

Employability Skills and Graduate Attributes – a letter to colleagues

Stephen Bostock, 12 August 2010

For over 10 years there has been debate and a deal of confusion over the terms employability skills and graduate attributes. The debate is compounded by the emotional traction of these terms, with their implications for the purpose of higher education and universities. *Employability* smacks of narrow training and government rhetoric about economic return on investment, for the student and the state, while many of us teaching in HE are concerned with our disciplines and with the human development of our students as professionals and citizens. None of us would deny, however, that we want our graduates to be employable, so we cannot ignore the debate and the terminology. Some programmes lead directly to employment in a specific profession while in other programmes there is little direct connection for many students. Therefore, for a university, especially a research-active university¹, there are many difficulties in agreeing and supporting the generic characteristics that we hope many or all of our graduates will possess, at least partly through our efforts.

Employability is a complex concept: employability for an individual student is simple in retrospect (did they get a suitable job?), and unknowable in prospect (will they be lifelong employable?) It is relative to the employability of competitors in the employment market. A definition is “the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment”.² As this is unknowable to us and subject to factors outside our control, employability was operationalised as the “key skills” or generic skills such as communication skills that many employers ask for in graduates, and often complain are missing. However, being an employable graduate cannot be reduced to discipline knowledge plus key skills: “Graduate employability is ... the possession of understandings, skills and personal attributes necessary to perform adequately in a graduate-level job”.³ Hence the term *graduate attributes* has been introduced to capture the broader nature of “graduateness” that is central to graduate employability: the “capabilities students develop at university that go beyond content”⁴. It is challenging to put these capabilities into words, so that we can agree that they are desirable for and achievable by all of our students, so that they reflect the distinctiveness of our university, and so that they are meaningful in the sense that staff and students can see where in our programmes and wider campus life they make a difference.

Let us summarise Keele’s employability skills and graduate attributes and then discuss their relationship. The nine employability skills were approved by Senate in 2003 and modified slightly in 2007:

1. Information technology
2. Numeracy
3. Learning to learn
4. Team working
5. Problem solving
6. Oral and visual communication
7. Written communication

¹ Baker, G. and Henson, D. (2010) Promoting employability skills development in a research-intensive university, *Education and Training* Vol. 52 No. 1, pp. 62-75

² Brown, P., Hesketh, A. and Williams, S. (2003) Employability in a knowledge-driven economy, *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 107-26, p111.

³ Knight and Yorke, 2002, p. 263 Employability through the curriculum, *Tertiary Education and Management*, Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 261-76, p261

⁴ Milne, C. (2000), “Tertiary literacies: integrating generic skills into the curriculum”, in Fallows, S. and Steven, C. (Eds), *Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education: Employability, Transferable Skills and Learning for Life*, Kogan Page, London, pp. 87-98. Quoted in Baker and Henson, op. cit.

8. Information handling
9. Research

Each of the nine has a handful of more detailed components such that they could be easily specified for teaching or assessment. They are built into our PDP framework. They are very varied in nature (e.g. IT and research) and varied in their relevance or appropriateness to different programmes, which is perhaps why they have been adopted and integrated to varying degrees across the university.

Keele's graduate attributes in draft are that "through both programmes and wider experience during their time at Keele, students will be able to develop" the following: (their underpinning employability skills have been attached in parentheses):

1. An open and questioning approach to ideas, demonstrating curiosity, independence of thought and the ability to appreciate a range of perspectives on the natural and social worlds (skills: research, learning to learn)
2. An appreciation of the development and value of your chosen subjects of study, awareness of their contexts, the links between them, and awareness of the provisional and dynamic nature of knowledge (research)
3. Information literacy: the ability to locate, evaluate and synthesize large amounts of frequently conflicting information, ideas and data (IT and information literacy skills, and possibly numeracy)
4. The ability creatively to solve problems using a range of different approaches and techniques, and to determine which techniques are appropriate for the issue at hand (problem solving, research, and possibly numeracy)
5. An appreciation of the social, environmental and global implications of your studies and other activities, including recognition of any ethical implications
6. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively in written and verbal forms for different purposes and to a variety of audiences (oral, visual and written communication)
7. The knowledge, skills, self-confidence and self-awareness actively to pursue your future goals (learning to learn)
8. The ability and motivation to participate responsibly and collaboratively as an active citizen in the communities in which you live and work (team working)
9. A professional and reflective approach, including qualities of leadership, responsibility, personal integrity, empathy, care and respect for others, accountability and self-regulation (team working)
10. The flexibility to thrive in rapidly changing and uncertain external environments and to update skills and knowledge as circumstances require (learning to learn)

Do we need to promote both employability skills and graduate attributes? Yes.

- One simple reason for retaining employability skills is that the external context continues to emphasize them and Keele must have a robust position on both skills and attributes.
- Another reason is that they are not opposites or alternatives because the skills underpin the attributes (see the list above). Skills are narrower and more specific, teachable and assessable, but necessary for graduate attributes alongside knowledge, self-knowledge and attitudes.
- Skills are easier for graduates to demonstrate, either as part of programme outcomes or extra-curricular activities. And employers may be more interested in skills.
- The most important reason is that to be employable our graduates will need, and need to demonstrate, both.
- Graduate attributes are not only about employment but do go beyond employability skills as a basis for professional employment.

Employability skills have become appropriately adapted and embedded in many programmes and in the next few years we need to clarify and strengthen opportunities to develop graduate attributes in our programmes (although extra-curricular activities are also important and are the responsibility of individual students). As academics we should be reflecting on whether we should increase the opportunities to develop these generic skills and capabilities in each programme. Where we can identify them already, we should be highlighting them to our students so that they can make maximum use of them to develop and demonstrate their employability.

Further sources:

LDU employability page

http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/aa/landt/links/employability_skills.htm

including the best wording of the nine skills

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/aa/landt/docs/employabilityskills.htm>

Annexes 5a, 5b, 5c of the Keele Assessment Strategy about assessing skills

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/aa/landt/assessing.htm>

The Keele Personal Development Planning site

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/pdp>