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# The Chester Graduate/Undergraduate Employability Conference and Employability Strategy

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## Abstract

Enhancing the employability of students is central to national and institutional learning and teaching strategies. In the Department of Geography and Development Studies at the University of Chester this agenda is addressed through an approach which focuses mainly on curriculum content, student reflection and careers awareness. One aspect of the latter is the use of graduate/undergraduate employability conferences, at which alumni recount their 'stories' since leaving the Department. Student feedback suggests that these type of events can help to expand fairly restricted 'careers imaginations' evident on arrival at University and confirm the longer-term value of the programmes that are being studied.

## Introduction

Student employability is high on the learning and teaching agenda of UK universities who are increasingly under pressure to provide students that are prepared for work after graduating. Employability is, in practice, a difficult concept to define, but can be understood as 'a set of achievements, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations' (Little, 2003 in Gedye et al, 2004, 381). In HEFCE's Strategy for Employer Engagement it states that:

*higher education has a vital role in making the country more competitive by promoting the knowledge-based aspects of our economy and driving up productivity and growth, through improving skill levels... the HE sector needs to collaborate more effectively with employers to maximise the benefits for learners, employers, employees, the economy and society.*  
(2006, p.1)

This strategy is echoed in the Geography benchmark statement (QAA, 2007, 5), which notes that 'Many geography degree programmes are now at the forefront of policies to furnish students with skills that are valued in the world of work and provide the

basis for employability and lifelong learning'.

One of the six core objectives of the University of Chester's Learning and Teaching Strategy is 'to develop curricula that facilitate employability and lifelong learning'. Within this context, enhancing student employability has a high profile with the programmes provided by the Department of Geography and Development Studies at the University of Chester. An 'employability conference', which brings together current students and graduates of the Department, is one approach that has been used in an attempt to achieve this goal, with a particular concern to broaden awareness of career opportunities. This short paper initially situates this activity within the Department's approach to employability as a whole, then describes the organisation and delivery of the conferences, and finishes by considering their impact on participating students.

## Context and challenges

Within the Department of Geography and Development Studies there are four programmes of study:

1. Geography Single Honours
2. Geography Combined Honours;
3. International Development Studies (IDS), Combined Honours;
4. Natural Hazard Management (NHM) Combined Honours.

A key intended learning outcome of each programme is the enhancement of student employability, e.g:

- 'provide meaningful guidance about careers and postgraduate opportunities linked to Geography' (*Geography, Single Honours*);
- 'equip students with the transferable skills (e.g. researching, analytical, presentational, team work, interpersonal) expected by employers of any Honours graduate' (*IDS, Combined Honours*);
- 'equip students with a range of cognitive, generic and transferable skills (e.g. researching, analytical, presentational, team work and IT) through a diversity of teaching and learning

methods, so that successful graduates can compete effectively in the employment market' (NHM, Combined Honours).

In addition to the national and institutional priorities, the significance that is afforded to employability is also justified in terms of student expectations. The Department has just completed a five-year study of first-year students immediately on arrival at University (for a review of some of the initial findings from this study see Ribchester and Mitchell, 2004). Between 2003 and 2007 there were 310 respondents and analysis of the findings shows the significance of employability to these students. For example, in response to the statement, 'Improving my career opportunities was an important factor in deciding to enter Higher Education', 95% either 'Strongly agreed' (73%) or 'Agreed' (22%). Other studies have uncovered similar findings about the importance of employability to students. For example, the Futuretrack Report published by the Higher Education Career Services Unit (HECSU) (Purcell et al, 2008, p.163) which studied the relationship between higher education, career decision making and labour market trends, notes that 'most applicants include, as a key priority, enhancement of skills and knowledge that will lead to satisfying and appropriate employment that will enable them to realise their potential'. Projects like this also emphasise the value of student-based research in understanding the role of employability within the HE experience.

The Departmental survey has also highlighted some of the challenges which need to be addressed by any effective employability strategy at Chester. Despite being confident on entry to HE about becoming more employable, there seems much greater uncertainty when asked to explain how this was likely to come about through the content of their university studies and experiences. Furthermore, only just over a third of students from the survey showed any conviction and clarity about their post HE-plans (career or otherwise). Finally, and most striking, is the apparently restricted 'careers imagination' of entrants, typically focusing narrowly on teaching (ranging from 35% to 55% of respondents over the five years), planning and a limited range of other occupations. Additionally, IDS students indicated development work as a common career goal. In light of these findings, highlighting the diversity of potential careers available to students pursuing our programmes emerged as the key rationale for the development of the graduate/ undergraduate employability conference.

