

## **Embedding employability into the curriculum: five recommendations to improve widening participation students' graduate employability**

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### ***Abstract***

Ensuring students succeed during and beyond their degree, no matter their background, ethnicity, disability or demographic has been outlined in the mission of the English higher education regulator, the Office for Students (Office for Students, 2018). Additionally, there are endless strategies, agendas, research projects and discussions around improving Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) within universities, yet there is less literature relating to EDI activity relating to graduate employability. This paper argues that the areas where greater attention is required within EDI is the work of academics and careers support services, to enhance graduate outcomes, through the development of core employment and recruitment skills (Underwood, 2022), through embedding professional literacies into the curriculum. From making parallels with strategies to support academic literacies, this paper argues that certain employability development elements should be embedded into the core assessed curriculum of degrees, to support all students in developing their professional literacies.

**Keywords:** employability; equality, diversity & inclusion; widening participation; graduate outcomes.

### ***Introduction***

Ensuring students succeed during and beyond their degree, no matter their background, ethnicity, disability or demographic has been outlined in the mission of the English Higher Education regulator, the Office for Students (Office for Students, 2018). Additionally, there are endless strategies, agendas, research projects and discussions around improving

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) within universities, yet there is one area of the Office for Students' criteria (Access; Success; Progression) where the literature is thinner: EDI activity relating to graduate employability (Progression). There are many shared barriers and disadvantages faced by widening participation students, where

the opportunities offered to students to improve their employability are unevenly distributed and, therefore, scarcely available to underrepresented students; and the market-oriented concept of employability damages non-traditional students.

(Rodríguez, González-Monteagudo and Padilla-Carmona, 2021, p.134).

This paper argues that particular development interventions could have great potential for impacting disadvantaged groups. Simply signposting job vacancies and running careers fayres, alongside a continuous focus upon 'skills', will not be impactful unless core knowledge application and exposure to experiences are addressed in a similar approach to ensure student success through academic skills development for academic literacies (Lea, 2004). This paper argues that the areas where attention is required within EDI is in the work of academics and careers support services, to enhance graduate outcomes with the development of core employment and recruitment skills (Underwood, 2022) through embedding professional literacies into the curriculum.

### ***Context of widening participation in higher education***

Particular focus upon widening participation in UK higher education began with an emphasis on access to higher education (Moore, Sanders and Higham, 2013). Outreach, support and role model activities have increased the diversity of students across the last 50 years (Lea, 2015), with ongoing developments to address accessibility gaps in demographics for many elite universities and disciplines. Particular interventions include additional orientation and welcome days for students with autism (University of Worcester, 2022), targeted outreach activities when recruiting from certain backgrounds (such as Military Children, see Hall, McCullouch and Lawrence, 2022) and direct recruitment pathways for Black, Asian and minority ethnic students at elite institutions (Trinity College, University of Cambridge, 2021). Although the work is by no means complete, similar activities have been matched with work to support student success during degree study, where curriculum and support services have been enhanced to ensure students who sit

outside 'traditional' student journeys and demographics can still progress through their degrees. Case studies of enhancement include support development programmes for certain student demographics (Bracken and Novak, 2019), targeted staffing for certain student groups and initiatives to support Muslim students with exam flexibility during Ramadan (Islam, Lowe and Jones, 2019). These efforts are not just led by policy makers and universities, but also by students who have called for enhancements through liberation campaigns for greater inclusion for minority students on campuses (see Rhodes Must Fall, Ahmed, 2020; Reclaim the Night, University of Manchester Students' Union 2022), supported by wider societal movements to decolonise the curriculum (Morreira et al., 2020).

### ***Graduate employability***

The English higher education regulator, the Office for Students, is supercharging its accountability through performance measures in the English HE Sector. This has been done through imposing target measures of minimum percentage outcomes for cohorts of graduates across every provider, no matter their grade level of entry or status, with penalties threatened of £500,000 for undeveloped areas of 'poor' student outcomes. These measures, known at the B3 Measures of Registrations, place emphasis on numerous measures, including 'Success' retention measures, which assess progression from one level of study to the next, and completion of degrees (Office for Students, 2022a). They include 'Progression' measures, assessing the 'Graduate Outcomes' of individual degrees/students through a nationally commissioned Graduate Outcomes Survey (HESA, 2022). These metrics, which also include 'Access' enrolment demographic data, do not only look at overall percentage, but also assess the demographics of those students for 'gaps', where early assessments have highlighted considerable gaps across all indicators, from 'Access', to 'Success', to 'Progression' (Office for Students, 2022a). These measures are referred to as 'Attainment/Awarding Gaps', where institutions are tasked with addressing these inequalities to improve outcomes for notable student groups such as disabled, Black, Asian and minority ethnic, and working-class males (Ross et al., 2018).

