

EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH THE CURRICULUM

ABSTRACT. Employability, it is argued, can be embedded in any academic subject in higher education without compromising core academic freedoms. A strategy for curriculum change is described, which is sensitive to both governmental expectations and traditional academic values – and is relatively easy to use. The strategy provides a way of preserving legitimate diversity in response to the homogenising tendencies of the human capital policies that are influential in many advanced economies.

EMPLOYABILITY

Governments around the world have drawn upon human capital theory (Becker 1975) in the formulation of policy in respect of higher education. Human capital theory, in brief, links economic success to the education of the workforce. Hence the development of employability in graduates¹ has become a significant expectation that governments around the world have, to varying extents, imposed on national higher education systems.

Some commentators have questioned whether human capital is the key to economic well-being (Hughes & Tight 1998; Morley 2001) and whether ‘employability’ is an empty concept. Although the challenges have force, the notion of employability has far too much face validity for politicians to abandon it, and it is significant that an ‘employment’ performance indicator has been introduced into the accountability mechanisms of higher education in the UK (HEFCE 2001). The measure used, however, is the proportion of graduates in employment six months after graduation. It should be noted that the measure records any employment, rather than employment in what would be normatively acknowledged as being a ‘graduate-level job’ and no adjustments are made for the institutional discriminations that pervade graduate labour markets.

In this article we differentiate between graduate employability and graduate-level employment. Our definition of graduate employability is near-tautologous, being the possession of the understandings, skills and personal attributes necessary to perform adequately in a graduate-level job. The near-tautology is dissipated when the nature of the graduate-level job is brought into consideration. For some jobs, a key need is for disciplinary expertise: the computer industry and social work provide two contrasting



examples. In the field of Information Technology, accreditation by major companies is competing with awards from higher education (Adelman 2001), giving employability a very specific disciplinary focus indeed. For other jobs, the need is for a person who can instead offer a broadly-based competence. The point is illustrated by Purcell and Pitcher (1996) who found that for many years over 40% of 'graduate jobs' had been advertised in the UK in terms more or less indifferent to applicants' subject of study. Harvey et al. (1997) showed that employers in the UK tended to value generic skills more highly than disciplinary-based understanding and skills (though whether the disciplinary aspect was being taken for granted by respondents to their survey is unclear). The message seems to be 'Give us a bright and engaged graduate, and we will build specific expertise for this organisation on top of that'.

Perhaps the key contribution to national prosperity lies in higher education's development of what Reich (1991) termed 'symbolic analysts'. The symbolic analyst has at his or her fingertips not only relevant disciplinary understanding and skills but also the 'soft' or generic skills that enable the disciplinary base to be deployed to optimal effect. In developing their expertise as symbolic analysts, learners need to refine four fundamental skills (which seem applicable to some non-graduate workers as well). Reich's list of necessary skills for the symbolic analyst consists of:

- abstraction (theorising and/or relating empirical data to theory, and/or using formulae, equations, models and metaphors);
- system thinking (seeing the part in the context of the wider whole);
- experimentation (intuitively or analytically); and
- collaboration (involving communication and team-working skills).

Educational institutions are not always successful in preparing learners for the complexity inherent in the symbolic analyst's role, for learners are often expected to learn what is put in front of them and to work individually and competitively; and subject matter may be compartmentalised. Plainly, the education of symbolic analysts (who are likely to be at the leading-edge of economic developments of one kind or another) challenges some higher education practices.

Higher education is, however, emphatically not only about the education of symbolic analysts. There are other ways in which it can contribute to economic development: as well as preparing graduates for employment-related roles, it has an acknowledged role in lifelong learning - in educating further the middle manager so that he or she can manage more effectively; in upskilling the teacher or process worker; facilitating the development of active citizenship; and so on.

When considering higher education's potential for contributing to economic well-being it is helpful to distinguish between the formation of

subject-specific understandings and skills² and the promotion of generic achievements. Whereas the world of employment has, by and large, been satisfied with the *disciplinary* understanding and skills developed as a consequence of participation in higher education, it has been less happy with graduates' generic attainments: along the spectrum of these are, at one end, literacy and numeracy and, at the other, self-efficacy and metacognition (about which we say more later).

