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4. Employability, transformatives Lernen und Kompetenzerwerb

Employability and Transformative Learning

Employability is a concept that has gained increasing attention in higher education discourse since the 1990s. The rise of employability as an issue for higher education policy and practice developed in Anglo-Saxon countries but has spread, through the Bologna process, to the whole of the European Higher Education Area.

The massification of higher education, along with the rapidly changing nature of employment, the fracturing of traditional graduate destinations, the development of more flexible forms of learning enabled by information technology have all increased the focus on employability. The 'knowledge society' has emphasised graduate outcomes and employers increasingly want graduates that adapt easily to the workplace.

The relevance of higher education is, increasingly, being questioned. There are those, who contend that huge amounts of money are being invested in higher education and, in an era where there are competing demands for public funding, higher education should demonstrate that it is delivering a value-for-money contribution to economic growth and prosperity. This shift from humanist to economic-utilitarian objectives in higher education (Kirby, 2007) is a spreading phenomenon, evident in those economies that adopted aggressive new-public-management approaches but also spreading through all countries in the wake of the internationalisation of business and education.

In the United Kingdom, the main employer organisation, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), in a recent publication entitled *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work* (CBI, 2009), maintained that: "It is extremely important that students develop valuable transferable skills as part of their university experience [...]". Similarly, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills indicated that it "wants to see [...] every school, college, university and training provider to treat the employability of their learners as part of their core business. We want a unified and coherent policy, assessment and funding framework that empower teaching and training professionals to develop employability."

The concern with employability skills has not just come from employers; the National Union of Students website in 2010 asked:

“Are you worried you’ll struggle to get a job because of the current economic downturn and looming recession? Do you know what businesses really look for when they employ graduates?”

According to CBI, businesses value skills, such as problem solving and communication, but CBI would like to know if students have had the opportunity to develop them at university.

We are asking students to fill in a short survey to tell us what they know and think about employability skills and whether or not they have received support from their institution to develop such skills. The survey should only take five minutes and you will be entered into a draw to win £100 worth of Amazon vouchers. Findings from the survey will be used to campaign to ensure students are supported by businesses and universities.”

This student view is reflected in the perspectives of students at Copenhagen Business School, who shared their ideas in a recent research study, for example:

“There is a ‘business’ culture at CBS; a culture which makes students from other institutions laugh sometimes, but I think it’s a positive culture. It’s about preparing yourself for a job when you graduate, networking etc. We think about this as a natural part of our student careers.” (CBS Student)

“In a sense we are free to think innovatively at CBS. There are less academic restrictions than in other universities.” (CBS Student)

A recent Spanish study (Rué *et al.*, 2010) identified the aspects of learning most valued by students and prominent were, ‘learning tasks connected with real life situations’ and ‘work on real life professional situations’.

The Bologna process began to focus on employability in the early years of the new century and a Bologna seminar, in Bled, Slovenia in 2004, concluded that employability is a major objective towards the establishment of the European Higher Education Area. It conceded that employability takes different emphasis in different programmes. However, it recommended that internships (placements or other periods of work experience) be developed on bachelor and masters programmes. It proposed that full advantage should be taken of the flexibility for employability provided through the new two-cycle structure, albeit that, in some countries, work was needed with employers to understand and develop the bachelor qualification. The seminar did suggest that the distinction between professional and academic programmes was not helpful.

Two years later in Swansea, Wales, another employability seminar concluded that embedding skills in the curriculum is a key element of the Bologna reforms; this endorsed the view to come out of the *Quality in Higher Education* project (Harvey with Green, 1994) more than a decade earlier that argued, amongst

other things, that employability was an element of quality learning and teaching and suggested that it be integral to programmes of study.

The Swansea seminar also suggested that higher education institutions should assist students to recognise and articulate the employability skills developed within the curriculum and in other activities at all three cycles. These skills should be linked to the Dublin Descriptors and national qualification frameworks where they existed. Higher education institutions should also ensure that students receive information and advice on all sectors of the labour market, together with career management skills.

Originally, the Bologna Process was about mobility and the idea of employability was problematic. Now, however, employability is seen as important in the three-cycle system. Albeit that it is still linked to mobility, as is evident in the Bologna statement on the official website:

“There are many definitions of employability. For the purpose of the Bologna Follow-up Group, employability is defined as the ability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market.” (The official Bologna Process website, July 2007–June 2010)

This definition is satisfactory. However, a preferred one, and one widely adopted and used also in the Bologna seminars in Bled and Swansea, is the definition developed by the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT, 2004), which proposed: “Employability: A set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation.”

