Employability and the austerity decade

Dr Vicky Gunn and Mr Klaus Kafmann, University of Glasgow

In 2006, when QAA Scotland reported on the Employability Enhancement Theme, the financial situation surrounding and concerning the university sector seemed much more buoyant than it does in 2011. The original report from this theme focused on three key strands:

- embedding employability in the curriculum
- enhancing students' employability through the co-curriculum
- engaging employers in the curriculum.

In many respects these strands are still the cornerstones for universities considering how to enhance the provision of opportunities likely to develop attributes which can be used both before and after graduation. The outputs produced as part of the original Theme still have currency in terms of sensible and practical advice, as well as central principles for understanding how and why students might be encouraged to engage in the employability agenda.

The biggest shift from the original Theme then is not so much one of a need for new guidelines or approaches, but rather is a sense of urgency being felt at all levels of the sector concerning its response to the immediate context of austerity both its staff and its students face. In Scotland, as well as individual institutional responses, there is the collective work across the sector being supported by Learning to Work Two and the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF). For further information, see www.heacademy.ac.uk/scotland/ourwork/institutional/employability.

Additional to the shift from variable engagement with employability among the sector in the past to it becoming a more universally acknowledged imperative has come an increasing sophistication in our understanding of what employability is, needs to be, and does for students. The sheer scale of resources on the topic currently can seem overwhelming. Academics and administrators alike need to filter information in a manner that suits their institutional culture and context. Having accepted institutional context though, a few key points continue to be re-articulated in the research on employability.

Work-based learning activities

Confronting a group of heterogeneous students with realistic work-related activities, exposing them to the experience of how other people's work and successes depend on the students' input, and providing positive feedback is likely to:

- influence their ability to articulate better the skills and knowledge they already have
- sharpen their understanding of how these skills and knowledge are transferable to the work environment

- enhance their confidence and reflective thinking
- motivate them to take on fuller responsibility for the outcomes.

Because of these implications, real-world exposure to learner employability, as emphasised by the current employability pedagogy debate, ought to remain an indispensable and an integral part in the curriculum (see further: Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009).

Having acknowledged the importance of the ability to transfer skills and knowledge from the classroom to the workplace is, however, not without some difficulties. Key among these is the need for the recognition of the boundaries between one 'activity system' (that of academic knowledge) and another, that of work-knowledge (Garraway, 2010). The boundaries between the two knowledges require effective brokerage to enable transfer and, in this sense, curriculum enhancement for 'work-readiness' is unlikely to be effective without substantial curriculum review (for a useful example of this, see Litchfield, Frawley and Nettleton, 2010).

Volunteering and student motivation

While, on an institutional level, the key driver for promoting, supporting and expanding the range of volunteering opportunities available to students in the higher education sector has been the belief that volunteering has the potential to contribute to students' employability, this is an oversimplification. The assumption that students have clearly defined and static career motives and are embarking upon volunteering first and foremost in the pursuit of enhancing employability is not borne out by research.

In promoting volunteering from the backdrop of the career and employability agenda, academics and university service providers need to consider that volunteering is often experienced by students as a field of learning, experimenting, and experiencing challenging, scary or funny situations.
These contingent qualities, which are often developed through volunteering for the sake of volunteering, are equally important and valuable, and could complete the employability agenda (see further: Holdsworth, 2010).

Embedding employability

Embedding employability is not just about writing good intended learning outcomes. Cognisance of the instructional methods and opportunities most likely to encourage meaningful engagement has to be part of any course design process (see further: Stoner and Milner, 2010).

Employability and enhanced research-teaching cultures

With respect particularly but not exclusively to research-teaching linkages, three main drivers are likely to ensure that employability-related initiatives are successful, namely:

- a partnership between an academic and careers advisor in the design and delivery of these initiatives is likely to help different groups within the university to relate to the project
- when the initiative is designed as an extra-curricular activity, it is likely that no 'territorial' issues over module credits will arise, and occasions for perceiving it in competition with disciplinary offerings will be limited
- to become more sympathetic to the theme of employability, the culture of a university needs to be supportive; senior management involvement is paramount in creating an environment for such initiatives to be received favourably.

(see further: Baker and Henson, 2010).

Previous briefings in this Enhancement Theme project have explored most of these areas and can be found at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/21stCGraduates/outcomes.asp.
While recognising these points, there are additional trends observable in the Scottish higher education context. These divide into four themes:

1   role diversification; the relationship between an institution's ability to undertake research and teaching at the same time as the facilitation of both employability and civic and/or community engagement
2   higher education and rural regeneration
3   employability initiatives at a distance (internationalising placements and offering employability curricular activities through distance delivery)
4   work-related learning and the potential transformation of 'non-vocational' disciplinary learning, teaching and assessment.

1   The universities' role diversification?

It is more stark than ever that, alongside the core roles of the university - disciplinary and interdisciplinary research and education through teaching which both enables students to engage with that research and even add to it - the 'third role' of Scotland's universities is increasingly one linked to local civic and/or community engagement. This is particularly true in terms of an employability agenda that seems to be now focusing equally or more on the provision of placements and internships as on in-curricular activities. Through necessity, the drive to engage with both local and global employers links the sector into a role as responsible local, as well as national and global, actors (see Chatterton, 2000). This is not a new phenomenon for Scottish universities. What is new, however, is that the impact of the fiscal situation (and with it the associated fear of destabilisation) has acted as a catalyst.