This brief survey is enough to indicate that employability is a complex construct. We argue in this paper that there is a personal aspect that tends to get overlooked in pedagogical thinking about employability, which includes the portmanteau of self-belief, or the self-theories, that the student brings to higher education. Hence, our conception of employability is wider than that of Reich and of others, such as Noble (1999), who have assumed that employability is tantamount to giving students a fistful of 'transferable' skills. We note that employability is being pushed to the fore in documents published by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], and hence, institutions are being given a fairly firm steer regarding their curricula. The Level H (First degree with honours) descriptor in the National Qualifications Framework (QAA 2001) refers *inter alia* to qualities and skills necessary for employment. These are picked up in the subject benchmark statements that the QAA has published to date (see QAA 2000). The subject benchmark statements are however relatively broad statements of expected programme outcomes, and they are particularly fuzzy where personal skills and qualities are concerned. This is not surprising, since assessment in the personal area is highly problematic (Atkins 1999; Yorke 2001) – a matter that we must discuss elsewhere.

There are, however, two problems with employability, both of which risk divesting it of its complexity and richness and compromising the credibility of the employability agenda.

1. We have already hinted that there is a danger of tokenistic thinking, with employability being reduced to 'key skills'. The Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997), though having a fairly wide view of employability, chose to focus attention in its recommendations on the key skills of communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn. Some institutions have packaged up key skills (not necessarily those identified by Dearing) into separate modules, sometimes trivialising them and dis-integrating them from the curriculum. Put colourfully, in such circumstances key skills – and, by extension, employability – are being ghettoised.
2. Once employment rates become an institutional performance indicator (HEFCE 2001), there is a pernicious backwash as institutions seek to 'improve their scores' since they know that these scores will end up in

the so-called 'league tables' published in the press. There is a danger that maximising the score will command more institutional attention than fulfilling the educational aim of enhancing employability.

THE USEM MODEL

Our account of employability is distinctive, compatible with what many universities advertise in their mission statements, and practicable. It extends well beyond key skills. It has been influenced by the concept of 'capability', which is described by Stephenson in the following terms.

Capable people have confidence in their ability to

1. take effective and appropriate action,
2. explain what they are seeking to achieve,
3. live and work effectively with others, and
4. continue to learn from their experiences, both as individuals and in association with others,

in a diverse and changing society. [. . .]

Capability is a necessary part of specialist expertise, not separate from it. Capable people not only know about their specialisms, they also have the confidence to apply their knowledge and skills within varied and changing situations and to continue to develop their specialist knowledge and skills . . .

Stephenson (1998, p. 2, minor presentational changes made)

Whilst the concept of capability is pragmatically persuasive (to some, at least), it has lacked an underpinning of theory and empirical findings (as also has the promotion of 'key skills' – see Bennett et al. 2000). Hence, it has not really caught on with academics, who have perhaps tended to see it as responding to 'what employers say they want', and to have overlooked the complementary commitment to academic values.

The literature on employability has suggested to us that it depends upon a synergic blend of personal qualities, skills of various kinds (of which 'key skills' are a subset) and disciplinary understanding. The USEM model that we are developing from the concept of 'capability' combines our interpretation of the literature with insights from cognitive and social psychology. USEM is an acronym for

- **U**nderstanding
- **S**kills (subject-specific and generic)
- **E**fficacy beliefs (and self-theories generally)
- **M**etacognition (including reflection).

The drive towards curricula that prominently include skills has focused attention on subject understanding (U) and skills, both discipline-based and generic, (S) at the expense of the 'EM'. Curricula seem typically to pay little attention to personal qualities or to focus on moral and quasi-moral qualities that practitioners need to display in professions with a primary care for people and their needs. They are mainly silent on self-theories and efficacy beliefs. However, the work of Pintrich and Schunk (1996), Bandura (1997) and Dweck (1999) suggests that a curricular focus on employability needs to bring self-theories and personal qualities (Cappelli 1995; Feinstein 2000) more directly into the equation, since the potential for some self-theories to develop (given an appropriate environment) could be turned to the student's advantage. In this article we concentrate on efficacy beliefs and self-theories, in the interests of attempting to redress an imbalance.

