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# Embedding employability context through assessment design

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## Abstract

There are increasing pressures on higher education institutions to ensure that graduates are 'employment-ready' when they leave university. The successful achievement of this meets with many challenges, including growing pressure on staff resources and ensuring that students appreciate the 'employability relevance' of the skills and content covered during their course. Increasing the 'employability context' of a course can be efficiently achieved by focussing on assessment design, which also provides additional benefits. This article outlines and evaluates a number of strategies for embedding employability context through assessment design. By adopting similar assessment strategies into existing course material, employment expectations of graduates and employers can be met without the need for major revisions. In addition, as assessment is often the major focus of students' activities, a focus on assessment design ensures that the 'real worldness' of the exercises, content and/or skills of a course is appreciated by all students.

## Introduction and background

Higher education institutions are increasingly expected by government and students alike, to ensure the 'employment readiness' of their graduates. With students now paying considerable amounts for their university education, there is an increasing demand that courses are appropriate for the employment market (Gardiner, 1998) and an expectation that courses will increase students' chances of attaining employment in their chosen careers (Gedye *et al.*, 2004).

There are many strategies for addressing this need to produce employment-ready graduates, including: engaging with employers to identify skills and knowledge 'gaps'; employers being involved directly in the teaching and/or assessing of courses; career-related material being taught explicitly within courses; and work-based learning opportunities. However, the need to engage with the employability agenda comes at the same time as many other pressures in higher education, such as diminishing

units of resource, hence strategies for embedding 'employability' within programmes need to be readily achievable with relatively modest resource implications, and without the establishment of a new portfolio of modules (*cf.* Clark and Higgitt, 1997).

Geographers have sometimes been accused of being less successful than other disciplines in forming effective links with the world of employment (Jenkins and Healey, 1995) and for covering material that will not necessarily help students become more readily employable or is relatively unimportant in career terms (Clark and Higgitt, 1997; Haigh and Kilmartin, 1999). It is therefore important to encourage wider acceptance amongst higher education practitioners in the field of geography, in particular, that the acquisition of career-relevant skills is an important aspect of a students' degree programme.

## Engaging with employers in the identification of skills gaps

Working with employers can be beneficial in many ways, and can help ensure the relevance of materials taught and identify skills gaps in programmes. There are a number of projects in the GEES disciplines that have worked with employers to identify gaps in the skills of recent graduates. Employers seek graduates who are 'self-starters,' with decision making, report writing and problem solving skills (Owen, 2001) and graduates with technical skills, fieldwork experience, and appreciation of Health and Safety issues (Penn, 2001). In addition to the final report writing, graduates are sometimes said to lack the skills required to draw together disparate sets of information from diverse sources in order to form a coherent, evidence-based argument (Robinson and Digges La Touche, 2007). Employers have also been critical of the independent thinking skills of recent graduates, blaming increasing modularisation within the higher education curriculum leading to 'modularised thinking' (Robinson and Digges La Touche, 2007).

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## Case study 1 – Placing core practical skills in an employability context

One of the most buoyant areas of employment for GEES graduates is environmental consultancy. This is also an area of employment that many GEES graduates are interested in and choose their subjects for, and yet some students find themselves less prepared for employment in this area than they had expected from their chosen degree programme (Gedye et al, 2004). In a project in collaboration with environmental consultants MJCA (Tamworth), an existing skills-based series of practical sessions for level 2, physical geography students has been re-orientated. This aims to highlight the work of environmental consultants and the 'real world' applicability of the skills and techniques developed during the practical sessions. A full report on this project is presented in Robinson and Digges La Touche (2007).