### Employability strategy

The Department's employability strategy has three core components (Figure 1). Worsley (2003, p.70) states that 'employers are requiring a more substantial skills portfolio from their perspective employees'. This has been addressed primarily through the diversification of the curriculum and particularly assessment exercises, which include on-site field presentations, e-postcards and video podcasts. A recent innovation is the introduction of

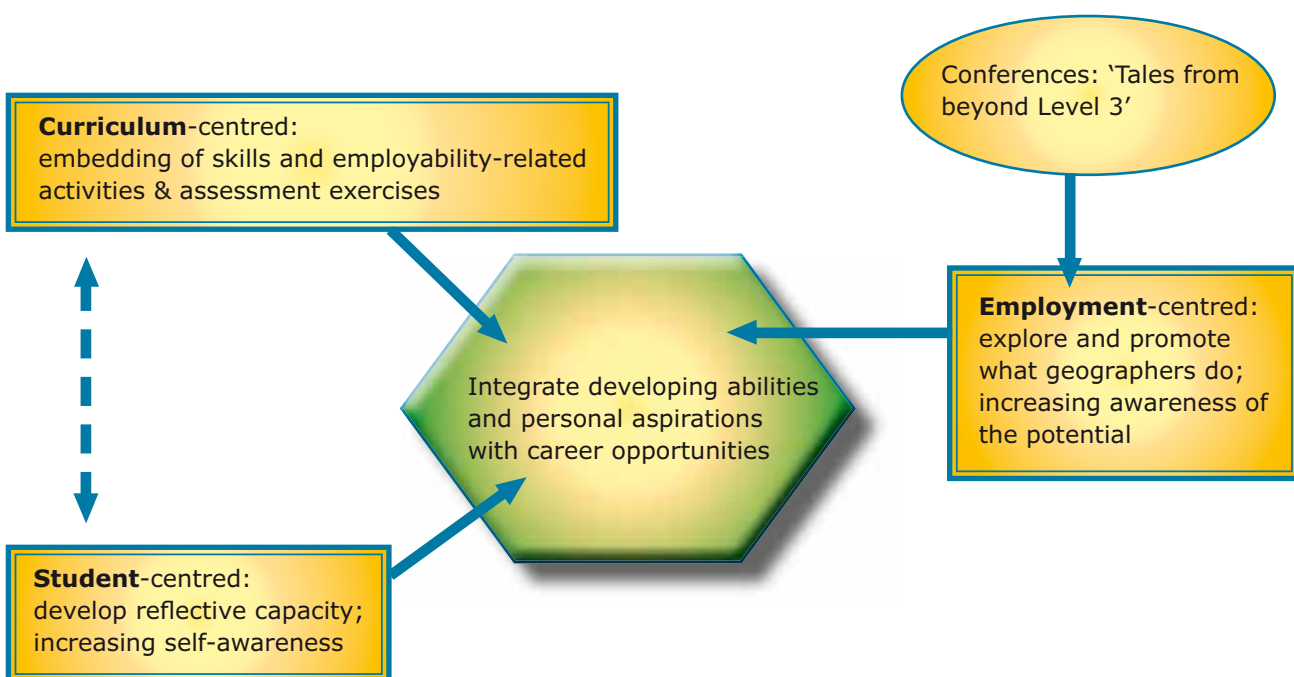


Figure 1: Employability Strategy

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an 'incasting' exercise in a final year urban studies module, which requires students to speculate on employment trends and the characteristics of specific careers under different future scenarios.

Providing more employment-related activities in the curriculum needs to be balanced with a greater focus on students' reflective capacity – an attempt to ensure a greater recognition of the scale and nature of personal development. Reflective portfolio assignments in the first and second year are one mechanism which we use to encourage this. Students select three programme learning outcomes and analyse their progress in relation to each over the course of the year, using evidence to support their claims. This is one way of tackling the apparent weaknesses in articulating the relationship between students' modular (and other) experiences and their worth and value to potential employers.

Thirdly, this is combined with awareness-raising activities, stressing the diversity of options available to broadly-based academic programmes like Geography. Prominent and frequently updated notice boards displaying relevant job and postgraduate study advertisements are, of course, a simple activity in this respect. However, a much more active way of raising awareness and aspirations is to bring career opportunities 'to life' as 'stories' told by former students of the Department. This is the straightforward idea which lies at the heart of the employability conference.

