shorthand—'key skills', for example—is used.

Very few definitions in use, or associated measures, explicitly identify employability as being equipped for a job. This is not necessarily because there is a single-minded approach that prioritises job acquisition over preparedness for employment. It is more likely that pragmatic measures prioritise job acquisition as it is easier to measure but, in so doing, measure the effectiveness of the institution rather than the employability of the graduate. As such, they are pseudo-measures.

Where a definition of individual employability of a graduate alludes to graduate attributes it implies that individuals have, and are able to demonstrate, them in order to obtain jobs. However, attributes, and the ability to demonstrate them when required, (i) may already have been acquired before undertaking a higher education programme and just need honing, (ii) may be in the process of being developed or (iii) may be missing altogether. Each case has different implications for attempts to measure and enhance employability. Traditionally, graduate recruitment programmes assumed (ii) and (iii) to hold and were premised on a willingness of the trainees to learn rapidly. Such programmes tended to be filled with 'bright' or 'exceptional' (young) graduates from prestigious universities. Now that fewer organisations have time or resources for a central graduate recruitment programme, situation (i) is assumed and recruiters are moving more towards specifying particular skills and even knowledge and practical abilities.

Where a definition of employability refers to attributes it also implies that employers have an idea of the attributes that are necessary for the effective functioning of their organisation now and in the future and that they have mechanisms for establishing that graduates exhibit appropriate attributes. These and related assumptions may be convenient but they do not appear to be sound.

### *Institutional Employability*

In practice, employability is ascribed to higher education institutions: league tables, for example, rank institutions on the basis of the employment rates of their graduates. Yet, institutions can do no more than play their part, through the experience they provide for their students, in encouraging and enabling students to become employable. In some institutions or parts of institutions this employability-development is explicit and integral to the education provided and in others it is not. Medicine, nursing, social work and initial teacher training have programmes of study closely linked to learning in practice settings that are directly related to future employment. Most philosophy, literature, and social science programmes, on the other hand, tend not to be closely linked with specific employment. Nevertheless, in those areas that do not include statutory professional practice employability is, in some cases, built into programmes through devices such as placement opportunities, employer-linked projects, visits and work-shadowing.

Aggregating the employment outcomes of graduates from institutions or parts of institutions is not an indicator of 'institutional employability'. It is not even an indicator of the assistance the institution provides in the employability of the student. The next section identifies nine factors that disqualify employment rates as measures of institutional employability effectiveness.

### **Operationalisation**

Operationalisation is the process of going from a theoretical concept to a measurable index (Harvey & MacDonald, 1993). Pragmatic, policy-driven approaches to measuring 'employability', such as using statistics on employment rates, subvert the operationalisation process at the heart of any good quantitative research. They begin with measurement methods (or even a convenient ready-made measure) rather than with conceptual specification. The correct sequence is:

1. *Define* the theoretical concept.
2. Break it down into *dimensions* that cover the meaning of the concept.
3. Identify a *range* of indicators for each dimension.
4. *Select* one or more indicators for each dimension.
5. Design *instruments* to collect information on each indicator.
6. *Decide* whether to have a multi-dimensional set of indicators, an array of indices or a single index and, if appropriate, *combine* indicators into an index.

If this approach is adopted, then clear differences occur in employability indicators depending on the initial conceptual definition (Table 1).

Quite clearly, a different conceptual starting point leads to very different operational outcomes and thus different measurements of 'employability'. Notice that in each case the operationalised measure is a measure of the employability of the *individual*.

