Education students, employers and employability: a report on a small scale project in 2004.

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Abstract

Employability isn't an issue for Education graduates. They always get jobs don't they? But what about the increasing number coming through on Education courses that have no vocational element? What do such graduates do?

Not all of them want to go into teaching. That's why they chose to do a degree without QTS (qualified teacher status). How do employers view their qualifications? What do they need to do to secure that perfect job? And what are the prospects for their careers in the long term?

This paper reports on a recent project which investigated Education courses in terms of the employability of graduates at one English post '92 institution.

The paper examines the initial findings from the project. These include data from a survey of a hundred and twenty seven undergraduates, focus group interviews with both students and staff and a student workshop. A small number of employers also give their views.

Introduction

Within many disciplines in Universities, there has been a growing debate on the issue of employability, fuelled by diverse sources such as the introduction of PDPs in 2005, widening participation agendas and the increasing numbers of students entering Higher Education. This debate is often presented as the polarisation of arguments about whether students should be studying purely for the knowledge and skills they will acquire on their degree course, as opposed to the ways in which the knowledge and skills acquired will enable them, as graduates, to gain successful employment (Knight, 2002:192).

In education departments there has been a different perspective. The majority of education students are taking vocational courses leading to Qualified Teacher Status and their employability skills are clearly defined through the Standards for QTS. Not all students do achieve QTS, of course, and of those that do, ten will move out of classroom teaching within three years (Robinson and Smithers, 2001). But this paper does not focus on students who are taking courses leading to QTS. For us, the focus is upon those students who have chosen to study Education (and/or Early Childhood Studies) as a degree subject in its own right. What skills for employment are they acquiring through their degree courses? And how important is employability to students and staff at one post 1992 institution?

What is employability?

Firstly we need to consider what we mean by employability. Definitions are variable and often confusing. The polarised arguments referred to above also influence definitions, with one academic doing a card sort for our project stating that employability was 'an ideology'.

In the literature, there are notions of key skills (Dearing, 1997) notably communication, numeracy, ICT and 'learnacy' (the latter from Claxton 1998). Closely allied to these are notions of transferable or generic skills, learned in one context but able to be used, or 'transferred' to other contexts. Transferable skills may be further defined as context dependent or independent (Bridges, 1983). The development of such skills (which include communication, team work and problem solving, now embedded in University courses), also challenges the notion that undergraduates should be primarily acquiring detailed subject knowledge and understanding from their courses. The polarisation of the argument is unhelpful. There is no reason why University courses should not enable students to acquire both subject knowledge and a range of key or transferable skills. Indeed the National Audit Office (2002) stated that almost all HEIs do build key employment skills into the curriculum. As Jenkins (1989) notes, Universities and their staff 'do have a responsibility……to help students develop skills (and knowledge) that will be valued in the workplace…….and that will allow them to manage their careers in an ever-changing employment market.'(SEDA Paper 89, 1989,p.2) This resonates with Sills' definition of employability:

> 'It is not just about getting a specific job as a graduate but focuses on how
> their range of skills and qualities enhance the potential for success in a range

of life-long employment, paid or unpaid, and including self-employment.' (power point presentation, Burlington Group, 22 July 2003)

Thus recent work on definitions of employability has become more complex and sophisticated; a meshing of different threads. The USEM model (Yorke and Knight, 2002, drawing on Bennett, 2000) brings together subject knowledge, a range of skills including key skills together with personal qualities and notions of metacognition. The latter is defined as a focus on student awareness of their own learning including reflecting on their own capability:

> 'Employability goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills, and is evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience.' (Yorke, 2004, p.11)

Academic conceptions of employability have also, of course, been influenced by employer views of graduate attributes which highlight the importance of personal communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills amongst others. (Knight and Yorke, 2004, Mentor Communications Consultancy, 2002).

One impetus towards approaches to employability came from the 1997 Dearing Committee Report which emphasised the need for programme specifications to state intended outcomes for student learning detailing not just knowledge and understanding but also the key skills of communication, IT, and learning how to learn. In addition, Dearing highlighted the need for graduates to leave University with an understanding of methodologies and the ability to undertake critical analysis, as well as with subject specific knowledge.