### How the Employability Conference works

Two employability conferences designed to bridge the gap between students and future employment have been held, and preparations are now being made for a third. Alumni were contacted to seek out speakers who were interested in participating. Almost without fail, those who were available were willing to contribute. The general brief for the volunteers was to talk about:

- What they were doing now and what that entails (highlighting the good and not so good aspects)
- The route that they took to get to where they were now
- How university affected their employability (not just their academic studies)
- Any advice they could give based on their experiences

Whilst these stories could be collected and subsequently presented by tutors, there is a feeling that their credibility and legitimacy is increased significantly by hearing them directly from former students. In a sense, they are acting as role models.

For both events, every attempt was made to create a conference atmosphere and dynamic. Even though the conferences were embedded into core year two teaching sessions (to help ensure attendance), a noticeably different environment to a normal session was developed, even down to the badges for participants and formal notices. As well as the main presentations, further activities and resources were made available, many provided by the University's Student and Graduate Careers Service. In true conference style, lengthy breaks provided networking opportunities and, at the same time, on-line employability resources were promoted in the adjacent computer room. Students who attended the conference were engaged from the start with the question 'What do you hope to get out of this?' and were asked at the end of 'What will you do now?' There was a concern with creating an active rather than just passive experience. This approach has many parallels with the successful one-day conference held as part of a final year module in the Department of Geography at Edge Hill University (Worsley, 2003). It is interesting to note the similarities in student feedback with those of the Chester students as discussed below. Five graduates spoke at the first gathering, seven at the more recent event, between them covering a variety of career trajectories in both the public, private and voluntary sectors.

### Assessing the impact

The students who attended the conferences were asked to complete a short feedback questionnaire at the end of the day. The responses to two open-ended questions are reviewed below, combining together the results from both conferences. The qualitative answers were categorised into themes, grouping together common responses, and the top three categories for both questions are shown below:

#### 'What was useful?'

1. Joint 1<sup>st</sup>: Listening to people's experiences and advice (19% of respondents), e.g.

*'It was really interesting to learn about what people were doing as it's an opportunity rarely available.'*

*'Hearing first-hand about different people's experiences and how they come about making vital decisions.'*

2. Joint 1<sup>st</sup>: Became aware of new job opportunities (19% of respondents), e.g.

*'Awareness of the amount of geo-related jobs available – apart from the obvious.'*

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*'It does make you see new things that you wouldn't have considered.'*

3. 3<sup>rd</sup>: Confirmation that a (Geography) degree is useful (14% of respondents), e.g.

*'They are geography graduates [which] shows they've got somewhere with it – gives you hope!'*

*'Reassurance about my degree getting me into areas of work I am interested in.'*

In acknowledging an awareness of new opportunities, there is evidence to suggest that the conference is serving to broaden 'careers imaginations'.

**'What are you going to do now?'** (arguably the most important question!)

1. 1<sup>st</sup>: Engage more with the University's student careers service (e.g. make an appointment) (32% of respondents)
2. 2<sup>nd</sup>: Look for career opportunities more widely (20% of respondents)
3. Joint 3<sup>rd</sup>: Seek work experience opportunities (11% of respondents)
4. Joint 3<sup>rd</sup>: Research more in-depth (11% of respondents)
5. Joint 3<sup>rd</sup>: Write/update CV (11%)

It is encouraging to see that the top three responses were all positive and affirmative actions. An expanded perspective on employment opportunities, again, emerges as a clear theme.

## Conclusion

The importance of enhancing the employability of students is recognised within the GEES subjects and beyond. The findings presented in this short review demonstrate how the strategic use of alumni can assist in the achievement of this goal. Undergraduate/graduate employability conferences appear to be relatively high impact events, which encourage a wider perspective on employment opportunities, emphasise the utility of the programmes that students are pursuing, and encourage engagement with careers-related support systems. They can serve as morale-boosting experiences for undergraduates, helping to highlight their developing potential and the value of their studies. However, events of this nature are unlikely to be effective in isolation and need to be

situated within a wider strategy, which includes the embedding of employability skills and knowledge both within and outside the curriculum and, crucially, the encouragement of reflective capacity which enables students to articulate their growing value to potential employers.

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