

Title: Employability Skills: Maintaining relevance in Marketing Education, 2013

Employability is an important outcome of education, particularly with vocationally orientated degrees such as marketing. Supporting this, a wide range of literature discusses the skills that should be developed within students in general, and those on business and marketing courses in particular (Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 1999; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Zinser, 2003). However, with increasing competition for graduate placements and jobs, do the skills under discussion remain relevant to the conditions of the job market and still give students an ‘edge’? This study was undertaken to explore the meaning, purpose and relevance of employability skills, using qualitative and quantitative research amongst employers of marketing and business graduates, to examine how they rated the importance of the ‘employability skills’ that universities strive to develop in students and to identify other factors that are looked for in ‘would be successful’ candidates.

Keywords: Employability skills, work placement, course design

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'Employability skills' have been the subject of a considerable amount of research and the literature is rich with discussion in relation to the relative benefits to be gained for students in terms of improving their chances of securing employment relatively quickly after graduation.

Much of the early steer on what should be included came from the 1997 Dearing Report, which showed that employers wanted graduates to have a wide range of skills, such as those personal and cognitive capabilities that people use to carry out a wide range of tasks and activities, including the ability to communicate, to use information technology, to think critically, to use cognitive skills, together with an understanding of methodologies or practical skills needed for the practice of a profession. (Dearing, 1997). Dearing did not identify a definitive list of skills, but recommended four that they believed were key to the future success of graduates, whatever they intend to do in later life, namely...communication skills; numeracy; the use of information technology; and, learning how to learn (Dearing, 1997, 9.17).

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) website quotes Hillage and Pollard (1998) who define employability skill as being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work, and having the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment, echoing the lifelong focus identified by Dearing (1997). In terms of the skill sets required, Hillage and Pollard (1998) add that individual employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes someone possesses, along with the way in which an individual uses those skills and presents them to prospective employers, but also the context within which the individual is seeking work. They undertook their research for the Department for Education and Employment and focused on the issues relating to securing initial employment rather than long-term career success. As a result they summarised that employability consists of four main elements: employability assets, deployment (including career management & job search skills), presentation (job getting skills) and finally the students personal circumstances and external

factors. Other work undertaken around the same time sought to identify and prioritise the skills under discussion, resulting in many of the terms listed by Dearing, and others, becoming known as the ‘Generic Skills’. These were summarised by the Pedagogy of Employability Group (PEG), in their publication *Pedagogy of employability* (2006) for the first Learning & Employability series published by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and outlined in Figure 1 below.

Imagination /creativity	Good oral communication
Adaptability / flexibility	Communication in writing for varied purposes
Willingness to learn	Numeracy
Independent working / autonomy	Attention to detail
Working in a team	Time management
Ability to manage others	Assumption of responsibility and for making decisions
Ability to work under pressure	Planning coordination and organising ability

Figure 1: Generic skills as compiled by The Pedagogy of Employability Group (2006, pp 4)

A major focus for work in this area has been how to cluster these generic skills, a topic approached for example by Nabi and Begley (1998) who posited the three core areas: personal, communication and problem solving skills. Douc and Metzger (2007) extended this to five areas: academic skills, professional competencies, personal development, personal attributes and enterprise skills. The work of Raybould and Sheedy, (2005) was more prescriptive and identified that when hiring employers generally value good evidence of ‘ability to cope with uncertainty; ability to work under pressure; action-planning skills; communication skills; IT skills; proficiency in networking and team working; readiness to explore and create opportunities; self-confidence; self-management skills; and willingness to learn’ (pp.260). This echoes Dearing (1997) in highlighting the importance of a willingness to learn. Hilton (2008), reporting on future skills demands, interviewed Richard Murnane of Harvard University, who suggested a broad range of competences would remain valuable, including communication skills, the ability to solve ill-defined problems, creativity, teamwork and adaptability. However, looking more specifically at

marketing orientated graduates, Dacko (2006) concluded that despite the on-going discussion, these graduates were often under-prepped in skills and over-prepped in knowledge.

Modelling the shape of employability skills for course development

Building on the work detailed that sought to define the nature and importance of employability skills, a number of authors proposed systems and models to assist the introduction of skills teaching and learning into higher education. This included Bennett, Dunne & Carré (1999) who developed a model to guide course preparation dividing the issues into disciplinary content, disciplinary skills, workplace awareness, workplace experience and generic skills. Yorke and Knight (2004) added to this with their USEM model of employability, as detailed below, in which the skills needed fall into four interrelated areas:

- Understanding
- Skills
- Efficacy beliefs
- Metacognition

Another highly useful work in this area was undertaken by Pool and Sewell (2007) who, in proposing their own model - the CareerEDGE, reviewed a number of models that sought to broaden concepts of employability into areas of self-reflection and personal development and incorporated some of the widely used aspects of Law and Watts (1997) model, known as DOTS, which aims at facilitating the development of:

- **D**ecision learning – decision making skills;
- **O**pportunity awareness – knowing what work opportunities exist and what their requirements are;
- **T**ransition learning – including job searching and self presenting skills ; and
- **S**elf-awareness – in terms of interests, abilities, values, etc.

