Information for Academic Staff on Employability

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Introduction

In the Employability Strategy, employability at the University of Exeter is defined as;

> *'The establishment of clear mechanisms by which students can develop their abilities to use and deploy a wide range of skills and opportunities to enhance their own academic learning and enable them to become more employable'.*

The employability debate is not a new one for Higher Education; the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) highlighted the objectives of providing 'instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour'. The Dearing Report into Higher Education (1997) emphasised the importance of education for employability, focussing on the development of key skills and the significance of work experience. Government policy to enhance the employability of graduates is part of a wider strategy to extend the skills base in the UK. The recent Universities UK/CSU report 'Enhancing employability, recognising diversity' (Harvey *et al.,* 2002) is focussed on making the links between higher education and the world of work.

Employability is a difficult concept to define – it is a multi-dimensional concept, much more complex than the relatively restrictive key skills agenda, focussed on by Dearing (1997), which has obscured a greater understanding of employability. Knight (2001) and Yorke (2001) consider the concept of employability to be a 'synergic combination of personal qualities, skills of various kinds and subject understanding'. Yorke (2001) believes that traditionally, little emphasis has been placed upon a student's personal qualities, but that these could have considerable bearing on a particular student's success.

The Level H (First degree with honours) descriptor in the National Qualifications Framework (QAA, 2001a) refers *inter alia* to qualities and skills necessary for employment, thus giving institutions a fairly firm steer in this direction. This agenda is picked up in a broad sense in the QAA subject benchmark statements (QAA, 2000). The university-wide Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Career Education, Information and Guidance (CEIG) gives a further steer in the direction of employability. The QA for CEIG is intended to ensure that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are preparing students for their future careers, or further study, and that they are producing graduates who are equipped to meet the demands of the employment market today (QAA, 2001b). This code emphasises the importance of HEIs in promoting the development of skills in relation to employment and lifelong learning. The QAA suggests that HEIs should consider integrating CEIG within the curriculum for all HE programmes of study, e.g. through incorporating it into the institution's Teaching and Learning Strategy.

There are two main concepts of employability (Yorke, 2001, Knight & Yorke, 2001):

1) the educational concept, relating to the ability of graduates to tackle 'graduate' jobs. This is connected to the notion of 'capability' whose development was sponsored by the Royal Society of Arts in the late 1980s - 'Higher Education for Capability'. This means that employability of graduates is related to their being equipped for a job and capable of being employed, rather than the job acquisition (Harvey, 2001; van der Heijden, 2001).

2) The ability of the graduate to get a job – any job.

The Government's agenda is to use the second concept in the construction of the Employability Performance Indicators (EPIs), but it is the first concept that most practitioners in HE are primarily concerned with. Good student learning and the curriculum, teaching and assessment that goes with it, describes 'education for employability' well (Knight & Yorke, 2000). This implies that curricula designed to enhance students' employability are also desirable on purely educational grounds.

Employment and employability should be differentiated. Being employed means having a job; being employable means having the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace. Employability from the perspective of HEIs is therefore about producing graduates who are capable and able, and this impacts upon all areas of university life, in terms of the delivery of academic programmes and extra curricula activities. Fundamentally then, employability is about learning – learning how to learn – and employability is not a product, but a process (LTSN, 2002).

Employability can be viewed from three different perspectives:

1. From the employer's perspective, employability is about someone having basic skills and experience.
2. From the student's point of view, employability is about being attractive to employers, in terms of skills, knowledge and experience, and the articulation of these, so that they get recruited.
3. From the institution's perspective, employability is about trying to develop students, through a variety of means to enhance their academic learning, broaden their perspectives and experience and enable them to actively enter the workforce.

