Employability Skills and Curriculum Planning

A review of the literature relating to employability and curriculum design reveals a significant body of work concerning associated theory and practice. Indeed, a vibrant community of practitioners and commentators has grown up around the employability agenda populated from the worlds of politics, education and industry, complete with its own local celebrities.

The range of the employability debate and the diverse forces which it brings to bear on the HE curriculum justify an examination of this body of work, much of which is characterised by its clarity and the consistency of its approach.

The following sources offer a good starting point for background research into employability and curriculum design:

- **Employability in Higher Education - what it is, what it is not** - Mantz Yorke 2006
- **Embedding Employability into the Curriculum** - Mantz Yorke, Peter Knight 2006
- **Employability: Judging and communicating achievements** - Mantz Yorke, Peter Knight 2006
- **Pedagogy for Employability** - The Pedagogy for Employability Group 2006

All of these guides, and a wide range of other resources, are available from the Higher Education Academy web-site: [www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk).

Research Findings and Issues Arising

Our research with those involved in curriculum planning and delivery in Higher Education revealed a number of issues relating to the integration of employability skills, and to curriculum design overall. It is interesting to note that the current focus on the delivery of employability skills has also appeared to stimulate general interest in curriculum design.

**Issue 1**

Although the theoretical model of the curriculum is often presented as an orderly and methodical construction, the actuality is a great deal less straightforward. The curriculum is driven by a diverse range of forces, some of which are conflicting, and its implementation influenced considerably by the individuals involved in teaching and learning. Although the core curriculum and its key outcomes are documented and verified, there is still scope for organic growth in its actual delivery:

*It is important to monitor and assess the employability process. You need to look at actual teaching and learning which is taking place and not just assess it in terms of stated aims and outcomes…*[Curriculum Development Manager]

**Issue 2**

The employability skills agenda does not drive the curriculum; departmental focuses are primarily on issues relating to their own fields of learning:

*Lecturers are primarily there to carry out research into, and impart knowledge of, their own specialist subject area…*[Lecturer]

This is not a negative observation, but it suggests that employability skills may not always the highest priority when curricula are initially designed. This factor presents an additional challenge to those with responsibility for the implementation of the employability skills agenda.
Issue 3

The work of key practitioners and educational developers in the area of employability does not seem to be widely known to teaching staff outside of this specialist area; there appears to be a lack of communication between theorists and practitioners, even when they are based within the same departments – one lecturer mentioned that he had worked in the same department as a well known and widely published authority on employability, but could not recall any instant where this expertise had been shared with colleagues.

Issue 4

Some teaching staff commented on the fact that the integration of employability skills into the curriculum was not an issue, as they were already embedded within their teaching and learning:

Most of the time we find that when the teaching and learning strategy comes down, it hasn't really been an issue, because we are usually doing it. We've been doing group work for 18 years…[Lecturer]

Strategies for Success

A number of respondents described practices which they felt to be particularly useful when planning curriculum approaches for the integration of employability skills:

Integrating Employability Skills

The integration of employability skills into the subject area of the course programme was the most widely used approach reported by teaching staff.

Integration was seen as essential for student motivation:

We don’t have a specific module for technical writing, we integrate it into the module. in one way, having a stand alone module would make sense, but the problem is, a lot of the universities have found is motivating it, and we’ve gone down the route of integrating key skills in the modules we teach…[Lecturer]

Employer Consultation

The importance of involving representatives from business and industry in curriculum design, a long standing practice in most HEIs, was referred to positively by both teaching staff and employers:

We have an industrial advisory board and we are constantly working with them…so far, they seem very happy with our students…[Lecturer]

Of course, we have an interest in working with the University and having input into the design of their programmes. They are training our future employees…[Graduate Recruiter]

The issue of employer consultation does have some implications for the nature of graduateness, and how far Universities should consider the needs of employers when designing their curricula. This is an issue which requires further discussion by practitioners in Higher Education and policy makers at University and national level.

Course Verification

A number of respondents involved in curriculum design pointed to the role of course verification in supporting the integration of employability skills. It was generally felt that the process of programme
approval was potentially an effective mechanism for ensuring that employability skills were present within the curriculum, and that their inclusion was checked and monitored.

**Employability Skills Audits**

Employability skills audits can be used to establish baseline criteria against which the inclusion of skills within curriculum areas can be assessed. The design of the audit tool can be used to define the employability skills to be included within the programme. An audit can help to ensure that a cohesive and consistent approach to the integration of employability skills is established across curriculum areas and that all skills are represented.

**Mapping Employability Skills in the Curriculum**

Although employability skills are commonly mapped within the curriculum as part of the course approval process, it would appear that this practice is not adopted in relation to students’ course programme information. Mapping the employability skills within student activities and assignments may help students to see their relevance and improve their ability to identify and articulate their own employability skills  

[see sections: Employability and Personal Development Planning, Employability and Oral Communication]

**Hearts and Minds**

The strategies discussed so far have largely focused on systems and processes. Effective delivery of the employability skills agenda requires integration with policy and procedures, but also needs the support, goodwill and ownership of teaching staff. We have seen that lecturers are generally in favour of the employability agenda, but a deeper level of commitment and engagement is required for it to be embedded effectively within individual curriculum areas. One means of achieving this involvement is to allocate specialist projects relating to employability to specific subject areas within University schools or departments. This devolvement of activity which is frequently carried out centrally, allows interested members of staff within schools to develop their knowledge and experience of employability and relate it to their specialist subject area.

Similarly, discussion groups and working parties relating to employability can be used to draw together isolated pockets of interest across the University into forums of ideas and shared practice.

An example of where these approaches have been put into practice at Sheffield Hallam University is included in: Examples of Current Practice, below.

**Examples of Current Practice**

**Employability and Curriculum Design**  
Kenneth Aitchison, Institute of Field Archaeologists, and Dr. Melanie Giles, University of Manchester  
[http://www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/guides/archaeology/Teaching_and_Learning-guide_4-fullversion.pdf](http://www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/guides/archaeology/Teaching_and_Learning-guide_4-fullversion.pdf)

This guide, aimed at both teachers and learners, seeks to explore the debate in the role of higher educational institutions (HEIs) in preparing people for professional life: the tension between delivery of discipline specific knowledge and skills, and broader development of critical and analytical skills, precariously balanced against the demand from employers for field-ready archaeologists...

**Sheffield Hallam University: Embedding, Enhancing and Integrating Employability**  
[http://www.shu.ac.uk/cetl/e3i/](http://www.shu.ac.uk/cetl/e3i/)

In 2005 HEFCE named Sheffield Hallam University a national Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in Embedding, Enhancing and Integrating Employability (E3I). Started in September 2005, the CETL works to improve the employability of Sheffield Hallam University students…
Integrating Employability, PDP and Work-based Learning within the Curriculum
Anne Gifford and Jane Robertson, University of Paisley

This case study outlines an integrated approach to curriculum design being adopted by the School of Media, Language and Music for the academic session 2004-2005 which places employability for creative and cultural industries at the top of the organising hierarchy for programme frameworks…