

Style over substance

Philip Martin et al

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What is employability and how do we measure it? Philip Martin *et al* argue against the bullet-point bullies and for a more holistic approach to reflecting on achievement

PHILIP MARTIN Skills has become an area where angels fear to tread. The “skills agenda” is unreceptive to critique, a huge irony given that critical questioning is supposedly a key graduate skill. Academics, beaten down by the welter of jargon, respond in the usual way: cut and paste, download the bullet points and shove them in the documentation. Everyone’s happy: quality units nod approvingly; skills zealots offer a patronising smile.

But there are problems with this modus vivendi and, like all compromises, it will end in tears. Students come into higher education sickened by skills at school. Many suffer tedious tutorials with tutors working through tick-box charts in progress files. It means nothing to them. How do I know this? They tell me - roundly. So do their teachers - behind their hands. Education programmes that separate “skills” as a quantity or as a series of attributes to be assessed tend to evacuate such programmes of knowledge and ideas. We are getting it the wrong way round. Skills without knowledge are worthless and harmful, promoting facility at the expense of thoughtfulness, creativity and understanding. That is why academics often resist giving assessment grades on “competences” amputated from content.

For example: I require my students to do seminar presentations on Romantic poetry.

I once sat through a lively ten-minute one on Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* (1798), which was superficially engaging, but completely cock-eyed. It included the revelation that Wordsworth composed the poem on a train. So what am I supposed to do? Reward nonsense because it is well presented? Penalise the student with a speech difficulty who had done ten times more work because her presentation was halting?

The problem with skills - or more specifically, the instrumentalist bullet points and tick boxes that go with them - is that they infantilise tutors and students. They presume to displace judgement and sensitivity, qualities that good teachers are always endeavouring to improve. In the final analysis, the knowledge economy needs people who understand knowledge and how it can be validated. We short-change our students if we pretend a tick-box chart will do just as well.

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VAL BUTCHER Whether they are personal, transferable, graduate, generic, common, core, key, business, enterprise, employability, learning or study - skills have irreversibly entered the vocabulary of higher education.

The government white paper published in January is clear that higher education must expand “to meet rising skills needs”. It talks of reviewing progress on the use of personal development portfolios, which “enable learners to understand and reflect on their achievements and to present these achievements to employers, institutions and other stakeholders”. A tick-box approach to skills cannot achieve this. Nor can the richness of what students learn in higher education be summed up in a list. Nevertheless, students, tutors and employers are having to ask themselves: “What are skills for?”

Arguably, skills are about equipping students for learning and work. Learning skills are not controversial; employability skills are.

During the past year, when employability has been high on the government’s agenda, I have detected four schools of thought.

For some, employability is about rendering graduates “fit for purpose”, able to hit the ground running in the world of work, with skills or attributes that minimise employers’ need to invest in induction and training. Vocational education, which combines knowledge with professional training, has a long and honourable tradition. But with pressure to prepare graduates so highly, non-vocational courses can stray inappropriately into training.

For others, employability is about easing graduates’ transition from college or university to their first job. Many academics see this as careers-service terrain. Here, the perception of employability centres on the ability of individuals to present themselves effectively and to understand what employers want.

Then there is the well-established school of practice that links employability firmly to the development of student skills and work experience. This perception of employability, although supported by research evidence that employers value these experiences, can lead to fragmented and episodic learning.

And finally, there is a growing body of thought, illustrated here, that sees employability as holistic. The Centre for Employability at the University of Central Lancashire articulates this view. Employability is: “A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that makes an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.”

Val Butcher is a senior adviser at the Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre.

SIMON ROODHOUSE It is hard to see why there is such an adverse reaction to what is the everyday business of higher education: training teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, social workers and health professionals. After all, European universities were invented centuries ago by the church to train clerics for their religious vocation. To pose conflict between theoretical and practical study is spurious. Combining knowledge and skills to achieve vocational excellence is a fundamental part of university life.

The introduction of key skills, portfolio assessment, personal progress

files and development plans are simply examples of the imaginative way in which curriculum designers have responded to the diversity of students.

The big disappointment in the skills debate is surely the lack of continuous structured engagement to meet the learning needs of the 35 million or so people in the UK work market. Snobbery comes to the fore when we enter this arena. One way to overcome this is to marry national educational and vocational systems of assessment, such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Quality Assurance Agency.