Originally this had the phrase “whether or not that is paid employment” appended to it to show that employability was not just about getting a job but also included unpaid work. However, over time, the appended phrase has been dropped. What the ESECT definition establishes, and is important for an understanding of the role and function of employability is that it is *not* the same as employment. There are still some approaches to employability, especially simplistic perspectives by governments that equate employability with the level of graduate employment. This entirely misses the point and presumes a simplistic ‘magic bullet’ approach to employability and graduate employment, where, of course, the situation is far more complex and is contingent on, *inter alia*, the graduate experience both within and outside university, the different study disciplines, the graduate’s networks and the state of the economy (Figure 1).

“It has been proved that all graduates main characteristics (place of residence, mark of degree, faculty, as well as knowledge of English or French language) affect significantly at least one of the employment variables. Nevertheless, graduate gender and specialty are the most important characteristics affecting nearly all these variables and thus

determining very different employability prospects and attitudes towards the labour market.” (Kostoglou and Adamidis, 2008)

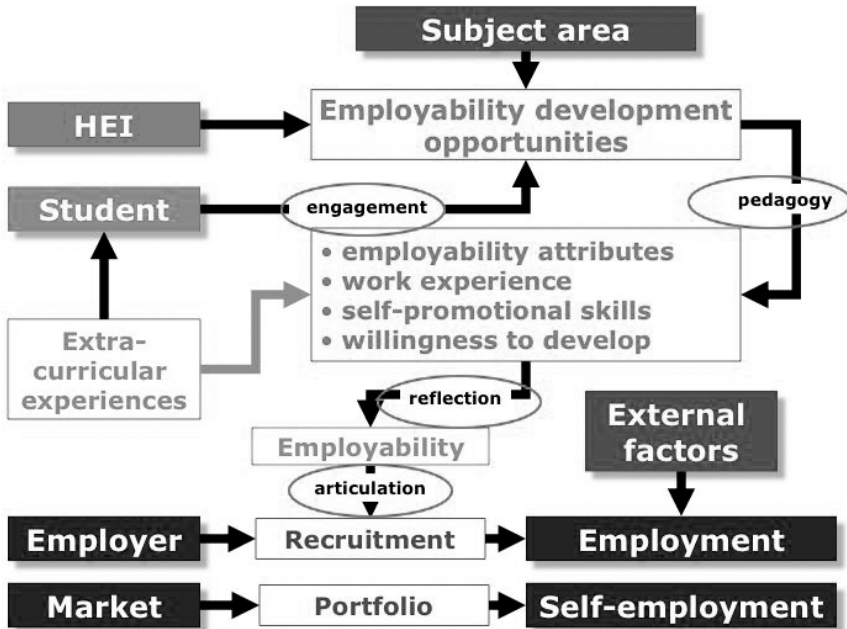


Figure 1: A model of employability development

Furthermore, employability is not about training for a job nor is it equated with vocationalism. Some programmes, such as nursing, which are highly vocational, may enhance employability but training for a specific job is not the same as developing a range of employability attributes.

Employability is about developing attributes. There are endless lists of such attributes and ways of describing them. One way of looking at them is to split them into personal and interactive attributes. The former include intellect, subject knowledge, willingness to learn and continue learning, ability to find things out, flexibility and adaptability, preparedness to take risks, and self-skills ranging from tact and tolerance through to timeliness and enthusiasm. Other personal attributes are mentioned in lists produced by graduate recruiters and researchers but these are the main ones that recur. The interactive skills are anchored by the triumvirate of communication, teamworking and interpersonal skills. Communication includes written and oral presentation skills, ability to use information technology effectively and foreign-language competence. Teamworking involves being able to work in teams, co-operate, adopt a range of different roles and ensure timely outcomes. Interpersonal skills overlap with

these and personal skills and are about ensuring professional and effective interaction within the workplace.

Different employers place different emphases on a suite of skills depending on their priorities. For some employers, the important thing is to have graduates that fit into their organisation easily. As one graduate training manager of a large London law firm said:

“We are looking for what we call, suitability to [our organisation], which is actually specific to our culture [...] I suppose that ethos would be work hard, play hard, in that order. [...] But when that deal is done we will relax, we will celebrate, we will pop those champagne corks. The team will have fun, and let their hair down.”

For others, the key is to have graduate recruits who can interact effectively. A development manager from a small software firm said that they looked for:

“Somebody who can work both in a team and on their own is not afraid to ask questions if they do get stuck. Another aspect is providing fresh ideas. No one person has a handle on all good ideas. So not being afraid to push their own ideas forward, but also, a big thing we look for is, being able to compromise as well.”

For some employers, the graduate needs to be transformative (eventually) to be able to facilitate innovation by getting involved. As the director of operations of a large vehicle manufacturer said:

“I want leaders, I want captains of teams rather than managers of teams. I want that captain to be on the pitch and not the manager up in the stand [...] I need people who have got that about them, who have the ability to work *with* people, not have people work *for* them.”

