Helping first year students understand employability

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Abstract
The authors have developed a tool that would offer tutors a simple and structured solution to the difficulty of engaging first year students in the concept of employability. The short diagnostic questionnaire is completed online and aims to increase student understanding of the factors which lead to success in obtaining graduate employment. Students receive personalised feedback and links to in-depth and relevant support and resources. It additionally provides a good starting point for tutors who are delivering employability and personal development within their programmes.

Introduction and background
In the summer of 2011, as part of the provisions of the Access Agreement, the Careers and Employability Service was asked to consider whether it was possible to diagnose employability awareness and potential for graduate employment in first year students around the point of entry, and suggest a means of doing so. Initial investigations revealed that there was a great deal of interest in this at other universities, and that some were making considerable efforts to raise self and employability awareness in their students. However, there was nothing currently in use which quite suited the MMU context, so Judy Reeve and Pauline Hearn set out to devise a diagnostic tool which would be quick and easy to use.

We needed to consider content, purpose, timing and means of administration. One of our major concerns was that the tool would be useful to students and to academic colleagues and not just another bit of bureaucracy, and that it would serve as a launch pad for structured employability or PDP content in courses.
Description of practice
In thinking about content, we needed to try to capture some of the factors which are generally understood to contribute to the likelihood of entering graduate or graduate-track employment on graduation:

- Possession of a ‘good’ degree at 2.1 or better
- Work experience (whether paid or voluntary)
- Self-awareness and the ability to articulate skills
- Contacts (for getting work experience, information and jobs)
- Good literacy and numeracy, including excellent written English
- Technical job-hunting skills (finding vacancies, writing CVs, application forms, interview performance etc.)

Not all of these factors are appropriate for first year students, so we looked at those which were, and made a first draft of our questionnaire, covering:

- Knowledge of jobs with their degree and whether they had any career ideas
- Knowledge of what employers are looking for in graduates
- Personal skills such as time-keeping, organisation and independence
- Key skills such as teamwork and presentations
- Understanding of assessment systems and how to achieve high marks
- Social skills and whether their parents had been to university (linked to networking and contacts)
- Literacy and numeracy
- Work experience
- Disability

Discussion
It is clear that some of these areas could be sensitive, so the draft was sent out for wide consultation, especially amongst student support colleagues, but also to academics, and interesting comments were received which led to amendments. One question, relating to the education status of parents, remains somewhat controversial, as it is felt to be inappropriate for mature students, but it does provide relevant information and the student is not obliged to answer it. We also held focus groups with first year students and interns at Manchester and MMU Cheshire to check whether the questions were readily understandable and that the process was useful. The students/interns were all volunteers who had responded to a request from their tutor or Careers & Employability adviser. The feedback was positive and also threw up some interesting observations on the psychology of first year students that were subsequently taken into account in devising the introduction to the questionnaire and accompanying staff and student notes e.g. that students might give answers they think will impress their tutor, that they might believe the questionnaire has some link with their academic programme or not understand some of the language used. Some of these points may usefully inform academic practice in a wider context than the questionnaire. For example, concerning language, some first year students interpreted “personal skills” as social skills i.e. enjoying university life. Some did not understand terms such as
“extra-curricular activities”, “alumni” or the difference between “attitudes” and “aptitudes”. We realised how much care needs to be taken when giving new students written instructions. This insight has led to changes in practice; e.g. when updating our guides for students we actively aim to eliminate or explain potentially difficult words. We have also introduced a new guide ‘What is employability?’, and more information specifically targeted at first year students.

The questionnaire now has 15 questions, taking students about 10 minutes to complete, and the student receives feedback which can be saved or printed out. We carefully considered whether each question made sense to a student and, where the purpose might seem to be obscure, provided an explanation. Depending on how the student responds, their feedback will contain advice and links to appropriate supportive resources, such as careers material on the Careers & Employability web site and quality-assured external sites, Student Support Officers, The Writing Project, tutors, or Skills Online. The questionnaire can be undertaken by a student without any tutor intervention, but equally, the feedback could be an excellent resource for a PDP intervention or as part of embedded employability content, as it brings together resources specific to a skill that a student may want to develop, or can support decision-making or a practical exercise such as researching a career option or writing a CV.

In terms of appropriate timing of delivery, there is very little consensus: one possibility could be to administer the diagnostic before the student even arrives, whilst other suggestions have been during induction, in the first term, or after Christmas. Student engagement, not just to complete the diagnostic but to act on the feedback, is the key issue here. Asking students to complete it before arrival or during induction would ensure a high level of completion and send a clear message that the university puts a high priority on their employability. However, students are receiving and trying to absorb a lot of information during this period are unlikely to see acting on the feedback as a priority. Similarly, during the first term they are finding their feet and focusing on understanding what is required of them academically. In the spring term they may feel more settled and have some experience on which to reflect, but will have time pressures as academic deadlines build. Our pilots this year should help resolve the timing issue, and could potentially help personal tutors find the best point to introduce employability into their first year PDP.

It was felt to be important that the administration was web-based so students could access their feedback at any time and potentially keep it throughout their university career and beyond. Our earlier investigation into existing possibilities had turned up some new commercial software called Jobsavvigrad, which had the capability to form the basis of an employability or PDP programme. Jobsavvigrad, which although new, is already used in a number of universities such as Reading, Oxford Brookes and UCLAN, allows a student to build a portfolio through skills analysis and examples of evidence. The evidence is then used to construct sophisticated and tailored CVs and application forms. The package also gives access to a huge range of vacancies which can be applied for and recorded. We were impressed by its potential, but thought it was most useful for students at levels 5 & 6.

However, an approach to the team at Jobsavvigrad resulted in an offer to put our diagnostic into the package for the exclusive use of MMU students and staff: in this way, it would be possible to use the same package from first year to finals and for the student to take their portfolio with them when they graduate.
The diagnostic questionnaire is currently being piloted with first year psychology students and first year Business sandwich students. Over eighty Business students will be using the questionnaire in conjunction with their PDP activity and will be asked to write a critique of their experience of both the questionnaire and Jobsavvigrad. Careers & Employability Advisers will support classroom sessions where students will register for the questionnaire and be encouraged to complete it within the following week.

**Next Steps**
We are looking forward to receiving feedback from both students and academic staff. Some staff not involved in the pilot have also been examining the Jobsavvigrad package to understand its possibilities as an employability skills and PDP vehicle. If you would like to look too, then simply register at [http://mmu.jobsavvigrad.com/academics/new](http://mmu.jobsavvigrad.com/academics/new).

We would value any comments or questions about either the diagnostic questionnaire or the Jobsavvigrad software, so please don’t hesitate to contact Julian White [j.r.white@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.r.white@mmu.ac.uk) or Pauline Hearn [p.hearn@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:p.hearn@mmu.ac.uk) at Manchester or Judy Reeve [j.a.reeve@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.a.reeve@mmu.ac.uk) at Cheshire.

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