

Employability in higher education: refashioning required?
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Introduction

On the face of it, HEIs are aware and responsive of the importance of developing employability skills in their students and there are recognised pockets of activity. In response to Government recommendations, universities in the UK are now required to produce data on the employability prospects offered upon completion of each degree course. Employer groups seem less satisfied by the efforts of academia with companies such as Deloitte offering a level 2 BTEC award in employability skills – signifying that there is a lack of or limited provision available through higher education. All but one of the objectives of the Deloitte programme can be fulfilled in the academic environment so one could legitimately argue that there is a failing somewhere in the system. In support of the position that has been taken by Deloitte, just over ten years ago, Plastrik (2003) observed that if educational performances were not improved, the gap that existed between the skills needed by industry and those that HEIs were providing their graduates would continue to grow.

Bearing this in mind, there is an impetus on HEIs to champion the products and services they offer. Web presence is no indicator of activity, but it provides a useful indication of what HEIs are doing to promote and acknowledge the employability agenda in accordance with the mission statement or strategic educational objectives of their own institutions. Using the World Wide Web, HEIs have advertised their wares effectively in so far as their academic accomplishments are concerned. However, the story is very different for the less academic, more employability focused aspects of a graduates' all-round education. They are little known, at least through the Web which is the strongest marketing tool at the disposal of any HEI. Therefore and without elaborating on the technologies of the Web, it is perhaps useful to establish the nature in which employability is depicted by HEIs via their web-based presence.

In the sample study, a total of five HEIs in the UK were randomly selected and the search term 'employability' was inserted into the search engine. The first five pages that came up were downloaded, printed off and analysed independently and collectively to establish what HEIs were drawing attention to and championing in terms of employability. In this presentation, research data is analysed from forty HEIs in the UK to provide more substantive data from which trends can be spotted.

Summary of the findings

As part of the analysis it is important to consider each HEI in a holistic sense as this would provide a much better indicator of 1. The direction the HEI was moving in with respect to the employability agenda 2. What particular questions, issues and areas of interest or neglect the HEI was addressing.

Cranmer (2006) argues that there is vagueness around the collective understanding of quality in HEIs when it comes to the employability agenda. This has been indicated by the sample as there is a vast difference in meaning given to the employability agenda. By this, it is meant that the content and positioning attributed to the webpages by their respective HEIs vary. Analysis of sample data suggested that HEIs in the UK are visibly engaged in initiatives and activities that specifically address the employability of their graduates. It was not possible to make generalisations, but when viewed collectively, a number of meaningful insights were revealed from the data analysis:

- ◆ In the UK, individual departments are seen to be more active in the area of skills development/awareness when compared with the institutions as a whole.
- ◆ In the UK, employability (and most aspects related to it) is generally housed within the careers service.
- ◆ The higher ranked HEIs from the UK seem to place a more academic and less vocational emphasis on the employability agenda than do HEIs that are lower ranked.
- ◆ The amount of data that does not bare any direct correlation to the employability agenda is unexpectedly high.

For most of the HEIs from this initial sample study, it was unclear as to who is taking overall responsibility for developing the employability skills of students; on occasion we are directed towards the careers service whilst at other times, it is implied, that the departments themselves are responsible for the employability skills development of their students. This shifting pattern may be attributed to the concern amongst HEIs that professionals support their graduates in attaining graduate employment and recent Government recommendations which stipulate that HEIs in the UK produce data on the employability prospects offered upon completion of each degree course (BIS 2009).

There is a danger that if the enhancement of employability skills falls under the remit of the careers service, the approach taken to the development of employability skills would be bolted-on rather than embedded or integrated as part of a core curriculum and offered as a generic package. The approach would constitute a ‘parallel development’ method of delivering employability skills in the higher education curriculum which, according to the DfES (2002), also suggests that there is limited contextualisation, a separate assessment that would result in a low impact on the curriculum. Students may not be able to see the direct relevance such engagement would have on their development as graduates as it is effectively divorced from the academic content of the degree programme. Similarly, if the development is driven by individual departments and remains local rather than centralised, all too often it is left to the champions from these various academic departments to take the agenda forward. There is already doubt that these skills can be developed effectively in the classroom, particularly if the measure of development is outcomes based (Cranmer 2006).

As this current research accommodates a greater number of institutions, it will be possible to establish whether there are substantive trends which can be used to make definite claims about the relationship higher education in the UK has with the employability agenda, what issues and questions HEIs are trying to address and whether the provision in place needs reshaping in some way.

References

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