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Enhancing practice

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QAA 113 06/06

Employability

Overview of the work of the
Employability Enhancement Theme

Contents

Preface	1
Executive summary	3
Introduction	4
1 Embedding employability in the curriculum	7
2 Enhancing students' employability through the co-curriculum	9
3 Engaging employers in the curriculum	10
4 Other key lessons and issues	11
5 Main findings and ways forward	12
References	17

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ISBN 1 84482 525 6

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Printed copies of current publications are available from:

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Preface

The approach to quality and standards in Scotland is enhancement-led and learner-centred. It has been developed through a partnership of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland (NUS Scotland) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland. The enhancement themes are a key element of a five part framework which has been designed to provide an integrated approach to quality assurance and enhancement, supporting learners and staff at all levels in enhancing higher education in Scotland drawing on developing, innovative practice within the UK and internationally.

The five elements of the framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of subject level reviews undertaken by the higher education institutions themselves; guidance on internal reviews is published by SHEFC (www.shefc.ac.uk)
- enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) run by QAA Scotland (www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR)
- improved forms of public information about quality; guidance on the information to be published by higher education institutions is provided by SHEFC (www.shefc.ac.uk)
- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service - student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) (www.sparqs.org.uk)
- a national programme of enhancement themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice to enhance the student learning experience, which are facilitated by QAA Scotland (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

The topics for the themes are identified through consultation with the sector and implemented by steering committees whose members are drawn from the sector and the student body. The steering committees have the task of developing a programme of development activities, which draw upon national and international good practice. Publications emerging from each theme are intended to provide important reference points for higher education institutions in the ongoing strategic enhancement of their teaching and learning provision. Full details of each theme, its Steering Committee, the range of research and development activities, and the outcomes are published on the enhancement themes website (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

To further support the implementation and embedding of a quality enhancement culture within the sector, including taking forward the outcomes of the various enhancement themes, a new overarching committee has been established, chaired by Professor Kenneth Miller (Vice-Principal, University of Strathclyde). It will have the important dual role of keeping the five-year rolling plan of enhancement themes under review and ensuring that the themes are taken forward in ways that can best support institutional enhancement strategies. We very much hope that the new committee, working with the individual topic-based themes' steering committees, will provide a powerful vehicle for the progression of the enhancement-led approach to quality and standards in Scottish higher education.



Norman Sharp
Director, QAA Scotland

Executive summary

This publication provides an overview of the work of the Employability Enhancement Theme for staff, student officers, employers and senior managers. It highlights the main features of the three sets of case studies on innovative practice in Scotland and elsewhere that were commissioned as part of the Theme. These studies dealt with embedding employability in the curriculum, enhancing students' employability through the co-curriculum (involvement in clubs, societies and community work) and engaging employers. The key lessons and issues emerging from the case studies are identified.

The overview concludes by summarising the main findings of the Theme and suggesting ways forward for the sector. This is done with a view to engaging all the major partners in this enterprise - academic staff, students, employers and higher education institutions (HEIs), supported by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), QAA Scotland and the Higher Education Academy.

The Steering Group wishes to thank QAA Scotland for supporting the Employability Enhancement Theme, and in particular Dr Alastair Robertson.

Introduction

According to *On Track*, the first sweep of the SFC's longitudinal survey of 2004 graduates, 'the main reasons learners are studying relate to acquiring skills/knowledge and their career development'. This implies that if higher education is to meet the expectations of its primary stakeholders, enhancing students' employability should be one of the core aims of those who design and deliver students' learning experiences. At this point, we should explain that by 'employability' we mean 'a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations,' (Yorke, 2004).

The aim of this publication is to provide an overview of the work of the Employability Enhancement Theme, particularly for:

- front-line academic and support staff who are primarily responsible for what and how students learn, and who may not have time to attend national enhancement events, read the resulting publications or check out the Enhancement Themes website
- officers of students' associations, which can provide valuable opportunities for students to develop employability-related skills through involvement in clubs, societies and community work (the 'co-curriculum')
- employers, many themselves graduates, who can help by creating opportunities for work-related learning through placements, projects or mentoring
- senior managers, particularly those responsible for institutional learning and teaching strategies, since in a rapidly changing marketplace employers value people who can plan and manage their own learning.