The USEM model of employability is one in which self-theories – and, by extension, personal qualities – colour everything the student (and subsequently the graduate) does: this is illustrated in Figure 1.

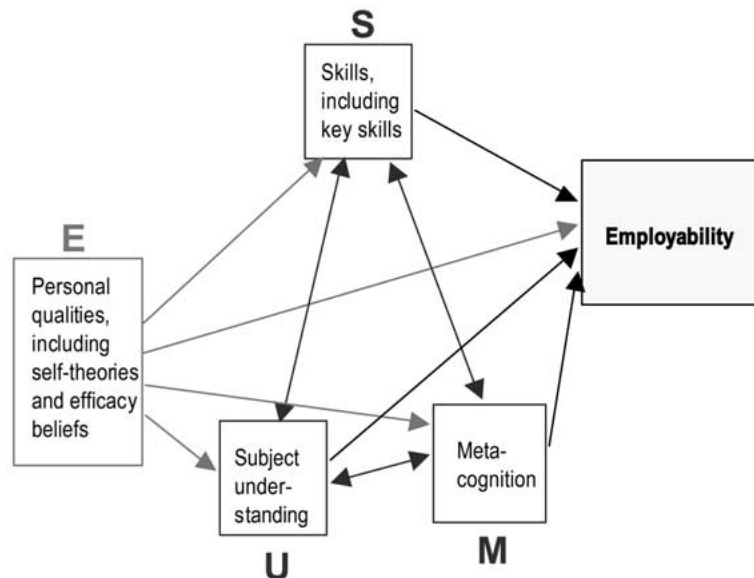


Figure 1.

In some ways Figure 1 contains no surprises although, thirty or forty years ago, subject understanding (U) was probably perceived by the higher education sector in the UK as the dominant aspect of employability. There was often a leavening of skills (S) – typically developed through giving seminar presentations – but skills did not figure particularly promi-

nently. The Enterprise in Higher Education [EHE] initiative gave skills a curricular boost, and metacognition (M) started to creep into curricula as a result of research on student learning. Personal qualities (to a limited extent, the 'E') had also figured in some EHE projects, but less fully than is intended in the **Skills plus** project which we describe below – after all, the value of American research had yet to be appreciated in the UK.

Figure 1 shows a network of interconnections between the relevant variables. Understanding, skills and metacognition can be mutually supportive and developmental. For example, who would disagree that the possession of some key skills (the use of computers in information retrieval and numeracy, for example) will facilitate the acquisition of subject understanding, and that the methods chosen for the teaching of the subject will, to varying extents, assist students to develop skills and metacognition? The channel between the subject and skills is two-way and the inclusion of personal qualities is a useful corrective to skills-dominated accounts of employability.

Personal qualities pervade employability in the obvious sense that an appropriate personal manner, for example, is an asset in any situation involving interpersonal contact. Less immediately visible are qualities such as the disposition to get things done, the taking of initiative, and the preparedness to stick at difficult tasks. We have found from interviews conducted with newly-employed graduates and their more experienced colleagues that these qualities 'count'. Personal qualities are also influential in both the acquisition of subject understanding and the development of skills. A willingness to learn (often from mistakes) implies a preparedness to tolerate some kind of stress in order to achieve success (which, for some, may simply be not failing). This illustration of the significance of personal qualities for employability forms a bridge to an important body of research into efficacy beliefs and self-theories because they shape qualities such as persistence, capacity to cope with error, and problem-working strategies. Our claim is that discussions of employability are transformed by the inclusion of personal qualities, *specifically* through consideration of research into efficacy beliefs and self-theories.

