

**‘An investigation to identify the key
strategies Cardonald College can use to
improve the employability of its students’.**

**A Report for Cardonald College Strategic
Management Group**

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1/2/07**

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this investigation was to try to determine whether there were key strategies a college could use to improve employability in its students. The approach taken was to carry out an in-depth study of Cardonald College. The investigation was carried out in stages as follows:

- A literature review was conducted to gain a deeper and wider understanding of the concept of employability and to determine a definition which would be pertinent to the college and its context.
- A sample questionnaire was used to try to agree common priorities in 'employability skills' across, students, staff and employers.
- A scoping exercise of what was being done prior to the Focus on Learning 2 project which could be considered 'employability' was carried out.
- A further investigation of how these activities had evolved and of their relevance and value was conducted
- An evaluation of the interventions carried out for Focus on Learning 2 – Steps to Employment was carried out to see if the key messages were consistent with published research and the findings of this study.
- Finally, a set of recommendations for consideration by Senior Management was developed.

The methodology adopted was a case study approach, examining whether employability skills already exist in programmes and activities within Cardonald College and using the information gathered to evaluate current impact and consider areas for improvement. The findings from the Focus on learning 2 interventions at Cardonald were then examined and incorporated into this report.

The conclusions of the investigation include:

- There is a lack of formal research or evidence in college to show that the steps taken to improve employability work, although anecdotal evidence is positive.
- The absence of a whole college policy leads to well meaning but ad hoc responses to perceived needs
- The lack of a co-ordinated approach means that there is no accountability for results or realistic measurement of impact.
- Areas of common agreement on employability skills between students, staff and employers surveyed centre around the soft skills of reliability, a positive attitude and the ability to work with others.
- the findings from the Focus on Learning 2 interventions reinforce published research that identifies
 - the lack of tools of measurement for soft skills,
 - poor employer engagement,
 - the impact of personal circumstances and
 - labour market conditions

as the main challenges in improving employability for students.

- It is possible to define employability in a college context.

Introduction

Changes in patterns of employment; ageing workforces; the 'global economy' and the decline of traditional industries has begun to transform the way in which labour is regarded and globally governments are striving to implement strategies to improve economic and social conditions. Education has a significant role to play in this, ensuring that learners are equipped not just with vocational knowledge and skills, but with the 'tools' which will enable them to compete in the new marketplace.

The majority of research into employability in education has focused on graduate employment and the Higher Education sector. In the UK, ESECT (Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team) publish information and resources to support university staff, but apart from some work by SFEU (Scottish Further Education Unit), practical guidance appears to be lacking for staff struggling to understand employability in the particular setting of further education. There are very few pieces of research that consider colleges as a stand-alone sector and what exists relies heavily on research carried out for universities and graduates.

Focus on learning 2 – Steps to Employment provided the opportunity to address this gap and, having been one of the partner colleges in the original Focus on Learning project, Cardonald was aware of the positive impact of action research on the learner experience and on staff motivation and attitude. The original project had led to changes in classroom practice and had added significantly to staff understanding of the importance of 'soft skills' to learners and the learning process but these lessons had not been embedded at strategic level and not fully disseminated within the college. It was therefore my intention to use Focus on Learning 2 to carry out research to investigate if there are key strategies a college can implement to improve employability in its students, using Cardonald as a case study.

The importance of college context for this research was important and is illustrated by SFEU's Briefing paper on the Scottish labour market 2003:

"... 'employability' is a problem where individuals have poor or below average employability. Those who have no or low level qualifications, suffer long term illness or disability or live in a single adult household are more likely to be jobless"

As a community college in Glasgow serving several areas of multiple deprivation and with almost half of the colleges' students living in post code areas considered to be in the '20% most deprived' in Scotland, enhancing employability is a key issue for Cardonald and it is important to adopt a strategy which ensures that all students are provided with the opportunity to improve their access to employment.

Literature Review

In reviewing the literature it was apparent that there is a plethora of information available and a great deal of previous research and investigation has already been carried out, not only in the UK and Europe, but also in Australia, Canada and the USA. In the UK, research has been carried out by, or on behalf of, employers (CBI), government departments (DfEE, DWP, Scottish Executive,) University departments (ESECT, CRESR) and by various academic researchers, but much of the research available aims to influence or direct policy and there was very little that could be said to offer practical solutions or tools for use in education, the main exceptions being the ESECT series and the Employability Skills toolkit produced by the Conference Board of Canada. There was also little research relating to the Further Education context, although a good deal exists in relation to graduates and school age pupils.

The vast amount of information available meant that care had to be exercised in deciding what to include in the literature review and I endeavoured not just to revisit the pieces of research considered 'classic', but to search for work which would help gain a better understanding of how to answer the question 'What can **Cardonald College** do to improve the employability skills of its students?' The geographical and social context of the college and its students were considered, as was its role as a community college in meeting the needs of the local community, at the same time as the demands of policy and funding bodies.