Pool and Sewell (2007) themselves proposed a more inclusive and metaphorical model in the CareerEDGE as a key to employability which they believe would provide greater clarity of information about what needs to be considered and included when planning programmes outlined in Figure 2 below. They bring the elements of career development learning, emotional intelligence (EI), reflection and evaluation and work experience into their model, and include in this the concept of helping students become more self-aware of what they are interested in, but also of how best to research the job market and how to present themselves effectively. Reflection and evaluation includes personal development planning (PDP) which they described as ‘*a highly appropriate vehicle for reflection and evaluation*’ (pp.285).

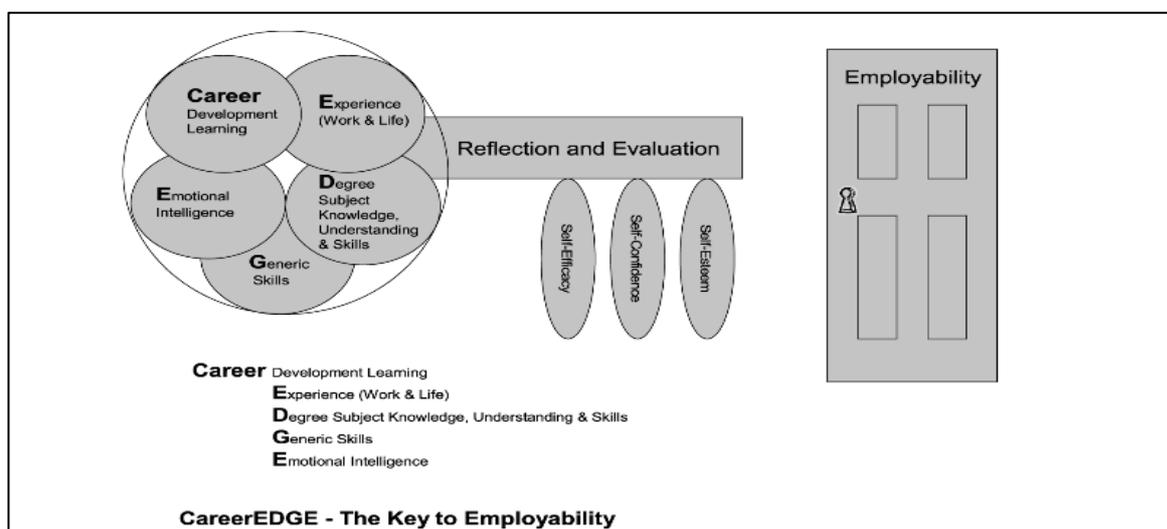


Figure 2: The key to employability (Pool & Sewell, 2007, pp.281)

PEG (2006) concur and cites that ‘the development of self-awareness is part of the rationale for the introduction of personal development planning [PDP]’ (pp.16) whilst highlighting a range of resources for the development of PDP, including Kneale’s context website (2005) from the University of Leeds, which aims to promote the use of case materials in Higher Education and employment. In addition, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK), (QAA, 2009), details that PDP should enable students to plan and take responsibility for their personal, career and academic development, and many other key personal skills that contribute to lifelong learning and employability. Reinforcing this, PDP has been embodied within subject benchmark

statements in terms of the skills and behaviours (QAA, 2007, pp.1) and they see the general role of business and management programmes to be 'threefold:

- study of organisations, their management and the changing external environment in which they operate;
- preparation for and development of a career in business and management;
- enhancement of lifelong learning skills and personal development to contribute to society at large.

'Preparation for business' is described as meaning 'the development of a range of specific business knowledge and skills, together with the improved self-awareness and personal development appropriate to graduate careers in business with the potential for management positions and to employability in general' (ibid, pp.2). In addition, they state that lifelong learning skills should be understood to include the development and enhancement of a range of general transferable intellectual and study skills, which, while being highly appropriate to a career in business and management, are not restricted to this (pp.2).

Building on this, the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2011) website states that PDP is 'a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development'.

It can be seen that employability has been recognised as an important part of the teaching and learning for higher education. Models and resources such as these help to stimulate thought and guide programme leaders to incorporate best practice into their courses and modules to enable students to better meet the demands of the world of employment.

