

## **GRADUATE 'EMPLOYABILITY' DO WE REALLY MEAN 'PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT'?**

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In Issue 35, summer edition of NCGE News we featured an article on Graduate 'employability'. As a follow on to that article, here we offer more detail into the programmes that Oxford Brookes Careers and Employment Centre developed in the area of Personal Development Planning (PDP). This supplement highlights the importance of personal literacy both for employability and learning.

In 2009, Oxford Brookes Careers and Employment Centre piloted a new, intensive, two day Team and Leadership programme endorsed by the Institute of Leadership and Management to enable students to practise working in teams on a range of problem solving real world tasks. The programme includes a mix of short theory based presentations and practical activities. The programme is open to all students and attracted participants from all disciplines and levels of study from first year to post-graduate and doctoral students. Teams are randomly selected and work together across the two days with an assessor giving continual individual and whole team feedback on performance. Participants are also required to give feedback to each other and to other teams. At the end of each day, time is reserved for participants to reflect on what they have learned and to identify areas for development. Based on the success of this pilot, the university is running four programmes in 2010 with 200 students. Evaluations so far have revealed that participation has enabled students to really understand themselves

and their strengths, and given them confidence to apply those strengths in future academic work and employment, which does not appear to have been adequately developed previously, elsewhere in the curriculum. A high number of participants have been business students who on the face of it would have had this type of experience in their courses, but seem to have needed a two day intensive training programme to make the experience 'real'.

In many courses 'employability' related activities are embedded. Often these are in vocational subjects (Publishing, Hotel & Restaurant Management, Business) and often include, as part of the assessment, a presentation, written CV and a reflective written piece. The Careers & Employment Centre have found little evidence that students on these courses are more likely to be able to write reflectively, present effectively or write a CV that would stand the test of a graduate recruiter as a result of these activities. In Autumn 2009, it was

decided that professional careers staff would 'mark' the CV component of such a professional practice module. Academic staff facilitated seminars on CV writing as part of the taught programme and students were given information on researching jobs, where to find information on job hunting, and writing applications, and help available from the University Careers Centre. Each CV was given extensive written feedback on the document, along with a clear marking sheet. Of the 112 submissions six were assessed as 'very likely to gain an interview in a competitive market', the majority were assessed as 'straight to bin'. Three students subsequently came to the careers centre disappointed but agreeing with the feedback and seeking help to improve. A total of 43 students complained in writing that the marking was 'too hard'. The rest did nothing, neither complained nor sought feedback.

A common problem identified by us with embedded careers education is that unless the assessment mirrors that of current labour market requirements students can have a false belief that their CV, application form, interview or group exercise performance is adequate for employment purposes. In addition, students' readiness to engage with employment related activity is variable. For many students, engaging with careers education is not seen as relevant for their life now; they are not focussed on the future, but on their life in and outside of university. Assessment of career development learning is seen as instrumental, the mark being more important than the learning.

## **Problems with learning**

But the problem appears not just to be an issue of skills development or career development learning. It is arguably an issue about learning itself, and the quality of that learning.

*'...students become more interested in the mark and less interested in the subject over the course of their studies.'* (Newstead 2002, p2).

It has also been argued (Rust 2000, p126) that modular or unitised courses especially 'compartmentalise' *'the students' attitudes to what they are learning, "ticking off" modules as they are taken, and failing to see, or look for, a connection between them.'*

But whether or not they are modular, there are certainly a disquieting number of research findings indicating a declining use of deep and contextual approaches to study as students' progress through their degree programmes (eg. Watkins & Hattie, 1985; Kember et al, 1997; Richardson, 2000; Zhang & Watkins, 2001).

## **Employability and learning**

It is an easy mistake to assume that employability simply means the ability of a graduating student to get a job. But it does not. I would agree with Harvey's conception of employability, that it is *'more than obtaining key skills'* simply in order to get a job, but rather should be seen as *'a range of experiences and attributes developed through higher-level learning. Employability is not a "product" but a process of learning..... Employability is, thus,*

*more about ability than it is about being employed. It is about developing as a critical empowered learner.'* (2003). This means that our concerns about employability and concerns over the quality of learning are essentially the same concerns.

This argument is also supported by the evidence that students seem to increasingly view HE in narrow terms of employability, and with an instrumentalism which arguably works against, and actually undermines learning (Tomlinson, 2008).