The literature review focused on exploring the various definitions of employability and seeking practical case studies, examples and 'tools' which could be adapted for use in an FE context. Two major methods of defining employability emerged, the supply-led definition which concentrates on making people work-ready and 'up-skilling' the workforce and the demand-led definition which is a 'broad model of employability' (McQuaid and Lindsay 2004) incorporating individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors as components that affect employability. This second model suggests that the importance of these will change with circumstances, for example, an employer may accept a lower level of skills when labour is in short supply, or change recruitment policies so that other groups can apply. In these cases it is not the 'skills' of the individual that have changed, but their ability to take up employment, which seemed to be of relevance to the college situation.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed facilitated greater awareness and understanding of some of the complex issues and concepts surrounding employability and has been used to refine the investigation, inform methodology and helped develop the tools to carry out my research.

Overall, I learned that there is no 'one size fits all' (Yorke & Knight 2004) solution to defining employability and that context and an appropriate definition for that context is probably the most important consideration of all. This is put to use in the analysis and conclusions of the investigation.

Methodology

The methodology adopted was a case study approach, carrying out a study of employability skills in programmes and activities within Cardonald College and using the information gained to evaluate current impact and consider areas for improvement. The findings from the Focus on learning 2 interventions at Cardonald were then examined to gain a college wide perspective and incorporated into a report for senior management.

This methodology was chosen so that the characteristics of the college and its context could be observed in depth, recognising that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effect (Cohen et al 2004 pp181) The purpose of the use of case study was to provide insight into the issue (Wellington 2004) of employability and to develop deeper understanding and knowledge.

A major advantage of using this approach is that there are a number of rich sources of material already available in the college, although it recognised that there are also disadvantages to this method, not least being the volume and contextual relevance of information available. It is possible that assumptions can be made about the relative importance of particular results and care was taken to avoid subjectivity, bias and impressionism. I used triangulation -“the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study” (Cohen et al 2004 p112) to try to improve the validity and reliability of findings, including secondary research, questionnaires, structured interviews and focus groups.

Secondary (desk) research consisted of:

- A literature review to set the context for the term ‘employability’.
- College MIS records as a source of quantitative data,
- College self evaluation records for the past two years
- College and Departmental Operational and Development plans.
- Records of meetings at Board, Strategic Management and College Committee level
- An Employability Survey carried out by the College Information Centre, a valuable source of recent information as it included responses from programme leaders for 48 out of 56 possible full time courses.
- The final reports from the Focus on Learning 1 and 2 interventions.

Qualitative and quantitative primary data was also gathered by several methods, including:

- A small survey questionnaire was designed to determine a ‘college context’ for employability
- A sample of 13 activities/enhancements were then selected and invited to take part in structured interviews.
- Two staff focus groups lasting one hour each were held during October 2005.
- .Two student focus groups lasting one hour each were held during October 2005.
- A consultation meeting between the Senior Management Group (SMG) and key employers.
- A consultation meeting between the Senior Management Group (SMG) and key partners.
- College Planning Event to identify key issues for the college Strategic Development Plan 2006-2009.

Findings

Information Centre Report

Primary research had already been undertaken in the form of an Employability Report carried out by the Information Centre during the period March – June 2005

The main findings with bearing on this current research are:

Work Experience

- seen as a crucial factor in preparing students for work.
- judged to help students relate their learning to work.
- appears to work best where students are aware of what's expected from them early on.

Employer Contacts – e.g. speakers, visits.

Deemed to yield valuable benefits such as:

- Opportunities for direct recruitment into jobs
- Engaging learners and providing valuable vocational context
- Staff in some areas were able to hand pick (pre-select) students for potential employers and so had the benefit of saving the employer recruitment costs

Issues highlighted however were:

- lack of staff time to maintain contacts
- the availability of suitable employers
- a difficulty in forging links with employers and changes in personnel meaning links were lost.
- unwillingness by some employers to take part in any activity.

Survey Questionnaire

A survey questionnaire was designed incorporating the 19 criteria which appear most often in definitions of 'employability skills'. This was sent out to 200 lecturing staff during August. When 40 were returned and the results analysed, it was found that the questionnaire design was flawed. Staff had been asked to rate the criteria for employability by their perceived level of importance on a scale of 1-4 but had rated almost all as level 1 (most important)¹. Since the purpose of the questionnaire had been to try to determine the criteria considered most important for employability this produced too many results and it was decided to amend the questionnaire before distributing to students, managers and employers. It was still possible to determine the 6 most popular answers from the staff returns, so it was decided to include these in the overall results.

The revised questionnaire asked for the 6 most important criteria to be selected to determine whether there would be consistency in those felt to be most important. The returned questionnaires were examined to check for completeness, accuracy and uniformity and the results numerically counted. (Moser and Kalton in Cohen et al 2004 p2645) It is recognised that this is a simplistic tool and that no real significance can be attributed to the results. For example, there was no option to allow respondents to add their own criteria, all of the criteria represented important aspects of employability and there is no way to tell if the results were truthful. However it was felt that a starting point for determining attitudes toward employability was required and this method was chosen because it was fast, easy to administer and had the advantage of being able to put the

¹ See Appendix I – Employability Questionnaires

same questions to all respondents so that differences/similarities between cohorts could be determined.

