

## **Employability: flavour of the month?**

Recent reports of student protests about fees reminded me of some of the factors I personally took into account when deciding on what to study and where. Interested in psychology (a subject not exactly renowned for potential earning power), I opted for a degree which had a placement year integrated into the third year of study. This, I figured, would enable me to demonstrate the application of psychology in the real world (although I had no idea of which specific direction I would develop). I was one of the lucky ones – I secured a paid placement abroad and gained some valuable transferable skills which I have subsequently applied in both my previous HR role and my current role as a self-employed business psychologist and career coach.

Reflecting on my own experience, I've noticed the use of the term 'employability' gaining in popularity in recent months, making it a concept fellow CIPD professionals may well benefit from learning more about. A commonly cited definition of employability is:

“A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”.

There are three related strands to the concept (York, 2006):

Employability as demonstrated by the graduate actually obtaining a job (market-sensitive)

Employability as a curricular process developed during the HE experience

Employability in terms of the possession of relevant achievements aligned with a specific role (and having the potential to acquire additional knowledge, skills, etc)

So, it appears that while 'competencies' may be defined as the behaviours that employees must have, or must acquire, to input into a situation in order to achieve *high levels of performance* (the focus being on the person), employability skills, I

believe, are more about the skills which are introduced to the “employment virgin” in an academic context with the potential for transferability into the work context. The more numerous the opportunities to apply the skills in a real working environment (i.e. via relevant work placements), the more experienced and employable the graduate becomes...

Certainly students are more concerned about the R.O.I. given recent announcements by the government around increasing course fees. Employers have been complaining about inadequate graduate skills for some time, for example, the CBI state that “employability skills and experience of the workplace are vital for undergraduates during the recession to better equip them to compete in the increasingly tough jobs market”. Their joint report with Universities, *‘Future Fit: Preparing graduates for the world of work’* stresses the need for greater integration of employability skills and more work experience during studies. The Times Higher Education recently reported that the UK has one of the lowest rates of participation in work placements in Europe (around 30%) compared with 84% in France and 97% in the Netherlands. Placements here have been declining over the past 12 years while sandwich courses dropped from 10.5% in 1994 to only 6.5% in 2007.

How are FE and HE institutions responding to employer demands? Pilots have been conducted around the UK to assess the utility of a *Higher Education Achievement Record* (HEAR) to formally verify and supplement the degree certificate with non-academic performance highlights. For employers, the HEAR should relay additional skills gained via the student journey to assist recruiters in identifying suitable candidates from direct cross comparison between student A from University X and student B from University Y.

Universities are increasingly delivering sessions to help students with the process of finding and securing a job. For example, Cardiff University’s CMS Programme offers a series of 50-minute career planning workshops covering CV Know How, Application Forms, Interview Skills and Assessment Centres (including access to practice psychometric tests). Students have fed back the importance, relevance and helpfulness of such workshops in helping them to manage their career and job search over the last ten years. 50% of graduates offered a mock interview service



with Cardiff University's *Graduate Employment Advice Centre* have been successful at a subsequent real interview.

So how do employers benefit from the investment that HE is making in employability?  
*What are the benefits to the workforce, the community and the economy?*

In Wales, our employment market is rich with employable graduates who actively choose to stay here after their studies are complete. Given the initiatives and sterling efforts made by the likes of Cardiff University and other academic institutions, such as UWIC's blended learning approach with their Career e-Module. The *Go Wales* team, who liaise with local employers to offer work experience, report a 63% employment conversion rate meaning that numerous employers have benefitted from an extended work trial with zero advertising costs incurred.

So to conclude, HE and FE institutions *are* responding to employers' requests to breed employability skills – but employers need to do their bit by engaging with them in offering opportunities to enable students to gain some of the practical employability skills in situ. If you are an employer, I urge you to do something positive: make contact with a university / college careers service and *Go Wales* to place or recruit an under/post graduate for work placements / temporary positions. You'll benefit from a fresh perspective and simultaneously be investing in our future home grown talent.

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