

## Assessment practice for functional employability skills

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**Keywords:** *employability, skills, functional, assessment, authentic assessment*

### Summary

In an uncertain economic climate the longer term prospects for employment are being increasingly considered by students embarking on higher education, particularly against the backdrop of increased tuition fees and debt. Consequently there is a move towards a more consumer mindset when choosing higher education provision, and this includes reviewing and evaluating the value gained from a particular course or institution. This paper therefore examines the role of assessment practice for the development of three functional skills which have been identified by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) (2009:10): namely, writing, verbal skills, and numeracy and information technology (IT). These, together with the authenticity of assessments, are considered in the context of the Social Work, Marketing and Dietetics courses at London Metropolitan University (LMU), and implications and recommendations are proposed.

### Introduction

There are many interpretations and definitions of 'employability'. According to Harvey (2003), employability is not just about getting a job; and conversely, just because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic. Employability is more than just developing attributes, techniques or experiences to enable a student to get a job or to progress within a current career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on 'employ' and more on 'ability'. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner. Thus, 'employment and employability are not the same thing' (Lees 2002:3). UKCES (2010) suggests that employability skills are those almost everyone needs to do almost any job. Knight and Yorke (2003) describe employability as covering a broad range of skills, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

According to The Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2012) in their recent reappraisal of assessment strategy, students have noticed how assessment

increasingly fails to meet their needs, particularly in relation to its relevance to the world of work. There is therefore a pressure to ensure that assessment can, at least in part, mirror the demands of the workplace or lead to skills that are relevant for a range of 'real world' activities beyond education. However, largely this has not been reflected in the reform of assessment within many disciplines. Burton (2009) suggests that the construction of 'real world' is an essential ingredient in authentic and work integrated learning assessment. Moreover, Knight (2002) also identifies a number of difficulties with current assessment and further suggests that summative assessment practices are in disarray.

Employers have suggested that assessment practices are not adequately preparing graduates, with a number of companies often finding they are lacking in business skills (Apprentice Eye, 2013). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reported in 2011 that LMU had a 17.1% unemployment rate six months following graduation, thus positioning LMU fourth from the bottom of the league table of UK universities. Consequently some students may not be adequately equipped, and there is concern about whether employability skills are being assessed adequately. Personal development planning for employability recognises that technical or subject knowledge on its own is, typically, not sufficient for graduate employability (Wilson-Medhurst, 2005). Ultimately, graduates in the workforce generally will not be taking exams and writing academic essays (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). Therefore, an authentic approach to assessment that enables students to meet learning outcomes is important to develop functional employability skills.

### **What assessment methods are currently used to assess personal employability skills?**

#### *Authentic assessment*

Mapping out the assessment methods for written, verbal, numerical and IT skills for the three disciplines (Social Work, Professional Marketing and Dietetics) identified traditional methods of assessment being used, in particular essays and exams.

These traditional assessment methods are established, validated and accepted among students and teachers, yet they are generally unrealistic to the tasks graduates will be undertaking once in employment. For instance, professionals are often expected, to write reports, assessments and GP letters rather than essays, which raises the question of the extent to which these traditional assessment methods are fit for purpose and authentic to the real life scenarios that graduates will encounter.

Verbal skill assessment in all three disciplines is considered promising and authentic, especially with regard to presentations which were regarded by all as being important for employability skills.

Numeracy skills are required in all of the disciplines, for example in calculating patients' dietary requirements, budgeting and welfare benefit calculations. However, when investigated and compared to the actual skills required for employment, it appears there is not enough depth of assessment. The weighting for numeracy appears to be too low (e.g. 5% of total mark of an assignment), especially when graduates are required to understand finances and budgets in more detail.

Recent research by BPP (Brierley, Price, Prior, 2013) found that 91% of employers are happy with graduates' IT skills (Levy, 2013), and noticeably assessment of IT skills was good across each discipline. The authenticity of the assessment was also apparent with students being assessed on their competence within the university's virtual learning environment, including their word processing and PowerPoint skills.

### *Summative and formative assessment*

Summative and formative assessment methods can be used equally to assess functional employability skills, however at present there is very little formative assessment in the three disciplines.

Appropriate summative and formative assessment feedback can help students reflect on their achievements and provide evidence of how their own employability is being developed through the curriculum. Both forms of assessment should include authentic tasks which reflect activities students will be expected to perform whilst in employment, thereby demonstrating the application of knowledge and skills. In addition, students value assessment activities which appear worthwhile because of the value they are seen to have beyond completing the task (Struyven et al. 2002, cited in Bloxham and Boyd, 2007).

### **Implications for practice**

LMU should consider enhancing its employability agenda and building on an institutional culture that promotes employability. In planning and reviewing courses employability needs to be at the forefront, involving employers in the process to ensure the development of appropriate functional skills is embedded in the curriculum. Consulting with employers should also help ensure graduates' skills 'gaps' are identified and curriculum and assessment practices can then be modified appropriately to bridge them.

There is a need to identify and develop approaches that involve less of a focus on traditional assessment methods and instead ensure assessment is authentic to workforce tasks for each discipline. Moreover, according to Bloxham and Boyd (2007), authentic assessment should help encourage students' intrinsic interest in the subject matter.

In addition, it is suggested that assessment criteria clearly indicate the employability skills to be developed during the learning process, emphasising to students the purpose of assessment to aid their future employability and not just to achieve a grade. An increase in the percentage weighting of assessment criteria for the functional skills component (for example, with respect to language skills, increasing from 10% to 15% of the overall mark) would further support this.

## Conclusion

Graduates increasingly require and seek effective functional employability skills to assist them to stand out in the employment market place. Employability skills development needs to be supported across the curriculum and assessment processes and be tailored to each discipline. Stepping away from traditional to authentic assessment practices will help encourage a 'deep' rather than a 'surface' approach to learning of functional employability skills where students only accept information to complete an assignment (Canon and Newble 2000). Consequently, LMU could look beyond traditional measures toward new and more authentic ways of assessment. Both formative and summative assessment methods can be used to develop functional employability skills and thereby help graduates in an uncertain economic climate.

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