In the next phase 200 students were selected, 100 part time in employment and 100 full time in education. Part time students returned 70 questionnaires and full time students 69. 12 senior college managers were also polled and 6 completed returns. The fourth category targeted were employers, 20 being identified from the college database and contacted by letter. Disappointingly, only 1 replied which makes drawing any conclusions from this information meaningless. In order to source further data 2 members of staff asked day release and evening students to seek replies from their employers and a further 10 were returned. This remains a small sample, but has been included in the findings to determine areas of commonality. A total of 402 questionnaires were issued and 196 returned. (See Appendix 6 for results)

In summary, numerical analysis of results suggested consensus from all areas as to 3 characteristics considered important for employability. It is interesting to note that the common themes:

- **reliability**
- **a positive attitude to the work**
- **the ability to work co-operatively with others**

do not relate to the academic or vocational content of programmes, but to personal qualities or attitudes and not 'skills' that are commonly "taught".

Structured interviews

These were carried out with staff responsible for initiatives deemed to possibly incorporate employability skills, identified from observation and the college self-evaluation documentation.

The main findings of these interviews can be summarised as follows:

- Five out of seven of the initiatives arose as a result of staff discussion and the majority have not been designed specifically with employability in mind, as staff focus was on retention.
- Six out of seven did not carry out external research before designing and implementing the activity and where amendments have been made, it has been as a result of anecdotal feedback, trial and error or due to external influences such as changes in funding, not as a result of considered evaluation.
- All of the activities have been reported in the self-evaluation paperwork as improvements but there is little hard evidence to support this.

The inference is that many staff are committed to giving students the best possible chance of gaining employment and are innovative and creative in the activities they design, but these activities arise as a result of staff *perceptions* of what can be done without recourse to research or clear evidence. In the cases interviewed the college ethos of devolved decision making appears to have contributed to the success of these ventures, with college management being supportive both in allowing staff time and investing money in the ventures. For example, setting up a Cisco Networking Academy and bidding to become the Microsoft Lead Centre in Scotland was funded by the parent Division, as were the initial set-up costs of the Holistic Therapy clinic. However, there was no accountability where teams had done nothing to include employability in any form into their programmes.

The interviews provided some insight into what is already being done to help students gain what staff think are the needs of employers and the 'tools' to meet those needs.

When the results of the Information Centre report and these findings are taken as a whole, there are examples of good practice in many areas of the college. Work experience units are present in a good number of full time programmes, employer links are pursued, visits take place and innovative enhancements are provided to give students experiences which will make them more aware of what they require to become employable. However, there is no base line standard for providing either work experience or employability skills and no accountability for programme teams who do nothing to enhance the skills that could make their students more employable. There is also no centralised support (although some funding is available via a college 'Challenge Fund') for teams who might wish to include work placement, 'employability skills' or design an activity but are unsure of how to do so.

Focus groups

Two staff focus groups lasting one hour each were held and asked to discuss the following questions: -

- What do you understand by the term employability?
- What do you do to ensure your students employability?
- Are employers or industry representatives consulted when designing programme enhancements/ activities to improve student employability? If not, why not?
- Are programme enhancements/ activities to improve student employability evaluated?

2 student focus (Groups X and Y) groups lasting for 40 minutes were also held. 11 students took part (6 and 5) and were asked the following questions: -

- What do you understand by the term employability?
- What was your main reason for coming to college?
- Which parts of your course will you find most useful when you look for a job (new job)?

The data collected from the focus groups was grouped during the course of the meeting and then sifted and reviewed to isolate the 'salient features' (Cohen et al 2004 p148) Group results were compared and similarities and differences noted. Patterns in common with earlier results and observations were identified and speculative inferences were ascribed to them.

Overall the focus group findings can be summarised as follows;

Staff Groups

- In only 3 out of 15 courses represented were employers consulted prior to designing or implementing activities/enhancements to improve student employability. These were programmes where students were being prepared for specific vocational employment and there was market demand (e.g. Construction and Care). These programmes were also more likely to also include work placement. Work –based courses such as SVQs represent only a small percentage of college provision.

- Where students were being prepared for more general employment (e.g. Business, Communications and Media and Art and Design), links with employers were not as strong and consultation less likely. In these programmes it had proved harder to obtain placements and staff had responded by devising innovative 'simulations' such as the 'Reel to Real' competition or incorporating units with employability skills such as working co-operatively with others or goal setting into their programmes. One specific vocational area had poor links with employers (Electronics), but this was attributed to poor labour market demand
- Most staff identified the annual self-evaluation process as their main source of evaluation of programmes, although they also mentioned the bi-annual External Review Boards, where Industry and Higher Education representatives meet with staff and students to carry out wider evaluation. Units are also evaluated by using end of term evaluation forms, but it was admitted that there was little quantitative evidence to measure impact and much was anecdotal.
- All staff agreed that improvements or impact of activities were not presently measured, except where working co-operatively with others is an outcome in a unit. Staff indicated that employability is stressed in a variety of ways, but agreed that there were no checks on this and no formal method for recording improvement. Examples such as opportunities for team-work, taking responsibility and giving positive feedback were quoted as ways of improving student skills and attitude, but it was agreed that staff and student awareness needs to be raised.
- In addition, anecdotal evidence and PCSR results identified that students were moving successfully into the workplace. A note of caution was expressed about college reliance on PCSR information as a source of comparative data, as student destination statistics are influenced not only by achieving success on a programme, but on the state of the labour market (e.g. Travel and Tourism) McQuaid et al (2004) echoes this view asking if employability relates to an individual's readiness for work or whether an individual can get relevant work.

