

Is it Time to Embed Careers Teaching and Support in the Disciplines?

Pauline Kneale

Employability is a powerful motivator for students seeking to reduce their debt, yet the proportion of university students who pass through the doors of their Careers Service is generally low. 'I will worry about a job when I've got a 2.1' and 'They don't have graduate jobs, why get their advice' are phrases heard all too often and of questionable accuracy. If students do not visit their campus careers offices, then this image is not going to improve. Careers staff are generally not perceived as cool (not that academics are either). So what can be done? At what point will academics in the disciplines be worried enough by graduate destinations to put employability issues on the front burner?

This introduction asks some questions that unhelpfully are not answered directly here. They are designed to raise issues for discussion, and the article that follows takes the same approach. Not all of these questions will be helpful, context is everything, and every higher education institution (HEI) is in a different position. But, for example: What are the triggers for making curriculum space for employability and enterprise matters? Is the curriculum the right place for employability-motivated student learning? What would a Careers Service have to offer in teaching to match the level of academic-led skills teaching? What might a research-led careers assessment consist of?

Essentially these points raise issues about cultural change in an organisation. To achieve an effective and successful employability and careers operation, change needs to be supported. Hultman (1998, p.5) lists eight reasons why people will support organisational change, all of which can be thought about in the context of careers operations:

1. *They believe their needs are not being met at present.* How would academics know if a student felt unsupported in the development of career-related skills or preparation for work? What is the evidence being collected? What is relevant evidence? How strong does evidence have to be to make curriculum space for new developments?
2. *They believe the change will make it easier for them to meet their needs.*
3. *They believe the benefits outweigh the risks.* What are the risks involved in making space for careers work?
4. *They believe change is necessary to avoid or escape a harmful situation.* What is the worst that can happen if the current student engagement with careers professionals is maintained?
5. *They believe the change process is being handled properly.* What is the mechanism for developing closer curricular ties with careers materials? Who validates the quality?
6. *They believe the change will work.* What is the persuasive evidence that this is a route worth pursuing? What will influence academic staff? What will influence careers colleagues?
7. *The change is consistent with their values.*
8. *They trust those responsible for the change.*

Background

Work through the 1990s and early 2000s has focused on the role of careers professionals in developing graduates who will move comfortably to the job market and raised the profile of degrees which are career-oriented (Maguire, 2005). Employability has been recognised as a force influencing student decisions when entering HE as well as in student retention. The report of the Harris Committee (2000) identified the strategic role and position of Careers Services. In seeking 'a modern service, which provides high quality provision to meet customers' needs', it is worth reviewing four of the recommendations (Harris 2000, pp.13-15) and asking to what extent the careers operation in one's own institution is meeting these aspirations:

- HE Careers Services should strive to engage the interest, commitment and involvement of senior management within the HEI.
- Careers Service staff should be engaged as consultants, catalysts and, where appropriate, deliverers, in relation to employability issues.
- The Careers Service could effect a more prominent role within the HEI by being centrally involved in the delivery of career planning modules which are run by individual departments.
- HE Careers Services should seek to establish service-level agreements with academic departments with a view to contributing to the development of the curriculum, including elements for enhancing student employability.

These questions focus on the role of careers colleagues, but there are questions in parallel for academics. The status of careers staff within departments varies across universities. It is arguable that careers colleagues need to have a place on faculty and department teaching committees so that both sides are aware of emerging agendas and opportunities. Knowing people personally can help to raise awareness and break down barriers. In some cases, these barriers are not insubstantial. One real concern is to get alignment of values around this agenda so that arguments like 'I didn't use the Careers Centre to get my job, so it's not worth you going', 'it's not my job to work on CVs with the students', and 'they came here for Chemistry/History/French, so that's what I'm doing with them', are heard much less frequently.

An information flow between academics and careers experts around graduate employability, alumni information and evidence of effective student engagement is needed to raise the profile of employability. This means presenting colleagues with convincing researched evidence to counteract theological arguments. Do the Dean and Head of School, for example, know the graduate employability rates for their students? Does the average lecturer doing admissions work have these facts? Who does need to know, who are the gate-keepers or influencers to work with, and how are these busy people to be kept up to speed in a dynamic market?