Students from less-advantaged backgrounds face barriers when applying to graduate level work due to bias and discrimination, but also do not necessarily have the networks, social

capital or parental guidance, to support with such activities as job applications, CV writing and to discuss graduate options. This paper makes the argument that there is a need to embed core employment skills into the curriculum so a higher percentage of students are exposed to such employability development activities, and particularly, learning is ensured for students from widening participation backgrounds. If these targets are not met, projected fines for non-improvement in English higher education (Office for Students, 2022b), have catalysed an increased sector focus on widening participation in student and graduate employability services.

### ***Embedding the basics of employability into the curriculum***

Many learning development teams were founded on the need to support, develop and train academic writing, research and referencing techniques (aka academic literacies). Subsequent professions, services and careers have followed, producing such brilliant communities of practice as the Association of Learning Developers in Higher Education (ALDinHE, 2022) and research in fields such as academic literacies and learning development. The need to embed academic literacies skills and professional literacies such as essay structuring, training on research ethics, and academic practice relating to research, is clear within our sector. Universities and their degrees now prioritise academic skills with resources and time in the curriculum to 'train' these practices for student success (retention, completion and attainment), to prevent drop out, poor academic practice and degree failures. To make such activities mandatory, degrees have often gone beyond making time in the curriculum, to creating academic skills assessments to ensure mandatory student engagement with these activities. Most students require these trainings at different levels based on prior assessment experiences in prior study, yet the parallel skills needed later for job applications, interview practice and research professionals are not yet necessarily given the same attention in curriculum (Bradley, 2021). Speaking from a USA context, Hirudayaraj argues that there is an 'urgent need to look beyond creating access for first generation students to creating opportunities for them in a globalized knowledge-based economy', where the core curriculum could create such an opportunity (2012, p.8). Indeed, universities on the whole provide well supported careers and employability services, yet where employability related content features in the taught and assessed curriculum is not yet equal across individual disciplines. This has led many to

call for a need to embed employability into the curriculum (Bradley, 2021; Saunders, 2022), although in non-vocational programmes, this is still emerging and underdeveloped.

There is an urgent need to embed certain employability development elements into the core assessed curriculum of degrees, to support widening participation students in particular, as well as all students in their professional literacies. Widening participation students are more likely to be first in family, from low-participation in university background communities, and/or from a demographic where there is societal inequality. There are core employment skills required for any graduate to be hired, no matter their background, transferable skills or ability, and to succeed in the graduate recruitment market. Like being able to structure an essay, researching appropriate resources and following academic practices, employment skills are similar in societal consistency and are a parallel necessity which are perhaps missed. These recommendations have been drawn from my experience as Head of Employability at a small-medium English University 2018-22, as well as literature that emphasises the need for students to be able to translate their university experiences for job applications (Dunne, 2017; Lowe, 2020), the need to embed employability into the curriculum (Daubney, 2021) and the importance of career choice following university (Bradley, Priego-Hernández and Quigley, 2022). The following five recommended actions are one suggestion to ensure employability skills are embedded into the curriculum. All of these could be implemented through structured support sessions, mandatory assessments, and constructive feedback so these may be mastered as part of the core student journey.

### **Five recommendations to improve widening participation students' graduate employability:**

- 1) The ability to write a job application/personal statement to a personal specification, with tangible examples.
- 2) The ability to write a graduate CV, with knowledge of how to adapt it for different roles.
- 3) The ability to answer interview questions with tangible examples and expansion.
- 4) The knowledge of diverse careers beyond the 'visible societal careers' (such as teacher, health professional or service sector) to give a broad choice of options for each graduate.

- 5) At least one tangible experience beyond degree study, such as a placement or extra-curricular activity.

## **Conclusion**

There is an urgent need to embed the above areas of professional skills development into the curriculum, not only through 'dropped in' timetabled sessions, but in engaging activities and whole units of study, and, as with academic skills noted above, building these into summative assessments. When consulting with course teams on embedding employability, more courses are beginning to replace some essays with job application assessments, presentations with business pitches, and seminars with job interview practice. Although making the above requirements mandatory may seem an extreme step, and perhaps far from the purpose of many degrees (Frankham, 2017), it can be argued that the main reason students go to university in the UK remains gaining some form of graduate outcome (HEPI and Unite, 2017; UUK, 2017; UCAS, 2021). Students from less-advantaged backgrounds do not necessarily have the networks, social capital, parental guidance or even knowledge to train and take advantage of the above. More privileged, perhaps 'traditional', students of higher socio-economic backgrounds, have influence from family and peers to either support such applications or arrange such experiences. Expecting all students to access services beyond the curriculum without prompt is no longer possible, particularly for time poor students who are part-time or have a substantial commitment beyond their studies, such as caring, childcare and/work. This paper has argued that it is time to make room in the curriculum to assess, support and facilitate employment skills if universities truly wish to support equality, diversity and inclusion in universities across the entire student journey and beyond.

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