This overview also identifies the key issues, findings and challenges that have emerged from the Theme, and suggests how they might be addressed.

Employability Enhancement Theme

The Theme's main aims have been to raise the profile of employability and its benefits, create a clear understanding of what is meant by the term, support institutions to develop employability strategies, and assist staff to embed employability in the curriculum. The Theme also sought to work in parallel with the PDP-ELF (personal development planning-Effective Learning Framework project), since PDP is a key component of any employability strategy. Other sub-themes emerged in the course of the work.

The timing of the Theme allowed us to draw on the materials produced by the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team and the Higher Education Academy; these can be accessed on the Higher Education Academy's website (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/Employability.htm>). Consequently, one strand of our work has been to publicise and disseminate these useful resources through the Enhancement Themes website and by two training events on 'Getting to Grips with Employability'. The first of these was an awareness-raising event for institutional champions; the second aimed to train trainers to use these resources, through practical workshops and expert advice. Other activities included two roadshows to launch the Theme and showcase local examples of good practice; a student-led event on partnership working; and two further events, one on enhancing the employability of part-time, mature and postgraduate students and one on assessment. Information about all these activities can be found on the Enhancement Themes website (<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk>).

The above events confirmed that there is already a good deal of innovative practice in Scotland directed at enhancing students' employability. Examples can be found in the case studies published on the Theme's website, some of which are analysed in more detail in our briefing paper on *Enhancing student employability: innovative projects from across the curriculum*. Scottish examples also feature prominently in two other publications: the *Guide to international best practice in engaging employers in the curriculum* and *Working together:*

enhancing students' employability, a study of collaborations between institutions and students' associations to enhance employability outside the academic curriculum. These publications are described in more detail below.

We were also assisted by the publication in October 2004 of the Scottish Funding Councils' report on *Learning to Work*, which helped to raise the profile of employability and has become an important reference work for the sector. In particular, the report issues a challenge to put employability at the heart of the learning experience by consciously designing (or tuning) the curriculum so that it enhances students' employability.

We set out to engage the sector by creating a network of employability champions - one senior academic/administrator and one student representative from each Scottish HEI. These champions also acted as a channel for information and feedback, so that we could tailor our activities to the needs of the sector. Their first task was to indicate how their own institution planned to engage with the Theme, what they hoped the outcomes would be, and what assistance they needed to achieve this. The network showed that the sector's top priorities were developing employability strategies and PDP. The four meetings of the network during the year informed the development of our programme of work and its outcomes.

The task of providing guidance and support for the sector in introducing PDP is being taken forward by the Universities Scotland/Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access/QAA Scotland Joint Working Group in the context of the PDP-ELF project. This group plans to publish a paper shortly on the links between PDP and employability.

Key strands

The next sections describe three strands of our development work, through three publications, and some of the key lessons and issues that have emerged. This is followed by the main findings and ways forward.

1 Embedding employability in the curriculum

This is the theme of *Enhancing student employability: innovative projects from across the curriculum*, a collection of 12 case studies showcasing ways in which Scottish institutions have set about embedding employability in the academic curriculum. Selected from 36 projects across the subject range contributed by nine institutions, they illustrate how much innovative and imaginative activity is currently to be found in Scotland. Some projects are of relatively recent origin, barely out of the pilot stage, but others are well established. What they share is a belief that employability should be a key concern for students, institutions and employers, and that it should be approached in a serious, considered and academically robust manner.

The aim of the collection is to share innovative practice that can be adapted for use outside the particular discipline and context in which it was originally developed. To this end, the projects are grouped into three categories according to their primary focus, although several could be classified under more than one category, demonstrating the value of a multilateral approach.