TABLE 1. Example of alternative operationalisations of employability

| Alternative                     | 1  | 2   | 3   |
|---------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Stage 1: Theoretical definition | Employability is the ability to gain and retain fulfilling work (Hillage & Pollard, 1998)  | Employability is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organisation (Harvey, 1999) | Employability is the ability of the graduate to get a satisfying job  |
| Stage 2: Dimensions             | Nature of employment, time after graduation, income, discipline  | Range of attributes: teamworking, communication, risk taking, etc.  | Financially rewarding, interesting, delegated responsibility  |
| Stage 3: Indicators (examples)  | Is the graduate employed? Is the employment linked to degree subject? Does it involve graduate skills? Does it have scope to be 'grown'? | Teamworking: experience of working in teams; experience of leading teams; ability to play different roles in different teams simultaneously, etc.   | E.g. delegated responsibility: control over flexible working; specify direction; make strategic decisions ... |
| State 4: Selection              | Is the graduate employed within six months of graduating?  | Set of key attributes, which may have a discipline-specific element   | Set of indicators of job satisfaction   |
| Stage 5: Instruments            | Survey of recent graduates' employment activity  | Evaluation of graduates' abilities  | Satisfaction survey of graduates in work  |
| Stage 6: Decision               | Simple indicator of employment   | Complex set of indicators of graduates' abilities   | Array of single indicators of graduate satisfaction   |

### Measuring Institutional Employability Effectiveness

An 'employability performance indicator' of an institution is intended to be an indicator of the effectiveness of the institution in developing employable graduates. For each of the three different individual measures (Table 1), there would be very different ways of measuring the effectiveness of the institution. If the preferred definition is the ability to get a job, then institutional effectiveness *might* be indicated by the proportion of graduates (in each subject discipline) who obtain employment. If the preferred definition is the attributes of the graduate, then institutional effectiveness *might* be indicated by an audit of the developmental opportunities of the institution. If the preferred definition is the satisfaction

of students with their employment, then institutional effectiveness *might* be indicated by a survey of graduates' satisfaction with their programme of study, the extent to which it prepared them for the world of work and their reflection on the skills developed. The first two of these different approaches to measuring institutional employability effectiveness will be examined in detail. The third, satisfaction surveys of graduates, are well documented elsewhere (for example, the Australian course feedback questionnaire) as is the satisfaction methodology (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey *et al.*, 1997b) and space limitations preclude examining this approach in detail.

The choice between different measurements of employability is not merely academic. At the very least it is likely to have an impact on funding of institutions. For one thing, differences in thinking about what employability is and how to measure it will have 'knock-on' effects on learning and teaching and the provision of support services. For another, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) are working on the development of an employability performance indicator and, although there will be no funding directly linked to performance measurement, it will have an indirect impact. Institutions in the UK bid for extra funded places on programmes of study and the employability performance indicator will form part of the evidence used by both bidding institutions and the panels making the decisions. In this case, institutions will be focused on ensuring that as many graduates as possible in the subject areas they are seeking to expand acquire the ability to obtain a job.

In Wales, though, the employability focus is on the activities in place within institutions to enhance employability rather than simply crude measures of employability rates. Hence, institutions are reviewing, in detail, the types of opportunities they make available across the institution at both programme level and centrally. This is described in more detail later in the paper.

### *Graduate Employment Rates*

Attempts to measure employability effectiveness by measuring employment rates of graduates imply a 'magic bullet' model of the impact of higher education on employment. The assumption implicit in this is that the higher education institution provides employability-development opportunities that enable the graduate to develop 'employability' and hence get employed (Figure 1). There is a presupposed causal link between the *employability-development opportunities* and the *individual employability* of the graduate. This link is, invariably, used as a *post hoc* legitimation for using (convenient) graduate employment rates as a measure of an institution's employability rating. As indicated above, it approaches the operationalisation process from the end (the data to hand) and works backwards (to the concept).

