

Employability in the curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The increasing shift from secure employment to short-term contract and portfolio working in the creative and cultural industries has brought with it an ever-greater emphasis on individual "employability". While the tension between learning for its own sake and the demand for "work-ready" graduates continues, there is an increasing expectation that students should develop the skills that employers want.

Employability is likely to depend on a number of factors such as:

- **SUBJECT-RELATED SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE**
- **KEY SKILLS**
- **TRANSFERABLE OR "SOFT" SKILLS SUCH AS TEAM-WORKING AND SELF-MANAGEMENT**
- **PRACTICAL WORK EXPERIENCE**
- **NETWORKING AND CONTACTS**

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland actually identifies all the following as skills that an honours graduate should demonstrate:

- To devise and sustain arguments
- To solve problems
- To manage own learning

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- To critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, concepts
- To communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- To exercise initiative and personal responsibility
- To make decisions in complex and unpredictable contexts
- To acquire the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature

Students may need help with developing and/or recognising and making the most of these attributes. Part-time lecturers, with up-to-date knowledge and professional practice, have much to offer. This could be fed in to the student experience in many ways – through work experience, through the use of contacts, through live projects and so on.

Here are some views on employability from the perspective of part-time lecturers and students:

Case Study One

I started out designing architectural models for competitions, working in a team. Then I went into advertising work, designing models for magazines, posters and commercials. I was invited through contacts to do some teaching; I've been working as a part-time visiting lecturer for a couple of years now.

Looking at student employability from a professional perspective, my main concern is that the students should understand and develop the skills they need to work in the real world.

TIME MANAGEMENT:

Two of the students I'm teaching at the moment have quite different approaches to their work. One's standards of finish were about okay; the project was completed to schedule. The other's standards were much higher, but because of poor time management the project wasn't completed. This student didn't go through the stages or work out a schedule based from the end point. Project planning, what needs to happen by when, is key for employability. I talk to the students at length on each project about what they need to do and encourage them to write it out. Professional people have to write out project stages and plan; if you lay it out you don't end up with a huge amount to do in the last couple of weeks.

Routine and punctuality are important too. In art and design students expect to work erratic hours, but in fact most people work regular hours. Some students treat college like a job or school, others work longer hours but don't get much done. They need to put in the hours but doing something useful, so they need to plan what they're doing and make sure they have the materials. I'll tell them to get the stuff as early as possible in the project so they don't waste time waiting for outside suppliers.

Prioritising and delegating are also to do with time management; thinking about which bits need to be done first and delegating if you can't do it all yourself. The students need to prepare what they're going to say and write it out first because trade people don't want to work with students.

RESEARCH:

Most students think they can do research because they've been on the Internet, but they need to understand how the search engines work and think about other routes like the library and investigating shops and other real world environments.

BUILDING UP CONTACTS:

I talk to the students about cold calling: phoning people up and asking them to look at work and give advice. Most people can spare half an hour to look at work if you make the right approach.

Work experience/work placement are important and they have to organise this themselves. If they're at least committed to trying to do some work someone should take them on. They need to play on the fact that they're free! They gain enormous confidence to see something through to a finished product. At college they have their own standards of finish, in the workplace they learn a huge amount seeing it done for real and knowing they have to turn up.

PRESENTATION SKILLS:

We do a separate module on how to present themselves and their work. They look at their portfolio to see how they can make it really stand out, effectively writing a book about themselves with images. We get them to create a "corporate identity" with their business cards, CV and so on, and "brand" themselves to fit in with their final show. Most art and design students relate well to visual approaches, so we get them to visualise an image for themselves. I show them magazine layouts that I've scanned in; they love magazines so they can use this to start thinking about what they're looking at and develop ideas for themselves.

Case Study Two

My background is in industry, and although I've worked with training companies I haven't had previous experience in education. I found a big contrast between life inside and outside university. I did my dissertation on the skills that textile students need to get jobs; I talked to employers and to graduates who had jobs. I found a difference between what industry wants and what the students are taught. Industry consider it's not their job to train staff in skills when there are others out there who already have them, but students don't realise this until too late. Small companies are looking for soft skills – skills that students gain on courses but don't realise it.

COMMUNICATION

One of my key frustrations as a student was the sharing of information. You wouldn't know that something had been relayed to other students – important messages like "the visiting lecturer won't be coming in". Information is often dismissed by students as soon as the meeting is over. In industry everything is confirmed, written down in memos or emails; at university there are different ways of communicating.