Skills and their link to employability

Employability may have been driven by employer requirements, but, as Cox and King (2006) note, it is also an issue for students and therefore for universities. In response, numerous studies over the last fifteen years have sought to provide guidance on course and programme design, together with trying to identify how well this focus on 'skills' is equipping graduates for the world of work. For example, Douc and Metzger (2007) report that employers continue to complain of a lack of skills or practical experience. One common theme for gaining clearer identification of what skills are needed is to involve potential employers in the design of courses or individual modules. Interestingly, Mason, Williams and Cranmer, (2009) noted that structured work experience and employer participation in course design had a significant impact on graduate employment. Indeed this work notes that sandwich participation increased the probability of finding graduate level employment by 5%, versus those who did not undertake sandwich training, although this data is based on a 1996-1999 student cohort. A study by Nair and Mertova (2009) of Monash University sought to acquire updated employer feedback on the graduate skills and attributes that employers considered to be most important. One of their key findings was that results are per say difficult to generalise and that there were differences in perceptions of desirable attributes among different employers. They therefore recommended the need for a clearer understanding of essential generic and professional attributes sought by the workplace and that universities, in general, should work more closely with industry so that graduates were better equipped for employment

Wilton (2008), used the same 'Class of 99 Survey' as Mason, et al., (2009) but focussing on the business and management (B&M) field, noting the growth of this sector from 1985 to 2005. Citing Salter and Tapper (1994), Wilton underlined a shift from a cultural rationale for HE toward one 'which advances its economic function in the development of graduate employability' (pp.144). He notes that this shift is underpinned by employers' calls for the incorporation of greater work related training and experience into education and that the inclusion of 'explicit

skills training in UG degrees is likely to increase in the future’, reflecting the perceived necessity to ‘increase the supply of high skilled labour to ensure national competitiveness’ as desired by the government of the time (pp.144). Through this Wilton sought to evaluate the extent to which these skills were used in employment, with particular reference to those taught and used by students undertaking B&M related courses. He used a shortened list of generic skills and compared the importance placed on them whilst at university versus the degree to which they were used in subsequent employment. He identified that B&M graduates tended to report high levels of training in each of the areas with the exception of foreign language and advanced IT, and above average training in areas such as working in teams, spoken communication and basic computers. However he identified that this does not correspond to their importance in subsequent employment as demonstrated in Figure 3. The degrees were seen to have endowed a range of usable skills and provided a head start in the labour market. Team project exercises and giving frequent presentations were seen as being of particular benefit, but that more emphasis could be placed behind spoken communication and management skills. His data also showed a labour market advantage in respect of those graduates who had undertaken work placements in terms of dealing with responsibility, shaping attitudes to work and developing self-confidence.

Criteria	Used in current job ‘a lot’	Developed on 1999 course ‘a lot’
Spoken communications	1	5
Management skills	2	6
Ability to work in teams	3	3
Leadership skills	4	9
Basic computer literacy	5	4
Problem solving skills	6	7
Written communication	7	1
Numeracy skills	8	8
Creativity	9	10
Advanced IT or software skills	10	11
Entrepreneurial skills	11	13
Research skills	12	2
Foreign language skills	13	12

Figure 3: Comparison of Skills development versus usage amongst business and management graduates (Wilton, 2008, p153)

Overall, Wilton (2008) concluded that while there was a need for employer involvement, there could be an even greater benefit derived from engaging with recent graduates to ensure the

continued relevance of skills training. The importance of team-working and decision making had also been highlighted by Nabi and Bagley (1998), while Nair and Mertova (2009) went on to reinforce the requirement for employer feedback to maintain the relevance of skills training.

Andrade (2008), building on Douc and Metzger (2007), found that mature students also tended to rate the importance of skills less highly than employers. Knowledge transfer capabilities, abilities to change and adapt, and the ability to handle pressure were rated as highly important by over 70% of employers, but much lower by the students in research conducted by Andrade (2008), who concluded that more needed to be done by universities to underline the importance of these skills to students.

Provision of Skills

There appear to be a number of routes taken by universities to develop employability skills in students. Pool and Sewell (2007) believe their model gives a clear understanding of what needs to be included. Mason, Williams and Cranmer (2009) outline the opportunity to embed the skills into course and unit design, or to provide stand-alone units that can be 'bolted on' to existing courses. Baker and Henson (2010) detail successful dedicated programmes, while Stubbs and Keeping (2002) argue the benefits of embedded skills training. Meanwhile Cox and King (2006) discuss the involvement of employers in course design, but warn of the dangers of creating courses which are too employer specific. Working with professional bodies and accreditation is also viewed as a workable alternative but this can be criticised as overloading the syllabus (Stubbs & Keeping 2002). Using employers as guest speakers, setting role-play scenarios and research topics whose findings can be reported directly back to the employer are all considered by Cox and King (2006). Stubbs and Keeping (2002) also record the introduction of role play models, citing Kolb (1984) on the value of experiential learning. It is, however left to Cox and King (2006) to highlight the tension between formal education and vocational training. They propose that education develops critical and analytical thinking that solves problems, whereas training is

focussed on task specific skills, which can be aimed too closely at a particular employer or business sector requirement.