Student Groups

When the students were asked about their main reason for coming to college the majority of answers centred round their employment aspirations. i.e.-

- to go to University
- to get qualifications
- to improve my life style
- because I couldn't get a job
- to get back into work after being at home/made redundant
- to learn IT skills
- to stretch myself
- to get a better job/promotion
- to progress to next level course (HN/degree)
- to prepare for a career
- to get a better qualification
- to give children a better future

and when asked what parts of their course had been most useful the answers were more about soft (employability) skills than about the vocational content of their studies. i.e.-

- increase in self confidence from gaining a qualification
- vocational skills and awareness
- better *communication skills*
- *learning to be part of a group*
- being able to get a reference
- IT skills
- learning to *manage time and prioritise*
- able to *project yourself at an interview*
- new job skills
- getting the qualification
- *team working*
- learning to *juggle all the work*
- *self – confidence*
- *communication skills*
- work experience
- everything!

Thus the majority of students who took part appear to see coming to college and getting a qualification as part of the process of becoming employed; as a means to an end with the end being, employment, better employment or improved access to employment.

The question, '*What do you understand by the term employability?*' was put to both staff and students. This was felt to be important in defining a 'college context' for employability. Both sets of replies focussed on making the individual 'work-ready' e.g.

From staff-

- 'getting students into jobs'
- 'life-skills'
- 'the skills necessary to become employed'
- Taking note of what employers and the market want

and from students-

- 'what I need to do to be attractive to an employer'
- 'having the right skills'
- Understanding the job market

Again, this would appear to indicate that there is a belief in college that employability is in some way linked to acquiring skills for gaining employment- or better employment. And concurs with the CBI view that: "*employability is the possession by an individual of the qualities and competences required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and to realise his or her potential and aspirations in work*" (CBI 1999 Pg1)

If this is the case, then there is work to be done in college to broaden perspective and give both staff and students a better understanding and awareness of the wider definition of employability. Placing the onus on students to be 'employable' neglects raising their awareness of the importance of having alternative strategies and if employment is not there at the end of a programme as expected, only serves to de-motivate and disillusion. This is especially pertinent when the majority of Cardonald students are already from 'second chance' (Osborne 2004), socially excluded groups.

Focus on Learning 2 Interventions

Cardonald staff ran 7 action research interventions during the period August 2005 to June 2006, with the intention of improving employability across a variety of student groups. These groups were:

- Intermediate 2 English
- ESF Building Inclusion
- Diploma in Stress Management
- Access to Higher Education
- SVQ Care
- Development course for adults with additional support needs
- Day/Block release students in employment.

Each of the intervention teams worked independently and was mentored by an experienced member of staff. The reports of their activity were evaluated and the key findings are as follows:

- All of the teams used a form of questionnaire to evaluate student progress. These were generally applied near the beginning and end of the intervention to measure 'distance travelled'. Although these vary in complexity and measurement, they all show some improvement in the skills which the intervention aimed to impact upon. In addition, 2 of the teams noted the difficulty of finding a suitable tool and all but one designed their own.
- All of the teams produced materials which will be of use in a wider context – e.g. questionnaires, suggested schemes of work, surveys, staff development materials, and literature reviews.
- 3 of the teams used some of their funding to bring in outside expertise which they feel contributed to success and 2 teams used some funding for staff development, so that the skills required to deliver the intervention could be 'cascaded' and kept within the college for the benefit of future students.
- 2 of the interventions used aspects of Emotional Intelligence (EI) training to try to improve student employability and another used Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. All of the interventions tried to improve 'soft skills' to enhance employability and all noted improvement. For example, students with additional support needs learned to handle conflict, Access students were better able to cope with disappointment, Stress Management students dealt with clients with more confidence and some SVQ students valued themselves and their achievements enough to be able to apply for promotion.
- Five of the seven interventions made mention of the students increased confidence and attributed this to the effects of the intervention.
- 3 of the teams stressed the influence of personal circumstances on student employability. These are often outwith the control of the student and the college. For example some students are hindered by the attitudes of family and peers or responsibilities as carers, even though they have the requisite skills and attitudes themselves.

- 3 of the teams used speakers and visits to ensure variety and provide context and reinforcement for the intervention. They all stressed the importance of fostering team work and co-operation in the groups. One team also emphasised that group identity seemed to be an important factor in the success of the intervention, as the students formed their own support systems and developed a more positive attitude to solving problems.

Conclusions

Employability in the Cardonald context.

This investigation looked to define employability in the context of Cardonald College and concludes that a broad perspective is required. Cardonald students often face multiple barriers to entering education and may also have a variety of personal attitudes and problems which further inhibit their ability to gain employment. This means considering not only the skills required by the individual to gain employment, but also their own attitude to becoming and remaining employed.

The research carried out suggests that employability is affected by personal circumstances and external influences as well as by what happens at college and means that our role is not to 'teach' employability, but to make our students employable. The challenge here is how that is to be achieved and it is envisaged that the concept will be embedded throughout college activity, rather than 'added on' to courses and programmes i.e. not an 'employability unit'. A main function of college in this context is to raise awareness of soft skills, to improve self-confidence and to introduce strategies to cope with problems, as well as to deliver vocational skills.