Context of University of Exeter

Here at the University of Exeter, the importance of developing the employability of our students and graduates is emphasised by the University Strategy, the Learning and Teaching Strategy, the Employability Strategy and the Business Relations Strategy. The Employability Strategy sets out in detail the objectives that are being worked to to enhance the employability of our graduates and is overseen by the Employability Co-ordinator. The Employability Group has representatives from many sections of the University – Academic Schools, Business Relations Unit, Learning & Teaching Support Centre (LaTiS), Careers Advisory Service, Graduate School, Alumni Office and the Guild, for example, working together to implement the strategy. Integrating employability initiatives into programmes of study that enable students to develop their employability skills and attributes, and enhance their academic learning, is one of the central objectives of the Employability Strategy. You can see below a diagram showing the reporting structure for employability initiatives and PDP.

National Agenda: Hefce; Research Councils; QA Precepts on Careers Education, Information & Guidance, Subject Benchmarks

Senior Management Group

Learning & Teaching Committee
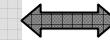**Chair - Deputy Vice-Chancellor**

Student Affairs Committee

Business Relations Strategy Group

LEARNING & TEACHING STRATEGY

Employability Co-ordinator
Dr Dawn Lees

EMPLOYABILITY STRATEGY

Staff Development: for Senior Management Group, Heads of Schools, Careers & Employability Tutors, Staff Induction, open access courses

Personal Development Planning
PESCA Profile (Personal, Employment, Social, Career, Academic
Personal Tutorial System: (Self Appraisal Forms & Development Plans)
Module Description Forms - ILOs
Personal & Key Skills

Employability Group:
Chair - Deputy Vice Chancellor,
Employability Co-ordinator, Academic Representatives, Careers Advisory Service
Learning & Teaching Support Centre (LaTiS),
Alumni Office, Graduate School, CPD, Business Relations Office, Widening Participation,
International Office, Marketing, Guild of Students

University Projects
Team Development
Work Experience modules & materials
Student Business Projects
Exepert - Alumni database
Skills workshops - Guild of Students & Careers Advisory Service
Exeter Personal Development Award

Careers & Employability Tutors Network

Undergraduate & Postgraduate Students

employ*ability*@exeter website

Marketing - *Focusing on our Strengths* - identifying unique selling points; example of good practice; raising profile of university, publications

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What employability means in practice

Enhancing employability for the individual student may be divided into five main areas:

1) knowledge and understanding of the subject of study,
2) developing skills, both subject specific and personal & key skills,
3) work experience – and the articulation of learning from those experiences,
4) personal development - strategic thinking or reflection – thinking about what you have done and how it has helped you develop as a person, not just doing it,
5) possessing appropriate personal qualities – examples are outlined in the framework for the development of personal management skills.

Employability is suggested as being about *how* we teach what we teach. Table 1 sets out the principles of good teaching that are consistent with the development of employability skills and attributes (Knight & Yorke, 2000). These suggestions are already incorporated into many academic programmes.

Table 1   Principles of good teaching that are consistent with the development of employability skills
and attributes, Knight & Yorke (2000).

Students' teaching encounters across a programme and in any one year of it should…

- Alert them to the 'rules of the game' - make them aware of what is valued and how it may be produced, both in general and in each case.
- Use the requisite variety of media (face-to-face, audio-visual, on-line conferencing, asynchronous information and communications technology).
- Use the requisite variety of methods (presentations, Action Learning Sets, work experience, seminars, proctoring, tutorials, Computer-assisted Instruction, independent study projects).
- Be in a variety of styles (coaching, instructing, facilitating, clarifying).
- Meet the standard indicators of good teaching, namely, interest, clarity, enthusiasm.
- Be structured across the programme as a whole so that they get progressively less help and guidance from teachers as they encounter more complex situations, concepts, arrangements, etc.
- This entitlement should be explicit in a programme-wide teaching summary.

Student's learning activities across a programme and in any one year of it will be largely determined by their teaching entitlement. In addition:

- There should be opportunities for depth study.
- Curriculum should not be so crowded that 'surface' learning is encouraged at the expense of understanding.
- Information and communications technology should be treated as a normal learning tool.
- They should expect to work collaboratively, whether learning tasks require it or not.
- Time for strategic thinking, reflection, planning and portfolio-making should be written into the programme; students should know that; and they should know that they are expected to engage with these learning activities involving peers, friends and tutors.
- There should be plentiful feedback that is intended to help future performance (rather than identify informational lapses), especially by encouraging self-theories that value effort and mindfulness.
- This entitlement should be explicit in a programme-wide learning summary.