National occupational standards could easily be incorporated as learning outcomes in relevant higher education programmes of study. These standards must describe the outcomes of activity rather than list tasks; describe work activities that can be demonstrated; be relevant to work, in a range of employment contexts; and be accessible in terms of the activities they describe. This sounds similar to the learning outcomes expected of vocational qualifications in higher education, that is, being able to demonstrably practise the knowledge and skills gained through a course of study in the workplace.

Similarly, the principles that underpin national vocational qualifications are similar to the underlying principles of widening participation and access.

For example, NVQs are expected to reflect the needs of employers and individuals; reflect the achievements of clear standards of competence; provide more effective career and training routes for individuals; be less concerned about passing knowledge-based examinations and more concerned with performance in the workplace; be accessible to all sections of society without

unnecessary barriers; and identify common areas of competence across sectors and occupations.

If these were incorporated as learning outcomes in higher education, coupled with evidential assessment, it is possible to believe in an integrated national education and training system at higher levels, led by universities. This would surely contribute to achieving a highly qualified workforce that is competitive in a global market.

Simon Roodhouse is chief operating officer at the University Vocational Awards Council.

LEE HARVEY It is unfortunate that some academics equate employability with the “skills” agenda and want nothing to do with it. They wrongly assume employability is a product, not a process of learning. They think it is about ticking off skills, rejigging modules to include the employability buzzword or setting up stand-alone key-skills modules. But student employability is about more than acquiring a set of skills that employers want. The debate has moved on. Employability involves a concerted holistic approach to developing students’ study skills, encouraging them to reflect and articulate what they have learned.

This requires universities and colleges to be strategic about teaching and learning and to include academic departments, central support services, management, employers involved in work experience and, centrally, the students.

The core concerns of employers remain the synthetic, analytic and critical skills integral to higher education. Students need higher-order skills. Course designers must not throw this away in the quest to bring in teamwork, communication skills, risk taking and so on. Employers want bright people, not just team workers. Subject disciplines play a big part. It is easier to integrate employability in some areas of the curriculum than in others.

However, it is a mistake to assume that just because a programme of study is vocational, it develops employability. If the graduate does not want to pursue the vocation has the programme developed the employability of the student? Is a nursing student any more likely than an English graduate to be a trainee manager for Marks and Spencer?

In the end, the graduate engages and brings extracurricular experiences to bear and reflects on and articulates his or her abilities. So, employability is more about ability than it is about being employed. It is about developing as a critical reflective learner. Progress files and personal career development planning will be a crucial element in this critical reflection. It is important that PDP is designed to aid employability, which it will do if employability is seen as an holistic learning experience rather than acquiring job-getting skills.

Lee Harvey is director of the Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University.

PETER KNIGHT Research consistently finds that employers value self-confidence, adaptability and self-awareness, which are more attributes than skills. But such attributes resist reliable assessment, which depends on repeated observations of an agreed object by different assessors in different settings.

So, how might employability, a blend of hard and soft achievements, be assessed? The brute facts of measurement theory challenge the belief that assessment equals measurement. They lead instead to the view that there are different forms of assessment for different learning intentions and outcomes. When the public stakes are high, reliability is vital. Tasks tend to be contrived or simplified to reduce ambiguities and divergence. Instead of getting students to make evidence-based claims to creativity presented in a portfolio - for example, departments might set objective response creativity tests. To cut the cost of reliably assessing professional practice, we contrive prepackaged problems. There is a case for preferring a fivefold view of assessment that distinguishes between achievements that are:

- * Directly assessed for highstakes purposes, for example, multiple-choice tests

- * Indirectly assessed, with high-stakes in play, such as displaying the critical thinking that also shows skilful analysis and evaluation

- * Directly assessed with low-stakes intentions, for example, when students get feedback, often from other students, on their contribution to group work

- * Indirectly assessed for low-stakes purposes, for example, feedback on a portfolio designed to demonstrate indirect evidence of perseverance, willingness to learn and time management

- * Presumed to be satisfactory unless contrary evidence is compelling, as when students show ineptitude with referencing conventions.

This differentiated approach to assessment is compatible with the complex achievements and attributes that employers and academics value, as well as with student learning.

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