Employability in Cardonald terms is therefore '***the factors which influence whether the individual is employable***' Although this definition may be flawed, if understood and consistently applied by staff within the college it at least allows standards to be agreed, targets set and lets the college start to move forward to improve.

What does the college currently provide to improve employability?

Staff and students currently interpret employability as gaining employment. This is evidenced from the results of the staff and student focus groups and the structured interviews carried out with staff. From this perspective, many groups of Cardonald staff are already working independently to improve the employability of students as follows:

- The Information Centre report and the observations from this research found that activities which incorporate elements of employability were provided through :
 - work placements, work experience, visits to workplaces
 - employer liaison, consultation
 - external visits, foreign visits
 - Speakers
 - Short courses (e.g. retail, ESF)
 - CV preparation, mock interviews, Personal Learning Plans
 - entering competitions
 - team projects (e.g. fashion show, charity events)
 - simulations (e.g. Reel to Real, the Write Stuff, travel bureau, exhibitions, clinics)
 - the use of relevant SQA units (e.g. Developing Personal Effectiveness, working with others)
 - bespoke activities (e.g. Building Glasgow's People))
 - Information Centre events such as career conventions.
- The measures observed are often innovative, responsive and relevant to the courses and labour markets for which they are designed (e.g. Cisco Networking Academy, Holistic Clinic, HN Units, work placement) The measures observed are often innovative, responsive and relevant to the courses and labour markets for

which they are designed (e.g. Cisco Networking Academy, Holistic Clinic, HN Units, work placement)

- The College responds to local needs by raising the aspirations of local residents by providing a range of quality programmes which provide vocational skills and many of which incorporate some activity designed to improve the employability of participants.
- Close links have been formed with local enterprise companies, economic development agencies and regeneration initiatives, as well as other colleges, Universities and employers in order to widen access and encourage participation in employment.
- The college has recognised the need to carry out research to develop approaches to enhancing employability and became involved in the Focus on Learning 2 project, developing 8 interventions' designed to improve employability in particular student cohorts.
- Senior Management has consulted with college managers, employers and key partner agencies to inform the college Strategic Aims for the next 3 years.
- Most full and some part-time courses carry out activities which approximate to employability within the framework for guidance. Groups are allocated a guidance tutor and meet regularly. In many courses guidance is used as a vehicle to introduce employability skills, with groups involved in carrying out mock interviews, preparing CVs, filling in application forms, undertaking personal development planning, organising visits and speakers or holding group meetings. However, it is left largely to the individual tutor to identify what is required and organise guidance and this means that there is no base standard set across college. Guidance for one year HNC and second year HND students tends to focus on employment or progression to University, but this is less prevalent in NQ and first year HND groups. The college is currently piloting a more formal guidance model with the introduction of SQA Guidance units to NQ programmes, but it is too early to evaluate this fully.

What is the usefulness and impact of these measures, including key themes and areas for development?

- It is evident that the activities already in place show staff awareness of the needs of their students in terms of their particular job markets and commitment to enhancing their opportunities for employment. Measures are limited sometimes by factors often outwith the control of the college, for example, changes in labour markets, funding policies and legislation can mean that activities can no longer be offered, to the detriment of the student and his/her employability.
- Staff respond to their perceptions of what employers require but almost no formal research is undertaken to check the current relevance of the measures being employed. An area for development should be to look at how the college gathers and uses labour market information at programme level.
- Evaluation of measures that have been introduced is informal and based on limited information. In general, staff consider Post Course Success Ratio

(PCSR) statistics unreliable and their own forms of feedback rely very much on anecdotal evidence and 'impressions'. A more formal means, possibly a checklist (or tool) for evaluating whether or not a measure improves overall employability should be considered.

- There is no base line standard for providing either work experience or employability skills and no accountability for programme teams who do nothing to enhance the skills that could make their students more employable. Employability is managed at course level on an ad hoc basis and although well intentioned is not managed or measured in any meaningful way. An 'employability co-ordinator' post might be investigated to provide support and a central focus for a cross – college approach. This has already been successfully piloted to embed both e-learning and inclusiveness policies
- There is no centralised support (although some funding is available via a college 'Challenge Fund') for teams who might wish to include work placement, 'employability skills' or design an activity but are unsure of how to do so. There is a need for a college policy to emphasise the importance of this issue, similar to those which have already been developed for key issues such as ICT, inclusion, and e-learning.
- Student awareness of the concept of employability is an area to pursue. Although the focus groups appeared to indicate that students had a general awareness that 'skills' were required for employment, they don't seem to have been as aware of the impact that their personal circumstances or labour market situation would have on their overall employability. Students are sometimes quite unrealistic in their expectations and, given the social and personal circumstances of some individuals, deeper understanding of the issues would assist them in making more informed choices.
- In some areas, innovation was forced on teams because of difficulties in obtaining employer/industry support and/or feedback. A key theme for development would therefore appear to be to investigate further ways to engage with employers (Hughes 2003) and to convince them of the benefits of working more closely with the college to design, manage and deliver provision.
- The importance of work-based learning is also important and it is interesting to note that this represents a fairly small percentage of college provision. Relationships with employers in some areas are very good (Care, Construction) and in these programmes employer engagement is evident and valued. These are areas however where labour demand and legislation have led to employers seeking partnerships and the challenge will be to gain involvement in areas where the market is less buoyant.