SELF-THEORIES AND EMPLOYABILITY

Dweck (1999) has demonstrated that the possession of either a fixed or a 'malleable' self-belief influences the way that a person tackles tasks. These self-beliefs are more powerful as determinants of people's action than other parameters, such as their measured intelligence quotients. A fixed belief is a belief that one has a fixed amount of something – intelligence, say – that cannot be changed. In contrast, a malleable belief is one

in which the possibility – even probability – of development is acknowledged. With effort, one simply can achieve more and, in doing so, travel round a virtuous circle and develop. We have found, from a questionnaire survey of 2269 students in a range of disciplines and institutions, that nearly one student in three holds a fixed view of intelligence. Although self-theories are quite strongly embedded, Dweck and others (for example, Perry 1997) have shown that they can be changed, although it would seem that the change will not occur without positive intervention.

Students with a fixed belief about their intelligence are likely to be discouraged by failure because failure is construed in terms of inadequate intelligence: they may well duck challenging work after an initial poor result because a further poor result could undermine their (vulnerable) view of themselves. Dweck points to a further undesirable feature of fixed beliefs about intelligence. If a task is difficult, those with fixed self-theories are prone to conclude that they are not clever enough to succeed, and so give up. They tend to lack persistence in the face of novel tasks that they find complex and difficult. In this way, even ‘clever’ people can develop a ‘learned helplessness’ – a corrosive belief that they are not clever enough (or personable enough, or skilled enough) to succeed in the relevant context - which leads them to attempt to protect their self-esteem from damage by not trying (Of course, not trying makes failure more likely, but at least the thought that they might have succeeded – which is unlikely – if they had made more effort provides a defence for self-esteem).³

However, intelligence, often assumed to be fixed, can be understood as malleable and multidimensional. Agreed, the kind of intelligence that is measured by intelligence tests tends to decline with age but ‘practical intelligence’ (Sternberg and Grigorenko 2000) can be augmented more or less throughout a lifetime. Educationally, therefore, there is a lot at stake, even if conventional measures suggest that a person’s intelligence quotient (his or her IQ) is not particularly high. Those who oppose the widening of participation on the grounds that higher education should only be catering for the top X% (where X is some arbitrary figure in the region of 20–25) should give some thought to the implications of the typical trajectory of practical intelligence.

Those with a malleable self-theory are more likely to attribute poor performance to a failure to put in enough (and/or the right kind of) effort. The poor performance can be a spur to further learning. These students are more likely than their fixed-oriented counterparts to be focusing on the development of their learning than on performing in ways that do not threaten their belief in their ability. The driver for them is learning, not propping up a rickety self-esteem and, although learning can itself be a source of self-esteem, the self-esteem develops consequentially. As if

they were on a yacht with the wind against them, they get to their desired destination by deliberately not pointing directly towards it.

In addition to students' beliefs about the fixedness or malleability of intelligence, the belief that they hold regarding their personal efficacy will have an effect on their performance. It is not enough to have a repertoire of cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural sub-skills – one has to be able to integrate them and have a belief system that facilitates this integration when facing the myriad challenges thrown up by the world. Perceived self-efficacy seems to be an important mediator of the relationship between ability on one hand and educational pursuits and attainments on the other. In employment, one is often faced with problems that are complex and poorly defined. Self-directedness is likely to be needed for success. With the advanced levels of cognitive functioning that problem-solving requires, the significance of self-efficacy beliefs for employability is readily apparent.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF AN EMPHASIS ON SELF-THEORIES

There are, in Dweck's work, a number of implications for the facilitation of a concept of employability which, at its richest, must embody *inter alia* something of a 'get up and go' spirit with a low fear of risking failure. The first is that teachers should not only appreciate the significance of self-theories for student learning, but also they should be able to infer where students are on the fixed *versus* malleable dimension.⁴ Further, they should have available to them strategies for encouraging students to move towards malleability, although good *programme* design should also foster learning cultures that keep trying to nudge students in that direction.

A second implication relates to curricular structure. If the curricular structure is such that significance is given (or is perceived by students to be being given) to getting high grades early on in the programme, then fixed-oriented students in particular are likely to 'play safe' and not take the opportunity to learn through taking on challenging (and hence, risky) tasks. Unitised schemes in which the first semester of ostensibly full-time study is summatively assessed may well create for the 'fixed' students conditions under which they seek to fulfil performance goals that relate to 'looking good' – or at least not failing – in the eyes of others, rather than goals in which learning is to the fore (see Dweck 1999, pp. 15–16). Curriculum designers therefore, need to consider the appropriate balance between summative and formative assessment.