Career Services:

McIlveen and Pensiero (2008) presented a clear example of how career services within universities can explicitly address employability. In their Australian based research they suggest that a typical career service should provide career education and career counselling and other industry specific initiatives free of charge to students. Their research was undertaken as a part of the Australian Beyond Education project that attempts to map lifelong learning and lifelong employability and developed five key life stages labelled: Backpack-to-Briefcase; Economy-to-Business; Functional-to-Holistic; Corporate-to-Portfolio; and Beyond-60-with-Value-to-Add. McIlveen and Pensiero's (2008) work was related to the 'Backpack – to – Briefcase' stage representing the beginning of the graduates working life, where technical and personal skills obtained from university are complemented by the generic skills required by employers, such that a graduate possesses 'a suite of skills allowing a smooth and rapid transition into a productive employee' (pp.490). Their project established explicit skills workshops hosted by employees, to add credence to the discussions, supported with a mentoring network and reflective mentoring journal focused on establishing 'clear learning goals and reflective learning pertaining to employability skills' (pp.494). A highly successful part of this was seen to be the explicit focus on student networking with potential employers, particularly from the small to medium sized enterprises. Their system has been held up as a template for use by other universities in Australia. Baker and Henson (2010) detail their employability skills programme which brought a career specialist together with an academic to provide a cross-disciplinary 'Inside Employment' pilot programme to develop the provision of employability skills and career awareness in a research

intensive university context. Students volunteered for the extra-curricular project and worked in well briefed teams to explore the needs and rewards of developing a career within the financial services sector sufficient to make a competitive presentation to their peers. The experiential learning style not only improved student skills but also reinforced their importance. The success of the pilot has led to the programme being embedded into University's employability provision, expanding in the first instance to encompass non-for-profit career opportunities. They cite three main factors that they believe contributed to the pilot's success: its cross disciplinary approach, that helped different groups relate to it; the fact that it was extra-curricular, which ensured that there were no territorial issues over module credits or competition with disciplinary offerings; and, finally that it reflects the senior managements endeavours to create an environment for such projects to be received positively (2010, pp.10).

On reflection, the literature demonstrates that focusing on employability, whether as an integral part of course content or work experience has a positive effect on the students' ability to gain graduate level employment upon graduation. However, it can be seen that there is a continued need to ensure that the experiences gained are relevant both the to market conditions and the industry that the students are aiming for. To corroborate this, primary research was undertaken to understand what business and marketing employers are currently seeking.

Primary research and methodology

Building on the literature review and secondary research this study set out to identify which skills today's employers of marketing graduates value. The survey was distributed via LinkedIn and remained active for a period of two months. The sample was based upon non-probability convenience sampling, the sample frame being drawn from the researcher's professional network of colleagues working in the marketing arena. In total 150 individuals were invited to participate. The email invitation outlined the purpose of the survey and contained an email link to the survey, which was hosted on surveymonkey.com. In total 72 completed responses were received. An

initial screening question asked whether respondents were responsible for recruiting graduates, of which 70 % said that they were, giving a total of 49 usable surveys. The sampling plan targeted to achieve 100 useable responses, but as this was not possible, the results are not considered statistically representative but strongly indicative of current opinion.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was primarily based upon the ‘quality indicators’ survey devised by Douc and Metzger (2007) and subsequently used by Andrade (2008). It comprised 15 questions, split into two distinct sections. The first section included a detailed list of core professional competencies, business skills and personal attributes, commonly included under the general heading of employability skills, and, as with the former studies (Andrade, 2008; Douc & Metzger, 2007), employers were asked to rate the individual skills in terms of importance. The main method for measurement used in this particular survey was a rating scale, where a rating of 1 indicates low importance and 5 indicates high importance. With a simple, comprehensive comparative measurement for analysis, the data can be interpreted against past research. In the section of the survey, respondents were asked a number of ‘open’ qualitative questions to identify priorities and new areas of importance.

