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# Developing Successful Intelligence: A curriculum for employability in changing markets for graduate labour

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## **Abstract**

A key pedagogical challenge for undergraduate educators in integrating work and learning in the curriculum, is the identification of appropriate conceptual constructs to facilitate student learning and development. State and employer organisations have articulated a discourse of 'key skills' which has been adopted by universities, and yoked to innovations in pedagogy for employability. We propose the construct 'successful intelligence' to enhance pedagogy for employability. We show how it might be introduced to the undergraduate business curriculum, using a case study of the evolution of an undergraduate management development programme to ground our thinking in practice. We also use student perceptions of teaching, learning, and career planning to distinguish what students regard as real and relevant in their studies, contributing to employability.

## **Introduction**

The policy context for the issues discussed in this paper is the familiar state agenda of knowledge economy, global competitiveness, technological change and lifelong learning (Scottish Executive, 2003). Given the decline of Scotland's industrial base, and the difficulty in regenerating the economy, efforts to improve graduate employability are primary elements of policy. Public interest has been accentuated by political devolution within the UK, in part expressed through desire to regain the high levels of intellectual and economic achievement associated with the nation's past.

Within the Higher Education (HE) sector, there have been increases in the graduate population in Scotland, especially those studying business subjects. Equally employers are seeking non-specific degrees, and emphasising the assessment of the whole person. Thereby underlining the need to provide undergraduates with clearly focussed personal development for employability, as well as disciplinary and functional knowledge. Several sector-wide initiatives exemplify these trends. Student Personal Development and Planning (SPDP) is being mandated in the UK HE sector by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/default.asp>). SPDP is proposed as a strategy for employability, in that individual students are to be supported in creating personal profiles mapping their work-related skills and accomplishments, to complement their academic achievements. In Scotland the arrangements for quality assurance take the form of Enhancement Led Institutional Review ([http://www.shetc.ac.uk/about\\_us/departments/learning\\_teaching/he\\_quality](http://www.shetc.ac.uk/about_us/departments/learning_teaching/he_quality)). The approach includes a strong thematic element, and it is no surprise, given the national policy agenda, that employability is a major theme (<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/defaultpage121bc1.aspx?pageID=165>). Taken together, the SPDP and employability initiatives represented a highly focussed form of state influence on the relationships between work and learning in HE.

Curriculum development is, therefore an extremely challenging undertaking. To clarify at least some of the pedagogical, social and economic challenges, we focus on

what is 'real'. This includes student's critiques of what is useful knowledge, and what is necessary for future graduate employment. Is it disciplinary academic knowledge and tests? Or is it a dynamic, personal development programme for career success? These questions have major consequences for teachers, as they attempt to introduce the 'real world' in forms such as 'key skills' for 'employability', and develop an appropriate pedagogy to engender the relevant personal and social attributes.

These are the topics of this paper, which we will address in the context of a particular curriculum innovation in a business school by:

- Focussing on how a critical consensus about big ideas like employability and successful intelligence is reached by a reflexive approach to course design;
- Describing how student feedback can contribute to the process, by analysing student views and revising course design accordingly

Meeting the pedagogical challenges requires a clear sense amongst educators of connections between social and economic influences on curriculum, course design and pedagogical strategy. Of equal weight is the capacity to step outside the traditional 'boxes' of: disciplinary and functional silos; departmental organisation of courses; individual lecturer control of teaching; and sharp boundaries between teaching and career planning. This challenge calls for acts of pedagogical imagination, including exploration of constructs like successful intelligence, as well as detailed planning and evaluation of changes.

### **Literature Review: Curriculum, concepts and challenges**

In earlier work on curriculum development we addressed these issues in a set of Integrative Studies classes at Strathclyde University Business School, developed to engender 'key skills' (Johnston and Watson, 2003; Johnston and Watson, 2006). We critiqued the 'key skills' discourse, which has influenced learning and work relationships in the UK Higher Education (HE), since the 1997 Dearing Report. Our critique proposed going beyond that rhetoric, by drawing on constructs from Human Resource Management (HRM) literature such as: learning organisation; psychological contract, personal capital.