Students' assessment encounters across a programme and in any one year of it should be compatible with their teaching and learning entitlements. That implies, for example, encountering a variety of assessment methods and modes and getting good feedback from a variety of sources. In addition:

- Summative assessment has the important function of providing trustworthy grades for significant learning achievements. However, by no means all achievements can be affordably and reliably graded with validity. This means that some achievements should not be summatively assessed by academic staff.
- Most assessments will be 'low stakes' assessments, which are intended to improve understanding, or skills, or reflection, or the development of self-theories that sustain achievement.

- Learning criteria should be available at programme and module levels. In many cases these will be 'fuzzy' criteria that guide assessment conversations in low stakes assessment.
- There should be plenty of occasions to get feedback on performance, which will tend to be conversational feedback.
- Peers (other students) will often provide feedback.
- As the programme progresses, students will learn how to become adept at self-assessment.
- Opportunities and support should be provided to help students create learning portfolios that document their claims to educational and employability achievements. For some achievements, this is the best alternative to summative assessment.
- These principles should be explicit in a programme-wide assessment plan.

Figure 1 shows the model of graduate employability developed by Harvey *et al.* (2002), linking together the development of graduate attributes and the obtaining of an appropriate job.

Figure 1: A model of graduate employability development (Harvey *et al.,* 2002)
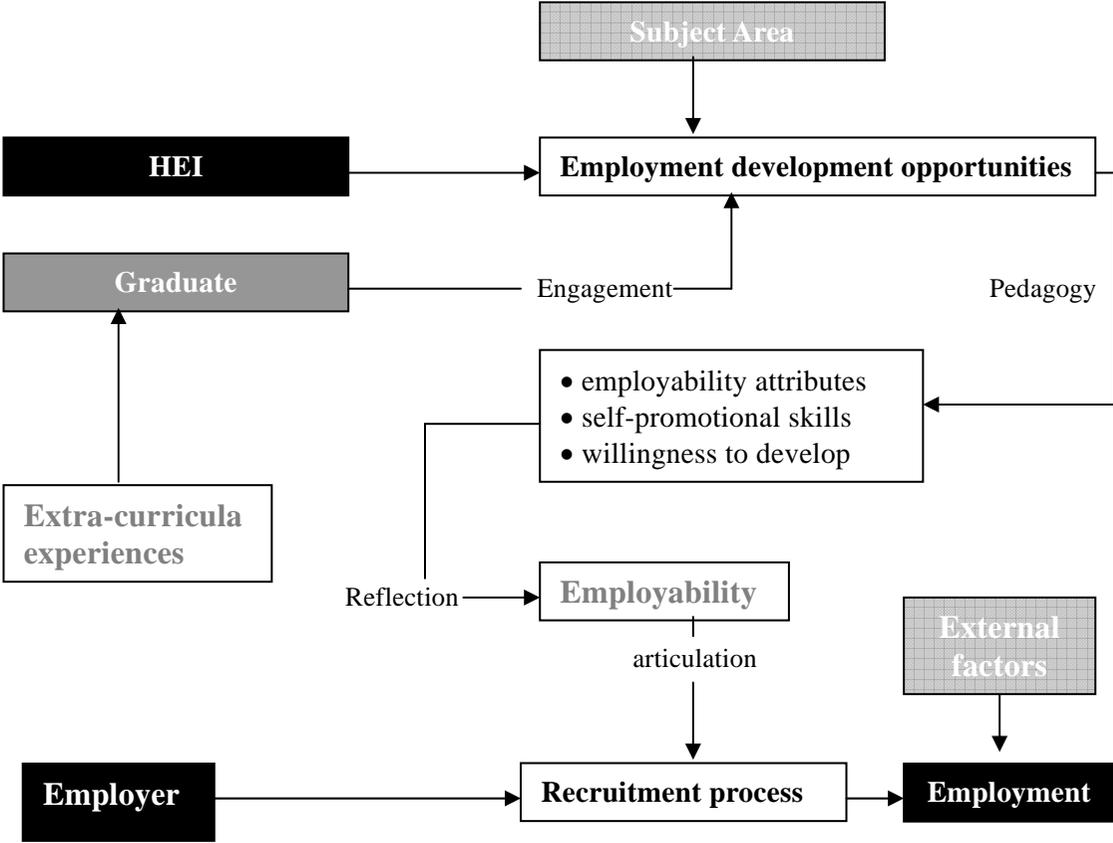
Key Skills are interpreted in many ways by different institutions, but the National Framework for Key Skills a list that is commonly used:

