Developing a Departmental Employability Strategy

Chrissie Gibson
Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences

This article describes the development of an employability strategy in the Environmental and Geographical Sciences Department at Manchester Metropolitan University. The Department has had a history of involvement with employers and the provision of work experience. It is now building on this experience by developing a strategy to improve employability amongst its students. The strategy will be informed by national and local policy and initial consultations have been carried out. Opportunities have been identified which can offer students a “menu” of employability choices. The strategy will influence the forthcoming academic review of courses. The article also suggests possible ways forward to implement these ideas.

“Higher education, employers and the Government need to engage in a wider debate about enhancing employability among an increasingly diverse student population.” Universities UK (2002)

Background
In 1997 the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report) (NCIHE, 1997) recommended that higher education institutions should help students to consider the relevance of work experience for their personal and future development. More specifically, the NCIHE made recommendations to increase the opportunities for work experience and for meaningful reflection about such experience.

Changing agendas
Since Dearing, the discussion has broadened from purely work experience to the agendas of employability and work related learning. Universities UK’s report “Enhancing employability, Recognising diversity” (Universities UK, 2002) supports the shift in thinking and action on employability away from bolt-on marginal and optional activities towards efforts that are better integrated into the curriculum. Much of the literature has emphasised transferable skills (AGR, 1995) (DES, 2002). However, there are many other attributes which graduates can hope to acquire which will make them more employable. Universities UK wants to see a holistic approach which integrates knowledge, work experience and technical and interactive skills development, together with reflection on the needs of a flexible organisation.

The Universities UK report identifies three aspects of employability which HE institutions should address, namely:

- development of employability attributes;
- development of self-promotional and career management skills; and
- a willingness to learn and reflect on learning.

Current Position
The Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences is currently preparing an employability strategy and is considering the concepts identified above. The Department has had a long-term commitment to working with outside organisations and helping students to develop their careers. It offers a range of courses at both undergraduate and Masters level. The undergraduate courses are particularly popular with geography students, whereas the Masters syllabus focuses on environmental subjects and geographical information systems. They can be classed as degrees with a vocational element rather than vocational degrees. To date formal employability-related learning has been delivered mainly through work experience and careers education. Undergraduate students can opt to study abroad in their second year.

The careers now open to both environmental and geography students have broadened. Whilst it had
been dominated by voluntary sector for many years, it now tends to be more office-based and predominantly public sector with the number of jobs in private sector consultancies increasing.

Work experience

The Department has been organising work placements for students for over 16 years. In the early years undergraduate students on the environmental courses welcomed the opportunity to gain practical experience and staff developed relevant contacts in outside organisations.

There are a number of opportunities within the curriculum for work experience. All the undergraduate courses can be taken in sandwich mode. In addition students can opt to undertake a two-week placement in their first year and/or a four-week placement in their second year. At the Masters level most students undertake their dissertation for an outside organisation.

Students gain much from this experience. It gives them the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in a classroom or laboratory to a real life situation. However, the additional benefits are to increase their understanding of the workings of a relevant organisation, to network with people in their area of interest and to try out a potential career.

Careers

Since the early 1990s there has been a comprehensive Careers Programme throughout all the years of the undergraduate courses. It was later extended to the Masters provision.

All students can join in sessions on job search, CV preparation, job applications and interview technique. There are talks by visiting employers. Students who wish to study careers education in more depth can opt to study accredited units which are linked to the placements and form part of their degree programme. The units include an exploration of the student’s skills, values and preferences and includes practical advice and mock interviews. The University Careers Service complements the departmental provision with sessions on psychometric tests and assessment centres.

There is also a resource of departmental web pages signposting students to information about relevant careers and work experience.

Skills

All the undergraduate courses include a strong skills input. In the first year there is a Skills Week covering the basic skills a graduate would be expected to acquire. Throughout the courses these skills are developed and higher level skills are introduced. The Department was part of the Skills Plus project http://www.open.ac.uk/vportal/Skills-Plus/home.htm which identified and categorised the skills within the curriculum.

Employability

The concept of “employability” has a number of interpretations. Jan Moore’s article in an earlier issue of LTiA (Moore, 2002) referred to the diverse definitions used by different organisations. A good working definition is provided by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN),

"a set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes — that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.”

(Yorke, Knight et al, 2003)

Employability is a quality, not merely a set of activities and skills. Therefore the key question is “What else do students need to make them more employable?”

Much of the literature provides lists of attributes (Durkin & Main 2002) and (Haigh & Kilmartin 1999) which include the familiar range of skills such as communication, numeracy and critical analysis. Interestingly, there has also been an increasing representation of more sophisticated attributes such as intrinsic motivation (Stubbs & Keeping, 2002), and political sensitivity.