These constructs highlighted the importance of student development for future management roles in changing organisational contexts, having commensurate weight with academic achievement in business education. In effect moving beyond the post-Dearing 'good degree plus key skills' image of the graduate, to propose a more systematic undergraduate experience of management development. Such an experience would emphasise developing self awareness, and preparation for evolving career models (King, 2003, Mayrhofer et al, 2005).

The constructs are therefore appropriate to a policy direction favouring increased economic and employer relevance in the competitive graduate labour markets associated with a global economy. (Brown & Hesketh, 2000). However, since these constructs differ from the dominant 'key skills' discourse, which institutions have accepted, curriculum development and management is complicated. It involves not just the addition of suitable statements of learning objectives for key skills, with associated learning tasks, but a more fundamental exercise in reviewing values of

teaching and learning, and considering how pedagogy for employability can be extended beyond key skills.

This conceptual approach to curriculum development and course design is coupled to a constructivist pedagogy for teaching, learning and assessment. Constructivism challenges the idea that teachers simply transmit knowledge to students, by asserting that learners have to actively construct knowledge for themselves. Teaching is viewed less as a matter of delivery of knowledge to students and more a matter of facilitating the students' discovery of knowledge (Ramsden, 1992; Nicol, 1997). Courses designed from constructivist principles typically employ problem-based assignments, collaborative activity, and varied forms of student engagement. These are all features of Integrative Studies, and are regarded as appropriate to the development of key skills and employability.

The paper extends the earlier conceptual and pedagogical work by focussing on the construct of *successful intelligence* (Sternberg, 1997;2003), and relating it to the construct *employability* (Hefce, 2003; Denholm et al, 2003; Knight and Yorke, 2003). Employability is a dominant term in UK Higher Education (HE) shaping thinking on the relationship between undergraduate learning and work. Successful Intelligence is a less known idea, despite Robert Sternberg's eminence in the fields of psychology, education and leadership.

#### *Employability-a current imperative*

Employability signifies the shift from a concept of graduate employment as a 'job for life' to a notion of regular change accompanied by continuous professional development (CPD) and lifelong learning. Changes in the organisation of work, requiring employees to be flexible, creative, problem-solving, teamworkers and reflective practitioners, influence the notions of 'skills' held by educators, and emphasise the importance of implicating employability in the curriculum. Concepts like organisational fit/learning organisation may be particularly helpful in explaining to staff and students what the 'skills' are, and why they are so important. Selection assessment based on Person-Job Fit, where primarily selection criteria were based on skills and abilities required for job performance, has been re-focused in many organisations by Person-Organisation Fit selection.

The application process frequently involves completion of a competency-based application form and behavioural/situational interviews, all of which will be seeking examples of competencies which may relate to behavioural, management and organizational competences (Sparrow, 2003). This approach includes a greater emphasis on flexibility, adaptability, team working, attitudes and behaviours, socialisation and how the individual will fit into the organisational culture (Anderson and Ostroff, 1997). Many larger organisations are adopting a more complex approach to assessment procedures involving work-based testing using both non-cognitive tools and cognitive tests at an 'assessment centre' (Searle, 2005). These changes emphasise the importance of students acquiring a realistic self-awareness ethos and values, in addition to specialist knowledge.

Knight and Yorke (2003) describe employability in the curriculum as a blend of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs or legitimate self-confidence and

reflectiveness (or metacognition). They supply the 'USEM' account of employability wherein four broad, interrelated components are seen as influential : **U**-subject understanding; **S**-skills, including 'key skills'; **E**-efficacy, beliefs, personal qualities; **M**-metacognition, encompassing self awareness.

