

Employability Skills and Graduate Attributes

Jane Hadley
University of Wolverhampton

Abstract There are a number of government reviews and white papers, which discuss how universities have a major role in providing students with employability and graduate attributes.

By embarking on a literature review to assess these requirements and an examination of the research undertaken with employers, students and universities, this review was able to identify that universities must continually monitor their programmes and assessment methods to ensure they are delivering the employability skills and graduate attributes required by local employers. This suggests that universities should consider undertaking research in their region to identify the specific needs within their local business communities.

Key words: Employability, Embedding, Skills, Local Employers, Graduates.

Correspondence: Journal of Health and Social Care Improvement FEHWjhsci@wlv.ac.uk

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Introduction

Every job, regardless of level, needs a range of skills and knowledge. There is an expectation of the degree of skills a university student will have when they leave university. These are known as employability skills or graduate attributes. They may include technical skills, the ability to take the initiative, the ability to be a team player, good quality communication skills or have passion and flexibility (BIS, 2015). However, OECD (2016 p.50) indicates that one in ten graduates have poor “basic skills” which could result in them never repaying their student loans. This may explain why over one thousand graduate jobs were not filled in 2015 within the top 100 graduate employers. (Higherfliers, 2016)

There is a long history of Government reviews, white papers and initiatives to address these issues and expectations of employers, students and universities. This literature in context review will examine this history. It will move on to how students, employers and universities manage and deliver these expectations. It will conclude with a research question that could add further help and assistance to assure that graduates of vocational educational providers, leave with the skills and attributes required by local employers.

Government policy.

There have been many government reports and white papers in the last 19 years that have debated the issue of employability and the role Higher Education (HE) especially universities, had to play in ensuring their graduates left with the skills needed by employers. ‘The Dearing Report ‘(1997), ‘Lambert Review ‘(2003), Leitch (2006), Students at the Heart of the System (2011), Wilson (2012) all highlighted aims and objectives they expected Universities to implement. However, employability was first highlighted in The Robbins Report, (1963). The report identified four main aims of HEI’s The first aim was “instructions of skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour” (Robbins, 1963, p.6). The committee felt that this needed to be the first identified aim to ensure it was not forgotten. They believed the work of HE’s should have a distinct direction regarding the development of individuals (Robbins, 1963). Two papers had been written examining the effect this report had on education 50 years later. One by the London School of Economics and Political Science (2014) and the other by David Willets (2013) who was the Minister for Universities. Neither report discussed how this first aim had been implemented.

The employability theme continued into the next major report regarding HE provision by Dearing in 1997. Throughout the 400 plus page report Dearing constantly referred back to the role universities needed to play in ensuring their graduates were equipped and proficient with the skills needed to ensure economic growth. The theme of employability was not just a strand throughout the report; there was a whole chapter dedicated to the topic. Chapter 9, p.130 stated, “learning should be increasingly responsive to employment needs and include the development of general skills, widely valued in employment.” The chapter went on to examine employers’ views and their beliefs regarding the skills and attributes they wanted and expected to employ their graduates with (Dearing 1997). However, eight years later, only 37% of employers felt the graduates they were employing had those skills that had been identified. (Manpower 2005 in Lauillard 2007)

In contrast to the findings of the Manpower survey, the Lambert Review (2003) suggested that employers were happy with the skills of many of their graduates. The Lambert Review (2003) was the first of its kind to examine the relationship between businesses and universities. Whilst the report mainly focused on research and development, it did discuss how students felt work placements were of value and how future students could benefit from knowing how graduates had progressed in relationship to pay and employability. However, employers expressed concern regarding how their needs and the courses offer by some universities did not match.

The review made a number of recommendations such as all universities should publish undergraduate and post graduate employability for each department to help students make an informed decision regarding their future. They also wanted HEFCE to guarantee their next review would take into consideration the needs and views of employer led bodies and the public and voluntary sector. (Lambert 2003)

In 2010, six years after the original recommendation from the Lambert Review and as part of a long term review between the Department of Business, Innovations and Skills and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, (HEFCE) all universities were “invited” to publish an ‘employability statement’ on the Unistats web site.

Unistats is the official government website that provides information to enable prospective students to compare different universities from information provided from the National Students Survey and the Destination of Leavers Survey (Unistats 2016). The reasoning behind this was to enable students to have a greater understanding of the success of previous students. However, the invite was compulsory and all universities had to respond. (HEFCE 2010)

When the coalition government published their white paper in 2011, “Students at the Heart of the System” it built on the Skills for Sustainable Growth (2010) white paper. The main emphasis of The Skills for Sustainable Growth paper (2010) was around apprenticeships and Further Education, (FE) with HE mentioned as the progression for both pathways. However, there was no specific direction regarding what HE was expected to delivery or how. Unfortunately, in 2014, OECD reported that there was “limited provision of post-secondary Vocational Education Training”. This suggested that this part of the White paper has not materialised. In the Students at the Heart of the System paper, the government identified they wanted the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship and National Consortium of University Entrepreneurs to liaise with HE to provide students with opportunities to acquire enterprise skills. The government also requested Professor Sir Tim Wilson to conduct a review in the same vein as the Lambert review (2003) examining the working relationship between industry and universities. (BIS 2011)

The Wilson Review (2012) was not as heavily based on research. It identified a wider range of measures need to strengthen the relationship between the universities and businesses. The review identified that students needed to have greater access to pertinent work experience during their time at university to increase their graduate attributes. To reinforce the work experience element it was recommended that “skills development” should be incorporated within degree courses and recorded for future development and employers. Wilson supported the government’s recommendation about entrepreneurial skills but Wilson wanted this to be delivered within the curriculum in the same way as general skills development. To support these recommendations, Wilson wanted the university careers services to create a link between the local business and the university. These links were to

identify placement opportunities and develop the programme to deliver the skills and attributes wanted by the businesses. (Wilson 2012).

