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# in Teaching and Learning for Employability (e3i)

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Appendix 3: Report on University Standing Panel Chairs' Perceptions of the Employability Dimensions of the Validation Process, June 2007.

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# Measuring Engagement with the Employability Agenda at Sheffield Hallam University: 3 University Standing Panel Chairs Experiences

## Executive Summary

### Background

Sheffield Hallam University's Employability CETL (e3i) aims to promote awareness of, and engagement with, the employability agenda, and enhance the University's commitment to employability. In order to achieve these aims, a number of core evaluation questions are being addressed. As part of this process, the Director of the e3i CETL undertook semi-structured interviews with three University Standing Panel (USP) chairs in order to gauge current levels of engagement with the initiative and the processes of validation. The following report presents the findings from these interviews.

### Evidencing Employability-Emphasis within Submission Documents

Sheffield Hallam University academic programmes are revalidated every 6 years in order to maintain standards and gauge compatibility with the institutions core values. In order to meet University requirements course planning teams are required to submit programme proposals using a standardised template, which are then assessed by University Standing Panels. Course submission documents revealed contrasting levels of engagement with the employability initiative, both at subject and academic level. At undergraduate level, there was a greater awareness of, and emphasis on employability, particularly within health related courses. An awareness of the e3i CETL was also apparent. However, explicit reference to the University's Employability Framework was limited. Engagement with employability was less consistent at post-graduate level. It was very *rare* for course leaders to refer directly to SHU's Employability Framework and there was little evidence of an increased 'championing' of employability. There was a stable emphasis on employability within *collaborative* programmes and external factors affected levels of engagement. Cultural expectations were variable and collaborative partners were often unfamiliar with concepts such as personal development planning (PDP) and the importance of Learning and Teaching Assessment more generally.

### Defining and Developing Employability/Describing Engagement

Contrasting interpretations of employability were evident amongst different subject groups within undergraduate, postgraduate and collaborative programmes. These were reflected in the irregular emphasis which course planning teams placed upon the different facets of the concept within submission documents. Some courses focused exclusively on equipping students to undertake specific professional roles, whilst others concentrated on the development of transferable skills.

### Innovative Practice

There was *limited* evidence of an increase in innovative practice to support the development of student employability. However, there were some positive examples. Course leaders from the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing had collaborated with NHS employers to assess the likely impact of the remodelling of professional healthcare roles upon student training requirements. Elsewhere, examples of innovative practice included the enrolment of students from non-traditional backgrounds and the development of a programme, which invited students to develop their own agendas for learning.

## **Genuine and Nominal Engagement**

When using validation documentation to assess levels of engagement with the employability agenda it is necessary to differentiate between genuine engagement and that which is expressed as a means of satisfying University requirements. Several postgraduate courses were aligned to professional bodies and these were inclined to embrace the employability agenda more fully. Moreover, key employability components were implicit within collaborative programmes course proposals. However, the format of the validation template encouraged a superficial tick box approach. Tokenism within undergraduate programmes was limited.

## **Work-Based Learning**

The integration of work based learning opportunities into course curricula, provides a key plank in the e3i CETL's strategy to promote student employability. Work-based learning was increasingly incorporated into postgraduate programmes, particularly within The Faculty of Health and Well-being. For collaborative programmes the process was less linear- work based learning was increasingly evident within some subject areas, however, less time was available for employer networking and employer forums were less common. Fewer students were opting to undertake work placements within collaborative programmes, despite their value being stressed at University open days. The increased integration of work placements into undergraduate student programmes would address the employability agenda. However, it was not always easy to find placements for large cohorts of students.

## **Validation Events**

USP Chairs can play a pivotal role in raising course planning teams' awareness of and engagement with the employability agenda. Course submission documents are screened for their suitability and conditions may be attached to the approval of course programmes. The USP chairs for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, both perceived a growing interest in the employability agenda, at validation events. At undergraduate level, this was evident in USP chairs approach to course documentation and employability questions. USP chairs for postgraduate programmes recognised the role of employability in recruiting students and this had fostered a growing interest in this area. The addition of an employability section to the University's course validation template, and the formal recognition of employability as a core University value had impacted similarly. However, it was atypical to allocate a specific time to address employability issues during validation events.