In this account the 'E' component suffuses all the others, reflecting the authors' dissatisfaction with a simple 'skills' perspective on employability. They highlight the importance of developing more complex constructs to characterise the personal domain, and draw on the psychological literature, including Sternberg's work, to inform their conceptualisation of an employability-aware curriculum. Research on what employers value in new graduates (Elias & Purcell, 2001) reinforce the drive to more complex constructs by discussing complex competencies like taking responsibility and coping with uncertainty.

Hawkrige (2005) surveyed the UK business education scene, and provided a useful snapshot of work on employability, which exposes some major trends:

- Defining employability in terms of preparation for continuing professional development and lifelong learning rather than first destinations;
- Acknowledging SPDP as highly compatible to the ethos of business and management;
- Adopting a holistic approach to developing employability (closely related to the dimensions of the USEM model);
- Innovating in curriculum around a discourse of 'skills' and 'reflective practice', and practices described by a terminology of collaborative and problem-based learning, with a strong emphasis on varying forms of work placement.

Hawkrige also identified the Higher Education Academy generic employability skills template ([www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability)) but noted only limited discussion in business schools and departments. It is difficult reading Hawkrige's survey, not to conclude that whilst much appears to be getting done about employability, it is still at a relatively general level, and has yet to be fully formed in business school curricula. In Knight and Yorke's terms perhaps U and S are more evident in courses than E and M.

### *Successful Intelligence-an enabling construct*

Successful Intelligence (Sternberg, 1997; 2003) derives from the psychological literature which maintains that intelligence is not a unitary, fixed property of mind, but is instead a multiple and malleable aspect (Gardner, 1993; 1999). Sternberg's account involves analytical, creative and practical aspects of thinking and problem solving. This differs from conventional accounts of IQ by distinguishing academic (analytical) success, and successful performance (practical/creative) in other areas of social and economic life. Whilst traditional academic assessment concentrates on the analytical, Sternberg's model encourages a balanced account of ability, and a focus on real world contexts of application like work.

This seems appropriate to the challenge of integrating and assessing 'key skill' type capabilities in the curriculum to develop employability. When related to individual development, the aim would be to achieve an optimum balance of the three aspects, in

pursuit of a range of academic and career goals. Equally there are connections to be made between successful intelligence and other 'multiple intelligence' frameworks which have been developed to address business contexts. For example: emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996); business intelligence (Furnham, 2005).

In an era of intensive economic competition and demand for a broader range of graduate attributes, Sternberg's model has obvious attractions as an enabling construct and illuminating perspective on employability. This is underlined by Knight and Yorke (2003). To be successfully intelligent is to think well in three different ways: analytically, creatively and practically. Clearly the three are interrelated, although traditional academic practice has tended to prize analytical thinking, thereby de-emphasising the other two. Consequently good thinking will involve balancing the three successfully. For example, thinking creatively to spot opportunities in business problems; using analytical thinking to solve problems and evaluate information; applying practical intelligence to use knowledge and ideas to have an effective impact in social and economic contexts. In a business context this might be exemplified as the difference between excellence in analysing textbook case studies, and ability to generate innovative, and workable new products or services.

Graduates who can operationalise such a model would offer employers a powerful human resource for managing their own and other people's efforts. Their ability would go beyond academic knowledge of business functions, to encompass the kind of qualities sought by knowledge-intensive organisations (Thompson & Warhurst 1998). As a concept, successful intelligence may therefore have value in designing appropriate learning, by providing a new perspective on employability which relates directly to personal competencies. For example the construct may prove more satisfactory as a signifier of complex management behaviour including the risks of not 'thinking outside the box' (Sternberg, 2003, 397), managing behaviour of self and others, and being intrapreneurial, than current, soft skill terms like teamworking or communication.