The employability model, in reality, is rather more complex. Higher education institutions provide a range of employability-development opportunities for students including development of attributes (important in obtaining, keeping and developing jobs or careers), self-presentational skills (important when seeking jobs), encouraging a love of learning and a willingness and awareness of the need to continue learning. Some are implicit in programmes of study and may not be made explicit. Some are explicit and deliberately embedded in programmes of study. Some are explicit and developed through 'add-on' modules. Some are provided through activities of extra-faculty units, such as careers services, and are optional extras. The student may or may not take advantage of all or some of these opportunities. There are several factors that influence the selectivity, intentional or unintentional, exercised by students, and the consequent development of

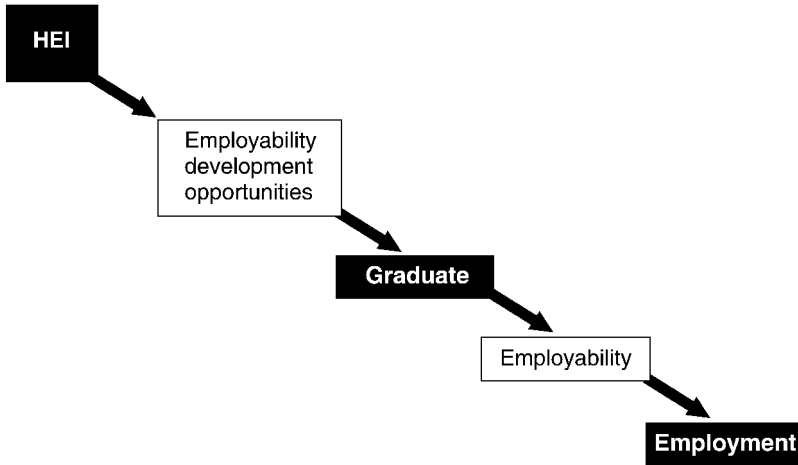


FIG. 1. A 'magic bullet' model of employability development.

their 'employability'. These factors include the students' previous experience, their extra-curricular activities, their career intentions and networks, and the quality and availability of the employability experience within the institution, particularly that which is integral to and explicit in their programme of study. So their employability skills are only partially contingent on what is provided by the institution.

The relationship between the employability-development opportunities provided by the higher education institution and the employment of the graduate is further complicated by the role played by employers. In the end it is the employers who convert the 'employability' of the graduate into employment (Figure 2).

Employers' recruitment procedures may be based on a 'rational' appraisal of appropriate attributes on an individual-by-individual basis, in which case, the employment of graduates may, superficially, be seen as an indicator of the employability of the graduate and, rather tenuously, as indicative of the employability-enhancement activities of the insti-

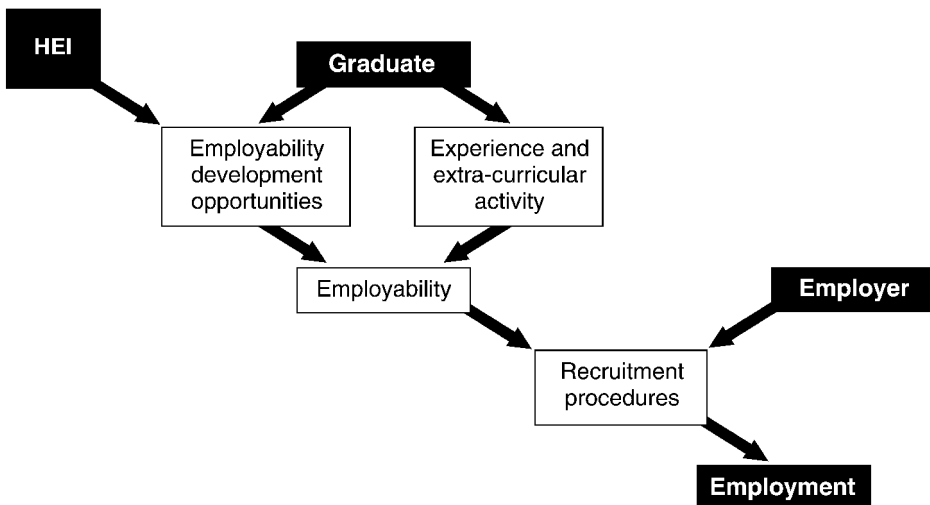


FIG. 2. A model of employability-development and employment.