## **Prompts**

Participants gave a mixed-response to the idea of a set of employability prompts to inform the assessment process. Measures could be taken to increase panel member's understanding and address of employability, including the issue and use of a tightly defined script. However, this should not constrain the questioning process and may be more relevant to increasing understanding of learner autonomy, as employability is a concept grasped more intuitively. From the perspective of the USP chair for collaborative programmes, USP chairs' initial emphasis on gathering evidence under the validation templates specific headings, which had accompanied the inception of the University's CETLs, had now been replaced by a more sophisticated holistic approach.

## **Conditions**

Employability conditions were rarely attached to the ratification of course programmes and doing so might reverse the integrative approach to validation which had developed in recent years.

# Measuring Engagement with the Employability Agenda at Sheffield Hallam University: 3 University Standing Panel Chairs Experiences

## 1. Background

The E3i CETL aims to promote awareness of, and engagement with, the employability agenda, and enhance the University's commitment to employability. In order to achieve these aims, a number of core evaluation questions are being addressed. As part of this process, the Director of the e3i CETL undertook semi-structured interviews with three University Standing Panel (USP) chairs in order to gauge current levels of engagement with the initiative and the processes of validation. Participants were purposively sampled and were chosen for their experience in validating programmes at different academic levels within the university. Each had contrasting levels of experience of undertaking the USP role. Participants gave their consent for the interviews to be recorded. Participant's quotes are encased with speech marks and presented in *italics*. Details from the interviews have been typed up (although a full transcript of the interviews was not carried out), to provide a structured summary of the interview. Data has been analysed by the e3i Research Team. The following report presents the findings from these interviews.

## 2. Evidencing Employability-Emphasis within Submission Documents

Sheffield Hallam University academic programmes are revalidated every 6 years in order to maintain standards and gauge compatibility with the institutions core values. In order to meet University requirements, course planning teams are required to submit programme proposals using a standardised template, which are then assessed by University Standing Panels. The template includes a new section which invites the applicant to explain how the course addresses the development of student employability. Other sections of the template also present opportunities to evidence this, by specifically addressing areas included within the University's Employability Framework (for example, personal development planning). In order to gauge the momentum of the employability initiative, USP chairs were asked whether they had observed an increased emphasis on employability within submission documents.

Contrasting levels of engagement with the employability initiative were evident, both at subject and academic level: At undergraduate level there was an increased emphasis on the employability agenda. An awareness of the e3i CETL was also apparent, but it was felt that people might be less aware of "*how that unpacks in terms of detail*". Employability was addressed in health related courses, partly because these awards gave students licence to practice and courses are heavily regulated. However, despite addressing employability, there was doubt that this explicitly met the University's Employability Framework. Indeed, within the submission documents, explicit reference to the University's Employability Framework was limited. However, this did not mean that employability was not fully addressed.

Engagement with the employability agenda was less consistent at post-graduate level, despite the validation template's new employability section being highlighted to course leaders, during preliminary meetings that preceded the submission of course proposals. It was very *rare* for course leaders to refer directly to SHU's Employability Framework within these documents or to convey that they had read it. Moreover, there was little evidence of an increased 'championing' of employability. However, this omission often reflected a wider inadequacy in the completion of particular documents, rather than relating specifically to employability. The participant cast a word of caution regarding their ability to comment accurately on current levels of engagement-the relatively recent launch of the initiative was

acknowledged, and it would be easier to gauge levels of engagement, when each of the current academic year's validation documents had been submitted.

External factors affected levels of engagement within collaborative programmes. Cultural expectations were variable and collaborative partners were often unfamiliar with concepts such as personal development planning (PDP) and the importance of Learning, Teaching and Assessment. However, these differences had resulted in fruitful discussion, and concepts such as student self-direction and reflection had been positively received. Overall, there hadn't been an increased emphasis upon employability within the University's *collaborative* programmes submission documents. However, it was perceived that emphasis had increased within programmes provided by The Faculty of Health and Wellbeing. More generally, employability was embedded in the majority of the University's *non-collaborative* programmes, and the University's focus on e3i CETL and LTA initiatives had highlighted this as an area that needed to be addressed within validation documentation.