These included questions such as:

- ‘Which of the above Professional Competencies, Business Skills and Personal Attributes did you feel were the most important indicators of graduate quality and why? Please list all that apply’
- In addition to the attributes described above, do you look for any other qualities in a new graduate? Please specify what these are and why they are important.
- Do you think that students should have a stronger understanding of Ethical Issues and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)? If yes, how do you think this should manifest itself to you?
- Do you think that relevant work experience helps? If yes please explain why.

All responses were anonymous but the survey included two questions - the respondent's industrial area and their job title - to help classify, segment and analyses data further. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1.

Findings from employers

The results are broken down into two main areas. First, the statistical results from the skills rating scales and cumulative mean average for each of the three skills categories, professional competencies, business skills and personal attributes in terms of their importance in getting the first job. Secondly, theme analysis of the open answers to the qualitative questions is provided.

Professional Competencies (Table 1): Communication skills (both verbal and written) were almost universally thought to be of great importance, closely followed by ability to apply knowledge, logical thinking and critical analysis. By contrast, academic excellence was seen as least important, although none of the respondents actually rated it at low as '1'.

Table 1: Professional Competencies sought in new graduate recruits (1=Low/5=High Importance)

Qu	Detail	Rating Average
1	COMMUNICATION SKILLS: Able to express clearly one's thoughts & information both verbally and in writing	4.71
2	ABILITY TO APPLY KNOWLEDGE: Able to transfer theoretical concepts to real life	4.24
3	LOGICAL THINKING: Thinks logically	4.24
4	COMPUTER PROFICIENCY: Able to generate professional spread sheets, graphs, flowcharts, documents & presentations	3.47
5	CRITICAL ANALYSIS: Able to examine a problem in detail & explain one's point of view about it	4.12
6	RESEARCH SKILLS: Able to research independently & interpret data	3.82
7	ADAPT TO CHANGE: Able to adapt ideas and behaviour to meet new challenges	4.12
8	ABILITY TO HANDLE PRESSURE: Able to deal successfully with pressure	4.06
9	ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: Achieved high grades in one's studies	2.94

Business Skills (Table 2): In terms of what is sought in new graduate recruits, respondents thought that ‘problem solving’ and the ‘overall quality of work’ as being of greatest importance, with teamwork, time management, and initiative rating very highly too.

Table 2: Business Skills sought in new graduate recruits (1=Low/5=High Importance)

Qu	Detail	Rating Average
1	PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS: Ability to critically assess a problem & devise a plan of action for its solution	4.35
2	LEADERSHIP SKILLS: Ability to influence/inspire others in ways that enhance their productivity and satisfaction	3.12
3	PLANNING AND ORGANISING: Ability to plan and arrange activities effectively	3.82
4	TEAMWORK: Ability to work in a team to achieve the team's objectives	4.12
5	PRESENTATION SKILLS: Ability to give a presentation in front of an audience	3.71
6	TIME MANAGEMENT: Ability to arrange activities on time or as scheduled	4.29
7	ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT: Ability to organise & manage a business undertaking & spot new opportunities	3.12
8	INITIATIVE: Ability to generate alternative and innovative ideas	4.18
9	OVERALL QUALITY OF WORK: Ability to accomplish assignments effectively	4.35

Personal Attributes (Table 3): of those sought in new graduate recruits, respondents rated enthusiasm of key importance, followed by self-motivation, maturity, and flexibility and adaptability, as detailed below.

Table 3: Personal Attributes sought in new graduate recruits (1=Low/5=High Importance)

Qu	Detail	Rating Average
1	ENTHUSIASM: Intense interest in work	4.53
2	SELF CONFIDENCE: Confidence in one's abilities	3.53
3	SELF RELIANCE/INDEPENDENCE: Reliance on one's own judgement, abilities, etc.	3.29
4	CREATIVITY: Inventiveness, creative ability	3.82
5	SELF MOTIVATION: Able to motivate oneself	4.24
6	MATURITY: the quality of being fully developed, not childish	4.18
7	FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY: Able to adjust to change	4.00
8	ATTENDANCE/PUNCTUALITY: Being observant of an appointed time frame	3.94
9	WILLINGNESS TO LEARN: Commitment to further study	3.94

Respondents were then asked to reconsider the list of eighteen criteria listed above and identify any attributes that stand out as being more important than the others. *Self-motivation, enthusiasm, willingness to learn, and willingness to become part of the team and fit in with the working environment,* were cited many times as being the greatest importance. One respondent noted:

“The job requires an ability to fit in with a motivated team, working for common goals and the individual to be self-motivated but tempered with the intelligence to know when to ask for guidance” Director, Insurance

Respondents were also asked whether there were any other attributes that they might look for in new graduates. Sixty-five percent said ‘yes’. Comments fell into two distinct areas: first related to the degree of knowledge a student had bothered to acquire about the company that they were being interviewed by and their motivation for wanting to work there:

“Knowledge of my company, knowledge of my industry” Marketing Consultant

“Interest in my business” Director, Marketing

“I usually examine their motives for being here and involved in the work. Some people inhabit moral high ground and then see a charity as the perfect place to take a look down at others”. CEO, Charity

Secondly, and a more difficult factor for universities to embed in any way – the simple fact of personality.