This extra ingredient appears to be what Salovey & Mayer (1990) describe as “Emotional Intelligence”. They describe emotional intelligence (or EQ) and compare it with IQ (intelligent quotient), stating that in order to succeed in life we need both.
EQ involves
self-awareness,
managing emotions,
motivating oneself,
empathy with others
the ability to handle relationships.

These attributes point to a maturity that goes well beyond the set of transferable skills as traditionally identified. A person who has developed their EQ is able to take responsibility for their own career and thus to develop their own confidence and job satisfaction. The idea has similarities with concept of “capability” as described by (Stephenson & Weil, 1992). “Capable people are those who: know how to learn; are creative; have a high degree of self-efficacy; can apply competencies in novel as well as familiar situations; and work well with others. In comparison to competency, which involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills, capability is a holistic attribute.”

Employers’ needs

Employers want their employees to have intellectual rigour and to be self-starters as the two quotes below indicate.

“Candidates should be able to demonstrate the intellectual capability to understand and analyse complex information and ideas”. Charles Miller Smith, chairman of Scottish Power (Claridge, 2002)

“I don’t care what you did your degree in, really don’t … It is as much if not more about personal traits, personal drive and ambition.”(Company Director, quoted in Harvey et al, 1997, p 58)

At the time of the previous academic review the Department carried out a survey of organisations that had employed our graduates or taken students on placement. The organisations stressed the importance of work experience, either placement or sandwich. They emphasised personal skills (reliability, initiative) and interpersonal skills, and wanted students to have evidence of tackling real problems.

The Department has an Employers’ Liaison Panel as an ongoing mechanism for keeping in touch with employers’ needs. It meets when necessary and has given opinions on curriculum development and advised specifically about placements and assessment.

The government and the employers are advocating a greater emphasis on employability, but what about the students? In a recent survey of second year Environmental and Geographical Sciences students 53% ranked “improve career prospects” as the most important reason for coming to university.

Process

The first stage in the preparation of the strategy was to examine the policy background. There are a number of policies that this initiative must take into account. Some are general, eg Universities UK “Enhancing employability, recognising diversity”, the Institution’s Strategic Review and the Strategy for Reach Out. More specifically the MMU Framework for Career Management and Development gives strong backing for this approach. It states “arrangements for taught programmes will ensure that ….. every opportunity is taken to ensure that students of the University are well prepared to achieve their potential in industry, commerce and the wider community.” (author’s emphasis)

Consultations have also been carried out with the Careers Service and the External Relations Division at MMU. In addition discussions have been pursued with the LTSN Generic Centre and LTSN-GEES, the Subject Centre Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences. The idea was also presented at the LTSN Bio-Sciences Real World Swap Shop which promoted some interesting discussion and contacts.

It was decided to analyse current undergraduate provision by adapting the Employability Audit developed by the LTSN Biosciences Subject Centre, see http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/issues/employability The audit is not subject specific and covers relevant general issues. It would complement the Skills Plus analysis which was carried out on a unit basis.

The following headings were used:-

- Do you know who employs your graduates?
- Are your students aware at an early stage of the graduate employment opportunities open to them?
- Are potential employers aware of the attributes/skills your students develop?
- Do your students have confidence and high aspirations?
- Are your students helped in making applications for employment?
- Are your students helped to steer their university experiences towards developing employability?
- Do your students have the skills to manage degree programme choices and their careers?
- Does your curriculum promote employability?
- Are your students encouraged to obtain work experience?
- Is the contribution of extra-curricula activities to employability recognised?
- Have you considered employability in the context of widening participation and disability?
There are six or seven questions under each heading. The audit has a scoring system. This was used initially, however it has greater value by using it as a checklist to prompt discussion.

This showed that many of aspects of employability are currently being covered, eg work-based or work-related learning experience and employability-related units within the curriculum. The areas where more could be done are:

- making potential employers aware of students’ skills
- improving student confidence and aspirations
- the contribution of extra-curricula activities
- making links to employability more explicit, especially for those students who do not do a placement
- widening participation and disability

The Postgraduate Network will be considered later as it will be delivered in distance learning mode which will introduce a new set of challenges

**Identifying opportunities**

The next stage was to identify opportunities to enhance employability within and outside the curriculum.

“Employability is compatible with many descriptions of good learning in general and is not just about learning about and for work.” (Yorke & Knight, 2002). The curriculum offers a number of possibilities to encourage employability and these will be explored during the review of the courses.