What are the key messages from the Cardonald Focus on Learning 2 'interventions'?

Taken as a whole, there are some significant messages contained in the reports. It is evident that those staff who have been involved in the action research have been enthused by what they have learned and have gained valuable skills as well as the opportunity for reflection. This has been possible largely due to the fact that some of the

work undertaken was funded by the project. Teams used the money available to 'buy time' to develop new materials and approaches or, in some cases, to bring in outside expertise to support staff and/or students. This has allowed a wide variety of student groups to be investigated and over 30 teaching staff to be directly involved in interventions.

- There is a need to ensure that what has been learned is shared with as widely as possible and a requirement for relevant professional development in this area for all staff has been highlighted. Employability is no longer just about employment and staff have to be aware of this.
- The problem of accomplishing involvement by, and relevant feedback from, employers again was highlighted; with the Development course reporting that they had difficulty getting placement providers to answer questionnaires, even when they were providing work experience.
- It seems to be critical and crucial to agree a common tool or framework for measuring 'distance travelled' in acquiring soft skills if employability is to be embedded in the learning process, all the interventions here have utilised 'variations on a theme' which cannot be readily benchmarked or cross-referenced.
- The reports also provide evidence of the impact of outside factors such as personal circumstances and market forces on student employability and reinforce the message that employer engagement and multiple agency support is vital if some students are to become 'employable'.
- One of the lessons learned from the original Focus on Learning project was that the results of the intervention have to be sustainable to be measured with any degree of accuracy. In some of the original studies at Cardonald this has been possible, with staff utilising methods and materials for the benefit of successive class groups. For example, the staff development in Emotional Intelligence delivered to staff teaching the Development course was rooted in the original Focus on Learning intervention carried out in the Supported Learning Section. Staff involved in Focus on Learning 2 met this challenge by incorporating sustainability into their interventions where possible, e.g. training staff and developing strategies to ensure that successes could be embedded in the curriculum without further funding.

Nothing in these conclusions is really 'new', - the importance of employer engagement is well documented (Gore 2004, Hughes 2003), as is the need for measuring improvement (The Pedagogy for Employability Team) and of considering external factors and personal circumstances in defining employability (Hillage and Pollard 1998 & Tamkin and Hillage 1999). Experience seems to have borne this out, with college staff recording similar problems in carrying out their interventions. Nevertheless the messages have not been picked up and adopted into practice in any co-ordinated way.

As an organisation, this may be because it is more straightforward to devise strategy and drive forward policies which are easy to measure and record. For example the digitisation of materials, the use of ICT in the classroom and the inclusion of groups who are normally excluded from education can be quantified more readily than an improvement in the confidence and ability to manage conflict of an individual student.

However, a college-wide strategy and funding to provide full dissemination and staff development and support could have the benefit not only of improving student employability, but retention and achievement, as has been observed in several of the Cardonald interventions, notably the Access course and SVQ Care.

Recommendations

- A college policy on employability or employability and citizenship be devised, incorporating a college definition .
- A college strategy on employability, which would incorporate improvement to 'soft skills' and raising awareness of citizenship to be developed.
- A discrete objective on employability and citizenship be added to Strategic Aim 1 in the College Strategic Development Plan 2006 -2009.
- Funding to support this strategy be allocated.

- The strategy might include:

- Staff development and methods to raise staff awareness of the concept of employability prioritised and delivered. F

For example, an employability or employability and citizenship 'launch', using a themed staff development day (in the style of the Health Day) and introducing the college definition

The possibility of involving greater numbers of staff in training such as 'steps to excellence'

A more overt link between CPD and the needs of employers through placements and visits.

- Support and advice provided for teams, particularly those who have not incorporated any aspect of employability into programmes. This would identify resources required to support those who wish to 'opt-in', while making it more difficult for others to 'opt-out'.

For example,. Employability or employability and citizenship could be the focus of a themed self evaluation for 2007/2008.

- An 'employability co-ordinator' post investigated to provide support, drive the strategy forward and provide a central focus for a cross – college approach.

For example, a section of the website could be set aside to share materials, approaches and experience, not only from FoL 2 , but from the examples highlighted during this investigation.

- The creation of a base line standard for all courses using a form of 'employability audit', for example based on the ESECT model..

For example, a tool or checklist might provide evidence that employability is already being delivered in many areas of the curriculum, but would also provide guidance for staff as to what to look for. It is envisaged that this would also incorporate some sort of 'soft skills' measurement guidance.

- Techniques to raise student awareness of the concept of employability identified and included in programmes.

For example, employability materials could be introduced into the guidance units used on NQ programmes and an appropriate unit such as Personal Development Planning or Professional Studies be identified to carry out the same function in HN programmes.

Make use of the part time employment of students as the basis for a work-experience unit which would form part of every full time programme, including general education.

- Further research on ways to engage with employers (Hughes 2003) and to convince them of the benefits of working more closely with the college to design, manage and deliver provision to be carried out.
- Further research on the role of work-based learning and the part played by employers in supporting the training and development of staff in the workplace to be carried out.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Employability Questionnaire 1A

Introduction

The need to improve employability skills – and therefore the life chances of those seeking and already in employment – has been highlighted at both national and international level and is one of the four pillars of the European Employment Strategy.

