

Guidance and Employability in Higher Education

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The concept of what is meant by 'guidance' and the methods of guidance support and intervention have changed dramatically in higher education (HE) over the past ten years. The key shifts have been in the responsibility placed on learners to access one-to-one and on-line support in the context of self-preparation through introductory diagnostic processes; and the development of curricula which equip learners with the awareness and the abilities to manage their own progression through learning and work.

There has been much recent debate into the remit and role of HE careers services. Student employability is high on the Government agenda linked to the drive for widening participation. Employers and their organisations are still vociferous in demanding more work-ready graduates. Traditional methods of supporting effective student transition are increasingly found wanting in the face of expanding student numbers and the different needs of new learners.

The AGCAS Review

In 1997, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) itself commissioned a review by Tony Watts of possible ways forward: *Strategic Directions for HE Careers Services*.

This outlined four options which are based on strong embedding within the institution:

- The integrated Guidance model, in which careers services becomes an integral part of a continuous process available to students pre-entry, on entry and throughout their courses as well as on exit from them;
- The Integrated Placement model, in which the careers service's concern for placement on exit is joined by responsibility for course-related placements and placements into part-time and voluntary jobs;
- The Curriculum model, in which the careers service becomes a service designed to support academic departments in incorporating employability skills and career management skills into course provision, either as consultancy or delivery; and
- The Learning Organisation model, in which the careers service fosters the career development of all members of the institution, contract researchers and staff as well as students.

Three further options are based on delivering careers services post-graduation.

Whilst HE careers services continued to be expected to deliver aspects of all these models, there was a significant increase in the provision of assessed career development learning modules, both free-standing and within

departments, delivered by careers service staff, academics or a combination of the two. This approach was supported and stimulated by eight 'Career Management in the Academic Curriculum' projects funded by the DfEE between 1996 and 1998.

The Harris Review

In 2001, the 'Harris Review', *Developing Modern Higher Education Careers Services*, was published. It recommended greater transparency in the provision that careers services were able to offer to various stakeholders, including statements of entitlement for students, for recent graduates and for employers. Institutions were invited to establish service level agreements between careers services and other parts of the organisation, if appropriate.

Closer partnerships between HE career services and other guidance providers was recommended. In addition, the quality standards already being developed by AGCAS were incorporated into the Guidance Council Standards to form the Matrix standards. These standards define the outcomes of a quality service whose aim is assisting individuals to make use of information, explore issues and plan courses of action in relation to learning and work - in essence, what a higher education careers service is all about. A significant number of HE careers services have been awarded these standards in the first year of operation.

In parallel with this, and supported by the Harris Review, there was an accelerated thrust to embed career development learning and employability in a much more integrated way into the academic curriculum; to build upon and extend the work of the earlier DfEE initiatives.

Three major initiatives

In 2002, three major initiatives indicated an overall will for higher education to grasp the nettle of what enhancing graduate employability might involve:

Lee Harvey

First, UUK commissioned a piece of research reviewing links between higher education and the world of work in the context of widening participation and increased student diversity. In it, Lee Harvey concluded 'In a few years, efforts to enhance employability have been transformed from an overemphasis on "bolting on" skills to imaginative initiatives designed to prepare graduates for lifelong learning in a manner that reflects the needs of workforce development and of social inclusion' although he cautions 'some academics think that embracing employability could infringe academic autonomy, undermine critique, and result in a shift in the balance away from education towards training'.

Skills Plus

Also in 2002, the Skills Plus Project, involving 17 departments from four universities in the North-West appraised their curricula based on a model developed by Knight and Yorke: the USEM model of employability in HE.

In the Skills *plus* project, employability was seen as being influenced by four broad and inter-related components:

1. Understanding.
2. Skills (the term is used here because of its significance in political and employment circles, but there is a real danger of its being given a simplistic and unhelpful interpretation – a term such as 'skilful practice' is probably more appropriate).
3. Efficacy beliefs, students' self-theories and personal qualities – of critical importance being the extent to which students feel that they might 'be able to make a difference' (not every time, but in a probabilistic way).
4. Metacognition, encompassing self-awareness regarding the student's learning, and the capacity to reflect on, in and for action.

ESECT

Finally, HEFCE funded a 30-month project commencing September 2002 which established the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) with a remit to draw together, disseminate and add to best practice in the enhancement of graduate employability:

ESECT sees employability as a challenge to higher education to put more emphasis on a set of achievements that are very compatible with widely-shared hopes for undergraduate learning. ESECT is concerned to help stakeholders promote these educational and employability-oriented achievements through good teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment design.

Over the coming two years, there will be significant research and dissemination of good practice and challenges in enhancing student employability in HE. Not the least of the challenges is the need for a variety of stakeholders to articulate with greater precision what they mean by 'employability'.

Implications for research

In terms of research need, it seems timely to consider:

1. What does 'guidance' mean in the context of the current employability debate?
2. How far and in what ways do the curricular interventions being developed in fact equip the individual for effective progression through learning and work?
3. What might be successful components of 'Do-It-Yourself' guidance?

Note

All ESECT publications will be available, as they are produced, on the LTSN Generic Centre website www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre

References

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