“Midnight rule - if we are still sitting round a table, whether for work or socially, do I still want to be in their company?” Planning Director, Marketing

“We are likely to find ourselves working long pressured hours. We will spend a lot of time together. We need to be able to stand each other or life will be hell” Marketing Consultant

“Being personable and appearing easy to work with” Management Consultant

“I also look for emotional intelligence, particularly in people coming for marketing roles” Services & Outsourcing, Head of Brand

In exploring other issues that might be considered, respondents were asked if they thought students should have an understanding of ethical issues and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility). Sixty-five percent said no. Those that went onto answer how an understanding of

ethical issues and CSR might manifest itself were in the minority but they raised some interesting comments:

“They should be trustworthy and ethical themselves”, Marketing Consultant

“It is almost impossible to determine whether an individual has genuine understanding of ethical issues both generally or otherwise and, most importantly, the strength of character to apply said ethics to their work and life. However, high ethical standards are essential in any business involved with controlling/ managing financial aspects of individuals or businesses”, Insurance, Director

Respondents were also asked whether they thought that work experience was important. This received ninety percent agreement, so it can be seen to be very important and reflects the findings from past research, as outlined in the literature review. Respondents were asked to elaborate, with some mentioning that willingness to undertake a placement showed keenness and a true/genuine interest in their field:

“Relevant work experience gives a candidate the 'edge'. It means they have had some experience of the post they are applying for, and have decided they are suited to it, and therefore are not wasting your time.” Manager, Education/Training

“It just gives them the edge in the interview. I know they already understand the work and therefore their passion and enthusiasm is not made up” Marketing Consultant

“Yes - in a tough market it's often the only differentiator” Director, Executive Search

Others said that it enabled them to develop, articulate and demonstrate many of the skills listed under personal attributes. One respondent outlined that it was increasingly important because employers do not want to ‘waste time training’.

“The graduate needs to be able to bring examples of applying their knowledge and skills to real world problems, which requires work experience. This can come in many forms however” Management Consultant

“It is important because graduates tend to lack some of the qualities reported in Q7. Work experience would help them to gain some of them gradually” Manager, Advertising

Conclusion

It can be seen that there are a great number of skills that are encompassed within the phrase 'Employability Skills' and that there is no perfect method for nurturing these within graduates as they undertake their university education. The CareerEdge (Pool & Sewell, 2007) certainly provides a solid framework around which to formulate programmes to try and ensure that they cover all of the requirements. In addition the QAA benchmark statements provide a good way to reflect the generic skills whilst tailoring them to the subject area of interest.

There is evidence that embedding skills rather than providing them as standalone modules is a stronger way forward, as it provides the ability to reflect a multitude of the more subtle personal skills rather than just honing specific business competencies. However, the evidence of Baker and Henson (2010) and Stubbs and Keeping, (2002) shows that devising modules around experiential learning combined with reflective techniques is a positive way to bring out required business skills and professional competencies. Professional accreditation is seen as important but universities need to be careful not to overload modules or design the course too closely to one specific employer's needs. However, the involvement of employers with assignments and research topics, or as guest speakers, is to be encouraged.

Primary research indicated a number of areas that are of current importance to employers, with communication skills being seen as the most important professional competency. Problem solving and overall quality of work are important business skills and enthusiasm is the most important personal attribute. When looking at all skills equally it was the personal attributes that were of greatest importance, with employers looking for self-confidence, self-motivation, maturity, and willingness to learn alongside the continued need for good communications skills. The order of priority identified from this research differs slightly from previous research that used the same survey elements, reinforcing Wilton (2008) and highlighting the need to ensure

continued relevance of employability skills training by involving recent graduates and current employers.

However, reflecting the literature, work experience was identified as key, with over ninety percent of respondents saying that it gave candidates ‘the edge’ over others, that it showed they had an interest in their industry, that it helped students develop, and then articulate, many of the personal attributes that are so highly valued. Skills remain of key importance to employers and it is imperative to not only ensure their continued development in the curriculum but also that students become more explicitly aware of their significance and their application within the real world.

When asked if an understanding of the modern business issues around ethics and CSR were important to employers, around two thirds said no. Despite this it is unlikely that future managers could afford not to have a strong grounding in ethics and CSR.