1). communication; 2). numeracy; 3). information technology; 4). learning how to learn;
5). teamwork; 6). problem solving

Key skills are expected to facilitate the acquisition of subject understanding, for example, using IT for research will enable students to learn more about their discipline. Whilst one module may not encompass all of the key skills, an entire programme should enable students to develop these skills throughout the different levels of study.

The University of Exeter uses a slightly different list of skills that it believes are more suited to degree work across the University (see TQA handbook). These are termed Personal and Key Skills and are:

1   Self-management
2   Managing your learning
3   Communication
4   Team/ group work/ managing others
5   Problem solving
6   Data handling

This is the list that is used for the Student Self-Appraisal form for Personal Tutorials that will be phased in to all Schools by 2005 (section on Personal Development Planning). It may be useful for staff to look at 'Key and Personal Skills: A framework for the development of Personal Management Skills' in conjunction with the self-appraisal forms.

Personal Qualities

Knight and Yorke (e.g. 2000, 2001) consider 'Personal qualities' to be an important part of the concept of employability. Drawing on the work of Dweck (1999) and Bandura (1997) there to be two broad categories of self-belief:

1)   an entity/immutable/fixed belief, that one has a set amount of something – intelligence for example, that cannot be changed

2)   an incremental/mutable/malleable belief that development is possible and even probable.

Students with a fixed belief about their intelligence are likely to be discouraged from failure because failure is construed in terms of inadequate intelligence. These students may avoid more challenging work. Conversely, students with a malleable self-belief are more likely to attribute failure to a lack of effort, that poor performance can lead to further learning, and it is the learning that becomes a source of self-esteem. These students are more likely to learn from mistakes and apply this learning to future tasks. It is therefore this type of self-belief that should be encouraged and nurtured. In addition to a student's beliefs about their own fixed/malleable self, students who have a belief in their own ability to produce, organise, undertake tasks (self-efficacy) will have an effect on their performance. Formative assessment is important so that students can learn from prior work and learn from taking risky challenges rather than opting for the 'safer' pieces of work that may be less of a challenge (Yorke, 2001). Yorke (2001) considers that it is not enough to have a range of cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural sub-skills, but that these have to be integrated into the challenges that are faced. Therefore, perceived self-efficacy or

ability will play an important role in choice of degree programme, career choice and personal development, and is thus significant for an individuals' employability. Self-belief will therefore have an impact on every aspect of a student's personal development, on all the learning and from and interpretation of any experience.

Personal Development Planning

The QAA expects students graduating in 2005/06 to have progress files or Personal Development Plans (PDP), documenting their achievements. The primary objective of PDP is to improve the capacity of individuals to understand what and how they are learning, and to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning. Students need to be able to reflect on achievements and present evidence for them. Students need to be aware of how their own employability is being developed both through the curriculum and extra-curricula activities. At the recruitment stage, the value of PDP is in helping applicants to explain and demonstrate what they know, what they can do and what they have done. Getting students into the habit of reflecting upon their activities and achievements and planning the action that they need to take to move on will have long term positive benefits for most graduates. At the University of Exeter we have PESCA a web based system that encourages students to reflect on their progress and planning in five areas: Personal, Employment, Social, Career & Academic. There are however, many other systems that are being used in a similar way across the British Isles, for example, RAPID and PARS). In addition to PESCA, PDP will be delivered here at the University of Exeter through annual student self-appraisal forms and action plans which will form part of the Personal Tutorial System. This will be phased in to all Schools over 2002/03 – 2004/05.