In the latest business-university review, the Dowling Review (2015) made 32 recommendations. None of which were to do with skills or attributes needed. The skills were addressed in a separate 245 page report from Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) entitled "Understanding Employers Graduate Recruitment and Selection Practices" (2015). This was a very comprehensive report about what employers wanted and expected of students and how they felt the input from universities was imperative in making a difference to the quality of skills and attributes of students. The report also discussed how small and medium employers' felt there was a skill discrepancy between their needs and what universities perceived they needed.

The history of reviews and legislation suggests that even though employability skills had been identified by many as a responsibility of universities, it may not have been executed in the manner employers and students wanted or needed. After examining the various reviews and white papers, it would appear that universities were seen as the place where students learnt and developed their employability skills and attributes. Pegg *et al.*, (2012) suggested that universities were responsible for the pedagogy for employment. This meant they should have been directing the ways in which teaching and learning took place regarding attributes, knowledge and skills to develop increased learning and career attainment.

However as there was a lack of consistence, concerns were being expressed regarding the implementation, omissions and shortcomings, clarity of terminology and relevance of how universities were preparing their students for the world of work. (Daniels and Brooker 2014). The widening participation agenda also meant there were more graduates competing for jobs. (Gunn *et al.*, 2010)

For these skills to be embedded in the curriculum, staff needed to understand what was expected of them and why it was important. Many academics felt that they were now providers of skills not nurturers of knowledge and questioned why universities were marketing themselves as providers of graduates with the skills, understanding and personal attributes required by employers. (Daniels and Brooker 2014) Gunn *et al.*, (2010) agreed with this as they identified that academics were facing "confusion,

ambivalence and definitional ambiguity" as they felt the employers' requirements were not always realistic and students were unable to see the importance of these skills and attributes. However, Pegg *et al.*, (2012) made it very clear they felt that universities had a responsibility to the students to assist them in making the connections between their learning activities and how they translated into employability skills. Yet, Tymon (2013) identified that first and second year students did not make the connection between the activities. It was only in the third year, when the students started to actively look for work was the connection made.

To address this issue, many universities developed employability awards in an effort to engage students and help them understand the skills employers wanted. Tibby (2012) believed the awards and what they meant confused employers and employers would prefer to employ students who had relevant work experience. BIS (2015) supported these ideas, as employers did not expect their skills requirements such as good communication skills and the ability to work as part of a team to change. Tymon (2013) established that students understood the importance of work experience as his research showed up to 90% of students felt "work experience was the best way to gain the skills they needed for work". However, Tibby (2013) acknowledged that only 9% of small and medium businesses offered work experience to university students. Bourner and Millican (2011) identified that many employers valued volunteering as more valuable than work experience when students had been involved with more than one organisation and completed more than 50 hours. However, both Bourner and Millican (2011) and Tibby (2013) suggested that if volunteering was not part of the academic course, barriers such as lack of flexibility and lack of finances for students who were part-time, mature with caring responsibilities and or from lower socio-economic groups could put that group of students at a disadvantage.

There is also an issue of what is a graduate skill or attribute. Tibby (2012) and Tymon (2013) both recognised that students lacked the understanding of the skills employers wanted. When asked employers rated communications skills as their number one requirement but students ranked this 16th. (Tymon 2013) Pegg *et al.*, (2012) felt that every university needed to identify the needs of their local employers

and examine the diversity of their students before deciding how to deliver their pedagogy.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2015) published a framework for HEI's to guide universities through the process of embedding employability throughout degree courses. Embedding was seen as being more effective than having bolt-on modules.



Figure 1: Embedding Employability Framework. (HEA 2015)

This framework places embedding employability at the heart of the model. The next layer indicates that the ten strands are equally important and need each other to ensure the success of the model. The four stages inform and draw on the relevant needs, wants and priorities of stakeholders, industry, colleagues and employers. This is how the framework can be personalised to each institutions needs as suggested by Pegg *et al.*, (2012). This framework could be the answer regarding the issue of academics ambivalence if they can develop a greater understanding of the role they can play in embedding employability.

As Daniels and Brooker (2014) pointed out that while universities could try and produce students with the graduate skills and attributes employers believed they wanted, they could not guarantee successful outcomes and students had to take some responsibility in building their own sense of identity.

Recommendations.

It is suggested that people who undertake vocational course such as health and social care, nursing and social work are more likely to live within a 25 mile radius of their education provider (OECD, 2014) therefore, it is recommended that further, local research needs to be undertaken. A small-scale piece of qualitative research could benefit and inform a University regarding the perception local businesses has of the skills and attributes they could expect if they were to employ a graduate of a local university and how lecturers feel they are embedding those skills into the curriculum for students.

Conclusion

Somehow, all the different needs, wants and perspectives, need to be drawn together to enable universities to provide students with the skills and attributes needed and wanted by employers to ensure the UK is able to be competitive against other countries.

This literature in context review, demonstrates that the three parties need to work considerably closer together to provide the economy with world-class graduates. Further qualitative research within the university and local business would inform a university as to the success of their efforts of producing graduates with the skills and attributes needed by local employers.

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