### *Pedagogical Challenges*

Evidently the literature of employability and constructs like successful intelligence have serious consequences for defining what knowledge, skills, attitudes and ways of being may be expected of graduates. From a teaching perspective, successful intelligence could be connected to constructivist pedagogy as a systematic notion of 'thinking' to enhance the traditional academic discourse of critical thinking and cognitive development. It might thereby be coupled to the notions of *reflective practice*, which have attained a place in pedagogical strategy (Boud and Knights, 1996; Boud and Walker, 1998; Andresen et al, 2000). In this respect, as Hawkrigde (2005) noted, reflective practice has become a key term in developing employability in business education, so further elaboration of possible meanings of reflection is highly desirable.

Integrative Studies already placed strategic emphasis on such critical reflection by students. This entails students thinking about, discussing, recording, and learning from their own practice, to gain new perspectives on future practice. To this end collaborative activities and team projects are used as a spur to individual reflection, and a learning diary assignment is used to focus individual reflection. Using the

constructs described above should assist tutors to make more meaningful connections for the students and to help them to think outwith their subject silos by focussing on themes like employability, and practices associated with successful intelligence. The process of implementing SPDP should also provide opportunities to assist engage these constructs and to encourage students to take responsibility for career planning.

### **Case Study 1: From design to practice, MDP 2005/6**

Utilising focus groups with Honours and year 2/3 students 2004/2005, Honours 2003/2004 and SPDP pilot 1<sup>st</sup> year students we researched students perceptions and attitudes in relation to employability and career planning (total 100 students).

These points are distilled from what students said, and interpreted in the light of staff perceptions expressed during teaching team course development sessions. This material provides insights into how students experienced their need for employability. The points are expressed as questions to help focus on the practical implications for course design, teaching, assessment, support etc. This offers a student 'commentary' which can be further interpreted in relation to employability, and by implication successful intelligence.

Can Integrative Studies provide:

- Variation in the degree of formality experienced at job interviews?
- Absence of feedback from companies following unsuccessful applications?
- Guidance on strategies for managing psychometric tests/simple maths & literacy tests?
- Development of capacity to translate experiences into concise statements which can be applied to application forms/interviews?
- Systematic awareness raising, focused activity, and formative feedback on personal development?
- A more balanced progression over the three years to ensure a gradual build-up of awareness, skills, integration and other relevant aims?

Can the Students be encouraged to

- Take more responsibility for their futures?
- Develop personal ways of reflecting on experience which can be applied to graduate employability and employment?
- Establish an appropriate balance of attention to employment oriented PDP, so that other forms of personal insight and development are not neglected, or overemphasised?

### *Interpretation*

This material confirms student interest in employability factors, although they don't use that term, and also identifies a need for some 'self' construct eg 'successful intelligence' to be made explicit and worked on. There is a mix of points focussed on obtaining the first job, and factors entailed by longer-term career building. In effect a 'first destination' 'continuing professional development' distinction. Employability seemed to be conceived as non-domain specific skills/ interpersonal skills, which are hard to learn. They are not quantifiable in that the number/duration/frequency of 'lessons' is a poor guide to achievement. The individual narrative of the personal



qualities and experiences identified with 'key skills' provides a better definition/description of achievement. In this respect the students clearly sought for attention to be paid to enhancing student disposition, self-management and systematic effort on SPDP. Successful intelligence may provide a framework to meet this desire.

## Case Study 2: MDP Curriculum and Pedagogy

**Fig 1 : MDP 2005/6 Y1-3 Progressions and Associated Teaching/Learning Practices**  
(Italics highlight elements of MDP and progression)