The 'customer' here is not necessarily helping the process. Lack of student engagement with and appreciation of employability learning opportunities can be an obstacle. This is never going to be a cool activity and graduation can seem too far away: 'I will worry about a job when I've got a 2.1'. We must recognise that students have many competing demands - vacation and term-time work, social and sporting activity. 'I have to have my job in term time to keep the loans below £6,000; there isn't time' is fair comment. It also brings to the fore a point that many students make: 'I have a job in term time, and in vacations. I have been successful in getting jobs in the past. I have a CV that has got me a job. So why do I need to think about the next stage now?' There is a real issue about pitching employability materials and activities in such a way that the student feels engaged without being patronised. Targeting level 1 students about jobs four years down the line is inappropriate.

It is worth reviewing with careers staff, academics and students what they see as working effectively towards this agenda as well as what is hindering it. Here are some suggestions as to what does and does not work.

What does work

- Careers staff working with academics with shared goals and both sides listening and responding to what students want. Academics understanding what careers advisers do and displaying a positive attitude towards

their work. Careers advisers drip-feeding information to academics and involving them in classroom sessions/workshops.

- A prompt service with support available when students need it most and guidance that is well-targeted and effectively delivered. Getting the basics right in terms of providing decent maps of how to find the Careers Centre and a user-friendly website. Students appreciate clear, easy-to-use materials.
- Flexible and realistic delivery of teaching that targets what is relevant to students *now*, and provides simple, immediate answers focused on students' needs. Identification of the stages in career planning from the first-week induction sessions onwards, with workshops targeted to specific needs. First years should focus on getting well-paid term time and vacation jobs and undergraduate internships. In parallel, there needs to be plenty of advertising and information targeted at relevant academic and support staff, with emphasis on relevance. Emailing those who are teaching students that week and the support staff who can put a notice up or email the entire year is useful. Untargeted requests and emails drop into the background clutter, to be ignored by all.
- Maximising discipline relevance through involving academics who possess a genuine interest in students' plans post-graduation, through applied research and through promoting connections to students between their subject and its application in the 'real world'. These might involve research-led module assignments for assessment, for example researching the labour market for their discipline, entrepreneurship amongst graduates of their discipline and in the past, and potential work-placement opportunities that will enhance discipline understanding.
- Support and commitment from senior management. Effective dissemination of management information and co-operation with Student Unions to identify student career needs and to promote careers education. Academic course teams already do much work for students in these areas that is not always recognised, and this needs to be identified and credited. Heads of School, Deans and other senior managers should be invited to regular, well-targeted briefings which tell them something about their student body that they did not already know. These meetings should be so useful that students want to book a date for the next meeting before the careers adviser leaves the room. If that is not the outcome then some review is in order.

What does not work

- One-off events for students at any stage – with no follow-up and no assessment, they fade quickly in people's memories.

- Start-of-year announcements. The request 'Can I have ten minutes at the start of a lecture ...?' is fairly traditional but is it effective? At a point when a student is waiting for their first lecture this is worthy but background information. Students are not prepared for it, and unless there is a compulsory follow-up activity and assessment, the message fades.
- Anything where the student is not required to follow up with a piece of personal research. An activity that personalises the information for the individual, and preferably an assessment, is critical to successful engagement.
- Any system where the student must be proactive to start the engagement. One-to-one careers interviews, student-booked, can be very intimidating.
- Leaving it to the final year – it is too late to get on a placement, many application deadlines have passed, and examinations and assessments present too many distractions.
- Giving careers support *before* reassuring students that yes, thinking about the future is uncomfortable. There is a danger in providing too much information at the wrong time and in running generic sessions with a 'one size fits all' approach.

Where are careers and employability activities located on campus? Location is important. It is worth remembering that students go to the library because curricula are cleverly designed to force reading. Careers offices on very well-trodden routes with sunny rooms, friendly people and good caf_ facilities will attract regular visitors who pick up information. If these criteria are not met, then perhaps some thought about improving the attractiveness of information locations would pay dividends. Crucial evidence is the number of student visits and revisits. If 80% of students visit 5 times or more, then everything is probably OK. What are the numbers by School and across an institution?