This point of view is echoed by Shepherd (1998) “It is important that we do not obscure or downplay the contributions that well-designed, discipline-based learning experiences can make towards the development of students’ personal transferable skills”.

An event for employers is planned for the Autumn. Local contacts will be invited into the Department to find out about students’ work and hopefully to obtain more offers of placements.

Problem-based learning is an area where students can be set new challenges which mirror real life. Boud and Felletti (1997) advocate the introduction of problem-based learning as a way to engage students in effective learning which takes place in the context in which it will be used. It can also improve students’ confidence in their ability to operate in the world of work. There are currently examples of good practice, eg on field trips, poster presentations and writing bids for funding. There may be opportunities for more.

Every undergraduate student has to write a dissertation (20 credits) or a research-based project (40 credits). Some use the contacts that they have made on their placements and develop a piece of work from that. There is further scope to tie in more dissertations and projects with outside organisations and real life problems.

Outside the curriculum there are many opportunities. The majority of students now have some paid employment. Recent surveys showed that about 60 per cent of full-time students worked during term-time and over 80 per cent of full-time students worked over the summer vacation (Universities UK, 2002). Many students gain valuable experience from voluntary work such as in Students Union societies or in their own communities.

In order to help students make the most of term time and vacation employment the Department has recently made partnerships with key organisations in the region, such as the Step scheme, Insight Plus, Steam, (Student Training & Employment About Manchester). “The coMMUni project” has potential, it is a Higher Education Active Community Fund scheme to support and encourage students and staff to volunteer in the community. There are a number of advantages of students gaining their employment through a recognised “student friendly” agency. The Department can help to advertise these intermediary organisations at induction to ensure students have good quality employment.
Many students work in the retail or leisure sectors and this can be challenging. One employer who came to talk to the students felt that Saturday work in a shoe shop is excellent background for professional jobs in his organisation. It shows evidence of patience, staying power and diplomacy.

There are other things students can do on their own. The Virtual Career Coach http://www.windmillsprogramme.com is an online range of exercises to help people to manage their careers. It recognises that the world of work is changing quickly and that everybody needs to manage their own careers. The Windmills Programme takes its inspiration from a simple quotation: “When the wind blows, some people build walls... others build windmills.” In other words, it’s pointless to resist the winds of change sweeping through today’s world of work – you have to turn them to your own advantage. This is the type of empowerment which Salovey and Mayer (1990) were advocating in their concept of Emotional Intelligence. There are also Departmental Careers pages with information specific to Environmental and Geographical careers.

As well as engaging in these activities students must provide evidence of what they have done and what they have learned. Students already draw on their placement experience for CVs, job applications, at assessment centre and at interview. Barr and McNeilly (2002) identified a problem of students not making the most of the career-relevant experience in their classrooms. They found that students willingly included work experience on their CVs but did not use evidence from activities in the classroom eg group projects, client consultations. This problem can be addressed by giving more guidance to students about the range of activities which they can draw upon to demonstrate employability. Staff can be encouraged to emphasise these points when writing job references.

From 2005/6 students will have Progress Files as part of a national scheme. Part of this is the Personal Development Plan (PDP – also see Trevor Williamson’s article, page 9 in this issue) which is a process to help students to plan and take responsibility for their own learning. Students who undertake a placement in the Department already complete a reflective proforma. The PDP will be a vehicle for ensuring this reflective process to happen for other students.

**The Next Stage**

A draft strategy will be produced and further consultation carried out. Departmental staff can debate the extent to which the employability provision is strengthened. Selected employers from the Department’s range of contacts will also be consulted.

The proposed philosophy is to offer these opportunities as a “menu” of employability choices. Students will not be forced to undertake “employability training” but there will be many opportunities for students who wish to enhance their career prospects in so doing. However it should not be seen as a “take it or leave it” option. Students will be required to make a commitment to a particular activity and must then carry it through.

**Implementation and monitoring**

The production of the strategy is timely because both the undergraduate and the postgraduate provision are being reviewed during the academic year. The strategy will include recommendations about how it will be monitored. The audit will be used again to compare progress with the base line data. In particular student destinations will be collected as a long term measure of success.

**Conclusion**

The process of developing a departmental employability strategy has been started. Many universities are working on institution-wide strategies but departmental strategies are still unusual. The Department’s strategy is an important step towards turning national and local policies into action. The overall aim is to build students’ confidence and their employability so that they can follow the career they want.

*The author is happy to discuss any aspect of this paper, particularly with staff who have worked on similar projects.*
References


Universities UK (2002) Enhancing employability, recognising diversity CU Universities


Chrissie Gibson
tel: 0161 247 1573
e-mail: c.gibson@mmu.ac.uk