### **Graduate attributes at Oxford Brookes**

In the current discussions about graduate attributes at Oxford Brookes University, I have argued that focus should be kept on what should be special, if not unique, to a graduate, that we keep the list short, and that we concentrate on attributes rather than contributory sub-sets of skills. And that rather than being seen as a distinct attribute, or set of skills, employability should be seen as an overarching, inevitable outcome from the combination of the graduate attributes. To this end we have discussed five graduate attributes, and four of them will probably not surprise anybody:

- Academic literacy
- Research literacy
- Digital literacy
- Global citizenship

But I believe that a fifth attribute which we have suggested as '*Critical self-awareness and personal literacy*', in essence the ability to 'read oneself' would if demonstrated and practised enable a student to be employable:

Understanding how one learns, the ability to assess the work of oneself and others, and to identify ones strengths and weaknesses. The ability to identify, critically analyse and meet one's own information needs, and to organise oneself and perform as an autonomous, effective and independent learner. The ability to relate to other people, and function in diverse groups, including the development of appropriate interpersonal skills, and emotional intelligence.

This can be seen as similar to, and a development of, the 'self-efficacy and personal qualities' component combined with some aspects of the 'metacognition' component of the employability framework developed by the Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team (ESECT) funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Yorke, 2010).

### **Personal literacy and employability**

Employers of graduates take personal development seriously. They want to see evidence that graduates have shown commitment to developing themselves during their studies and from extra curricular activities. Graduates need to be able to know

themselves and their strengths and be able to provide examples of how they have demonstrated these. Examples of how they have changed their approach to something as a result of feedback, when they pushed themselves beyond what was required, when they have persuaded someone else to a different point of view, what skills they brought to a team, how they have motivated others, adapted to a new situation or group, being reliable: showing up on time, dealing with mundane tasks with enthusiasm, diffusing a difficult situation with tact and diplomacy, juggling priorities and implementing back up plans to deal with the unexpected, thinking quickly and using initiative, keeping an open mind, going above and beyond ones own expectations. The relationship between these requirements of employers and theories of emotional intelligence is clear: the ability to read ones' own emotions and recognise their impact on others and make decisions, controlling one's emotions to adapt to changing situations, ability to sense, understand and react to the emotions of others and the ability to inspire, influence and develop others and manage conflict.

### **How might we best ensure the development of personal literacy?**

The challenge now facing us at Brookes is how to implement a culture of learning and personal development and ensure its inclusion in the curriculum.

Some other decisions that have already been taken should help. For instance, the university already has the policy

that all undergraduate programmes must have an explicit 'pathway' developing research skills and a commitment to 'research literacy' as a core graduate attribute. And it is very much the intention that this will shape the staff/student relationship, with students seen (and seeing themselves), from day one, as novice entrants to a community of practice embarking on the common enterprise of the production of knowledge. The University has also recently agreed an 'Assessment Compact' between students and staff which includes a commitment to the development of the assessment literacy of students and recognition that the ability to assess the work of both self and others must be seen as an essential skill for all graduates. But even if successful, neither of these initiatives will specifically require or explicitly develop critical self-awareness and personal literacy.

The University does also have the leadership development course, previously mentioned (above) which does explicitly focus on self-reflection but it is optional, and outside the curriculum, and currently only available for 200 students a year.

Other institutions run a variety of extra curricular interventions. For example at Napier the Confident Futures Programme offers 'Personal skills for professional development' (<http://www.napier.ac.uk/confidentfutures>) The programme is designed around a series of personal and professional development workshops designed to build well founded confidence and enhance the sort of soft skills and attitude demanded by

employers. These include assertiveness, creative problem solving, embracing change, managing conflict, knowing yourself and others. Much more like professional development programmes offered by employers but also enabling participants to gain skills and attributes that will enhance their academic performance especially in a curriculum that assesses more than knowledge.

In many ways, Personal Development Planning (PDP) would seem to offer, at least in theory, a way of ensuring, within the curriculum, the necessary level of personal reflection for all students and to be a logical place for students to integrate, and make explicit, what they have learnt. However, in practice, we know that embedding PDP in the curriculum has been problematic, with academics failing to see its relevance to 'their' curriculum and feeling that it is being 'shoe-horned' in (Johnson, 2010). And for that reason, in some institutions, PDP has been seen as something of an optional add-on, left largely outside the curriculum, and often based on student engagement with a piece of software.

Perhaps through continued arguments for the importance of personal literacy, both for employability and for learning, PDP can be revisited, sharpening its focus, and looking at how it might be more effectively structured in a curriculum that includes professional and personal development. And my suggestion would be for universities to be explicit about the expectations of students to perceive themselves as professional from entry and think about offering an underpinning professional

and personal development programme within each programme of study for all students, as graduate employers do for their staff.

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