

Employability And Entrepreneurship in Higher Education

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Abstract: To thrive in a digital economy, people need skills appropriate to the times. During the past 20 to 30 years, the demand for increasingly sophisticated information technology in society and the workplace has placed an ever-growing premium on knowledge- and technology-intensive skills. Occupations as disparate as delivery driver, doctor, bank teller, and graphic designer now fall under the broad category of information worker. Students, teachers, and school administrators must also adapt to learning in the digital age, and the education system must constantly evolve to educate and prepare the information workers of the 21st century. Success in this global, collective future also heavily depends on the students of today developing innovative solutions for key societal issues. To be truly innovative, any solutions they find must involve a change in thinking in addition to a useful application of these new ideas or discoveries.

Keywords: employability, higher education, entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly evident that the word 'employability' is often used carelessly and interchangeably with 'enterprise', which in turn is confused with 'entrepreneurship'. Watts & Hawthorn (1992) acknowledged this confusion between enterprise and entrepreneurship SME years ago when they proposed that it was possible to distinguish between: 'business entrepreneurship' – encouraging students to set up their own businesses; 'working in enterprises' – using enterprise as a noun meaning business; and 'being enterprising' – being innovative, recognizing/creating opportunities and taking risks/responding to challenges. The authors suggested that at the time, a certain ambiguity surrounding the terminology may have been quite useful, as it gave Higher Education Institutions the freedom to implement the Enterprise in Higher Education policy, in ways that matched their needs. Indeed, this ambiguity was expected to encourage debate in HEIs about the meanings of these terms. The term 'enterprise' was used for a number of years in HEIs to describe many activities that we now subsume under the term 'employability'. However, since the term 'employability' has become used more widely in the HE sector, the scope for confusion has become greater and the need for clarity more pressing. This is particularly important in areas relating to funding of these activities.

It is important to recognize that 'employability', 'enterprise' and 'entrepreneurship' are complex concepts and that each has a substantial literature in which there is considerable debate about where the overlaps lie. However, this lack of clarity could become a serious problem for HEIs looking to implement strategies in these areas. The purpose of this paper is to offer some suggestions for helping to resolve this confusion and clarify the meanings of these terms.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) has developed a framework for the skills it considers important to employability. These include functional skills including using numbers and IT, a set of personal attributes including thinking critically and self management, as well as having a positive approach to work and employment. Current notions of what it means to be enterprising are closely linked to this. They draw upon the characteristics of the enterprise mindset which constitute a set of personal skills, attributes, behavioral and motivational capacities (associated with those of the entrepreneur) but which can be used in any context including social, work and leisure. (Wilkinson and Aspinall, 2006) Prominent among these are for example, initiative taking and strategic thinking. Employability has been described as being "about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required. For the individual, employability depends on: their assets in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess; the way they use and deploy those assets; the way they present them to employers, and crucially the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they see work." (Hillage and Pollard, 1998.)

DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS:

The following definitions and distinctions may help educators to identify new opportunities and evaluate existing practice. Learning often takes place within institutions without bearing the label of 'enterprise'. More important than labels are the approaches taken and the behaviors, attributes and skills developed. The definitions are offered with the expectation that they will

be applied in conjunction with subject expertise, customs and practices

ENTERPRISE

Enterprise is defined here as the application of creative ideas and innovations to practical situations. This is a generic concept that can be applied across all areas of education. It combines creativity, ideas development and problem solving with expression, communication and practical action. This definition is distinct from the generic use of the word in reference to a project or business venture.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Entrepreneurship is defined as the application of enterprise skills specifically to creating and growing organisations in order to identify and build on opportunities.

EMPLOYABILITY

We have defined employability as ‘...having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful’ (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007, p 280). It has also been conceptualized in our Career EDGE model illustrated below