The purpose of this short questionnaire is to help develop a clearer understanding of what is meant by ‘employability skills’ and to ascertain those which are considered most important in order to meet the needs of employers and the aspirations of individuals.

Instructions

Please consider the following statements and score each 1,2,3,or 4 by ticking the box according to the level of importance you attribute to this skill/characteristic, with 1=most important and 4= least important/not important.

	1	2	3	4
A person is more suitable for employment/promotion if they:				
• Show a willingness to learn				
• Have relevant vocational skills and knowledge				
• Are punctual				
• Can work on their own initiative				
:				
• Can learn from their mistakes				
• Show a positive attitude to the work				
• Can work co-operatively with others				
• Can read and understand information				
• Are able to follow instructions				
• Present themselves appropriately (dress, language etc)				
• Are able to understand and use numbers				
• Relate to customers				
• Are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses				
• Want to improve				
• Can plan and organise				
• Can influence others				
• Are reliable				
• Show enthusiasm				

Appendix 2 Employability Questionnaire 1B

Introduction

The need to improve employability skills – and therefore the life chances of those seeking and already in employment – has been highlighted at both national and international level and is one of the four pillars of the European Employment Strategy.

The purpose of this short questionnaire is to help develop a clearer understanding of what is meant by ‘employability skills’ and to ascertain those which are considered most important in order to meet the aspirations of individuals and the needs of employers. Your help with this is greatly appreciated, will remain anonymous and will be used only for the purposes of research.

Instructions

Please consider the following statements and score by ticking the 6 skills/characteristics you consider most important

:	
A person is more suitable for employment/promotion if they:	
• Show a willingness to learn	
• Have relevant vocational skills and knowledge	
• Are punctual	
• Can work on their own initiative	
• Show that they are hard-working	
• Can learn from their mistakes	
• Show a positive attitude to the work	
• Can work co-operatively with others	
• Can read and understand information	
• Are able to follow instructions	
• Present themselves appropriately (dress, language etc)	
• Are able to understand and use numbers	
• Relate to customers	
• Are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses	
• Want to improve	
• Can plan and organise	
• Can influence others	
• Are reliable	
• Show enthusiasm	

Appendix 3

Dear Sir/Madam,

Cardonald College is currently taking part in a Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) funded project called Focus on Learning 2. The theme of the project is '*steps to employment*' and several of our staff are conducting action research 'interventions' with groups of students to gauge the impact of strategies to improve their skills for employment and employability.

The Funding Council's key document with regard to employability is called 'Learning to Work' and it identifies employability skills as '*the ability to gain and sustain employment*' - in other words it's **not** just about getting a job, it's about things like attitude, self- regulation, work ethic, customer focus, ability to prioritise etc. A lot of work has been done on this in Higher Education, but very little in Further Education - so this is a very important and exciting research project for the sector.

As part of the project, I have been given the task of looking at the college as a whole, evaluating what we are already doing which could come under the banner of 'improving employability' and then trying to see what would be the key strategies we could implement as a centre, which would make our students ready for the workplace and effective and efficient co-workers.

To gather information I am seeking the **views of employers** on what they consider to be the '*skills of employability*' and I have devised a very short and simple questionnaire, which should take no more than 5 minutes to complete, and which will help me greatly in my part of the overall research. The questionnaire is completely anonymous, voluntary and will be used solely for the purposes of the FOL2 project and to help determine a 'Cardonald College' definition of the most important skills for employability, which can then be used to enhance college programmes and meet the needs of employers.

I would be most grateful if you could complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it to me in the envelope provided by 9th November. Thank you in anticipation of your co-operation.

Yours Faithfully,

Cathy McSkimming

Quality Development Manager

Appendix 4 Focus on learning 2 – Staff Interview list

Division/Unit	Course/Activity	Named person	Interview
A	Cisco/Microsoft Vendor Qualifications	D N	5/10/05 9.00am
A	Travel and Tourism course design	P P	5/10/05 10.00am
B	Communications PR experience on Reel to Reel	M T	5/10/05 11.00am
B	Practical Journalism newspaper& the Write stuff	N H	12/10/0/5 2PM
D	Holistic Therapies clinic	P C	7/10/05 9.30am
D	Sports Coaching work with schools	J P	Cancelled
F	Get Ready for Work programme	M R	Not pursued due to time constraints
F	Remploy	M G	5/10/05 2pm
K	Fashion Design and manufacture induction and show	J D	Not pursued due to time constraints
K	Clothing Design and manufacture	D C	Not pursued due to time constraints
K	Support for Small Business	B G	Not pursued due to time constraints
K	Graphic Design exhibition	D L	28/9/05 2.30pm
M	Building Glasgow's People	A M	28/9/05 3.30pm

Appendix 5 -Focus on learning 2 – Employability Project

Staff Interview Questions on employability initiatives.