Of course, much activity takes place online, but students are very web-savvy and sites need to be refreshed in style regularly and be user-friendly. Again, statistics on student visit numbers and time spent online, together with event bookings, are vital evidence of effectiveness. Discussions with student focus groups are useful in raising the effectiveness of web delivery.

The academic, for whom employability is unlikely to be a central interest, but for whom student success is vital, might want to consider to what extent the following statements line up with their own context and practice, and to reflect on what might be done to enhance the current position:

- Without academic intervention and support, the status of employability amongst students is not going to increase.

- Placing students effectively in the graduate workforce is as important an outcome for a university as the number of 2.1s and firsts.
- Methods for integrating engagement must be backed up by positive support from the teaching community. Researching a career opportunity is as good a way of practising research skills as any other research activity, and it can therefore be assessed.
- The assessments for careers or employability activities within modules are as tough as in any other module. All such activities are assessed.
- There is creative use of the employability profile data, for example with entries in every student handbook, on all department websites and in PDPs. This information is used in tutorials and at open days (Higher Education Academy, 2006; AGCAS, 2006).

Places to start looking for UK current practice include employability case studies and institutional employability strategies (AGCAS, 2007), the Higher Education Academy (2007) Employability and Enterprise site, and the Careers Education Benchmark Statement (AGCAS, 2006).

What from the following list might careers colleagues embrace?

- Development of employability and careers learning packages with academically solid content. These may be used in small bites - 2 to 5 credits in each of the 3 years, or in chunks as large as a module.
- Making real links with PDPs at every teaching and discussion session.
- Materials in the style that are familiar to students: for example, with clear learning outcomes for each session, and linked assessments.
- A focus on short-term returns, rather than end-of-degree employment: for example, on work placements, internships and getting employment in the local area for first-year students.
- Being challenging and demanding of students at all times. Work set should be difficult to be treated as a parallel activity to other degree assessments.
- Using alumni at every possible opportunity. Try to ensure students see graduates as close to their own age-group as possible as employment role models: their information is 'more real'.
- Being able to quote every department's graduate employability statistics.
- Finding the opportunity to talk to directors of studies and heads of school, to promote the 'what careers can do for you' agenda.

What might a successful employability and careers operation look like?

Here are a selection of possible ambitions for engagement. What is a relevant challenge in your own university or discipline?

- All students have at least two meaningful engagements with careers each year.
- All students receive CV assistance and interview practice.
- 90% of students move to graduate jobs within three years.
- Every undergraduate student undertakes one piece of career-related research and assessment in the context of their discipline.
- Every level 1 undergraduate is aware of and knows how to research work placement, research placement and internship opportunities appropriate to their discipline and has the ability to create CVs and letters of application tailored to different types of employment of the right standard to be successful if they choose to apply.
- Every level 2 and 3 undergraduate is aware of and knows how to research career opportunities appropriate to their discipline, can create an evidenced curriculum vitae and letter of application, and has had an opportunity to practise interview skills.
- Every postgraduate student has at least one careers tutorial introduction to researching career opportunities, resources and provision. Each taught postgraduate student has had an opportunity to develop CV and interview skills six months before they complete their degree.
- Every research postgraduate student understands that a PhD provides research skills which are sought after by many graduate employers. PhD students undertake a short course in careers research, CV and interview skills as part of research training.

Concluding thoughts

Raising questions is, at one level, very annoying. This article is however offered as a template to aid thinking around practice by both discipline and careers colleagues. The issue of employability is not going to go away. It is hard to make it work but universities cannot afford to ignore it and there has never been a better time to push it to the forefront of practice. It is also a good time to review practice by individuals and by departments. Regular, traditional activities drop into calendars, but are they really effective? What are the numbers of people really influenced by an event? Episodic events are momentarily attractive, but what is their long-term impact?

Cynical academic colleagues are only likely to be persuaded to revise teaching arrangements by hard evidence. This is a good time to have it on hand to drive change. Whether or not it is time to integrate activities which involve students researching employment opportunities in their assessed curricula, it is certainly an opportune time to review practice and to raise students' awareness of their graduate options.

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For correspondence

Professor Pauline E. Kneale, Professor of Applied Hydrology with Learning and Teaching in Geography; Director, White Rose CETL Enterprise, University of Leeds
Email: p.e.kneale@leeds.ac.uk