Using Assessment to Support Employability Awareness and Development

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Introduction

This paper examines a teaching and learning approach to support employability awareness and development within a pilot employability module on the second year of an undergraduate degree (at London Metropolitan University). The module, QB212 'Professional Systems in Systems Development', resides within the computing and information systems subject area (IT sector).

The view of employability taken on this module, and the courses it supports, is that whether or not a student is employable is determined by whether they possess the skills, knowledge and attributes to successfully acquire a 'graduate' job as opposed to 'any' job. This distinction between 'graduate employability' and 'any employability' is made by Yorke, as well as Knight and Yorke (cited in Lees, 2002).

The QB212 approach to supporting graduate employability awareness and development focuses on building upon the first year experience in two ways. Firstly by further developing subject skills and knowledge, and secondly by expanding the self awareness and self development (personal development planning) process started in the first year.

This emphasis on pdp for employability recognises that technical or subject knowledge on its own is, typically, not sufficient for graduate employability. Hence QB212 seeks to promote explicit self-reflection and self-evaluation around both technical (subject) knowledge, as well as the 'soft' skills valued by employers of graduates and many academics. Key to the teaching and learning approach adopted is the assessment mechanisms which include both group and individual coursework as well as a final examination.

Further background and some definitions of terms

As outlined above, employability is viewed within the context of the personal development planning (pdp) process. Pdp is defined by LTSN Generic Centre, (2002) as:

'a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and / or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development'.

They refer to pdp as being (amongst other things) about developing self identity and awareness.

Employability is defined by HE Academy, (undated) as:

'A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and to be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'.

In summary, therefore, pdp is about planning for personal, academic and career development, developing the 'whole' person, while employability specifically focuses on 'career' aspects within the chosen subject area(s). This distinction between the 'whole' person and the 'career' person is obviously a little artificial since the development of the '…skills, knowledge and personal attributes…' that make individuals more likely to gain (graduate) employment…are clearly supported by the 'whole' person pdp process. Thus the employability approach taken on QB212 is to focus on the *process* of planning for career and employability development including identifying, targeting and evidencing particular skills, knowledge, attributes and experiences that employers are likely to value. This also with a view to supporting career self-efficacy, where self-efficacy is defined as '…the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations' (Bandura, 1995, p. 2).

The employer's view of employability

So what are the skills, knowledge and personal attributes valued within IT sector? There are a wide range of job roles each one requires a different balance of technical aptitudes/existing skills and knowledge, as well as so-called 'soft' skills and knowledge, plus relevant personal qualities.

There are, however, some generic attributes, skills and knowledge that are common across a number of disciplines including the IT sector. For example TMP Worldwide Research (cited in Cottrell, 2003. p. 39) identifies a number of so called 'soft' skills desired by employers the top six of which are: oral communication; team working; listening; written communication; problem solving; relationship development.

That the above soft skills are valued by the IT sector employers is witnessed by the following quote at a recent Professionalism and ethics in Computing curriculum conference:

> *'Develop IT graduates to recognise that technical skills are not enough. The (most) successful IT professional will be a collage of technical specialist, team player, relationship builder, communicator and business person'.*
> (Electronic Data Systems Corporation, 2005)

Additionally a theme echoed by number of employers at the above conference was the ability of the IT professional to behave professionally and ethically at all times.

The author has not been able to determine how accurately the above is reflected in employers' recruitment practices, but the advice about soft skills development is certainly reflected in the learning aims and outcomes of the London Metropolitan University undergraduate curriculum and in the advice given to students from the Careers Service.

The QB212 approach to supporting employability awareness and development

The module on 'Professional Issues in Systems Development' explicitly builds upon the technical (subject) skills and knowledge base already encountered within the first year and a half of the course, but also expands the notion of the 'professional' and 'reflective' practitioner. Professional body and employer perspectives are taken into consideration when developing the module curriculum. Students are encouraged to critically reflect on the personal qualities, soft skills, as well as technical skills and knowledge they already have or need to develop.

To achieve the above, the assessment on the module is structured to support two key things:

- the further development of appropriate subject knowledge particularly as it relates to notion of professional (and therefore, it is argued here, employable..) practitioner.

- Begin, or continue, the process of personal development planning for employability, by (amongst other things) conducting a preliminary self-evaluation in relation to a target job role.

In addition to an examination that tests specific subject knowledge, the coursework assessment therefore involves two key components:

- A group assignment which focuses on relevant technical, professional and team work areas.

- An individual assignment which includes asking students to identify a target job role and do a preliminary self-assessment against that role. (The two-stage individual assignment is summarised in Appendix A.)

There are appropriate links between the two assignments, for example, in the individual assignment the student is asked to reflect upon the team work experience encountered in the group work. This with the aim of promoting an understanding of how to operate successfully within a team.

In both assignments there is some low-stakes formative assessment for feedback purposes, and an emphasis on the learning process. In relation to the individual assignment this emphasis on process involves encouraging the student to explicitly think about their strengths and weaknesses in relation to job role they might like to perform and then action planning for employability development. This with the aim of promoting career self-efficacy, that is to develop the student's confidence in their ability to manage their personal and career development.

QB212 targets many of the areas that Lees (2002) identifies as being relevant to enhancing student employability:

'Enhancing employability for the individual student may be divided into five main areas:

1. *knowledge and understanding of the subject of study*
2. *developing skills, both subject specific and personal & key skills*
3. *work experience – and the articulation of learning from those experiences,*
4. *personal development – strategic thinking or reflection – thinking about what you have done and how it has helped you develop as a person, not just doing it,*
5. *possessing appropriate personal qualities…..'*

One of the areas from above not specifically addressed in QB212 is work experience, however students are encouraged to reflect upon any existing work experiences and to plan for further ones including project(s) and work placement(s) that might benefit them.

