Revisiting the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability

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It has been thirteen years since the publication of the article that introduced the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability. During this time, there have been many changes in Higher Education and the graduate employment market, which raises the question, is the CareerEDGE model still relevant in 2020? This article looks back at the development of the model and the complementary questionnaire, the Employability Development Profile and evaluates their global impact. It also considers any criticisms and explores some other employability-related concepts for inclusion in a model of graduate employability development.

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Introduction

It has been thirteen years since the article introducing the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability development (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) was published in the journal *Education + Training*. During this time, Higher Education (HE) has experienced rapid change, not least the large increase in student fees in 2012, bringing with it an increasingly consumerist approach to education. One outcome of this is more focussed attention on the student experience, which includes ensuring students have access to development opportunities that help them to increase their chances of success within HE and to prepare them for life beyond university.

As a psychologist, viewing employability as something the individual can develop and improve, feels positive, empowering and optimistic. The CareerEDGE Model approaches employability from the same perspective as Yorke (2006) who describes it as a multi-faceted

characteristic of the individual. Of course, it is essential to recognise that developing employability does not guarantee a graduate a satisfying occupation. For example, Clarke (2008) draws attention to the fact that '…even the most seemingly employable person may experience difficulty finding a suitable job in an unsympathetic labour market.' (p. 269). However, labour market conditions and other external factors are not something that we as employability developers can influence, but we can try to ensure our students are made aware of them. As De Cuyper et al. (2011) point out, the word '*employability*' is derived from the words '*employment*' and '*ability*'. Universities may be able to influence the '*ability*' element which refers to the person's skills and competencies but have no control over the '*employment*' aspects which are dependent on a number of issues, including labour market demand.

With all of this in mind, now seems like an opportune time to revisit CareerEDGE and consider if it still has value and relevance in 2020.

Development of the CareerEDGE model

The article that introduced CareerEDGE was the result of in-depth, rigorous research into the concept of graduate employability, which had revealed the concept as somewhat woolly and often misunderstood. In particular, from much of the literature on the subject, it was very difficult to distinguish the difference between employability and career management/development learning (CDL). A 'lightbulb moment' occurred when it became clear that CDL was just one aspect of employability development and that seeing them as interchangeable concepts

Figure 1: The CareerEDGE Model of Graduate Employability
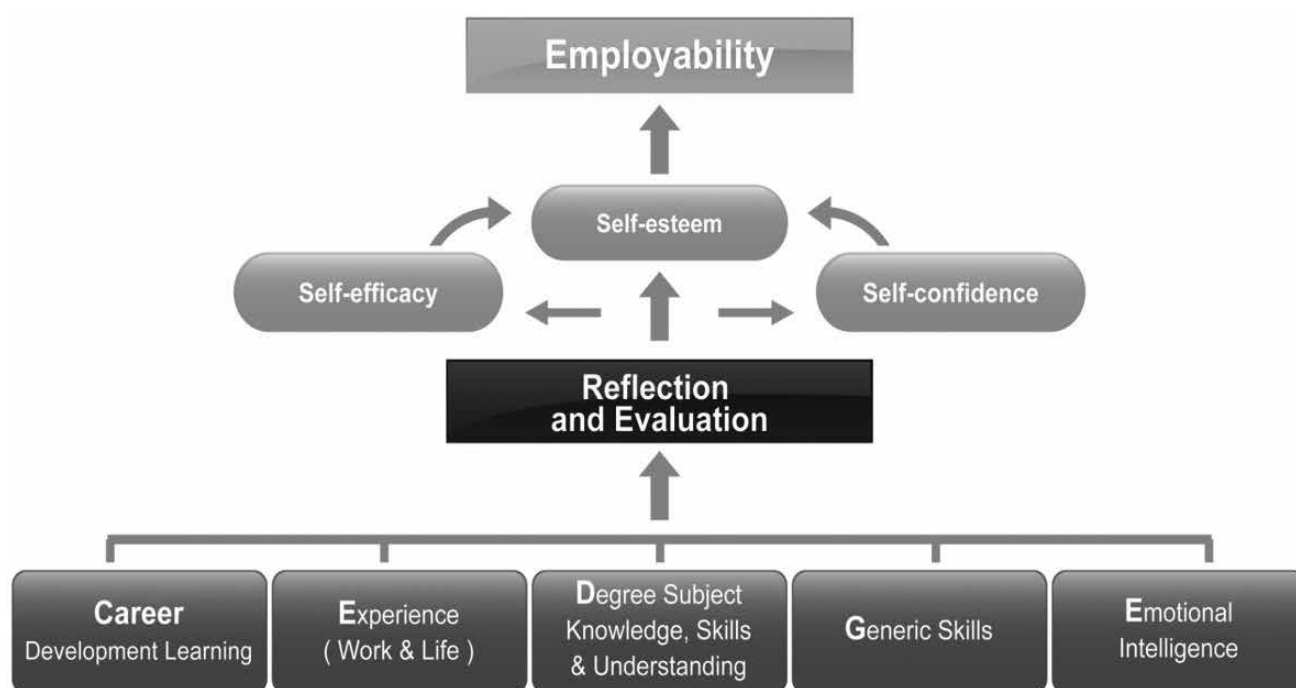
Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007)