According to employers, although graduates are a 'key source of talent' who can bring great benefits to employers, the cost of recruiting and employing them is relatively high, which is only justified if they are able to contribute to an organisation swiftly and without major additional training, that is, if they possess employability skills (Association of Graduate Recruiters).

The creation of ESCET (Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team) was a HEFCE response to the shortfall identified in student acquisition of these skills according to both employers and HEFCE's own research. ESCET's approach, working within the LTSN (now part of the H E Academy) has been to concentrate on embedding employability into the undergraduate curriculum. Within some of the subject centres, employability very swiftly achieved a high profile resulting in work leading to the creation of useful resources, which have been made available across subject centres. Examples include questionnaires and audit tools, both of which have been invaluable to this project.

It was within such complex notions of employability that this small research project was undertaken. Non-vocational undergraduate courses in departments of education are becoming more common, and the project focused upon students enrolled on degree courses in Educational Studies and Early Childhood Studies. Both courses are modular joint honours courses, so both have to be combined with another subject. At the post 1992 institution used for the data collection, there is a large range of other

subjects with which each course can be combined, but many students choose to combine Education and Early Childhood Studies. We wanted to ascertain whether students had pre determined ideas of what employment destinations they might choose on graduation, as well as student views of the employability offered by their courses, as for these students there is not a clear career path upon graduation. Furthermore the requirements for all students to leave H E with a Personal Development Plan, also a consequence of the Dearing Report, with effect from 2005/6, lent an extra urgency to the project. Personal Development Planning appears in many guises, but does require the active involvement of the student together with academic support,

> ' a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their learning, performance and achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development.' (National Guidelines /PDPs)

In teacher education PDP systems already exist, focused on student knowledge, skills, and understanding in their development as teachers. Within non-vocational education courses however, PDP systems need to consider generic attributes for employability as well as the graduate profile of each course.

One further factor relates of course, to the ease with which graduates are able to find employment within their chosen sector, and how they develop a perspective on employability. Within education as with Health Sciences (Sills, 2003) there are many employment opportunities. These may not all necessarily be at graduate level however, and command graduate salaries. Destination data from recent graduates of both the courses used in this research showed some students clearly entering posts which did not require graduate level qualifications.

An initial trawl through the literature provided evidence of employer views together with material discussing the embedding of Key Skills within undergraduate degree courses across disciplines (Jenkins in Fallows and Steven, 2000). Other employability projects including the HEQE (Higher Education, Quality and Employability) Projects run through the DfEE during 1998-2000 demonstrated different approaches and interpretations of employability and PDP development. Practical and highly useful material was provided through ESCET which gave access to data collection materials used in other similar projects on employability, albeit in different disciplines to those which form the focus of our work on this project.

Data collection

Data were collected through questionnaires, followed by focus group interviews and a student workshop, the latter run by the Careers Centre staff of the University. The questionnaires were based on those devised by the Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES), University of Plymouth but were amended to ensure they included specific questions relating to the two courses on which the students were enrolled. Respondents were also asked whether they would be prepared to be involved in focus group interviews, and if so to provide contact information.

In addition we chose to research an eclectic mix of staff views on employability, collecting data from both administrative and academic staff at a subject centre away day meeting. For this we used the same card sort as used with the students.

A small number of employers also completed a short questionnaire for the project.

Of the 200 questionnaires given out to the undergraduates, 127 were returned, which represents an excellent response rate of 63.5%. Only four of the returns were spoiled, apparently through misunderstandings about how to complete them.

In the questionnaires, students were provided with statements about the value and currency of their degrees and asked to state with regard to each statement whether they agreed strongly, just agreed, felt neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Analysis of the responses to certain questions revealed the following points.

Students questionnaire analysis
Asked about whether they thought their degree would substantially improve their job prospects, 43 students said they 'strongly agreed'; 64 said they 'agreed'; 16 felt neutral and 3 disagreed with the statement (raising the issue of why they are on their current course unless they are choosing to study purely for interest).

Asked about whether they felt their degree qualified them for a range of job prospects/ careers, most, 72, said 'agree' with 18 saying they 'strongly agreed', 26 opting for the neutral answer and 9 saying they disagreed.