Work Experience

The Department for Education and Skills (2002) suggest that students of all ages can learn from their experiences in the world of work to develop their key competencies and skills and enhance their employability. Employers value people who have undertaken work experience and reflected on it and can articulate and apply what they have learnt (Bennet et al., 2000). Work-based learning requires the learner to manage their own learning, create learning opportunities to enable outcomes to be achieved and provide satisfactory evidence (Jackson, 1999). It can also help students to manage their time more effectively, be more realistic and help to develop a maturer attitude. Increasingly, students are working more than the 15 hours maximum recommended to support themselves whilst they are studying at university (Bibby et al., 2000). A large percentage have to work in order to support themselves because of tuition fees, the lack of grants and an increase in the expectations of the standard of living that students now have (Shabi, 2002). Academia has to accept that most students will be spending some time each week earning money rather than studying. It seems sensible to capitalise on these experiences and utilise them to increase students' understanding of both themselves and the workplace. Voluntary work is also a valuable way for students to contribute to the community and enhance their employability skills and attributes, by learning about themselves and the body they are working for.

Here at Exeter, students can opt to undertake the Independent Work Experience Module (IWE 2000) for which the university will recognise and accredit the learning from work experience as part of their degree. Alternatively, students can participate in the Exeter Personal Development Award, allowing recognition for learning experiences through undertaking paid or voluntary work. This award is run through the Guild and the Careers Advisory Service.

Teamwork

With increasing numbers of students entering HE and reductions in staff contact time, the ability of students to work together efficiently is likely to become increasingly important (Dunne & Rawlins, 2000). Groups of students often work together during the course of their degree studies, for example seminar groups in Law, groups on Geography, Biology or Archaeology field classes, or in laboratory classes. Teamwork is used for enhancing the learning process, and enhancing the knowledge of learning, not just skills development (Nichol, 1997). It is not often, however, that students are trained explicitly

to understand the processes, roles, tensions and means of resolving them that stem from team work (Dunne & Rawlins, 2000). Mutch (1998) suggests that the 'softer skills' of negotiation and compromise can be honed from working in teams where the primary aim is knowledge based, and these are important attributes in the workplace. Each autumn, Team Development courses are held on the Hockey pitch behind the Innovations Centre. In October 2002, ten Schools participated, with approximately 1,000 undergraduates being trained in team working skills.

Lifelong Learning

Educational policy in Britain is currently putting great emphasis on lifelong learning (DfEE, 1998). This is in response to the recognition that the typical patterns of every day working life are changing, thereby making more varied demands on an individual's skills (Harvey, 1997).

Atkins (1999) suggests that Dearing (1997) regards the undergraduate experience as a one-stop shop for the development of employability skills, terminating in graduation. HE could be seen as an environment to improve the performance of future employees, so the concept of lifelong learning offers more scope, by enabling students to develop skills which will give them a foundation and basis for future learning and development. The recent approach to lifelong learning is more than a second-chance at education – it sees a well educated and trained population as essential for future economic prosperity, innovation, and social and political cohesion (Harvey, 2000a). The view of education as preparatory to work is being challenged by the concept of lifelong learning, which sees education as an activity each individual engages with throughout life and under conditions which favour motivation and success (Skilbeck & Connell, 1996). However, there is still ambiguity about what lifelong learning means for HE in practice, so that lifelong learning tends to be associated with the employability agenda and to an extent with the Widening Participation agenda.

Conclusion

With over half of each generation now having the opportunity to enter HE (50% of under 30 year olds by 2010), preparation for the world of work has to encompass a much broader spectrum of skills and competencies than it used to (Skilbeck & Connell, 1996). With a greater number of graduates, they will be expected to take up employment in a wider range of areas than previously.

Employability skills and attributes will be developed through a combination of the programme of study undertaken; the methods of learning, teaching and assessment that are encountered, any paid or voluntary work that is undertaken whilst at university and through the student's social life and involvement with Guild activities. These encounters should enable an individual to develop the self in a general sense too, for good citizenship and lifelong learning.

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