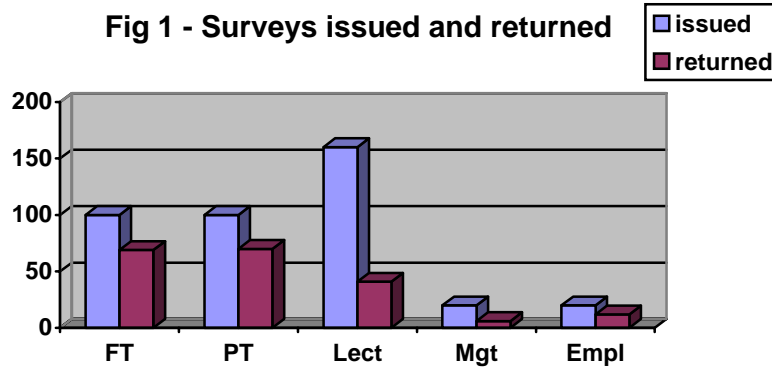
Brief description of activity/initiative _____

	Question	
1.	Describe what you are doing to help your students gain and sustain employment?	
2.	How/Why did you decide to do this? (e.g .was it your idea or market/employer driven or led)	
3.	Who did you consult?	
4.	How did you design your programme/activity?	
5.	What did you hope to achieve?	
6.	What results have you had?	
7.	What amendments have you made (if any)/	
8.	What feedback have you	

	had from students?	
9.	Have you evaluated the impact ?	
10,	Which of the 'skills of employability' does this initiative/activity address?	<p>e.g. <u>Core Skills</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication • numeracy • ICT • working with others • problem solving <p><i>Soft Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • customer care • oral presentation • planning and organising <p><i>Personal Qualities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • punctuality • self-presentation • reliability • enthusiasm • willingness to learn <p><u>Other</u> (please specify)</p>

Appendix 6

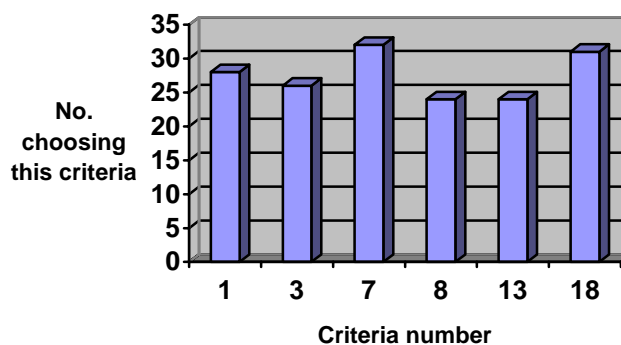
Results of Surveys Carried out October/November 2005



The six most important criteria for staff were:(Fig 2) ²:

1. shows a willingness to learn
3. are punctual
7. shows a positive attitude to the work
8. can work co-operatively with others
13. relates to customers
18. are reliable

Fig 2 - Staff

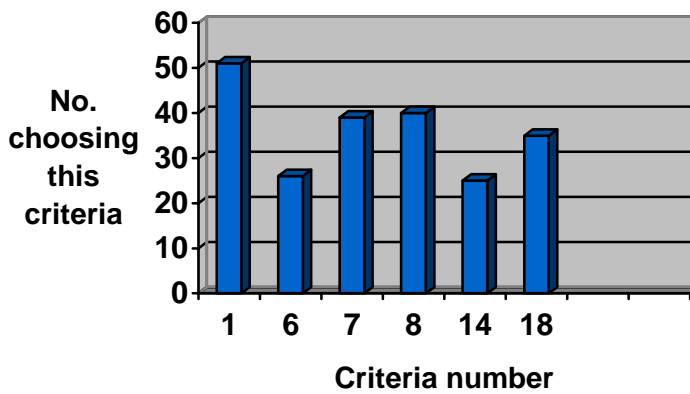


Part time students in employment ranked the most important 6 characteristics as:
(Fig 3)-

² Criteria shown in bold indicate common responses across groups. Those not in bold indicate responses particular to individual groups.

- 1. shows willingness to learn
- 6. can learn from their mistakes
- 7. shows a positive attitude to the work
- 8. can work co-operatively with others
- 14. are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses
- 18. are reliable

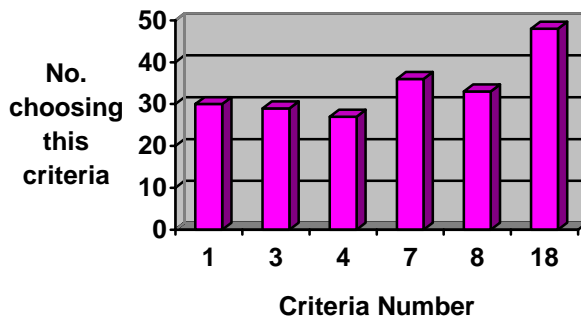
Fig 3 - Part time students



Students on full time education ranked theirs as: (Fig 4)

- 1. shows willingness to learn
- 3 .are punctual
- 4. can work on their own initiative
- 7.can work co-operatively with others
- 8.shows a positive attitude to the work
- 18.are reliable

Fig4 -Full time students



College managers' most important criteria were:

1. shows willingness to learn
5. show that they are hard-working
7. shows a positive attitude to the work
8. can work co-operatively with others
14. are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses
18. are reliable

and the results from the 11 employer responses were as follows:

2. are punctual
5. show that they are hard working
7. show a positive attitude to the work
8. can work co-operatively with others
13. relate to customers
18. are reliable