Y1	Y2	Y3
<p>Focus: Dearing Type Skills: 3 hard/2 soft + Introduction to Reflection</p> <p><b><i>New Stated Themes/ Topics/Terms: Employability Successful Intelligence Reflection</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Introduce SPDP. Use messages from focus groups + Y3/4 students to explain MDP</i></b></p>	<p>Focus: Soft Skills &amp; Management Skills Decision making, negotiation, leadership, entrepreneurship</p> <p><b><i>SPDP foci: commitment, concentration, positive approach</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Introduce new student managed project to engage creativity and responsibility. Use reflective report to discuss project against Stated Themes</i></b></p>	<p>Focus: Research &amp; Critical Analytical Skills, project planning Strategy/social issue Ethics/values</p> <p><b><i>PDP - CV &amp; job search specifics related to Employability</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Successful Intelligence and Critical Reflection applied to self-awareness and development planning</i></b></p>
<p>Practice: Teams and Projects</p> <p>Assessment Individual IT skills Team Presentation skills Team projects Learning Diary/<b><i>formal PDP sessions &amp; support</i></b> Holiday project</p>	<p>Practice: Case Studies Role Plays Reflection skills Assessment Team projects Practical negotiation Individual reflection on Leadership skills Case study-entrepreneurship</p> <p><b><i>Synthesising Assignment. Assessment Centre atmosphere. Include specific writing such as 250w self portrait</i></b></p>	<p>Practice: Information search Researching critical social issues Employer research Assessment Team projects based on critical social issues Individual research project outline based on Honours dissertation proposal/workplace project</p> <p><b><i>Critical literature review assignment (link to Library/Information activity &amp; process)</i></b></p>

This section is written from the joint perspective of the course manager and an academic developer working closely with the manager and year teams to evolve the curriculum and teaching practice. A key aspect of our approach is to develop a course *reflexively*, to draw on the views of all stakeholders, so that constructs like successful intelligence are closely aligned to student perceptions, motivation and activity, and staff willingness to propose such constructs. This section outlines the strategic thinking which is being developed to guide the MDP, and also identifies some of the practical activities required to implement the first full session of MDP.

The specific context for this paper is the transition during 2004/2005/2006 from a sequence of three Integrative Studies (IS) classes, spread over the first three years of

the BA, to the Management Development Programme (MDP), which has evolved out of IS classes, and came on stream in 2005/2006. This is a compulsory class for all Business School students in years 1-3, around 500 students in each year participate and staff from all departments Economics, Accounting and Finance, Marketing, Human Resource Management, Management Science, Scottish Hotel School are engaged in teaching. This evolution exemplifies the general shift in locus of academic coherence within degree studies from disciplinarity and functional relevance, to more structured programmes aimed at enabling the graduate attributes associated with employability and lifelong learning. Students work in multi-disciplinary teams (6) in group sessions of 48 students, the focus is on problem based learning and team teaching. Collaborative course development and evaluation using away days for all staff is a feature of the class.

The course design summarised in Fig. 1 above has emerged from teaching team away days, student feedback, research on employability/work and learning relationships.

### **Next steps for research and development**

Successful intelligence might be introduced to students and related to employability in the courses by:

- Presenting it as an enabling construct for employability, and related to influential factors such as employer statements/use of competency recruitment practices, success in organisations and future careers.
- Balancing it against more established constructs like employability, which has high institutional status due to its use by the state, sector leadership, graduate recruiters etc, and critical reflection, which has high status amongst some educators, due to its position in the academic and professional literature.
- Deploying it as a focus of discussion in staff development sessions with staff, to encourage debate, and develop teaching team positions on the thematic aspects of the course design as well as the pedagogical strategy and practice.
- Implicating it in the stated objectives of the course, and the activity, task, process structure of the course.

Successful intelligence might be introduced to staff and related to teaching practice by:

- Pre-session workshop for whole teaching team to concentrate on ethos and themes aligned to pedagogy as well as practical arrangements for syllabus delivery.
- Review workshops during semester for each year team.
- Mid-session workshop for whole teaching team.
- Alignment of course design and staff development with an evaluation strategy for MDP 2005/2006.

In terms of better managing relations between learning and work we need to educate staff and students in the conceptual language of employability. This will involve encouraging critical rigour rather than simple compliance in developing a more sophisticated account of curriculum, course design, and pedagogy within teaching teams. We will seek to develop a more robust system of management and academic development at course level to ensure academic coherence and rigour.

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