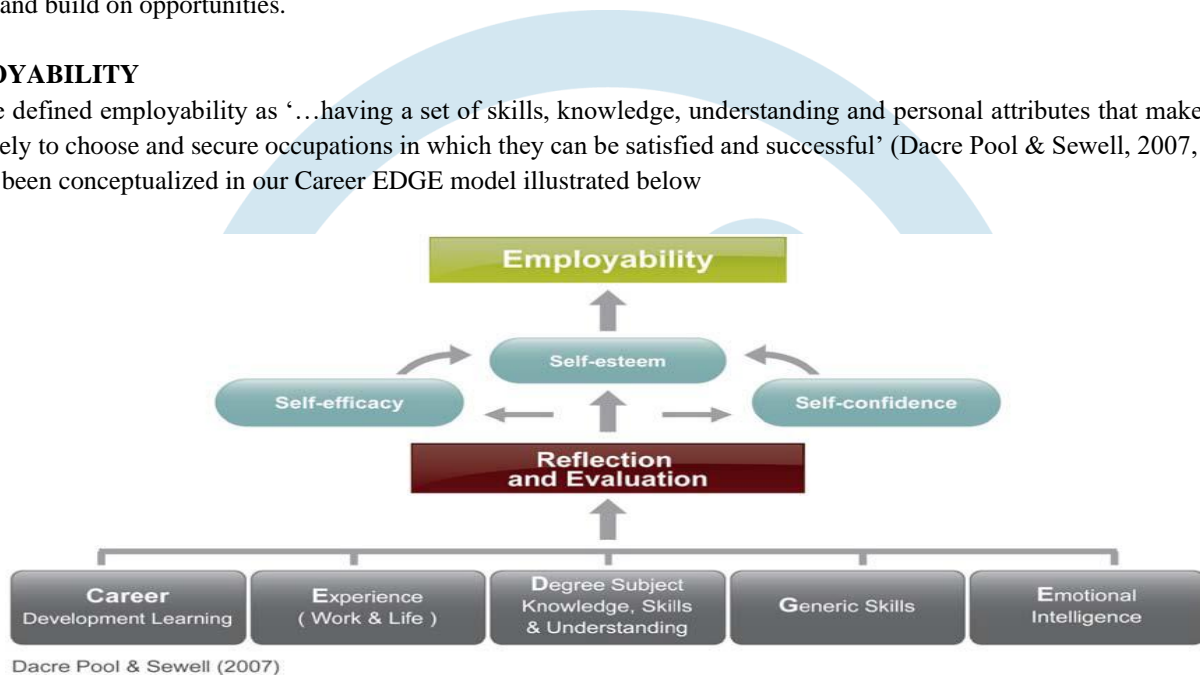


FIGURE 1 – CAREER EDGE - THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF GRADUATE

Career Development Learning
 Experience (work and life)
 Degree Subject Knowledge, Skills and Understanding
 Generic Skills
 Emotional Intelligence

EMPLOYABILITY

We have suggested that whilst at university all students need to engage with and be supported to develop the five elements on the lower level of the model and be given opportunities to reflect on and evaluate these experiences in order to reach their full employability potential.

EMPLOYABILITY, ENTERPRISE AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

There are a number of responses that HEIs can adopt in this respect. These key areas seem to have become important features of a strategic response to this challenge. One could be to embed, employability including ‘enterprise skills’ as a fundamental component of academic provision at all levels. This clearly makes sense as a strong case can be made of the need for all students and graduates to have access to opportunities that will enhance their employability. It is also possible to identify methods by which such an objective can be achieved: for example, through work placements, student projects with employers and career development related activities.

It would be important for ‘Teaching and Learning’ strategies to recognize that some staff will be less experienced and knowledgeable about adopting such approaches to the delivery of their curriculum. Therefore appropriate training opportunities need to be available together with ongoing support in order to maximize the success of this approach. Rae (2007) agrees that in order to implement such a strategy effectively, university staff will need ‘leadership, encouragement, inspiration and updating on current practices’

We believe these points of clarification are not simply an exercise in semantics. They are a serious attempt to help make sense of the terminology, in order to enable a consistent message to be given about employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship to staff, students and employers. It is especially important that managers, practitioners and other stakeholders involved in this process, recognize the importance of the distinctions between employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship.

DUTIES & RESPONSIBILITIES INCLUDE:

- Review/complete (where relevant) participatory asset based assessments with youth in target communities;
- Design and deliver entrepreneurship training programs that build on existing strengths and needs of youth businesses within target communities in collaboration with counterpart volunteers in other communities;
- Support the *Monitoring and Evaluation Framework the Diaspora for Development and Diaspora Youth Connect initiatives*;
- Provide distance mentorship support for young entrepreneurs for 2-3 months subsequent to the placement and;
- Mobilize support from Diaspora communities for young men and women from target communities through the *Jamaica Diaspora Connect portal*.

SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS:

Essential requirements

- Degree in Business, Economics, Marketing, Human Resources or related field and 3-5 years' experience working in an entrepreneurial environment or as owner/manager of a small business
- Experience in training, teaching or mentoring role
- Experience in management, marketing, market research and sales
- Experience in project evaluation and conducting monitoring activities
- Resourcefulness, strategic thinking, creative problem solving and basic financial management skills
- Proven ability to follow through on objectives and produce timely results with little supervision
- Excellent communication skills, verbal and written
- Basic computer skills and the ability to communicate effectively by email

THEMATIC APPROACHES

Enterprising behaviors, attributes and skills are highly interconnected. The following themes help to draw out essential requirements. Creativity and innovation Ideas led by enterprise and entrepreneurship are founded on the ability to think and act creatively.