Each case study follows a standard format:

- institution, discipline and contact details
- abstract, context and rationale
- how the project works in practice and contributes to the institution's employability agenda
- suggestions for others wishing to introduce a similar project
- analysis of key features and strengths
- ideas for adaptation
- links and further information.

Each group of case studies is preceded by a brief analysis of their significant features and what can be learned from them, together with a list of related projects available on the Enhancement Themes website.

A Curriculum design (three case studies)

These projects feature giving management students the opportunity to apply knowledge and develop skills through reflective placements in the voluntary sector; building a practical element into a non-vocational course on the history and theory of rhetoric; and simulating the experience of working in the communications industry through cross-year project teams working on real-life clients' problems.

B Working in partnership (five case studies)

These case studies cover embedding creative business models in the arts and design curriculum; using mentoring by practitioners to develop students for their professional roles; a competition for cross-institutional multidisciplinary teams to design and deliver solutions against a real-life client brief; a module to help life science students to secure an industrial placement; and a project to embed employability in the curriculum at faculty level, thereby avoiding duplication.

C Work-related learning (four case studies)

These projects feature modules that enable students to gain credit for learning acquired in the course of their part-time or voluntary work; an on-line journal run by postgraduates for postgraduates that provides training for researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences; and an oil business game that combines a discipline-based field course with the skills-rich demands of team play and competition.

2 Enhancing students' employability through the co-curriculum

This is the theme of *Working together: enhancing students' employability*, a survey of 60 projects involving collaborations between institutions and students' associations in the UK and abroad to enhance employability through the co-curriculum. For ease of reference they are grouped under five themes.

- *Development of sports clubs and societies* - schemes that raise students' awareness, or develop and accredit their transferable skills, or provide education in coaching.
- *Services for student welfare and diversity* - student-run schemes (including peer tutoring, leadership development, and mentoring programmes aimed at black and minority ethnic or disabled students) that explicitly include enhancement of employability as a core aim and provide training and skills accreditation.
- *Volunteering* - schemes that promote the employability aspects of voluntary and community activities, including Student Volunteering Scotland, Project Scotland and EU-funded Science Shops.
- *Entrepreneurship and enterprise* - schemes to develop practical business skills, promote self-employment and link students with small and medium-sized enterprises, including the Scottish Institute for Enterprise and Graduates for Growth.
- *Issues of recognition* - schemes that certificate or accredit employability-related skills developed through the co-curriculum, including four different ways in which student organisations can certificate student activity, and international examples of successful leadership and cooperative education programmes.

Each theme concludes with a detailed case study (mostly Scottish) and suggestions for 'quick wins' and longer-term action.

3 Engaging employers in the curriculum

This is the theme of the *Guide to international best practice*, which provides a resource for institutions and individuals wishing to enhance students' employability by engaging employers more effectively in the curriculum. It presents 28 UK and international case studies which provide particularly innovative or unique examples of best practice to illustrate nine different types of engagement: work-based learning (eight case studies); work-related learning (two); employers delivering aspects of the curriculum (four); employers advising on the curriculum (four); business mentoring (two); accreditation partnerships (two); simulation of workplace facilities and experiences (two); employability modules (two); and sponsorship (two).

Four case studies are used to suggest some general principles of best practice. These include clear communication of the employability-related aspects of the curriculum in course publicity; central coordination of relationships with business and industry; and provision of resources to help academic staff to introduce learning in the workplace to their courses.

The guide also analyses the key features of two well-established case studies which have engaged with employers' organisations and other partners to deliver sustainable programmes that influence the academic curriculum and enhance student employability. These are the Co-operative Education Programme at the University of Limerick, where every student undertakes a period of relevant work experience, and the Flying Start Programme at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, which involves a major employer and a professional body. The analysis provides the basis for a list of 12 critical success factors which could be used in a Scottish context to assess the viability and sustainability of any proposed venture between HEIs and employers' organisations.