The key, in practice, is for the graduate to be adaptable, to know when to ‘fit in’ when to push boundaries and when to facilitate teamwork that leads to innovation. Astute graduates, who can play different roles and understand the politics and processes within the workplace, progress; while those who are rigid and appear arrogant (a frequent complaint of employers) do not flourish.

A recent European study by Storen (2010) explored the views of graduates about the usefulness of their programmes of study. Relatively large country differences were found concerning the graduates’ assessments of the employment usefulness of the study programme. Storen noted that the assessment of the Norwegian graduates emerges as far more positive than any other country. Graduates from the Netherlands report the most negative assessment.

Storen also concluded, rather more importantly than country differences, that the more the study programme was viewed as demanding, vocationally oriented, known by the employers, academically prestigious, based on lectures, internships, written assignments and/or oral presentations, the greater is the probability that the graduate will reply that the programme was a very good

basis for starting work. The more multiple-choice examinations are emphasised in the study programme, the lower is the probability of a positive response about the value of the study programme for commencing employment. This is an important outcome and indicates that graduates value demanding courses, with meaningful assessment, that are work-connected in one way or another. In a situation where there is more and more international competition in the graduate labour market, this is not an altogether surprising outcome.

In the United Kingdom, it now seems that there is a measure of agreement across the sector about employability. First, that employability needs to be part of the learning experience, embedded into the curriculum and not an 'add-on' component. Gvaramadze (2010) noted, of Scotland, that: "Promoting student employability is also one of the elements for enhancing student learning experience. Increasing numbers of institutions in Scotland integrate elements of employability and professionalism in designing and delivering of their curricula." The second element of agreement is that career planning and reflection are being developed and potentially linked to reporting of student achievement. Third, and a point also emphasised in the Dearing Report in 1997 (NCIHE, 1997), is the acceptance that placements or other forms of work experience were a desirable addition that helped not just employability but broader academic skills. Nonetheless, the employability agenda is still driven by an enthusiastic minority. There are still those in academia who resist and argue that anything to do with employability is not their job. As one senior careers advisor in North East England noted:

"[Academics] don't really respond. [...] A lot of the time they are more interested in the teaching of the subject rather than getting [their students] into jobs. Which is a bit unfortunate, really because I think if they were more career minded it would work to the students' advantage a lot more."

An initiative in Wales moved employability centre stage in the early years of the century, following an evaluation of the skills needs in the principality. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales introduced marginal funding linked to the development, by universities, of 'Work Experience and Employability Plans' (WEEPs). The Welsh universities worked hard (at least within parts of their institutions) to embed employability skills and link academic work to workplace learning. These plans became increasingly sophisticated, based on audits of activities within institutions. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales were satisfied that work experience and employability was being integrated and that institutions were able to take it forward and dropped the requirement for WEEPs after three years.

Work experience covers a variety of different activities but usually refers to some form of organised experience linked to a programme of study in which the

student spends some time, either in a block or a day or so a week, in a work setting putting academic knowledge into practice. This differs from the *ad hoc* work experience gained by students when they undertake paid employment during their programme of study. Organised work experience may include ‘thick’ placements (internships) where the student is away from the university for a number of weeks (sometimes up to a whole year). It may be that the placement element occurs in a number of shorter blocks, (‘thin’ placements), such as teacher training in the United Kingdom. It may be that the student is working part-time and studying part-time on a programme directly linked to their paid work. Employer-linked projects are another form of work experience; this occurs where students, individually or teams, undertake a project on behalf of an employer, which links their academic study to real-world problems. Work-shadowing and study visits to employers are also a weaker form of work experience but nonetheless can be valuable.

A study of graduate employment in the United Kingdom taking the whole graduate cohort for a year (Bowes and Harvey, 2000) showed that, for most disciplines, students on degrees with a sandwich placement had a higher rate of graduate employment (69 %) within six months of graduation than students on programmes in the same subject area but without placements (55 %). This varied by discipline. In the social sciences, for example, 75 % of graduates from sandwich programmes got jobs within 6 months compared to 59 % of students from programmes without placements. The equivalent figures for built environment students (architecture, town planning and so on) were 71 % and 59 %; and for engineering were 73 % and 64 %.

There is considerable endorsement of the benefit of work experience from employers, teachers and students, albeit much of it anecdotal. The problem is that there are not enough opportunities for students, a point made by the Dearing Report in the United Kingdom (NCIHE, 1997). Employers argue that graduates who have had work experience as part of their degree are more effective in the work place.