## 2.1 Defining and Developing Employability

It is widely acknowledged that the concept of employability is multifaceted, contestable and negotiable (see Yorke, M, 2006). Contrasting interpretations of employability amongst different subject groups were evident within undergraduate, postgraduate and collaborative programmes. At undergraduate level the "*employability agenda*" was particularly evident in health related courses such as nursing, midwifery, and occupational therapy. In contrast, it was felt that courses with a less obvious vocational element, and ones unaffected by professional statutory body constraints, for example History and English, would address employability, *but in a different way* to the vocational health subjects. Law awards illustrated the middle ground, for example, by introducing two new work-based learning modules into the curriculum.

Similar constructs of employability were recognised by the USP chair for collaborative programmes. Some courses focused exclusively on equipping students to undertake specific professional roles, others explored the range of available employment options and focused on the development of transferable skills. Sports, Science, Engineering and Construction students were all likely to encounter difficulty in finding employment in a related occupational field and this was reflected in student expectations and the experience of staff in exploring alternative options. Staff found it more difficult to identify transferable skills in some subject areas, and this affected their willingness to discuss employment prospects. Interestingly, some employers and academics had expressed conflicting opinions regarding employability and debated whether credit should be granted for undertaking employment, or reserved for more traditionally recognised modes of learning.

At post-graduate level it was unclear whether every course-planning team had fully *understood* the employability framework, and definitions of the concept tended to be narrow, emphasising the strengths of a particular course in equipping students to obtain a job.

## 2.2 Describing Engagement

Contrasting understandings of employability were reflected in the irregular emphasis which course planning teams placed upon the different facets of the concept within submission documents. This variation was present within undergraduate and postgraduate level programmes. The USP chair for undergraduate programmes commented on the substantial variation in levels of employer input in course planning. In health related courses for example, employer input is viewed almost as a prerequisite. In other cases, the participant couldn't recollect a clear sense of whether employers had engaged in the planning process. This variation extended further into curriculum design. The participant raised concern over

the extent to which employability is actually designed into the central curriculum rather than being located peripherally. They illustrated this point by discussing two new modules in Law that have been designed to replicate the experience students' gain through The Law Clinic *The Law Clinic is a fully-fledged solicitors' practice where students work under supervision, on real-life cases* (Sheffield Hallam University, 2007a). As the Law Clinic is only available to a restricted number of students, the new modules aimed to replicate the experience for a wider number of students. This is clearly an example of employability being situated at the heart of curriculum design, but to what extent is this sort of approach central to other courses? Indeed, is it even practicable to take such an approach in other subject areas? The participant expressed concern that the employability agenda might become disproportionately focused on PDP. Although there were cases where PDP had been granted sufficient consideration (for example, the participant discussed one example which had been "*brilliantly integrated into the curriculum*", clearly showing how students would engage with it and how it would address employability), there were also examples where this was not the case. Indeed, it was sometimes necessary to question whether PDP would actually work, whether it was merely bolted on to existing modules, and whether students would actually engage with the process.

At postgraduate level, SHU's Faculty of Health and Well-being were currently engaged in a large-scale retraining programme of health professionals, which incorporated due emphasis upon the development of core skills and professional development. This can partly be seen as a response to the current changes taking place more broadly within Healthcare (no further specifics given). Less emphasis tended to be placed upon the development of core skills within professional areas that were perceived to be more stable, such as engineering and mathematics.

Collaborative programme teams' contrasting definitions of employability have been acknowledged previously (see section 2.1 '*Defining and Developing Employability*'). Within course submission documents, learner autonomy was particularly emphasised. 'Skills' and enterprise also featured. PDP had become much more evident within collaborative post-graduate programmes recently, partly due to its instigation as a mandatory requirement. Career management was not evident and some students were critical of the levels of support for this area, particularly towards the culmination of their courses.