was one of the reasons why people were mistakenly viewing employability development as exclusively CVs, applications and other job-getting activities (which are themselves, tools to support just one aspect of CDL). Once this was established, the rest of the essential elements of CareerEDGE became clearer. It is vital that in addition to CDL, students are given opportunities to gain real-world experience, develop their generic skills and their emotional intelligence (EI). At the centre of CareerEDGE is the 'D' for degree subject knowledge, skills and understanding. One of the reasons for the success of the model has been this emphasis on the degree subject being at the centre of the student's experience and, in itself, an essential element of employability development.

Career Development Learning, Experience (Work & Life) and Generic Skills

Career Development Learning (CDL) is indeed about ensuring students are well prepared for job applications and interviews, but a good deal of important work in this area takes place long before

graduation. Developing self-awareness, which is essential for a successful life beyond university, together with guidance on the wide-range of opportunities open to graduates, are also key to helping students make career decisions that ensure they stand the best chance of securing and retaining occupations they will find satisfying and fulfilling. Additionally, students now need support with presenting themselves in digital spaces such as LinkedIn or other social media and preparing for modern-day selection processes, such as video interviews. CDL activities can also help students to explore important aspects of future careers such as the increasing use of artificial intelligence in the workplace and the importance of living and working in sustainable ways.

Experience, from paid and voluntary work, is also essential. It not only allows students to develop many of the generic skills employers look for in graduate recruits, for example the ability to communicate with different people, work as part of a team and solve problems, but can be another helpful way of learning about what they are looking for and importantly, what they do not enjoy, in an occupation.

Emotional Intelligence

Before the original publication I was concerned that the inclusion of EI in a model of graduate employability development would be met with some criticism from the academic community but fortunately this did not happen. In fact, quite the opposite occurred with many academic colleagues agreeing that EI is an essential element of employability development. This is supported by the fact that many employers now include EI in job descriptions and person specifications. In 2015, the Chief Assessor and Chief Psychologist with responsibility for recruiting individuals to the Civil Service Fast Stream graduate programme was quoted as saying 'We want people with good interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence…' (Leach, 2015). EI also features as part of the Civil Service Learning curriculum, which demonstrates its acceptance as an important aspect of everyday experience in the workplace. Having asserted that EI was a key aspect of employability development, I needed to be able to demonstrate that it was possible to teach and for students to develop. This work was carried out between 2007 and 2011 and provided evidence to support this assertion, not only demonstrating that EI could be taught but that students can also develop confidence in their EI ability, otherwise known as Emotional Self-Efficacy (Dacre Pool & Qualter, 2012). Confidence in any ability means there is a greater chance that it will be used. If we needed any further convincing, a recent meta-analysis has shown a clear, positive association between EI and academic performance and supports the growing consensus among educators, researchers and policy makers, of its importance for both wellbeing and future workplace success of students (MacCann et al. 2020).

