

Employability: A process of learning

“Employability is, at heart, a process of learning.”

(Harvey, Locke and Morey, 2002: 2)

“We take as a premise that there is no necessary conflict between employability and traditional academic values. Good teaching and learning practices can serve both kinds of end...”

“...a concern for employability is not inimical to good learning, but is supportive of it. The student learning that makes for strong claims to employability comes from years, not semesters; through programmes, not modules; and in environments, not classes.”

(Knight and Yorke, 2003)

Introduction

1. Employability cannot be considered in isolation
2. Employability is a process of learning
3. To integrate employability within the curriculum we need a holistic approach which combines:
 - Employability
 - Lifelong learning
 - Teaching, learning and assessment activities
 - Deep learning and active learning
 - PDP and reflection

This brief overview brings together some of the key elements in this list and encourages you to make your own connections between them.

Knight and Yorke (2003: 8) summarise the key elements of the relationship between good learning and employability:

“It could be objected that higher education is primarily about developing advanced understandings of worthwhile subject matter, not about employability.

However, learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum experts regularly say that good subject matter understanding comes from the active construction of meanings. That, in turn, involves instruction, tasks and learning environments that call upon incremental self-theories, self-motivation, reflection and a range of social practices, amongst other things.

In other words, graduate employability is fostered by teaching approaches that take this set of factors into account. Whilst academic staff might reject

employability as a curriculum goal, they are much more likely to accept that curriculum processes can improve the chances that students will gain in terms of employability. In this way, we say that good subject matter understanding is compatible with employability policies, and that employability and good learning are highly compatible”.

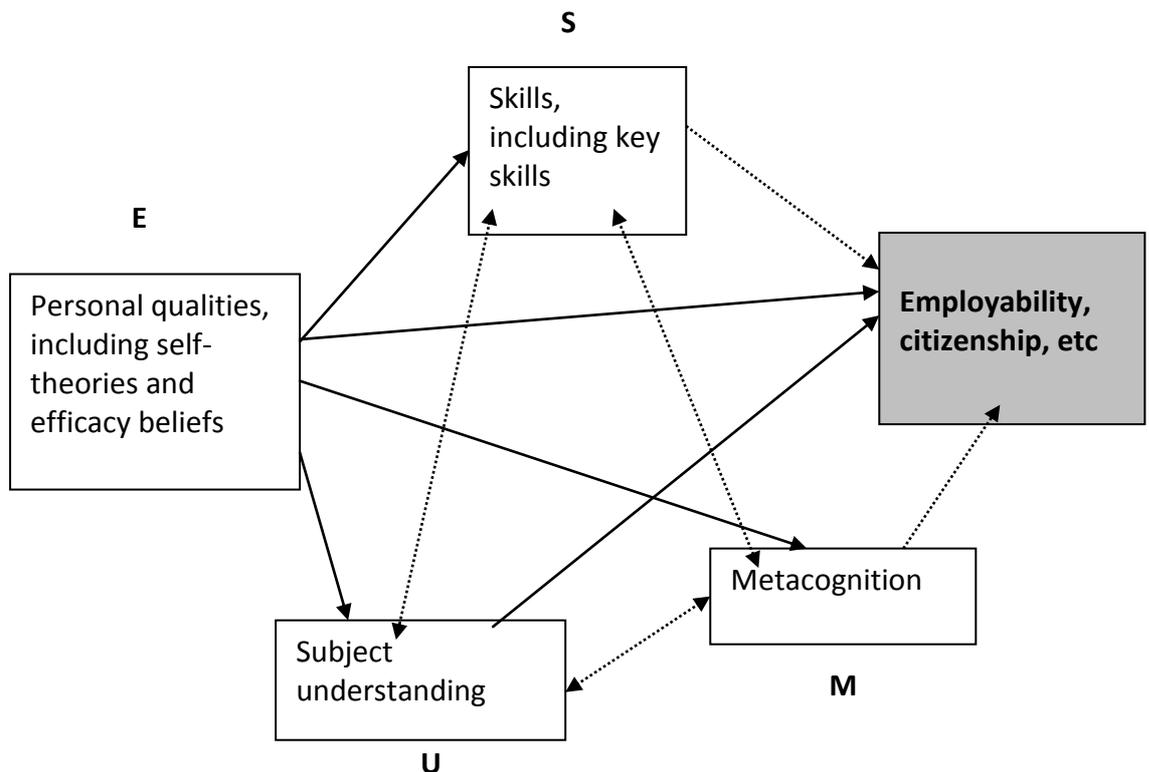
Knight and Yorke’s USEM model of employability

Understanding – of subject/discipline

Skills – including key skills

Efficacy beliefs - students’ self-theories and personal qualities. Do they believe they can learn; can they make a difference?