### **2.3 Innovative Practice**

SHU's Employability Framework builds on and integrates current and developing policies and strategies related to Key Skills, Learning from Work, Progress Files, Enterprise and Career Management (Sheffield Hallam University, 2007b). As testimony to this commitment the e3i CETL has financed a number of innovative projects, which promote development in these core areas. The CETL also seeks to identify pockets of good practice elsewhere within the University as a means of recognising excellence and developing its knowledge base. All three USP chairs felt that there was *limited* evidence of an increase in innovative practice to support the development of student employability. However, there were some positive examples: The USP chair for undergraduate programmes cited one area of innovative PDP practice where course leaders had: "*taken something that in the past was treated as an optional add on in some parts of the university, and in a very innovative way had made it part and parcel of the fabric of the curriculum*".

A further example of innovative practice was found in the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing. Course leaders had collaborated with NHS employers to assess the likely impact of the remodelling of professional healthcare roles upon student training requirements. This subtle engagement with the employability agenda was unlikely to be discernible within course submission documents and illustrates one of the limitations of using this type of data for assessment purposes. Elsewhere, examples of innovative practice included the enrolment



of students from non-traditional backgrounds and the development of a programme, which invited students to develop their own agendas for learning. The course encouraged self-reflection, autonomy and the development of skills necessary for “understanding employers”. Interestingly, the course had experienced some difficulties in recruiting students and it was felt that younger students might find this level of innovation and autonomy difficult to understand.

From the perspective of the USP chair for collaborative programmes, genuine engagement relied upon a ‘champion’ to drive the agenda. The value of an evolutionary approach to course development was also recognised. As part of the revalidation process, staff commonly developed new modules that failed to build on innovative practice and this ultimately led to its loss.

## **2.4 Genuine and Nominal Engagement**

When using validation documentation to assess levels of engagement with the employability initiative, it is necessary to differentiate between genuine engagement and that which is expressed as a means of satisfying University requirements. This presented USP chairs with a complex task and participants expressed contrasting views. The USP chair for undergraduate programmes found it difficult to comment on levels of engagement but felt reasonably comfortable that tokenism was limited. Interestingly, with the exception of PDP, it was hard to be tokenistic about elements of employability such as work based learning, as it was either a course component or otherwise.

However, written documentation did not always provide the best means of assessing the realities of everyday practice. From the perspective of the USP chair for collaborative programmes key employability components were implicit within collaborative programmes course proposals. However, the format of the validation template encouraged a superficial tick box approach. The participant cited the example of course planning teams copying and pasting sections of previously ratified submission documents into their own proposals, in order to satisfy validation requirements. Nominal engagement with the procedure was less common where employer input was prevalent:

*"I think if the rationale is about producing a person with a particular set of competencies at the end then I think it's a very serious planning process. I think if it's a re-validation of something that is perhaps not quite as employer led then, then it's jumping through hoops"*

The role of professional body accreditation in driving the employability agenda was evident at postgraduate level. Several postgraduate courses were aligned to professional bodies and these courses were inclined to embrace employability more fully, in order to match the increased interest shown by their professional bodies in this area. Consequently, course leaders had to satisfy two sets of benchmarks.

## **2.5 Work-Based Learning**

The integration of work based learning opportunities into course curricula, provides a key plank in the e3i CETL's strategy to promote student employability. However, there were inconsistent opportunities for work based learning at subject and academic level. Work-based learning was increasingly incorporated into postgraduate programmes, particularly within The Faculty of Health and Well-being. This was also beginning to increase within other Faculties: For example within the Faculty of Arts, Computing, Engineering and Sciences, the computing subject group were currently deciding whether to incorporate work placements into their programmes, and whether these should develop an ‘international flavour’.

Within collaborative programmes the process was less linear. Work based learning was increasingly evident within some subject areas (subject areas not specified). However, the changing focus of academic staff meant that less time was available for networking with employers, as staff increasingly pursued their research interests. Employer forums were also less common. Fewer students were opting to undertake work placements in some subject areas, despite their value being stressed at University open days. Several factors were thought to affect this, including student confidence, ethnic background, and the students living arrangements (i.e. whether they lived with their parents).

