



# Promoting student employability in

---

higher education

[peter.knight@open.ac.uk](mailto:peter.knight@open.ac.uk)



# What is employability?

---

- Good definition → *appropriate* action
  - Beyond skills
  - Systemic/programmic action
  - From the individual teacher to consultancy with departments and teams
  - Thinking about opportunities
  - Emphasis on design of learning sequences and environments
  - 'Mid-level leadership' becomes a priority



## Employers' views

---

- Attributes of a highly employable graduate include:
  - self-management skills; communication skills; team-working; interpersonal skills; self-awareness; self-promotion; exploring and creating opportunities; action planning; networking; matching and decision-making; negotiation; political awareness; coping with uncertainty; development focus; transfer skills; self-confidence; handling one's own work load; getting to the heart of problems.

(See also Sternberg, R. *Practical Intelligence*, 1997)



## Life research data

---

- Longitudinal data on 6000 UK people born in 1970 and surveyed aged 5, 10, 16, 21, 26
- Analysis shows great significance of non-cognitive factors in work/life success: for example,
  - Self-esteem
  - Learned helplessness *versus* high internal locus of control
  - Behaviour
  - Peer relations

- Employability may be described as:
  - **U**nderstanding
  - **S**kills
  - **E**fficacy beliefs
  - **M**etacognition
  
- Surely this is also what we value?



## Implications for practice (1a)

---

- We need to design *programmes* because:
  - Key achievements take years to grow.
  - What is learned *here* and *today* resists transfer to *there* and *tomorrow*. But academics and employers want graduates who can transfer their achievements.



## Implications for practice (1b)

---

- Good programmes will:
  - Promote slow-growing achievements.
  - Be coherent.
  - Be progressive (provide scaffolding which is dismantled as students go through the programme).



## Implications for practice (2a)

---

- We often think about how to teach better but ...
  - ... remember that we want to stimulate good learning.
  - Good teaching contributes to it, but ...
  - ... so do the tasks we set (and we often use these tasks to evaluate students).
  - The way we assess learning influences what students learn.
- We need to think about learning tasks ...
- And about *sequences* of learning tasks

(Colleagues who design e-learning think about the design of whole learning environments as well).



## Implications for practice (2b)

---

- Good programmes have a variety of:
  - Tasks and assessment practices.
  - Demands or challenges.
  - Support or scaffolding.
  - Emphases on teaching and learning.
- They are coherent but progressive, which means they have clear:
  - Criteria or indicators of achievement.
  - 'Rules of the game'.
  - Expectations.
- This is about designing for learning cultures



## Implications for practice (3)

---

- A need to review assessment.
  - A differentiated assessment system:
    - Assess summatively (grade) those achievements that can be reliably and affordably assessed
    - Assess formatively those that cannot
    - Decide whether to treat the rest as if they could be reliably assessed (expensive) or whether to settle for formative assessment
    - Help students to make and support claims in respect of those achievements that we will not assess reliably
    - Give public accounts of our process standards – what students do and what support they get.



## Some examples from practice

---

- Thinking systemically: *elements of a course design system*
- Coherence in practice: *The contribution to programme learning outcomes made by key courses*
- Coherence in practice: *Extracts from an undergraduate module handbook.*
- Defining and addressing employability: a fresh approach (to appear in *Exchange*, issue 2, Summer 2002)



## What has been missed?

---

- Improve the relevance of programme content.
  - Provide work experience or work placements.
  - Improve careers advice or guidance.
  - Portfolios.
- 
- Design new programmes that base academic learning on workplace practices — learn from your work.
    - The case of the UK Open University.



## Haug and Tauch (2001)

---

- 'Enhanced employability seems to be the strongest source of change and reform in [European] higher education'.