A third point relates to the design and enhancement of complete degree programmes. The self-theories of which Dweck writes and the general self-efficacy described by Bandura are complex and subtle constructs that have

built slowly and continue to evolve in this vein. They are the products of what Claxton (1998) has called 'slow learning', achievements that may only be fully appreciated after their development has 'simmered' for months, perhaps years. If an aim of a programme is to work on the development of students' self-theories, it needs to use the time-span of undergraduate learning to maximum effect by providing a learning culture that is suffused with cues and clues that are conducive to the development of malleability. In other words, curricular aims and design, learning and teaching, and assessment (especially formative feedback) all need to be pointing in the same general direction. Programme leaders and designers should be asking whether the approach to teaching and assessment is

- consistent with a rounded conception of employability.
- structured to encourage progressively higher levels of autonomy;
- appropriately balanced throughout the programme (across contemporaneous units of study and across time);
- allowing those skills and qualities (that usually need longer than a study-unit to develop) the opportunity to grow progressively;
- involving a variety of pedagogic methods and styles;
- encouraging deep rather than surface learning (or, put another way, weighting quality of learning more heavily than quantity of learning);
- valuing collaboration in learning for what it can offer to employability (but taking care to deal appropriately with assessment issues);
- providing plenty of feedback in a manner designed to enhance the capacity for self-assessment and to lead to enhanced future performance; and
- helping students to become aware of, and document (perhaps *via* portfolios), what they have achieved during their period of time in higher education.

A fourth implication stems from Bandura's work on self-efficacy which is relevant wherever an undergraduate student is faced with an extended assignment – a dissertation or project, for example. The need is for a series of sub-goals that can act as milestones of progress. The self-efficacious student will 'naturally' set reasonable targets and gain satisfaction, pleasure and encouragement from achieving them – and continue on round the virtuous circle. Some form of structuring will be necessary for the less self-efficacious student.

A series of modules within a programme can be construed as a sequence of (admittedly, rather broad) sub-goals. If the sequencing is done well, this could be a partial solution to the problem of structuring learning into chunks that can produce encouragement through success. However, it may not take into account the variation in the students' starting-points. As the programme progresses, the development of students' autonomy

implies that they should exercise more control over their learning. There is a tension here between prescription and negotiation, since the needs of students will vary according to their position on the spectrum of self-efficacy. The tension is accentuated by the institution's need to demonstrate that its curricula and teaching fit with the normative expectations of subject disciplines, professional and statutory regulatory bodies (where relevant), and the expectations of external quality scrutiny.

THE 'SKILLS *PLUS*' PROJECT

The **Skills *plus*** project, based on the USEM model, has involved 17 departments from four universities in the north-west of England. It has required participating departments to undertake audits of the learning experiences, skills coverage, assessment practices and learning cultures that are embodied in the 'core' components of curricula. These audits have allowed a sophisticated mapping of the goodness of fit between the curriculum and the USEM model. In most UK institutions, students have some flexibility at the periphery of their programmes of study, and hence it makes no sense to try to cater for the myriad of possible variants in student choice. The audits have been undertaken by inquiring of each unit of study (in the core) what employability aspects are being intentionally fostered in them and whether these aspects are being progressively developed over time. The analyses have shown where there is over-emphasis and insufficient emphasis, allowing leaders of programmes and their component study units to see where the latter might be adjusted to improve the focus on employability. The emphasis on adjustment is important, in that it has signalled a 'low pain, high gain' approach to change rather than major reconstruction. Proposals for major change would – in most institutions – trigger the operation of a full-scale curriculum (re)validation process. The work required for this would act as a powerful disincentive to staff who typically have to go through the process at five-year intervals. We therefore have been engaging in that which is practically feasible, rather than trying to achieve at this stage something closer to the full potential of our conception of employability through the curriculum (which would imply a more radical and effortful change).