Clearly then employability awareness and development (like the whole pdp process) needs to be supported across the curriculum and cannot just reside in one module exclusively. Specialist 'employability' support providers such as the Careers Service and Employability Unit also have an important role to play.

Student feedback

For the 2004/5 Spring Semester run of the QB212 module, 12 from 35 (actively participating) students, i.e. one-third (34%) of the class, completed the anonymous

end-of-module feedback questionnaire. With regard to the question 'through this module I have developed knowledge/skills/qualities useful for future careers' the responses were as follows:

RATINGS (% distributions)			
Strongly agree	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
33.33%	58.33%	8.33%	0.00%

Thus, of those students who completed the questionnaire all except one respondent felt that the module had enabled them to develop knowledge, skills and/or qualities useful for future careers. This also indicates that these students had some confidence in their ability to plan for their personal and career development.

To better assess self-efficacy improvements (or otherwise) in relation to employability, more explicit measures of self-efficacy pre- and post-module might be explored and incorporated in future runs of the module.

From a tutor perspective, the formative Part A individual assignment submissions were useful in allowing students to go through the process of planning for career and personal development and to get some feedback on how they were tackling this activity. This guidance was offered so they might develop their approach within the second (Part B) submission. Part B submissions did indicate that students were using some of the feedback from Part A to develop their career action planning approach. This observation is supported by student responses to the question 'I was able to use the tutors feedback to improve my work on subsequent coursework (if appropriate)', with 92% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to reflect upon and enhance our understanding of what is meant by employability and its links to the personal development planning process. Employability, seen within the context of pdp in H.E., is about developing the student's ability to tackle a 'graduate' job rather than 'any' job. As part of developing this ability the student needs to understand the personal attributes, skills and knowledge that employers (and academics) within their target discipline value, and then as part of their personal development process start to target them.

Within the context under consideration (IT sector), a professional practitioner 'benchmark' is seen as a useful standard against which the student can self-evaluate. Other subject areas may have similar employer and professional body guidance or requirements, and some may not. However, what is important in terms of supporting employability awareness and development is to help the student explicitly

identify the (kinds) of skills, knowledge and qualities (and experiences) they are aiming for.

Finally, a clearly planned learning process, with appropriate assessment(s), is important to help the student to reflect and plan for personal development and employability. Thus the assessment on this module encourages students to go through the *process* of planning for career and personal development so that they enhance their understanding of what is involved. This process should also be supported by relevant learning activities within other modules. Student feedback indicates that the module has been reasonably successful in supporting employability awareness and development, although a more explicit pre and post module employability self-efficacy assessment would provide better feedback on this.

References

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Biographical note

Sarah Wilson-Medhurst is a principal lecturer and the departmental learning and teaching facilitator for the department of Computing, Communications Technology and Mathematics. Sarah is an HE Academy registered practitioner and has worked with a variety of student groups including 'returners' and work based learners. Building on both her industrial and academic work experience, Sarah's learning and teaching research interests include employability and supporting retention and progression, as well as the effective use of learning technologies. E-mail s.wilson-medhurst@londonmet.ac.uk.

Notes on QB212 Portfolio Part A and Part B (Spring Semester 2004/5)

The module learning outcome to which the portfolio coursework assignment primarily relates is module learning outcome 6 which states that students should:

> *be able to identify their responsibilities under professional codes of conduct and computer law, and develop their own professional standards in relation to computing and information systems development activities including identifying areas for personal and career development.*

Part A enables the student to demonstrate that they are successfully working towards this module learning outcome (plus some others), and to get some feedback on their progress. Part B summatively assesses the above learning outcome.

Part A is worth 10% of the module mark, so while the primary aim of Part A is to give students feedback on their progress, some marks are included. This is to both encourage participation and to indicate to the students that their formative work is valued. Part B is worth 20% of the module mark. These and the other assessment items for the module are summarised below:

Description of QB212 assessment item	% Weighting	Week due
Individual Portfolio Part A	10	5
Group case study	30	10
Individual Portfolio Part B	20	11
Unseen 2 hr examination	40	Held during semester 2 exam period

Part A (amongst other things) asks the student to research, identify and briefly describe some key job roles within the IT industry. Students then select *one* of the above roles that they might like to perform and list the key qualifications, skills, knowledge and experience required for this role including any social ('soft' skill), legal and ethical dimensions. They then make a preliminary self-assessment against these key job role elements and identify a preliminary 'career development plan' for the role.

Part B asks the student to build upon earlier experiences on the module including the feedback they have received on Part A. The Part B element that explicitly builds upon Part A is the section that asks the student to develop their exploration of the job role they identified in part A (or they can choose another one if they now prefer) and to analyse their Curriculum Vitae (CV) against this role.

Questions used to guide this self-exploration include:

- What skills, knowledge, qualities, experience and qualifications do you currently have?
- What do you hope to have in place by the end of your degree?
- What are the areas of professional experience and legal knowledge/awareness you need to develop?
- In your final year are there any projects you can undertake that will help you to develop/evidence the generic (presentation, team work, communication etc) and subject specific (technical, legal and professional) skills etc you need to develop? For example, what might you hope to gain from a group project developing an information system for a real client? This likely to include technical as well as other skills, knowledge etc like team work and an awareness of relevant legislation.

From the analysis above the student extends their personal career development plan. When assessing the above work the emphasis is on orientation to the question in hand e.g. is the CV oriented to the target job role? Is the self-analysis and personal career development plan similarly oriented? Do they show good self-awareness? Thus the emphasis is assessing how effectively the student has gone through the personal and career development planning process rather than (say) judging a stand-alone CV.