Asked about whether they think career guidance should be an important part of the curriculum, most agreed with 38 saying 'strongly agree' and 58 saying 'agree'. Just 18 said they either disagreed or were neutral about the answer.

Asked whether they felt they needed more vocational training after graduation, most agreed (64) or were unsure/ neutral (43). Just 13 said 'strongly agree' and 5 said they disagreed.

Asked finally whether they believe the course should include skills useful for employment, most thought it should with the numbers being 70 (55%) saying 'agree' and 38 saying 'strongly agree'. 17 were neutral and 2 said they disagreed.

Data from the questionnaires therefore strongly supported the notion that education and early childhood studies students believe that their courses should help to prepare them for employment, with 74% stating that careers guidance should be part of their degree course, and 71% agreeing or strongly agreeing that their degree will qualify them for a range of job opportunities. This was a useful starting point from which to delve further into undergraduate understandings of employability as well as willingness to engage with the concepts it raised.

The 127 students were also asked about the extent at which they expected to develop 25 named skills through their education course. These named skills included oral presentation skills, teamwork and problem solving as well as 'education subject knowledge', which arguably should not be defined as a skill. The list was again based

upon the questionnaire retrieved from the Subject Centre GEES, the identified 'skills' adjusted to reflect those contained within the learning outcomes specified amongst the transferable skills for the undergraduate modular course at the University.

These questions were also answered well by respondents who were asked to quantify the extent to which they expected to develop these skills to a **greater, moderate, lesser** or **'not'** extent. As previously, there were no more than four 'spoilt' or missed votes for any of the 25.

Of the 25 identified skills, student responses to ten selected skills are represented in tabular form below (*for more detailed analysis and the full list of 25 skills, see Appendix One*). Those represented in the tables below have been chosen as those most closely linked to the definitions of employability discussed above. It appears that both career planning and reflection are not considered by student respondents to be particularly well developed as part of the two courses.

To a great extent

51 %	26%	46%	61%	30%	54%	56%	46%	23%	50%
Intellectual Skills	Career Planning	Flexibility/ Adaptability	Education Subject Knowledge	Problem Solving	Oral Presentation Skills	Teamwork	Self and Time Management	Reflection	Self Confidence

To a moderate extent

43%	43%	45 %	30 %	45 %	37 %	37 %	43 %	50 %	40%
Intellectual Skills	Career Planning	Flexibility/ Adaptability	Education Subject Knowledge	Problem Solving	Oral Presentation Skills	Teamwork	Self and Time Management	Reflection	Self Confidence

To a lesser extent

4 %	24 %	4 %	6 %	21 %	4 %	2 %	0 %	17 %	6%
Intellectual Skills	Career Planning	Flexibility/ Adaptability	Education Subject Knowledge	Problem Solving	Oral Presentation Skills	Teamwork	Self and Time Management	Reflection	Self Confidence

The results of the data set was not unexpected as the questionnaires highlighted aspects of the course which the course team would have identified as clear strengths of the courses, and also areas which were less strong. They do raise issues however about the ways in which students (and staff) perceive the courses and the purposes of University education. This issue will be returned to later in this paper.

The positive response to the questionnaires, and the useful data which they provided gave us a basis to investigate student views on employability and the employability potential of their courses further. The 17 students who had indicated that they were willing to be involved in further research were contacted and invited, by email, to participate in a focus group interview. Four of those invited sent apologies, and of the remaining 13, three students attended. All three were mature students, two enrolled on joint honours in Education and Early Childhood Studies, and the third on a course comprising Education and another subject available in the modular programme.

The students were asked whether they still wished to participate considering the low turnout rate, but the three (all friends) stated that they did. The focus group had been structured to begin with the employability card sort, enabling the students, to decide on the definitions of employability contained on the cards, with which they agreed, and if so, how strongly. The exercise proved a useful ice breaker, and enabled a follow up with semi structured interview questions to probe further how much they felt their course was preparing them for future employment.