tution. However, it is only a superficial indication because, even with a 'rational' approach, there is a range of factors that mediate the employment process, irrespective of the opportunities afforded learners in their undergraduate programme of study. They include:

1. *Type of higher education institution.* A definite 'pecking order' of higher education institutions persists amongst graduate recruiters. Some institutions have good graduate employment rates because of their reputation but that may have more to do with employers' perceptions that the 'best' students go to the institution rather than perceptions about how well students are developed at them.
2. *Mode of study.* If, for example, part-time undergraduates, who are concurrently employed full-time, are included in employment rates, then this clearly distorts statistics as the fact that they are in employment is not the result of their higher education experience. On the other hand, not to include such students, ignores the employability-enhancement that the higher education experience may have had for the graduate.
3. *Student location and mobility.* Not all graduates, for various reasons, are mobile and employment rates are therefore contingent on the vibrancy of the local economy. Furthermore, some employers are wary, for various reasons, of employing graduates from particular parts of the country. For example, one major employer in the West Midlands avoided targeting universities in London because they were of the opinion that London-based graduates would not settle in the West Midlands.
4. *Subject of study.* There are well documented variations (i) in employment rates of graduates from different disciplines (Purcell *et al.*, 1999), (ii) discipline differences in time lags between graduation and employment, and (iii) discipline differences in the type of job that is desirable. In art and design, for example, not only is the time to 'graduate' job after graduating longer than in many other subjects, almost a third of graduates undertake some form of self-employment for at least part of their time (this is far more than in any other discipline area) (Blackwell & Harvey, 1999). Some of this self-employment represents the pinnacle of a desirable job; some of it is out of necessity because of the nature of the design industry. However, this is not easily identified in such things as first-destination returns [1]. Thus, subject mix will considerably influence the employment rates of an institution's graduates. Some institutions have good employment rates because they specialise in areas that have good rates anyway, such as pharmacy, computer science, mathematics, optometry.
5. *Previous work experience.* Prior experience is a major factor for many recruiters, especially small and medium enterprises. In the main, this is experience as a result of previous work, whether a previous full-time job or extracurricular work undertaken on a part-time basis by graduates. This is experience independent of the institution of study. However, graduate recruiters are increasingly attracted by new graduates with work experience as part of their programmes of study (Harvey *et al.*, 1997a, 1998).
6. *Age.* Graduates are discriminated against by recruiters on the basis of their age (Harvey *et al.*, 1997; Purcell *et al.*, 1999).
7. *Ethnicity.* Although the level of discrimination against 'ethnic minorities' has probably reduced since some of the studies that revealed direct bias in recruiting procedures 20 years ago, it is unlikely that this is a negligible factor.
8. *Gender.* Females still face the 'glass ceiling' and are underrepresented at senior levels in organisations. However, they are recruited in larger proportions than males in many organisations (Harvey *et al.*, 1997a; Brooks, 1997).
9. *Social class.* Social class continues to affect employment opportunities because it is so entangled in access to educational opportunities, the ways they are experienced and

the opportunities for extracurricular activity and social networks that develop (Brennan *et al.*, 1996).

Even if all the factors impinging on employment could be taken into account [2], it presupposes that employer recruitment could be and is rational. There is clear evidence to the contrary. For example:

We are trying very hard to bring in more science graduates, because the Deputy Prime Minister wants us to. In the past we have had a lot of people doing classics and ancient history, etc., and in the modern age you have got to have people who are comfortable with new technology, so we are making special efforts to try and attract more scientists and engineers. (Head of branch, civil service) [3]

We used to take the best people regardless of discipline and that was a policy we followed all the way through my time to about the late 1980s. The present Governor, then the Deputy Governor, had a very strongly different view. We had a spell in the early 1990s where we moved dramatically towards taking economists. I mean the message got actually distorted in the process. We got to the point where universities thought we were only interested in economists preferably with two degrees so we had a couple of years when our intake wasn't very large and they were overwhelmingly eggheads. So we have now gone back to recruiting a wider range of people. (Director, large public financial institution)