These circumstances should not detract from the notion that such engagement is both a worthy and fundamental service that institutions can play, and that in return the nature of disciplinary development is also enhanced. In this context, Glasgow School of Art (GSA) has a new employability-focused initiative with Harris Tweed. On the face of it, it looks like a normal 'placements' relationship between GSA and a company. A closer look, though, shows this to be a sophisticated linking of research-teaching-community engagement. With such an approach, the framework for engagement becomes much more about the mutual relationship between the institution and the employer, rather than a one-way process.

The issue then is not that such employability-research-civic links are necessarily impoverishing to the 'idea of the university', but rather that they require substantial resources (for further information on civic engagement see Watson, 2007; Curtis and Blair, 2010).

2   Higher education and rural regeneration

The relationship between higher education in Scotland and employability is particularly pertinent. Through links between local employers, work-related learning within the curriculum, and the development of degree programmes which tie into specific employer-led apprenticeship schemes, some of the issues related to rural depopulation are attempting to be addressed.

As an emerging theme, the more strategic approaches to employability found in rural locations addresses a key point about rural students - many of them have qualitatively different concerns about money, lifestyle and academic preparation than those who opt to attend civic institutions (McDonough, 2010). The unique culture and nature of such students requires subtly different learning, teaching and assessment methods, some of which are more able to accommodate both employer engagement and employer-university co-delivery.

In some senses, this is not a new approach to employability. The emerging trend is more to do with the need to make decisions about what universities in rural areas need to focus on with increasingly limited resources, which can in its turn lead to an over-reliance on labour market and economic needs (Miller, 2008). Work-related learning opportunities provided as part of broader or distance-delivered programmes, the impact of participation in these, and the role of the arts within community development are also critical aspects of current employability trends. The same can be noted of programmes which enable bridging into higher education, such as the Open University's Scottish Openings suite of courses (Cannell and Hewitt, 2010).

3   Employability initiatives at a distance

For some institutions in the Scottish higher education sector, offering technology-based systems of support for the development of employability attributes at a distance is not new. Where campuses are geographically distributed over large distances this has been an essential approach since the initiation of the Employability Enhancement Theme. These practices seem to be extended from distributed, but locally located, institutions to employability initiatives at an 'international distance'. The increased engagement in campuses outside of the UK by universities means that new ways of enhancing the students' experience of learning at the same time as attribute development are now being sought.

4   Transformation in non-vocational subjects

There appears to be an increase in the already emergent shift of emphasis in approaches to undergraduate learning. This shift - from learning in university as a particularly cognitive process, in which students unlock and add to disciplinary codes of knowledge, to higher education experience being where both intellectual and social attributes are developed - is a potent one. It is perhaps a new formation of longstanding debates about what and who an undergraduate education is for, and is also clearly influenced by an increasing sense of urgency on the part of universities to provide opportunities for all their students (academically-focused as well as those who are not) to access fulfilling employment once they have graduated.

This urgency has, of course, been exacerbated by the financial crisis and the move, at least in England, to a fees-based university teaching economy. Ironically, two ideologies look to be influencing one another; the first being the Labour push to link universities with labour markets through employability initiatives tied to specific government funding (see Boden and Nedeva, 2010); the second being the universities' subsequent and now increasing dependence on the resources of employers in the face of a dwindling state teaching grant. Either way, in terms of what an undergraduate degree needs to provide is changing rapidly in Scotland, like the rest of the UK, and, through this, how the 'idea of the university' is understood is going through one of its periodical revisions. Nowhere is this more visible than in those subjects which have come to be known as non-vocational.

The inclusion of placements and internships adds another dimension to the study of broad subject areas, such as the general sciences, arts and social sciences, in which there are fewer clearly articulated lines of professional career development. The same can be said of approaches to learning and teaching which simulate workplace-type experience. Essentially, the undergraduate degree becomes a learning experience in which the attributes related to the intellect, the social and cultural context, and the experiential are all woven together, with an aspirational outcome intrinsically linked to work-readiness.

For subjects that have centred on abstract learning within classrooms, laboratories, and the corridors of academic departments, the concern engendered by such a shift cannot be underestimated or ignored. Aligning disciplines (which, hitherto, have been the loci of critical and challenging reflection on any sort of norm, be it political, social, or economic) to the needs of employment futures is not comfortable. This is especially so if it means an apparent lowering of intellectual standards to allow for space in the curriculum for students to raise other capabilities.

Yet what some employability initiatives have shown us, such as those covered by the Scottish Funding Council's funded project on work-related learning in the Scottish university sector, AUL@W, is that it is perhaps a misinterpretation to assume that developing social and cultural competencies at the same time as engaging in experiential learning is in some way in opposition to developing intellectual rigour. Thus, while on the one hand a degree of scepticism to curriculum reform is relevant in the current academic climate, the practicalities of adapting curricular experiences to include:

- challenging intellectual enquiry,
- developing a range of transferable attributes, and
- experiencing more than one learning context

do not necessarily equate to a lowering of academic ability or standards. Indeed, in some cases they might enhance it.

Some final thoughts: impact of employment futures on why we teach

As well as the overarching aspirational, critical academic values and rationale for teaching in the universities, we also need to be:

- preparing our students for:
  - the potential range of employment they might face
  - changes to forms of employment both within and outside of the academy
  - being able to recognise the range of attributes derived from learning in the research and knowledge-intensive 'globalised' world of the universities at the same time as local, regional and immediate contexts
- managing the impact of closer relationships between employers, the private sector in general, and academics to build on the enhancements to teaching we have already made through employer engagement and approaches to skills development
- managing closer collaboration between different professionals within the universities - academic, service, and technical professionals - to encourage synergies which expose students to the whole-world of the university, rather than just an abstract classroom-world (so that student engagement becomes something about their responsibility and awareness of the organisation in which they 'reside' while studying, as well as what they can learn in the classroom).

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