

Employability Skills: What are we talking about here?

There is a large body of debate relating to the definition of employability - it is not our intention to add to it here. For those whose interests lie in this direction, there is a considerable choice of reading material at their disposal. The Higher Education Academy has a searchable database of employability publications and materials available through its web site at: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability.asp>

The current position of the employability agenda within Higher Education has, however, been partly defined by this debate and it is helpful to identify some of the key themes within it.

Employability as a Performance Indicator

Employability is frequently spoken about in relation to the ranking of institutions with the University league tables, in which Employability is used as a performance indicator relating to the employment rates of graduates as measured and defined by the HESA Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE). There has been widespread criticism of the scope of the DLHE data as a limited indicator of Employability. This criticism has focused on the potentially anomalous use of first year graduate respondents and definitions of what constitutes a 'graduate' job. There is universal agreement that Employability is not simply about getting a job. HESA are now planning a longitudinal study of graduate destinations.

Employability as a Commodity

The concept of Employability as a commodity is closely linked to government policy in which graduates represent a valuable resource in the increasingly knowledge based economy. The ability of graduates to be able to respond to the changing needs of a rapidly developing labour market is seen as vital for economic growth.

Employability as Skills, Knowledge and Attributes

The definition of employability that underpins the work of the Higher Education Academy and ESECT is:

"A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make 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."

This definition seems entirely reasonable, but does raise questions about the nature of the personal attributes to which they refer. *Personal attributes* is a wide category and suggests an 'x factor' ingredient relying on personality and disposition which may be outside the influence of our academic institutions. Interestingly, the students we spoke to tended to subscribe to the 'personal attributes' definition of Employability.

Employability to meet Employer Needs

Increasingly, employers are demanding skills from graduates which are outside the subject area of their course of study in Higher Education. Indeed, some employers have placed less importance on graduates' actual degree discipline in favour of the more generic skills which they have acquired:

Employers generally see a graduate's achievements related to the subject discipline as necessary but not sufficient for them to be recruited. In some employment contexts the actual subject discipline may be relatively unimportant. Achievements outside the boundaries of the discipline (such as the

possession of so-called 'soft skills' are generally considered to be important in the recruitment of graduates... [Employability in Higher Education: what it is-what it is not, Mantz Yorke 2006]

Significantly, extra curricular activities such as work experience, volunteering and involvement in clubs and societies are seen as having equal importance in this context as the knowledge and experience acquired through academic study (see section: Employability and Work Experience]

Employability Skills in the Context of this Guide

This guide focuses on the skills set which has been identified as a fundamental element of graduate employability and takes its point of reference from the key skills framework:

- Written communication
- Oral communication
- Group work
- Problem solving
- Application of number (numeracy).

We believe that, although by no means exhaustive, these key, or transferable skills, are central to the attainment of graduate employability and that their absence seriously undermines its other aspects.