Cultural Intelligence

One further concept that does warrant explicit inclusion within CareerEDGE is Cultural Intelligence. This concept shares a degree of overlap and interaction with EI, and some researchers now consider it to be a key part of the concept (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 2016). Cultural Intelligence is defined as 'an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings' (Ang & Van Dyne, 2009, p3) and is an essential skill in today's diverse workplaces and global society.

Reflection and Evaluation

At the next level of the model, we have 'Reflection and Evaluation', whereby students should be provided with guidance and opportunities to reflect on and evaluate their employability learning experiences. Reflective logs, diaries, portfolios and journals have become widely accepted assessment activities across the HE sector, with a recognition that it is often guided reflection on learning experiences that allows effective and deep learning to take place (Artess, Hooley & Mellors-Bourne, 2017). It is these deep learning experiences that have the potential to bring about increases in Self-Efficacy, Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem (the three Ss), so vital for employability development.

By engaging with all the elements of the model, graduates have a better chance of reaching their full potential and developing their personal resilience. For example, a student may take part in an in-class activity where they are given a group problem-solving task. During the activity they may find themselves naturally assuming a leadership role, encouraging quieter members of the group to contribute, organising the different members with essential tasks and managing the time, resulting in a positive outcome for their group. Time spent reflecting on this activity should allow the student to recognise the different generic skills they were able to develop and demonstrate during the activity. They may also recognise their EI ability, which helped them to see when others may have wanted to contribute but didn't feel able to (reading emotions in others), recognise and regulate their own emotions (they may have felt anxious about completing the task but worked through this with the resultant successful outcome). We can see how taking part in this planned classroom activity and reflecting on it, could lead to this student recognising that they do have potential for a leadership role, should they choose to follow this path in the future.

Resilience – connected to the three Ss and EI

The subject of resilience is receiving a good deal of attention in HE, with growing concern about students struggling to cope and experiencing mental health

issues. Resilience was not explicitly included in the original CareerEDGE model but is closely related to the three Ss and to EI. For example, a student who takes part in a work-related experience, perhaps a project working to a brief from an employer, will no doubt experience set-backs and challenges along the way. Perhaps they will make a mistake. By reflecting on this experience and being guided to learn from it, they can also see that mistakes are part of life – we learn from them and use the learning in future. It is this type of experience that helps to build self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-esteem and resilience and can be recalled to mind when similar challenges are faced in the future. Additionally, developing aspects of EI such as emotion regulation strategies, will also be helpful for building resilience.

Other related-concepts for consideration

Over the years there have been a number of other suggestions for inclusion in a model of graduate employability development. These include concepts such as positive attitude, integrity, enthusiasm and other aspects of good character. These, among others, can be recognised as important for any student to develop, but unlike other aspects of CareerEDGE, they cannot be taught in the same way we can teach knowledge, skills and abilities. However, as part of CDL activities, we can and should talk to our students about them, explain their importance for future career activities and help them to articulate evidence of them in future job applications and interviews.

The Employability Development Profile (EDP)

The CareerEDGE Employability Development Profile (EDP) is a brief self-report diagnostic tool that encourages students to consider their employability strengths and plan actions for any improvements. It has been made freely available to the academic community throughout the world and translated by overseas universities into a number of different languages including German, Spanish, Polish, Mandarin and Persian. It is not the answer to everything employability related but can ensure that students recognise early on in their HE experience that

employability is not just about getting a job, which can wait until their final year or until after graduation. They are then in a much better position to take advantage of the many learning opportunities on offer whilst they are studying, which will help them to develop their employability throughout their degree studies. It is recommended that students complete the EDP on an annual basis, allowing them to 'check-in' with their employability development and continue to plan their next steps.

The psychometric properties of the EDP have been examined and published (Dacre Pool, Qualter & Sewell, 2014). More recently, changes have been made to the enterprise/entrepreneurship question on the front of the questionnaire. Where there used to be a statement, 'I would consider starting my own business' with a 'Yes/No' response, following helpful feedback from an expert in this area, this has now been updated to two questions, 'Are you interested in self-employment?' and 'Do you have an idea that might be developed into something of social, cultural or economic value?' A 'Yes' response to either of these questions allows students who may need support with an enterprising idea to be guided towards relevant services.