I feel that our firm takes a very narrow view [of recruitment], it is concentrated more on traditional universities but it is getting better each year. There are less and less of the Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, Exeter and it is actually getting down to Leicester. So the majority of people are coming from what I would class as the top universities. (Recent graduate, international accountancy firm)

They go to eight universities ... I guess it must be a mixture of past success with those universities ... it is people at those universities who are demonstrating those qualities that we are talking about, so it is a safer, or more efficient, option for them to go there. It doesn't mean that people from other universities can't apply ... We have a lot of Oxford people, I went to Bristol, then there is Durham. I guess if you look at the universities with the top points scoring, and draw a line under 8 or 10, then it will be those. (Marketing officer, multinational food manufacturer)

Such apparently 'logical' choices are illogical as they are based on a limited and arbitrary set of variables. Often, this is coupled with some rather more bizarre prejudices. For example:

Linguists do not make good lawyers generally, so in our ideal candidate we are looking for somebody who has an innate language ability. Perhaps they have got a parent who is of that language and they have been brought up as bi-lingual ... But generally, if we have somebody who comes to us with a degree in Russian, very often they are not going to make a good lawyer because they think differently. You get a guy with a degree in maths, they make extraordinarily successful lawyers because they think in the same way and think in an analytical factual way that lawyers need to think, whereas a linguist will not. So, generally, we will interview candidates who have developed those languages or have an



innate ability. That is not to say we exclude linguists, but we look at them quite sceptically. (Head of personnel, large law firm)

Such 'irrational' criteria, often based on the personal opinion of recruiters, is rife:

First of all I personally do believe that a degree has become somewhat devalued and easier to obtain ... I believe the range of organisations has grown in recent years that are providing degrees and I think that quality control of those organisations is pretty difficult. I think a degree out of Oxbridge or one of the red bricks now is probably the same as a degree was 10 or 20 years ago, so I don't have concerns that the highest quality universities are diminishing their standards. (Senior manager, large financial institution)

If I interviewed somebody who'd applied for a care post and was a graduate, I would be happier if I saw that a graduate did psychology, sociology and one or two of the sciences. If somebody was a graduate in physical engineering or electrical engineering or something like, then I would be quizzing them about their flexibility of thought. I'd be wanting some evidence, because I wouldn't see overriding instinct. If somebody was a graduate in Oriental Studies, similarly again I would expect they'd have a flexibility of thought. (Head teacher, special school)

I am sometimes intrigued that we recruit graduates in Latin American studies for instance, because it tends to tell me that that individual was not looking for a vocational type course ... I do, personally, like to see a vocational type qualification, one which actually says they are going to do something, rather than the more sort of exotic ones, but that could be personal prejudice of course. (Planning and analysis manager, large freight company)

Probably the area of most significant discrimination is age. There are many examples of graduate recruiters actively, and blatantly, discriminating against older graduates:

No preference on age. If I was employing somebody I would probably go for a younger person, but it's down to the individual really. Somebody who is 30 plus probably had a career change and those sort of people I just think they might not be stable in the company, they might spend a couple of years with the company and move on. (Studio manager, small design and print agency)

Our experience shows that people who enter the law late do not usually make a success of it at the sort of level that we work. They might be absolutely cracking as a provincial solicitor or high street solicitor, or West End practice but in the City generally they are not a success. (Head of personnel, large law firm)

What we are starting to see, of course, is the phenomenon of the mature graduate. I think probably we are not so good at this. Because it is a young workforce, it's self-generating, the 25–26-year-old interviewers expect to see new product that is younger than them. But we are starting to see graduates of 28, 29, astonishingly 32. We are starting to recruit some people with wider experience who can provide more than just the intellectual qualification. But that is a slow change, we have to change our own mindsets there a bit also. (Human resources manager, large pharmaceutical manufacturers)

Given the range of independent factors that impinge on the recruitment process and the

tenuous link between employment and employability-development opportunities offered by institutions, it is rather surprising that intelligent people have rushed to use employment rates of graduates as measures of the employability-development impact of institutions. In part, in the UK, there has been political pressure to produce an 'employability performance indicator' and the clear preference is a simple quantitative measure based on outcomes, irrespective of whether it actually measures anything that the institutions can directly affect.