I start the semester by talking about the timetable, the project brief and assessment criteria. The students often don't retain the information, so now I give them the same information but reinforce it at each meeting – they get the big picture at the beginning of the course then each week I give the information for the next week. A lot of information is held on computer for them to access but many don't.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Many students bring a tiny notebook to a business studies lecture; some don't bring a pen or paper. In tutorials, only one in four brings notes, paper

and a pen. They're not opting in so the only solution is to keep reinforcing it. Whatever subject I'm teaching or discussing, I ask them to write down key points.

TEAM SKILLS

I find team skills interesting as part of the students' project work is carried out as a team effort. Project management skills need to be carefully explained: how they are going to manage themselves. The groups are reluctant to appoint a leader, but a natural leader usually comes through. I talk it through and explain that in many disciplines, such as graphics, you need team skills, and need to show that you have experience in team work. They need to be able to move beyond personality clashes to focus on the job in hand. The students are much more willing to fill in self-assessment forms than to assess their peers if it means criticising them.

CONFIDENCE

There can be a lot of self-doubt in art and design because work is not assessed in the same way as academic study. Students can suffer from severe anxiety, mental health problems and low self-confidence. One cause can be lecturers not balancing criticism with praise. This affects self-esteem and self-management. When I give my first lecture I tell the students that they are taken on with the belief that they can succeed. They already have the standard to do well, and how hard they work will determine whether they keep it. It's important to put things in a constructive way. I look at the criteria and the work, not at the person, and frame criticism positively. It's highly unlikely that a student is deliberately doing something poorly.

CVs

When it comes to an analysis of skills to put on their CV, the students say they haven't done anything although many have had several jobs. They don't see their part-time jobs as relevant. Work while they're at university is not always seen as valuable experience by students or tutors, it can be seen as a nuisance. I talk it through with them, and explain how they can use their skills gained in part-time jobs to boost their CV, both hard and soft skills. Students rarely detail on their CV what skills they gained at university. I put up adverts from the Guardian and ask the students to interpret what the employer needs, then link these with the skills they have. When they complete the CV having had the discussion, half a page of nothing becomes two pages of hard skills

NETWORKING

I talk about market research and give the students a list of where they can find out information, including tutors and technicians. Students think it's an imposition to ask tutors what they do, so it's important to tell them about your work, how you price work and that kind of thing. When tutors give an introductory talk about themselves it helps the students to get more out of it – they understand what they stand for, their experiences, what media they use, their experience of doing an MA.

PLANNING

Coming up to leaving most of the students don't know what they want to do or how to get there. I tell them to cut jobs out of the Guardian and assess the skills they'll need to get there. We have an Enterprise Forum and I've got agreement to have a symposium with speakers in art and design, the Craft Council are coming in; there's been huge interest from the students.

The Student Perspective

Here are some findings based on student's responses to these questions. You might like to use these questions to gather feedback from your students or to help you plan your teaching

WHAT KIND OF THINGS DO YOU VALUE ABOUT HAVING VISITING LECTURERS COMING IN TO WORK WITH YOU?

- THE DIVERSITY OF THEIR WORK: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES
- THEIR VAST KNOWLEDGE OF THE REAL WORLD
- THEIR "TASTE" AS THEY ARE POTENTIAL FUTURE EMPLOYERS
- AN OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE IS VALUABLE. VISITING LECTURERS OFTEN BRING UP-TO-DATE KNOWLEDGE OF PRACTICE IN THE REAL WORLD

WHAT KIND OF SESSIONS DO YOU FIND MOST HELPFUL?

- PRACTICAL SESSIONS, LECTURES WHERE THEY DESCRIBE ONGOING WORK
- LECTURES DRAWING ON THEIR OWN PRACTICE EXPERIENCES

FOR YOUR OWN LEARNING AND YOUR FUTURE CAREER, IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU NEED FROM THE LECTURERS?

- AN OUTLINE OF THEIR OWN PROFESSIONAL CAREER
- STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING PERSONAL WORK
- CONTACTS IN THE INDUSTRY, AT THE END OF YEAR SHOW WHERE THEY INVITE ALL THEIR CONTACTS, WHO MAY EMPLOY US
- TO BE AN EXCELLENT ROLE MODEL
- MORE PERSONAL CONTACT WOULD HELP WITH NETWORKING, SETTING UP CONTACTS ETC.

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FOLLOW-UP	
Comparing these case studies with your own experience, what do you think are the main employability issues for the students you teach?	
How does your teaching help to develop the list of graduate skills required ?	
How are transferable skills integrated into other forms of learning ?	
In what ways could you help the students to increase their employability?	