The USP chair for undergraduate programmes felt that the increased integration of work placements into course programmes would address the employability agenda. Placements may also be viewed as an important element by students themselves. The participant referred to comments made in the Student Experience Survey, by students from the Applied Social Science Programme. In the survey, students made negative comments about placements. This was particularly interesting because placements are not part of the Applied Social Science Programme. As the participant remarked, what are the students actually saying? Could it be inferred that they would actually like placements to be part of their learning experience? However, the participant raised an interesting point about balancing placements with capacity - it was not always easy to find placements for large cohorts of students.

### **3. Validation Events**

USP Chairs can play a pivotal role in raising course planning teams' awareness of and engagement with the employability agenda. Course submission documents are screened for their suitability and conditions may be attached to the approval of course programmes. To some extent, USP chairs' perceptions of teaching staffs engagement with the employability agenda will depend on the degree of significance that they attach to this themselves. In order to measure this, participants were asked if they had observed an increased emphasis on employability within validation meetings. Participants were also asked whether specific time was set-aside to address employability issues within validation meetings, whether employability conditions had been attached to the approval of course programmes and whether they felt that it would be beneficial to issue USP chairs with a series of employability prompts to inform the decision making process.

#### **3.1 Emphasis within Validation Events**

The USP chairs for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, both perceived a growing interest in the employability agenda, at validation events. At undergraduate level, this was evident in USP chairs approach to course documentation and employability questions. USP chairs for post graduate programs recognised the role of employability in recruiting students and this had fostered a growing interest in this area. The addition of an employability section to the University's course validation template, and the formal recognition of employability as a core University value had impacted similarly.

#### **3.2 Needs-Based Responses**

It was a-typical to allocate a specific time to address employability issues during validation events. At undergraduate level the inclusion of employability questions depended upon individual panel members identifying this as a requirement when reading submission documents. Panel members were asked to present the issues they would like to address and then the agenda for the validation event was structured around "clusters" which may relate, for example, to curriculum design or LTA work.

Similar processes were recognised by the USP chair for postgraduate programmes. The participant hadn't conceived employability as a *specific* issue prior to the interview and time was allocated to employability issues on a needs-only-basis. Individual sections of course documents were divided amongst USP chairs and 'flagged-up' when material was deemed inadequate. Satisfactory material was given positive written feedback.

### 3.3. Prompts

Participants gave a mixed response to the idea of a set of employability prompts to inform the assessment process. Somewhat conflictingly, the USP chair for undergraduate programmes felt that in many instances, panel members raised adequate questions, but was uncertain whether these addressed the employability agenda sufficiently:

*It is serendipitous whether [in the] cluster of issues raised there are questions that align with the employability agenda.*

Measures could be taken to increase panel members' understanding and address of employability, including the issue and use of a tightly defined script. However, this should not constrain the questioning process and may be more relevant to increasing understanding of learner autonomy, as employability is a concept grasped more intuitively.

The USP chair for postgraduate programmes felt that using a set of prompts to inform the assessment of one specific area would be problematic, as this would need to be mirrored for all sections of the document.

From the perspective of the USP chair for collaborative programmes, USP chairs' initial emphasis on gathering evidence under the validation templates specific headings, which had accompanied the inception of the University's CETLs, had now been replaced by a more sophisticated holistic approach. During the very early stages of the CETLs it had been extremely common for USP chairs to address their feedback under related headings such as employability and PDP. However, USP chairs no longer felt the need to search as intently for evidence under these headings and looked for a more integrative approach to the development of student learning and employability.

### 3.4 Conditions

Employability conditions were rarely attached to the ratification of course programmes. The USP chairs for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes were unable to recall any *specific* employability conditions or recommendations being made at recent events. However, the USP chair for postgraduate programmes did suggest that work-based learning was the most likely area to attract these. An explanation for the limited stipulation of conditions was offered by the USP chair for collaborative programmes. The participant felt that it would be difficult to attach employability conditions to course programmes as this would result in a reversal of the more integrative approach which had developed. However they did recall formulating one condition regarding careers advice to a fine-arts programme. The submission document which contained several rhetorical references had failed to specify the processes which would be undertaken to engage with this issue. However, further investigation revealed substantial engagement that had not been evidenced within the document. Again, this highlights limitations of using validation documents to measure levels of engagement with the employability agenda.

## References

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