The Student replies from the card sort
The card sort comprises a number of statements about employability, each on separate cards, which students were asked to sort as to whether they strongly agreed, disagreed or felt neutral.
Statements that students definitely agreed with, sometimes strongly, included the following.
Employability is:
- for undergraduates for all ages
- skills for life,
- about creating a learning environment which develops student employment related attributes,
- is what employers want,
- is about equality of opportunity,
- about helping students recognise and develop their strengths and weaknesses
- about meeting the economic requirements of society, and
- creating a learning environment which enhances student skills.

Furthermore, the students broadly accepted was that employability was
- about initiating CPD activity with students
- about academics understanding how to help their students become employable.
- getting a work placement
- covering key skills
- having the right skills for the market place
- having work experience
- meeting standards set by professional bodies
- what the paying customers expect

- Learning about the world of work
- Benefiting from part time and casual and voluntary jobs.

Neutral statements

Things that the students were generally ambivalent about, stating that they neither disagreed or agreed, were that employability was about
- keeping the graduate market buoyant,
- a challenge to the traditional concepts of HE,
- the job of the HEI
- about encouraging involvement in student clubs and societies and
- 'social engineering'.

Disagreed with

Statements provoking strong disagreement were the following: statements
- employability is the responsibility of the students union,
- the responsibility of the careers service
- for the less capable students.

They also disagreed or were neutral about statements defining employability as compensating for disadvantage, the latest fad or not related to the academic process. Two were unsure and the other disagreed that employability is part of the contract between the HEI and the student.

Statements that resulted in a particularly broad range of responses – from strongly agree to disagree were those that said employability is the responsibility of the individual student and about doing a vocational course - or about citizenship and addressing the agenda of the current government. Only three statements were omitted, perhaps because they do not easily fit with any group.

Focus group statements

The student conceptions of employability elicited in the focus group discussion did not always coincide with those identified above through the card sort. In fact, there was some confusion about what was implied by the term, as well as an admission that career planning was far from a priority for these students.

> 'Personally I don't know exactly what I'm going to do when I leave so I can't say yes they are going to help me or no they're not. They are helping me as a person giving me better skills as a person, to understand a way of looking at different things and respecting other peoples wishes more I think. But, employability I'm not sure.

In the following, **I** is used for interviewer and **R** for student respondent

I. What do you consider a generic employability skill? That you will take into any sort of role you get into?

R. I think quite a few transferable skills I have got here *(the post '92 HEI*), definitely.

I. Could you name, to be more specific, something you feel you've got now that you perhaps didn't have when you started with the course?

R. Patience. No, I think also that I……. time management.'

Further discussion about future career options produced the following responses**:**

R. I can't make that decision until I know I'm going to get my degree.
The two just don't slot together for me at the moment.'

This could be attributed to the fact that all three were mature students and all commented on the expansion of H.E., leading to more opportunities for non-traditional students such as themselves.

R. 'We were talking to a first year the other day and talking to her about her modules and we ended up talking about how we got here and she was saying the same thing…she was sure somebody was going to come up to her and say look we've made a real big mistake and you really shouldn't be here'.

Such statements might be attributable to mature student angst but they also indicate that there may be some issues about the 'learning culture' (Knight, 2002:164) of the courses, which may need to be further addressed. An appropriate learning culture should be supportive of student progression which must lead through their course towards graduation. The use of PDP (Personal Development Planning) should also help students to take control of their own learning and to identify their goals beyond successfully gaining credit from individual modules. They may also indicate an awareness (conscious or otherwise) that factors leading to success in work and life include those which may be described as 'non-cognitive'(Knight,2003), including attributes such as self-esteem, behaviour and peer relations.

 Issues about culture continued to surface during the focus group, with all three students stating that, when they were younger, higher education had never seemed an option for them. For their children however, it was different.

R. 'My five year old she told me the other day she was going to University'.

Issues about future careers had been avoided however. When this topic was pursued, one respondent gave the follow reply,

R. 'I'm just constantly changing my mind depending on which module I'm doing. And I'm just constantly changing which career I'm going to go for.'

This last comment emphasises the difficulties which can be particularly attributed to employability issues on modular programmes (Yorke and Knight, 2004) in which 'slow learning' (Claxton, 1998) such as critical thinking competence cannot be grasped within one module. But it also resonates with evidence provided by graduates through the First Destination Survey, accessed through the careers department.