Metacognition, encompassing self-awareness regarding the student’s learning, and the capacity to reflect on, in and for action.



Yorke, M. and Knight, P. (2003)

Reflection and PDP

Universities UK (2002: 4) state:

“It is essential to give students structured support to learn from experience and to record their learning, preferably through integrated personal development planning processes.”

Jenny Moon (2004) has written on the importance of reflection in the development of employability and includes discussion of the role of PDP to promote and encourage this. In addition, Moon makes links between learning and reflection and, by extension, employability, when she asserts:

“From the evidence in the literature, the following can be outcomes of reflective processes:

- learning and material for further reflection
- action
- critical review
- personal and continuing professional development
- reflection on the process of learning or personal functioning (metacognition)
- the building of theory
- decisions or resolutions of uncertainty
- problem solving
- empowerment and emancipation
- unexpected outcomes such as images and ideas that may be the solution to problems.”

(Moon, 2004: 5)

Graduate attributes

The Pedagogy for Employability Group suggests that employers are looking for graduates with high-level skills, knowledge and personal attributes who can ‘grow on the job,’ and that there is ‘...a broad consensus about the attributes employers expect to find in graduate recruits.” (Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006: 4).

These attributes include:

- imagination/creativity
- adaptability/flexibility
- willingness to learn
- independent working/autonomy
- working in a team
- ability to manage others

- ability to work under pressure
- good oral communication
- communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences
- numeracy
- attention to detail
- time management
- assumption of responsibility and for making decisions
- planning, coordinating and organising ability

Complex learning

“...employability derives from complex learning.” (Yorke, 2006:2).

A consensus is emerging amongst writers and researchers that employability is best achieved through complex learning. Such learning is more likely to develop a wider range of graduate attributes conducive to employability. Biggs and Tang (2007:148) summarise these attributes as including:

- critical thinking
- ethical practice
- creativity
- independent learning
- problem solving
- communication skills
- teamwork
- lifelong learning
- professional skills

They also hold that these generic attributes are the core elements of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning

In developing their Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) Deakin Crick, Broadfoot and Claxton (2004) identified seven general principles of lifelong learning which echo some of the key recent ideas in employability, in particular, the self-efficacy and metacognitive elements of Knight and Yorke’s USEM model (2002).

These general principles are:

1. Growth orientation – the belief that learning can be learned
2. Critical curiosity – the desire to find things out
3. Meaning-making – seeking to make connections
4. Change – robustness and resilience in relation to learning
5. Creativity – trying out different ways

6. Learning relationships – learning with others
7. Strategic awareness – sensitivity to own learning

Constructivism and deep learning

Complex learning rejects the notion of transmission-based teaching, as typified by the ‘traditional’ lecture and focuses instead on a more student-centred, active approach.

Constructivist approaches to learning (Yorke and Knight, 2006; Biggs and Tang, 2007; Scales, 2008; Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2009) hold that students actively build knowledge and understanding by synthesising new information with knowledge they already possess. In this theory students actively ‘construct’ meaning.

In addition to constructivist approaches, complex learning is also ‘deep learning’. This concept was initially developed by Marton and Saljo (1976) and was further developed by Entwistle and Entwistle (1997) and Biggs and Tang (2007). Marton and Saljo’s work was based on the premise that students who adopt a ‘deep’, as opposed to ‘surface’, approach to learning look for underlying meanings and key concepts, rather than the accumulation of unrelated detail. According to Biggs and Tang (2007: 24): “When using a deep approach to handling a task, students have positive feelings: interest, a sense of importance, challenge, exhilaration. Learning is a pleasure.”

Learning and teaching methods

The kinds of teaching and learning activities most likely to encourage deep learning and constructivist approaches to learning include, for example:

- case studies
- problem-based learning (PBL)
- discussion and debate
- concept mapping
- independent research
- presentations
- role plays
- brainstorming sessions
- peer tutoring/ teaching
- networking
- wikis and blogs
- simulations/ games
- groupwork activities

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