Students should be able to:

- Generate multiple ideas, concepts, proposals, solutions, or arguments independently and/or collaboratively in response to identified problems and opportunities.
- Think speculatively, employing both convergent and divergent approaches to arrive at appropriate solutions.
- Delivery should include opportunities for:
 - creative thinking
 - Conceptualization
 - Innovation
 - Problem solving
- Understanding the value of intellectual property.

OPPORTUNITY RECOGNITION, CREATION AND EVALUATION:

Enterprise and entrepreneurship rest on recognizing real opportunities from a spectrum of possible ideas. Students should be able to:

- a) Identify, analyse and respond to relevant opportunities.
- b) Develop and produce multiple solutions to identified problems, shortfalls and similar challenges.
- c) Be flexible and adaptable, seeing alternative perspectives and offering a choice of solutions
- d) Review and evaluate multiple solutions in contexts that anticipate and accommodate change and contain elements of biguity, uncertainty and risk. Delivery should include opportunities to:
 - e) recognize or create multiple opportunities through actively making connections
 - f) Make connections as a result of problem solving, evaluating and assessing ideas, and iterative development strategies involving critique and enactment.
 - g) Develop relevant subject expertise, as well as awareness of contemporary issues, both of which should feature strongly in any strategies for recognizing opportunity. As enterprise and entrepreneurship are led by ideas, it is important for students to develop awareness of how to manage intellectual property issues.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

As well as working within teams, enterprise and entrepreneurship involves the ability to build effective relationships with others. Well developed interpersonal skills form the core of relationships both within and beyond the team. Students should be able to:

- Identify and respond to stakeholder needs.
- Communicate enthusiasm to 'sell' new ideas, concepts or solutions.
- Interact with others both to build trust for long-term relations and also to 'close the deal' to make things happen.
- Delivery should include opportunities for:
 - Building trust
 - Influencing
 - Networking
 - Negotiation
 - Stakeholder relations.

COMMUNICATION AND STRATEGY SKILLS

Successful enterprise and entrepreneurship depend upon clear and impactful communication to gather support. Clear communication and interaction with others, alongside effective planning, is a key tool for developing and implementing strategies. Students should be able to:

- ✚ Employ visualization and flexible planning skills to interact effectively with others, articulate ideas, and present information or outputs to audiences
- ✚ Draw on the views of others to inform the development or enhancement of their work
- ✚ Provide research and other evidence to suggest how ideas can be taken forward over time, taking changing environments and emerging technologies and concepts into account.
- ✚ Delivery should include opportunities for:
 - Thinking about and visualizing the future, scanning the environment, planning,
 - communicating, directing, and rationalizing
 - Building relationships, building trust, influencing, networking, negotiating, and reviewing progress
 - Multiple forms of communication for a range of audiences including new media technologies
 - Learning how intellectual property and issues of confidentiality impact on communication.

Key Findings:

- ✚ Employers are frustrated that HE courses do not meet their needs. They say that even when they serve on HEI committees, their views on course design are often disregarded.
- ✚ There is a lack of systematic practice to promote employability across HEIs (higher education institutions). Indeed, some HEIs do not see employability as an important part of their mission.
- ✚ Placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities are an effective way of providing university students with relevant employment skills, knowledge and awareness of employer culture.
- ✚ Some academics are concerned that employability measures diminish the academic integrity of higher education. However, there is no reason why this should be the case.

Recommendations:

- ✚ Funding mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework should be used as a lever to encourage HEIs to develop their students' employability skills and attributes.
- ✚ One of the most crucial measures HEIs can adopt to promote employability is a structured approach to placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities of significant duration. Some of the more vocational and business-orientated courses already make good use of these approaches, but humanities and social science courses should also make greater use of placements and internships.

Conclusions:

The requirements of employers are sometimes seen to be at odds with academia. However, a closer analysis of the sorts of things employers are looking for reveals that there are congruities between the abilities developed in higher education and those desired by employers (Harvey & Knight, 1996). The problem, when it arises, tends to be in the first few months of transition to work. Not only do employers expect more from graduates, they expect them to be effective more quickly. The transition is complex and is enhanced if student's tacit knowledge is honed. This is both a function of the awareness and application of the graduate and the opportunities afforded graduates by higher education.

The last five years have witnessed an accelerating pace of engagement with employability within the academy. Initial, piecemeal accommodation of employability through skills modules has developed into a more diverse array of opportunities. In some institutions, they have been developed into an integrated, holistic strategy, most recently linked to learning and teaching policy.

Indeed, it is this integrated approach and the clear emphasis on learning that has moved employability into centre stage. Nonetheless, many activities in institutions are pump-primed via various nationally funded initiatives. This is a problem for the development and maintenance of an integrated strategy. Although externally-funded initiatives can be extremely useful in kick-starting activity, they can be of limited impact if they are perceived as transitory or marginal.

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