'Feedback from graduates…indicates that they fail to engage with Careers issues early enough in their academic programmes. This probably limits their use of opportunities for personal and skills development, may restrict their vision of the career opportunities available and means that they don't give sufficient time to how to communicate their skills and aptitudes to prospective employers.' (Cooper and Froud, 2003)

And indeed, this failure to engage with careers issues sufficiently early was reinforced through our third tranche of data collection with students which involved the Careers service presenting a workshop on employability to which all students on the Education and Early Childhood Studies Programmes were invited. The workshop programme was based upon the data gathered from the questionnaires and the focus group. Individual email invitations were sent to all students who were also promised a free tea as part of the workshop. Of more than 200 students invited, only three attended (two of the focus group attendees, and one other, a traditional student).
With the two members of the careers department, and the two researchers, we outnumbered the student participants!

The failure to engage with employability as an issue was mirrored by the responses given by a group of administrative and academic subject centre staff who were asked to complete the employability cardsort.

Employability card sort results from academics and support staff (May 2004)

The card sorts were the same as those done with Education studies students earlier in the year. The group this time consisted of thirteen people in all; eight that termed themselves 'academic'; four that called themselves 'support' staff and one who recorded themselves as 'other'.

All are or were at the time associated with the Subject centre for Education, ESCalate and under 'academic' included the director and two associate directors/ manager - and others researching / teaching in Education. One is an Education developer. Two work for Escalate as evaluators.

Twenty three of the thirty nine statements given out in the card sort are noted below. The sixteen not remarked on attracted mostly neutral and /or mixed responses from which it is difficult to draw any generalisable conclusions except that there was little agreement about them.

The card sort was done in a limited time slot as part of a two day event. Approximately fifteen minutes was spent allowing people to make their individual choices with follow up discussion as a group. This mirrors the time the students had for the same activity.

Agree
Nobody disagrees with the statements that employability is:
- Helping students recognise and develop their strengths and weaknesses
- Initiating CPD activity with students that should continue throughout their working life

- About academics understanding how to help their students become employable
- Creating a learning environment which develops students employment related attributes

Further statements were also largely agreed with, with some academics, up to two at different times, disagreeing. These statements are that employability is:

- Is for undergraduates of all ages
- Creating a learning environment which enhances students skills
- Having the right skills for the market place
- Skills for life
- Covering key skills
- About equality of opportunity
- Learning about the world of work
- What employers want
- Meeting standards set by professional bodies
- A challenge to the traditional concepts of HE

Also largely agreed with but with one academic and one support staff disagreeing are the statements that employability is:

- What the paying customers expects
- Having work experience

Disagree

Statements largely disagreed or neutral about (both academics and support staff) - with no more than two actually agreeing with the statements, are that employability is:

- For the less capable students
- The responsibility of the student union
- A distraction from the academic agenda
- Not related to the academic process
- Social engineering
- The responsibility of the careers service
- Doing a vocational course

Footnote:

One academic did not put two statements into any category. Another person said that their " interpretation of employability varied". Two others completed blank cards provided for the purpose saying that they considered employability " an ideology", " about skills as well as knowledge" and "about recognising process as well as outcome".

So there were variable responses, but overall staff did not perceive employability as a burning issue for students in education departments. This is interesting because it does raise issues about whether staff have considered the importance for students of obtaining graduate level employment on completion of their degree courses. In tandem with the response from students, it is clear that considerably more work will need to be undertaken in order to raise the profile of employability with both students and academics in the institution.

If neither staff nor students working in education saw employability as particularly high priority, what of employers? Through a large UK wide conference, we asked employers attending what their views were.

Employer feedback

When asked about skills looked for in graduates, we had comments that highlighted that the following were very important:

- Communication – both oral and written x2
- To work strategically and operationally
- Networking abilities
- Awareness of current issues in childcare and early years education
- Teamwork; some multi - agency experience
- Potential ability to manage budgets

Another who commented said that " We have to employ teachers as a DfES target on qualified teacher support. We also need to only employ experienced early years specialists"

The most important graduate skills for all were **communication skills** and **team working**. These were seen as essential. Also seen as essential were time management and critical appraisal.