Further developments

There is a widespread recognition that providing opportunities for students to develop their employability is an increasingly important aspect of any teaching and learning strategy and CareerEDGE provides a framework for these activities. To support academic colleagues with embedding employability in the curriculum we developed the Course Employability Mapping Tool which allows course teams to audit employability-related activities in their provision, recognise any gaps, and plan actions for improvements. This tool is also freely available to the academic community on request.

Recognition

The success of CareerEDGE has been somewhat overwhelming, being described as 'the most comprehensive' model of graduate employability (Small, Shacklock & Marchant, 2018) and a 'sustainable employability model' (Tymon, Harrison & Batistic,

2019). Shortly after publication, the article was selected by Emerald as one of ten noteworthy articles (from approximately 450) included in the 'Monthly Highlights' section of their website and then featured weekly as the most downloaded article in the journal for over a decade. At the time of writing, it has been downloaded almost 60,000 times and cited 1088 times (Google Scholar, accessed 25.2.20). It has appeared in journal articles, book chapters, published reports and is used extensively in Careers/Employability Services and academic departments across the HE sector, in the UK and throughout the world, including Europe, the U.S., Australia, North Africa, the Middle East and Far East.

One example of this is the University of South Carolina in the U.S. where the model was slightly adapted and used to write a chapter for a Year 1 transitions text book. The model was presented to several thousand first year students and their parents during the summer of 2015. At University College Dublin, the model has been used extensively as their chosen employability framework. Careers staff there have mapped their work onto CareerEDGE, illustrating the impact of the entire team.

> Using CareerEDGE has allowed staff to appreciate and assimilate the breadth of what makes a student employable. While the importance of effective CV's and performance across graduate recruitment and selection remains critical, we have a focus on enhancing students' skill development, self-efficacy and self-confidence. These, we see, as the building blocks for success in life at University and beyond.
>
> (David Foster, UCD Director of Career Development and Skills, 2016)

Value and relevance of CareerEDGE

People often say that the reason for its success is that the original article is readable, the model perfectly understandable and straightforward to explain to others and to operationalise. There has been very little criticism of the model. Only some unpublished whisperings that it is too simple! However, I would answer this possible criticism with a question; why does it have to be complicated? Complicated doesn't

necessarily mean good – in fact it can often hide some very muddled thinking… One senior academic recently wrote in a Times Higher Education article that 'The view seems to have taken hold that serious work must be painful to read, and almost impossible to understand' (Tourish, 2019). Personally, I do not see the point of producing work of this nature that only a tiny percentage of the population will read, and an even tinier percentage understand. I would rather be criticised for simplicity but know the work is of interest and use to many.

Since its original publication in 2007, the CareerEDGE model has informed the way careers practitioners and academic staff understand and teach employability development. The elements on the lower part of the model, are still essential for employability development, as is the assertion that reflection is the key to the development of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem. In the current economic climate, with the resultant uncertainty and precarity in the labour market, it is more important than ever that our students are as prepared as they can be to face these future challenges and thrive in this rapidly changing world. The CareerEDGE model supports this endeavour and indeed, in a more marketised HE sector, helps us to meet the higher expectations of our students in relation to developing their employability (Money, et al. 2017).

Interest and positive feedback in relation to CareerEDGE over the years from both Careers/Employability professionals and academic colleagues, provides strong evidence for its current relevance and sustainability. Nottingham Trent University were one of the first UK universities to utilise CareerEDGE and it seems pertinent to conclude with the words of their Director of Employability,

> As the future of work develops at an even faster pace, we cannot hope to prepare our graduates for jobs which in all likelihood have not yet been invented. However, if our ambition is to equip graduates to be adaptable in a changing world and secure successful and fulfilling futures for themselves, then CareerEDGE is probably more relevant now than it has ever been.
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> (David Eade, 2019)

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