The project has simultaneously undertaken a study of employability as perceived by recently appointed graduates and their co-workers. The rationale for this is that previous work has focused on senior personnel's conceptions of employability, and it is unclear whether these conceptions can be transferred to the work-environments in which new graduates are expected to operate. The period of a new graduate's employment is where the concept of employability needs to be explored so as to test the

match between our theoretically-driven conception of employability and employability as seen in the workplace. We now have interview data from 97 recently-employed graduates and from 117 more senior colleagues, and are in the process of analysing these. We anticipate that the outcomes of this empirical investigation of employability, along with our interviews with recent but unemployed graduates, will help us to refine the USEM model and its practical applicability to higher education curricula.

SOME EARLY OUTCOMES

Reports from participating departments have told of a generally favourable reaction to the ideas behind **Skills plus**. Departments have seen the project's intentions as being more closely aligned with traditional academic values and expectations than some other employability-oriented curricular interventions. The USEM model is thought to be something that can be grown organically into existing curricula, and some departments which had independently concluded that they would need to review their undergraduate programmes have welcomed USEM as a heuristic. This is critically important because, if academics can feel comfortable with the USEM model and the pedagogic approaches that we are associating with it, they are more likely to treat employability as a legitimate curriculum goal which does not compromise their commitment to the promotion of subject-specific understandings.

The **Skills plus** project was funded to concentrate on curriculum analysis and design. The implementation of curricular change and its evaluation were not funded, but we started out with the expectation that at least some of the participating departments would be fired with the determination to make well-grounded changes when the period of funding ends. There are indications that this is happening. For example, the USEM approach has assisted three very different departments (in the areas of nursing, environmental science and cultural studies) to work on a switch to problem-based learning.

Participating departments have, through the auditing processes, helped us to identify common curriculum impediments to programmes that are concerned with good learning and that simultaneously enhance student claims to employability. The following points, *inter alia*, have been made.

1. Some of the dimensions of employability, and how they relate to teaching/learning experiences in the existing programmes, need to be

made more transparent to both staff and students. There is not only some confusion as to what terms mean, but also uncertainty about how they may be captured in learning activities.

2. Students need to appreciate how their employability is being developed. This appreciation may well need to be included in the pedagogic approach adopted.
3. A need was perceived for the dimensions of employability to be introduced early in a curriculum and revisited periodically. This is a matter of curricular coherence that may have been occluded in the UK during a period when primary attention was being given to restructuring curricula in terms of study units (modules).
4. Many students were nowadays undertaking part-time employment in order to finance themselves through higher education. This situation had some potential (as yet little tapped) for the facilitation of employability-relevant skills.
5. Assessment methods were not always coherent with an employability-sensitive curriculum or with the rather general expectations included in those subject benchmark statements that have been published by the QAA. The assessment of employability, like the assessment of capability (Yorke 1998), needs to be developed if a number of difficulties – technical, economic and ethical – are to be resolved.
6. Curriculum overload was a problem. The enrichment of curricula with employability-related teaching/learning activities implies pedagogical substitution and rearrangement rather than addition of further content. There was a need to determine how the USEM model could be optimally applied. (Where professional and statutory regulatory bodies exert control over content, the challenges are more severe, since it is more difficult to win an argument for emphasising the *quality* rather than the quantity of learning.)
7. Some activities (e.g. fieldwork) which bear on employability were becoming increasingly problematic for institutions because of safety and insurance considerations, and institutions were playing safer than hitherto.

Points 1 and 2 are directly relevant to teaching and learning in that they relate to the identification of, and facilitation of the development of, personal qualities and skills through the curriculum. Points 3 to 6 have implications for teaching and learning, in that they relate primarily to matters of curriculum design. Point 7 refers to a threat to aspects of the curriculum that could contribute, both formally and informally, significantly to the development of employability: whilst the threat might be mitigated in some disciplinary arenas, in others mitigation might not be possible.

Departments have also mapped, against *core* components⁵ of curricula, 39 aspects of employability which we have derived from both existing practice and the psychological literature, and which can be grouped under three headings:

personal qualities (including self-confidence, emotional intelligence [see Goleman 1996], adaptability, willingness to learn, and reflectiveness);
core skills (including numeracy, oral and written communication, listening, critical analysis, and self-management); and
process skills (including applying subject understanding, computer literacy, commercial awareness, political sensitivity, coping with ambiguity and complexity, influencing, teamworking, and negotiating).