Other important skills were seen as being problem solving, analytical, data analysis and critical appraisal and time management.

Their experience of whether the graduates they have employed have supplied the skills mentioned seemed to be positive with only one noting that communication skills were lacking. In this section one noted: " We are hoping to provide a multi – agency graduate course on a children's centre site. Early stages of project"

Conclusions

Despite the present level of student interest, the continued increase in numbers in H.E. required by governments must impact on the availability of employment opportunities on graduation. Indeed there is some evidence that this is beginning to occur. Grice and Gladwin, working on employability within a different discipline, highlight the issue thus:

> 'as participation in higher education continues to increase, new graduates may find the employment market more competitive. Consequently, students will need to be confident that their investment in higher education, and the associated debt, will be of benefit to them and they may be influenced in their choice of institution and subject by the career prospects on graduation.'
> (2003:4)

From the beginning of the new academic year (2004/5), materials relating to employability will begin to be embedded within the first year of the undergraduate courses at the post '92 HEI used for the main students data collection above. This will

form part of the material for individual Personal Development Plans, but is aimed also to highlight student and staff awareness of the need to consider University courses as part of a lifelong learning perspective. It will also enable us to continue collecting data on the development of employability in education.

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Appendix One : Questionnaire Analysis

Work independently
81 answered this saying 'to a great extent' with 37 answering moderate and just 6 saying to a lesser or not at all.

Career planning
'To a moderate extent' was the most popular answer attracting 54 votes; both 'to a great extent' and 'to a lesser extent' received similar numbers at 35 and 30 respectively. 5 students said it offered nothing so far.

Flexibility / adaptability
116 said 'to a great extent' or 'to a moderate extent' with the votes being almost evenly split (59 and 57 respectively). Just 5 said 'to a lesser extent' and 1 said not.

Education subject knowledge
Very similar to the previous question, 78 said 'to a great extent', 38 said 'to a moderate extent' and just 7 said 'to a lesser extent'.

Intellectual skills
65 said 'to a great extent', 54 said 'to a moderate extent' and 5 said 'to a lesser extent'.

Interpersonal skills
Almost exactly the same as the previous question the answers only differed with No 'to a lesser extent' when 4 stated it as their choice.

IT skills
'To a moderate extent' and 'to a lesser extent' attracted most students with 63 and 36 respectively. 'to a great extent' attracted 22 votes.

Leadership
Interestingly almost the same as the previous question, 'to a great extent' received 23 votes, 'to a moderate extent' had 62 and 'to a lesser extent' had 33.

Oral presentation skills
By far the most popular answer was 'to a great extent' with 68 votes; 'to a moderate extent' got 47 and 'to a lesser extent' had 5.

Teamwork
Very similar to oral skills, teamwork received 71 for 'to a great extent', 47 for 'to a moderate extent' and 'to a lesser extent' said 3.

Problem solving
'To a moderate extent' was the most popular answer with 57 votes; 'to a great extent' had 38 and 27 said 'to a lesser extent' was the most appropriate answer for them.

Professional work experience
A very even split for 'to a great extent', 'to a moderate extent' and 'to a lesser extent' the students gave 37, 44 and 30 respectively.

Reflection
'to a moderate extent' was the most chosen with 64, and 'to a great extent' and 'to a lesser extent' getting 29 and 21 respectively.

Research skills
The most popular answer was 'to a great extent' with 61; 'to a moderate extent' had 48 and 'to a lesser extent' had 14.

Self and time management
'To a great extent' and 'to a moderate extent' had the majority of votes with 59 and 55 respectively.

Self-confidence
Similar to then previous question, 'to a great extent' had 63, 'to a moderate extent' had 51 and 7 said 'to a lesser extent'.

Working under pressure

'To a great extent' and 'to a moderate extent' both had 56 votes with 'to a lesser extent' getting 9.

Work with policy / other documentation

The most popular answer was 'to a moderate extent' with 66; 'to a great extent' had 31 votes and 'to a lesser extent' had 24.

Written communication

64 said 'to a great extent' to this question and 52 said 'to a moderate extent'. Just 6 said 'to a lesser extent' or