The study concludes by highlighting the importance of integrating work experience and learning, providing adequate student support, consolidating reflective learning, identifying commercial motivations for potential partners, and providing explicit funding for developing employability-related elements in the curriculum.

4 Other key lessons and issues

- The challenge of sustaining projects as they evolve beyond the development phase.
- Using senior students as mentors, thereby harnessing the enthusiasm and experience of those who have been through the mentoring process themselves.
- Making explicit links between classroom assignments and tasks that might be encountered in the workplace.
- Using simulations, competitions and game-playing to contextualise skills training and motivate students.
- Using classroom simulations to compensate for lack of work placements and prepare students for life in the workplace.
- The importance of addressing skills development in a progressive manner at programme level.
- The role of self-assessment and effective feedback in developing employability skills.
- The added value of collaboration by cognate disciplines and institutions with complementary expertise.
- Adapting projects specifically developed for one target group to address the needs of another.
- Tuning an existing curriculum to enhance students' employability.
- Developing indicators to provide evidence of skills development.
- The need to create space in the academic curriculum if students are to engage with employability, particularly in the early stages of their programmes.

- Timing interventions at the point of student need in order to avoid overloading and to encourage student engagement.
- Exploiting the employability potential of what students do alongside the academic curriculum, thus converting a potential obstacle into a significant opportunity for learning.

5 Main findings and ways forward

Learning to Work proposes a model in which responsibility is shared by staff, students and employers, all of whom require to be engaged if employability is to be successfully addressed. Institutions also have a major role to play, of course, as the primary agents of change and the locus at which the three others interact. This provides a convenient framework for presenting the main findings of the Employability Enhancement Theme and the way ahead.

5.1 Engaging academic staff

One question raised by the Theme's scoping study concerned the evidence that embedding employability in the curriculum is effective. Given that 80 per cent of all higher and further education students already feel that they have improved their employment chances (*On Track*, 2005), persuading sceptical and over-burdened staff that they should give serious attention to employability might be easier if there were a clear answer. A similar issue is raised in *Working together: enhancing students' employability*, which found that few UK co-curriculum schemes have had their effectiveness in developing employability formally evaluated, possibly because this was not their primary aim. Systematically evaluating the long-term effectiveness of various kinds of provision designed to enhance students' employability would be helpful in increasing academic engagement. This is a topic that the SFC should address.

Although there are signs that the Theme has raised the profile of employability and awareness of the term's meaning among front-line staff, participation by the latter in national events was low. This was

partly because these events were often targeted at specific groups. Evidence from our case studies, however, suggests that many academics are finding imaginative and effective ways of embedding employability in their courses, and with proper support and encouragement could also assist their colleagues to do so. Such staff are a potential training resource for the development work that will be needed if more academics are to put employability at the heart of the student learning experience.

It is also evident from our case studies that researching, designing, testing and delivering curricular initiatives requires time, commitment and sometimes additional resources. Encouragement and support from line managers are therefore essential, along with access to institutional pump-priming, if buy-in from further academic staff is to be secured. It is also important to properly recognise and reward individual enterprise in this area.

There is also an important role for communities of practice, such as those associated with the Higher Education Academy, in stimulating engagement at subject level, sharing innovative and effective practice, brokering and supporting development partnerships.

Finally, our guide to *Benchmarking employability* shows curriculum designers how subject-specific knowledge and practice relate to lifelong employability prospects for graduates.

5.2 Engaging students

Although the Theme sought to engage students' associations through the Institutional Contacts Network and held one event in a students' union, student participation in the year's activities was disappointingly low. Yet here too the evidence from *Working together: enhancing students' employability* suggests that there is already a considerable amount of employability-related activity among student associations, much of it as part of other projects. Indeed, some associations now have a designated officer or staff member with specific responsibility for employability. The studies

also showed that although only a minority of student-run services recognise their potential for enhancing employability, ways of making skills development explicit can often be incorporated into existing activities with a little creative thinking and resource.