“Business awareness and maturity [...] are significantly improved by work placements. [...] Those people who have worked in organisations previously have a host of examples of experiences that they are able to share with us. That makes them stronger candidates than those who have just gone from school to higher education and then come straight to us. So it is an advantage to the individual concerned to have done a placement.” (Senior manager, large financial institution)

Taking it broader and referring to students who take time out abroad, either working or studying, Charles Macleod, Head of UK Resourcing, PricewaterhouseCoopers, noted:

“The value of [a student’s] international experience goes beyond purely the acquisition of language – it lies in the ability to see business and personal issues from other than your own cultural perspective.” (Quoted in Archer and Davison, 2008)

Some employers use internships as a recruitment route. Employers often indicate that they would like to see more placements (although few are offering more!) Employers in the United Kingdom seem to prefer to offer year-long placements as this provides the optimum return on the effort of setting up the placement.

There is some evidence that work experience adds success for graduates in the job market and students are positive about the impact of work experience. This ranges from impact on their organisational abilities through to development of higher-level academic skills, as revealed in a study (Little and Harvey, 2006) in which students were interviewed about their placement experiences. Personal skills development centred on increased confidence and personal organisation. Time-management skills were frequently mentioned.

“[...] a get up and go attitude – as opposed to get up and mope around and then think about doing work. Because for that year I was getting up at half past seven getting in for nine [...] That was how I worked for a whole year; it was pointless changing my whole routine after a year of doing it this way.” (Business and Technology student, marketing assistant in a mortgage company)

Other students indicated changes to their approaches to learning and development of higher-level academic skills:

“Other thing I noticed in my final year that I am really taking completely different approach to learning now. I am challenging everything here because I now have the experience [...] While I was on placement, I was always thinking about what it means, what it means for my degree.” (Business Administration student)

“I know what I’m looking for a bit better now. I think I’m [...] quicker at finding stuff and I’m a bit more on the ball when it comes to [...] picking out the most relevant stuff, because I was expected to learn quite quickly when I was down there. So it was [...] essential that I was able to find information quickly, find the relevant bit and then use that as a basis for my testing.” (Information Systems student, product tester, software company)

So how does this all fit to learning? As was noted above, developing a range of students’ attributes that help them to be successful in the work context is *not* the same as developing vocational courses. It is, arguably, a manifestation of developing transformative learning: *viz.* the enhancement and empowerment of the learner. Developing graduates’ employability is not about getting graduates into jobs. It is not about delivering ‘employability skills’ in some generic sense. Rather it is about developing critical reflective lifelong learners. This requires an approach to teaching and learning that goes beyond requiring students to learn a body of knowledge.

Empowering and enhancing students requires facilitation of learning rather than teaching. Developing employability attributes is an aspect of the shift from teacher-centred learning, where the teacher disseminates information and controls the curriculum, to student-centred learning, where students are empowered as learners and take control of the curriculum. Students are taught how to learn, not taught things to remember. They are taught how to analyse, critique, synthesise, reflect and deconstruct, rather than taught specific items of knowledge. Empowering learners means treating students as intellectual performers rather than as compliant audience.

The relationship between transformative learning and employability lies in the pragmatic acceptance that in a fast changing world organisations need to change and graduates need to be able to help organisations to transform in the face of such rapid and continuous change. In that sense, employability is about developing CRITICAL graduates: Critical, Reflective, Intelligent, Transformative, Interactive, Communicative, Analytic, Lifelong learners.

To achieve effective and integrated employability development it might be worth adopting an employability framework such as the following. There needs to be a coherent, holistic approach to employability, not a piecemeal adoption, as it is likely to lead to fragmentation and possible alienation. Nonetheless, the approach within a university should not assume one size fits all and an employability policy needs to be flexible and adjust to incorporate locally-determined practices. There needs to be a shift in academic culture and an acceptance that it is part of everyone's job.

Development of intellectual, subject *and* employability attributes should be integrated not contrived or enforced. The big step is to shift from teaching to learning, and the adoption of a student-centred learning philosophy, resulting in the progressive development of learner autonomy. On a practical front, learning should be enhanced by the inclusion in the teaching situation by 'real world' activities and examples that students can work on. Students should have opportunity and be encouraged to reflect on their use of skills and knowledge and their own performance, with subsequent action planning for improvement and development. They should be encouraged to develop career management skills (including self awareness, opportunity awareness, decision making) but the overall emphasis should be on learning not job getting. Almost all students have some form of work experience, whether a planned part of the programme or *ad hoc* paid employment and so should be given opportunities to articulate learning from work. It should be noted that students need help to transfer attributes as research shows that transfer from one setting to another is *not* automatic.

In the last resort, it must be remembered that employability is about transformative learning; it is not about training.

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