Finally, employers said that they look for two things when differentiating candidates: first the level of knowledge that the graduate has about the company or industry and their motivation for wanting to work within it, and second, the element of personality. In other words, does the interviewer think that they would be able to get on with the person and would they contribute positively to their team? The importance of the former is something that is already built into many module assessments, teaching students how to research relevant details and questions about a company and its industry in preparation for interview. The latter is more difficult to develop and change and is possibly a topic for further research.

The limitations of this study are primarily related to the sample size, which whilst producing results that are indicative the general marketing and business area, and therefore generalizable, are not able to be segmented in any way to identify variations between sectors.

Recommendations

Employability skills remain a priority, particularly within vocational courses such as marketing and business, however it is important that these are regularly reviewed to ensure their continued relevance to the marketplace. Employer panels are suggested through the research as a way to achieve this. However, experience within the case studies explored in the business and management field indicates these are difficult to develop at a course or programme level as industrialists often find the time commitment unacceptable in light of limited tangible benefits to them. In addition, if the orientation is too closely matched to a single employer the overall education and learning may become limited. At the university-wide level such initiatives can develop but with limited input into any particular course or programme. The research would indicate that the concept of a panel is sound but it also highlights that it is not their knowledge that should be sought, but how they use it and what they look for in others. Potentially a route forward for this is to make greater use of the new and part-time academics who are still working and in touch with industry rather than looking for high profile industrial names. There are many such individuals and they can bring a generic view to employer requirements overlaid with an interest and understanding of students, rather than a company specific one. In addition, inviting graduate alumni to return and present to students on how they 'got their job' or 'what they look for in their own new recruits' can be highly relevant, with advice coming from successful members of the students own peer group.

However, links to individual companies remains important and students can benefit from a strong relationship with an organisation that can feed into a module and its assessment design to give students a real world case study to work on. The research indicates that working with small to medium sized enterprises (SME's), non-for-profits or public sector organisations can provide students with good opportunities to develop a broad range of insights and could even provide mentoring opportunities. In addition, inviting organisations to participate in a live case study, brief students in the details of the case around which their assignment is undertaken can have

multiple benefits. Students see the relevance of their teaching and learning to the wider world; they present their recommendations back to the organisation and hear relevant real world feedback. Live case studies are more easily included on resumes, helping students articulate skills they have developed or become more aware of. Committed organisations can provide letters of reference for students undertaking the case study assignment, again adding an edge to their applications for work.

In terms of work experience and placements, the research clearly underlines the importance of this area and there is wide evidence of placement and career support across universities. However, where placement is not a compulsory part of the course, uptake remains small, despite the fact that both the literature and primary study indicate that work experience is a primary differentiator in the race to gain employment following graduation. If the work does not appeal to students then further research is needed to identify how to shape suitable placements to support them but also to ensure that the students fully understand the depth of a role and how the experience will enhance their future.

If time is an issue and students remain keen to finish their degrees quickly then research should be undertaken to identify alternative means to deliver the skills equivalent of placement. This might, for instance, be by developing a local SME network, such as that explored in the Australian Beyond Education project, where individual students are able to undertake a different sort of 'placement', working with organisations, say, one day a week across a semester, or maybe for just a few days each month, to help with a project that could benefit from a marketing perspective and receive essential mentoring themselves. This increased flexibility could be mutually beneficial to all parties.

A further reason could be that a high percentage of students already have some form of part time work that they are undertaking to supplement their incomes whilst at university. Often these are viewed as a necessary evil, being a means to an end and having the potential to prevent the

student concentrating on their studies properly. As a result, time is not often taken to explore exactly what it is that students may be doing in their current part-time work. It is recommended therefore that some further research be done in this area to understand the types of part time work undertaken by students and the skills that are being developed in that context. In this way it may be possible to help students become more aware of the generic skills that they are developing, moving them to a more explicit understanding of what they are doing on a day-to-day basis and improve their ability to articulate the application of skills when crafting their CV's or in interviews.

Employer relevance remains important, therefore it is recommended that more use should be made of contacts across the marketing provision to help build content, projects and assessment thereby enable students to benefit from a greater degree of experiential & reflective learning experiences. Regular feedback is essential to ensure the continued relevance of what is taught and how.