### *Employability Audit*

When employability is defined in terms of the attributes of the graduate, then, as suggested above, institutional effectiveness *might* be indicated by an audit of the developmental opportunities of the institution (employability audit, for short) or, rather more directly, by measuring the extent to which students from a particular institution or programme have developed appropriate attributes. Even if there was a meaningful, sector-wide measure of the array of graduate attributes (beyond subject knowledge), then, to repeat a point, the outcomes would not necessarily be attributable to the efforts of the institution. Even though 'value-added' measures that show the change in graduate achievements between admission and graduation are better indicators of the institution's contribution, they cannot differentiate between what the institution promotes and what is developed out with the institution.

A more practical alternative is to audit the extent of employability-development opportunities made available to students within an institution (or programme within an institution). Such an audit identifies the work-experience opportunities and the attribute-development opportunities explicitly embedded in the curriculum, including job-seeking and job-getting skills. It does not assess the effectiveness of what institutions provide but nor does it presuppose that the student's development of employability attributes is *solely* dependent on what the institution provides. In short, rather than a simplistic output measure, an employability audit provides an indication of process and an indication of where and how that process can be improved.

To be manageable, such an audit depends on self-reporting by institutions against a common framework (Harvey, 1999; Little *et al.*, 2001). The veracity, accuracy and extent of reported activity might be verified through an external analysis of audit responses or, more directly, via inspection or audit trails (in the UK this might be via the 'drop-in' arrangements of the QAA under its proposed new model of operation).

In the wake of the assessment of skill shortages in Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW, 1999) recently undertook a pilot audit of all its higher education institutions to discover the nature and extent of the employability-skills development offered by Welsh institutions. Areas covered included:

- work experience of various types including sandwich courses, 'live projects', semester and shorter placements, visits and work-shadowing;
- opportunities for structured reflection on work experience because learning comes not just from doing work experience but also (and significantly) from reflecting on the experience;
- embedded and explicit skills development in programmes of study;
- free-standing electives (skills development, career management, etc.) and centrally-provided services such as careers advice;
- helping students recognise what they have learned from extra curricular activities.

There is a case for extending audit to the whole experience of the student, including whether teaching methods are conducive to the development of employability attributes. That task is large, costly and likely, in practice, to result in duplication or overlap with such things as subject reviews and teaching assessments.

The Welsh employability audit highlighted substantive issues of institutional policy and strategy and revealed a number of methodological issues attaching to attempts to measure employability.

### *Methodological Issues*

The data provided by the Welsh institutions varied enormously in its richness. The reasons for this were a lack of clarity in what exactly was being sought and from whom; a presupposition that there is a common linguistic currency for employability issues and thus a lack of definitional specificity in the initial audit guidelines. In a sense the framework, derived from a development audit of Wales, was too general and imprecise for consistent classification of information. Some institutions clearly considered it difficult to allocate activities to the diverse categories and similar activities were often allocated to different categories both within and between institutions. In addition, it was not clear whether the institutional response was expected from or in respect of central services or from individual teaching departments, or both.

It was also clear that there was not a common conceptual language of 'employability'. Project working, as an employability-enhancing activity, for example, ranged from employment-linked, problem-solving team projects to academic projects that were in no way connected to the world of work. Similarly, 'placements' ranged from year-long industrial placements to a couple of days work-shadowing. Given that most institutions did not provide much detail about the employability-development opportunities, because they were not asked to, it was difficult to be clear about how significant such activities were or whether the same thing was being 'double-counted': for example, placements involving work-shadowing. Where statistics were provided they were raw statistics and institutions rarely gave any indication of the proportion of students involved in such activities.