One currently under-exploited avenue for work-related learning is the Erasmus exchange programme. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that those who have taken part in this programme believe that the personal skills and attributes they acquired during the experience have enhanced their employability, particularly abroad. Given that the number of Scottish students participating in Erasmus fell by 22 per cent between 1998 and 2003, more needs to be done by institutions to publicise this opportunity, by employers to recognise its value, and by the Scottish Executive to remove financial barriers.

Since students are the primary target and beneficiaries of these initiatives, it is essential to make them aware of what employability is, why it is important and how they can use the opportunities available to them during their time as students to enhance it. It would be helpful if the SFC, as part of its plan to raise the profile of employability among the student body, were to commission a brief informative leaflet on this topic, aimed at first-year students. Student engagement with employability should also be explicitly promoted through the work of other Enhancement Themes, such as the current one on The First Year.

5.3 Engaging employers

A recent campaign to market the Skills for Business Network may suggest that some employers have out-of-date ideas about today's graduates and how higher education is addressing the employability agenda. However, others (according to our case studies) are effectively collaborating with academics to provide opportunities for work-related learning through placements, input to course delivery, curricular advice, business mentoring and sponsorship. Indeed, a number have highlighted the contribution made by alumni who themselves benefited from an employability-related project as students.

SFC plans to support institutions by working with Scottish Enterprise, the Sector Skills Councils and other bodies to increase employers' awareness and engagement. It will be important for institutions to be ready to respond. Our *Guide to international best practice and Enhancing student employability: innovative projects from across the curriculum* contain a range of helpful resources, advice and suggestions. Those institutions with vocational programmes in the sectors covered by the Sector Skills Councils may find the information published in the *The Skills for Business Network - a briefing paper for Scottish higher education institutions* also helpful in this regard.

5.4 Engaging institutions

The Theme has provided a catalyst and support for several institutions to develop employability strategies, either as a stand-alone policy or as part of their overall teaching and learning strategy. In many cases, these strategies have been informed by mapping exercises for employability-related activities, which have been used to raise staff awareness, collect examples of good practice, identify gaps in provision, and frame action plans. Since many institutions have found the employability strategy developed by the University of Glasgow a useful model, we are arranging for other such strategies to be made available through the employability section of the Enhancement Themes website, so that those wishing to develop or revise their own strategies can consult them.

Key success factors in promoting employability at institutional level, according to our contacts network, are discreet support from the careers service, funding for a dedicated employability support post, an energetic employability champion, access to project funding, and a mechanism for coordinating activities. The main challenges facing institutions are likely to be increasing buy-in from academic staff, combating student apathy, managing information, addressing the enterprise agenda, and sustaining momentum beyond the end of the Theme.

The next step is to support institutions in their implementation and evaluation of these strategies and action plans. We believe that the SFC has a key role to play here, not only by monitoring progress through regular dialogue with institutions, analysis of their strategic plans and scrutiny of the evidence provided by ELIR reports about how effectively institutions are addressing employability as part of their educational provision, but also by actively supporting the sector in the next phase.

The Theme has provided ample evidence of the willingness by many academics to find imaginative and effective ways of embedding employability in their courses, and by groups and institutions to work together to develop subject-specific and generic material. The decision of the SFC to invest in a major programme of collaborative strategic development projects for the sector should stimulate and support further activity. This would address one of the main criticisms of the Theme.

The Institutional Contacts Network needs to continue, albeit with a revised remit and membership, to support institutions through the implementation phase. It can do this by providing a forum for institutional champions and a reference group for SFC in determining the needs and priorities of the sector, as well as (possibly) an agency for brokering collaborative projects. It should also be charged with reviewing the progress of implementation after 12 months and disseminating the results through a national conference. We understand that arrangements for servicing the network and maintaining the employability section of the Enhancement Themes website are about to be agreed by the SFC, QAA Scotland and the Higher Education Academy.

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Websites

- <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/Employability.htm>
- <http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk>

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