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Appendices:

Appendix 2: Quality indicators for Graduates (Douc and Metzger, 2007, pp. 635)

Appendix 1: Draft survey

Paper based draft of the surveymonkey.com questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete my survey. It will form the final part of my PGCHE (Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education). The aim is to clarify what 'skills' are looked for by employers when interviewing graduates for marketing and business roles. The survey lists a number of commonly cited skills that I would ask you to rate in terms of importance, plus room for you to add others skills or attributes that you know you look for. The results will remain confidential but will be fed back into course and curriculum design with the aim of ensuring that graduate education continues to be tailored to meet business requirements. Many thanks, Beverly

1. Your Industry:

2. Job Title:

3. Are you responsible for recruiting graduates?

- YES
 NO

4. Thinking of the Professional Competencies that you seek in new graduate recruits, please rate how important you think each of the following is in getting that first job.
1 = Low Importance and 5 = High Importance.

	1 Low	2	3	4	5 High
COMMUNICATION SKILLS: Able to express clearly one's thoughts and information both verbally and in writing	<input type="radio"/>				
ABILITY TO APPLY KNOWLEDGE: Able to transfer theoretical concepts to real life	<input type="radio"/>				
LOGICAL THINKING: Thinks logically	<input type="radio"/>				
COMPUTER PROFICIENCY: Able to generate professional spreadsheets, graphs, flowcharts, documents & presentations	<input type="radio"/>				
CRITICAL ANALYSIS: Able to examine a problem in detail and explain one's point of view about it	<input type="radio"/>				
RESEARCH SKILLS: Able to research independently & interpret data	<input type="radio"/>				
ADAPT TO CHANGE: Able to adapt ideas and behaviour to meet new challenges	<input type="radio"/>				
ABILITY TO HANDLE PRESSURE: Able to deal successfully with pressure	<input type="radio"/>				
ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: Achieved high grades in one's studies	<input type="radio"/>				

5. Thinking of the Business Skills that you seek in new graduate recruits, please rate how important you think each of the following is in getting that first job.
1 = Low Importance and 5 = High Importance.

	1 Low	2	3	4	5 High
PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS: Ability to critically assess a problem & devise a plan of action for its solution	<input type="radio"/>				
LEADERSHIP SKILLS: Ability to influence/inspire others in ways that enhance their productivity and satisfaction	<input type="radio"/>				
PLANNING AND ORGANISING: Ability to plan and arrange activities effectively	<input type="radio"/>				
TEAMWORK: Ability to work in a team to achieve the team's objectives	<input type="radio"/>				
PRESENTATION SKILLS: Ability to give a presentation in front of an audience	<input type="radio"/>				
TIME MANAGEMENT: Ability to arrange activities on time or as scheduled	<input type="radio"/>				
ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT: Ability to organise & manage a business undertaking & spot new opportunities	<input type="radio"/>				
INITIATIVE: Ability to generate alternative and innovative ideas	<input type="radio"/>				
OVERALL QUALITY OF WORK: Ability to accomplish assignments effectively	<input type="radio"/>				

6. **Thinking of the Personal Attributes that you seek in new graduate recruits, please rate how important you think each of the following is in getting that first job. 1 = Low Importance and 5 = High Importance.**

	1 Low	2	3	4	5 High
ENTHUSIASM: Intense interest in work	<input type="radio"/>				
SELF CONFIDENCE: Confidence in one's abilities	<input type="radio"/>				
SELF RELIANCE/INDEPENDENCE: Reliance on one's own judgement, abilities, etc	<input type="radio"/>				
CREATIVITY: Inventiveness, creative ability	<input type="radio"/>				
SELF MOTIVATION: Able to motivate oneself	<input type="radio"/>				
MATURITY: the quality of being fully developed, not childish	<input type="radio"/>				
FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY: Able to adjust to change	<input type="radio"/>				
ATTENDANCE/PUNCTUALITY: Being observant of an appointed time frame	<input type="radio"/>				
WILLINGNESS TO LEARN: Commitment to further study	<input type="radio"/>				

7. **Which of the above Professional Competencies, Business Skills and Personal Attributes did you feel were the most important indicators of graduate quality and why? Please list all that apply.**

8. In addition to the attributes described above, do you look for any other qualities in a new graduate? If YES please go to Q9. If NO please go on to Q10.

YES

NO

9. In addition to the attributes described above, do you look for any other qualities in a new graduate? Please specify what these are and why they are important.

10. Do you think that students should have a stronger understanding of Ethical Issues and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)? If YES please go to Q11. If NO please go on to Q12.

YES

NO

11. Do you think that students should have a stronger understanding of Ethical Issues and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility). If yes, how do you think this should manifest itself to you?

12. Do you think that relevant work experience is important? If YES please go to Q13. If NO please go on to Q14.

YES

NO

13. Do you think that relevant work experience helps? If yes please explain why

14. Would you be willing to elaborate on your answers above in a short email or telephone interview?

- YES
- NO

15. If you are happy to be interviewed please leave me your email address in the box below, thank you :-)

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

If you have any questions about the work please contact me on xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.ac.uk