In the departmental curriculum audits, the most frequently-mentioned aspects were applying subject understanding, written communication, critical analysis, and oral communication, which is probably not particularly surprising. A long way back in fifth place came listening skills. No doubt reflecting the widespread use of English as the main international language, language skills were the most obvious 'gap' in curricula. Other gaps mentioned with reference to a few curricula were commercial awareness, ethical sensitivity, acting morally, the possession of a malleable self-theory, and resolving conflict. Given the potential for self-theories to impact on other employability-related qualities and skills, this could be seen as a significant curricular weakness. The other 'gaps' noted are arguably second-order, in that they can be built into curricula as and when needed.

THE CHANGE PROCESS

Fullan (1991) reminds us that it is the human aspects of educational innovation that are complex, although governments (and others) persist in treating innovation as something simple to be planned, delivered and evaluated. It is not surprising, then, that top-down interventions tend to fail or get subverted: the erstwhile (governmentally-driven) Enterprise in Higher Education initiative in the UK was one such, where the academic world redefined the initiative's emphasis on 'entrepreneurship' in terms of what it saw as more palatable general constructs, such as 'personal/transferable skills'. The lesson from experience is that, whilst educational leadership implies a measure of 'top-downness', this has to be supported by a strong commitment from the 'bottom up' if an innovation is to succeed.

Texts on quality and on organisational development stress the importance of committed hearts and minds to the implementation of action. Too big a leap, and fertile ground is created for scepticism – even cynicism – to

flourish. More might be gained by proposing less. The *Skills plus* project is not asking participants to make the big leap that we believe is ultimately needed. Rather, we open possibilities up a chink. Our approach is simple and practical (practical in two senses: practical for departments, since the expectations are not impossibly high; practical for us, in that we do not set goals that are unachievable by what would otherwise be an equivalent of doomed-to-failure ‘top-downing’). As we noted earlier, some participants can see that there is potentially more than we are offering, and want more as a result.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

There are two key features of the project which have the potential for uptake well beyond the boundaries of the project.

1. Our conception of employability, which is richer than much that has been promoted under this banner (not least because of the theoretical underpinning that we are giving it). As a consequence, we have so far escaped negative reactions to what is often perceived as an ‘unacademic’ intrusion into higher education.
2. Our methodology, which avoids the excesses of ‘top-downism’ and the danger of homogenisation. We are sensitive to disciplinary cultures, academic integrity and autonomy and, hence, to diversity. What we are doing with departments is more process-based than content-based (in contrast to a number of key skills interventions). In the tradition of the European Union, the operational model is that of subsidiarity – the general framework is adapted to fit local circumstances.

We believe that the way in which we are approaching employability is both valid and academically respectable. Although there is work to be done well beyond the span of the *Skills plus* project, the signals from the project suggest that our work has set off in a potentially fruitful direction, and we believe that the project will, in the longer term, prove to have transfer-value well beyond the shores of the United Kingdom.

NOTES

1. We use the term ‘graduate’ generically in this article to indicate any student who has exited from higher education with any award up to and including the bachelor’s degree with honours. Our focus is on the young undergraduate rather than on those who have entered higher education as mature students with greater experience of life, and often of prior employment.

2. We will use the language of skills although there are severe objections to it, concisely expressed by Holmes (2001).
3. Note that those who come to higher education as highish-fliers in their own school have to cope with being in groups of similar students (or even higher fliers) in higher education: a middling performance amongst peers can be demoralising when the student has been at the top of the pile in school, and the student's self-theory will have a strong bearing on the consequences.
4. Some implications for pedagogy are discussed by Yorke and Knight (2002).
5. Electives are problematic, and have not been included.
6. Can be downloaded from www.hefce.ac.uk via Publications.
7. The currently available statements can be found at www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/benchmarking.htm.
8. Can be downloaded from www.ltsn.ac.uk/about/sub_benchmarking.asp as Working Paper No. 2.
9. A range of project papers can be found at <http://www.open.ac.uk/vqportal/Skills-Plus/home.htm>.

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