Definitions turned out to be much more of a problem than anticipated. Even 'graduate' caused confusion as it was sometimes taken to refer to 'enrolled postgraduate students' and sometimes as 'ex-students who had graduated and were no longer enrolled' and sometimes as 'graduates (of any institution) attending employment-related short courses'.

It was not surprising, therefore, that some of the employability-related terms turned out to be less than precise in practice. 'Placement', for example, included placements embedded in the programme of study and 'placements' external to the programme. Embedded placements included thin sandwich clinical or professional placements; 'year-long' placements as compulsory or optional parts of courses; compulsory or optional semester placements; compulsory or optional placements of a few days to 12 weeks

However, the sector-wide report still highlighted some strengths and weaknesses in provision. More importantly, the audit process provided feedback to the Welsh institutions that encouraged development and gave indications for targeted improvement, which an output measure of employment rates would not have done.

To reinforce the importance of employability provision, of process rather than simple output measures, HEFCW has required work experience and employability plans from institutions alongside learning and teaching strategies (HEFCW, 2000). Half a million pounds will be allocated to institutions on the basis of teaching and learning strategies and work experience and employability plans submitted to the funding council (Carter,

2001). The responses from institutions have also been evaluated and the process of audit and planned activity has clearly prompted improvements in employability provision. Institutions are clearer about their provision and are better placed systematically to align aims, strategies and actions (Harvey, 2001).

## Conclusion

Whatever measure of 'employability' is adopted within a higher education system, it is necessary to assess its impact. It may be, for example, that making inferences from employment rates diverts energy from efforts to develop student employability attributes. Instead of putting effort into preparing a range of different types of students for subjects that have 'problematic' employment rates, institutions might compromise the educational agenda by:

- changing their subject mix;
- de-emphasising the recruitment of non-traditional students;
- focusing on job attainment skills (interview technique) rather than developing employability attributes;
- not bothering to embed generic employability attributes in the curriculum, thus threatening the empowerment of lifelong learners.

In sum, concerns about employability reproduce concerns about the definition and measurement of quality and the relationship between quality assessment and quality improvement (Harvey & Knight, 1996). League tables of employment rates, for example, do not offer any guides to improvement. External and comparative benchmarks pitting institution against institution are potentially misleading and counter-productive. Rather, any evaluation of employability needs clearly to indicate areas for improvement and might be done by internal, longitudinal benchmarking that, over time, compares and evaluates outcomes (employment of graduates) against input and process (effort in developing employability opportunities) (Harvey, 2000).

## Notes

- [1] This is not really surprising as first-destination returns in the UK were originally an indicator used by Careers Services in institutions to aid the dissemination of good practice. As a convenient already-established measure, FDRs have become a *de facto* measure of employability performance irrespective of their original purpose and their appropriateness as a performance measure.
- [2] In the UK, for example, there is no intention of taking all the appropriate factors into account because such factoring would make the indicator too complicated and costly. The official reason is that it would create too much 'noise' in the indicator (Thompson, 2001). This means that comparing like with like is very difficult and so a crude measure that ignores the niceties of comparing the comparable will be used. This measure is being legitimated as a benchmarking device, as part of the current British obsession with benchmarking. However, the proposed benchmarking of employability is different from the benchmarking of academic standards. The latter is a set of qualitative prescriptions of programme content (a sort of national curriculum for higher education) with a flimsy set of qualitative guides as to what constitutes threshold outcomes and what is indicative of excellent outcomes. The benchmarking of employability is essentially a process of providing national benchmarks and then establishing institutional target benchmarks by 'factoring in' some, but by no means all, of the relevant variables. Truly, higher education does not learn from schools.
- [3] This and subsequent quotes from employers are taken from in-depth interviews undertaken as part of the *Graduates' Work* survey (Harvey *et al.*, 1997a).

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