A series of existing techniques-based practical sessions designed to teach students techniques for the collection and analysis of soil and water data, was adapted to incorporate a simulation of carrying out an environmental baseline survey, similar to those required as part of Environmental Impact Assessments undertaken in support of Planning applications. These form a major part of the work carried out by environmental consultancies. The original practical sessions were assessed through a workbook and this was changed to assessment of a more open-ended report to encourage greater independent thinking and practice in writing styles appropriate for environmental employment. In the first running of this project, a representative from the collaborating consultancy presented the 'real world' context and introduced the project to students. Students were engaged in project planning and making decisions on data requirements, field and lab data collection, qualitative and quantitative analysis and presentation of data and the production of a final professional 'consultancy-style' report. Students also carried out an assessed 'personal reflection' on the project, which included evaluating their own and group performance and their level of acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

The project helped students develop a wider range of skills than had been achieved in the previous 'workbook' style assessment, including (amongst others) report writing, group work and leadership skills and greater awareness of 'geo' career options. Almost ninety percent of students said they had a greater understanding of careers available in environmental consultancy after the practicals, and students generally enjoyed the project. In particular, students generally appreciated the

careers relevance of the project, commenting that the '*real lifeness made it a lot more interesting,*' and that they enjoyed '*learning the methods used by professionals that could one day be crucial to our careers.*' Although students tended to find the report, and the associated synthesis of data, challenging, students a year on from the project saw the benefits of a report-based assessment in providing preparation for their dissertation writing. In their personal reflections, no students referred to the involvement of the local employer in the project, but many students found it useful to be asked to reflect on their specific areas of skills and knowledge acquisition.

This case study highlights how the context in which core material is taught can generate greater awareness of the relationship between careers and the curriculum, and highlights that engaging with the employability agenda does not have to be at the expense of other course content, and can provide additional benefits (such as dissertation writing preparation).

## Case study 2 – Accessing and synthesising secondary data sources

One of the key skills gaps identified by employers is in the synthesis and presentation of data (Robinson and Digges La Touche, 2007). Environmental Consultants draw on many freely available data resources in initial desk studies and it is therefore useful to introduce students to these sorts of resources and the uses to which they can be put. As part of a 'Water Resources', level 3 module for physical geography undergraduates, students are required to carry out a qualitative assessment of the risk to water resources from a proposed landfill site, using data sets provided to them and those available through sources, such as the Environment Agency, simulating the type of work carried by environmental consultancies. Students are required to 'make sense' of a large volume of data, drawing on their theoretical knowledge in order to assess the risk through the development of a conceptual model and then to make recommendations to a client.

End-of-course evaluations have shown a transformation in students' attitudes towards this assessment from one of uncertainty and fear to eventual enjoyment. Students have written that they '*enjoyed the coursework strangely enough,*' and that '*the coursework was actually very interesting*' and '*Once I'd got to grips with it I actually quite liked doing it*', and the technical report has been included as one of the best aspects of the course. Students also said that the report was one of the most difficult aspects of the course,

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but that they *'learnt from having to actually think independently'*. Some students, however, said they struggled with the technical report writing and would rather have been able to write an essay.

This case study shows that report-style assessments that are based on the handling of large sets of data, appear often to be initially unpopular with students, who find the work challenging. However, this sort of problem-solving exercise encourages independent thinking, and data synthesis and presentation, which are all skills and attribute gaps identified by employers. The difficulty that students experienced in this coursework suggests that there is greater need for development of these skills earlier in their degree.

### Case study 3 – Rewording existing assessments for employability context

One simple strategy for providing employability context through assessment design, is through the phrasing and background information provided in coursework instructions. For example, presenting a series of project options as a role play e.g. 'You are working for an Environmental Consultancy and have been asked by your client to investigate where the greatest pollution to water bodies is occurring and how this can be remediated', rather than giving students a simple project title such as 'Water quality variations'. Such simple rewording of coursework instructions immediately highlights to students both the type of work carried out in different potential employment areas and the 'real world' relevance of the course material and coursework assignment. Careful wording of instructions can also highlight to students the relevance of particular forms of assessment. For example, many students fail to see the immediate relevance of generating poster-style coursework presentations. However, rather than instructions stating simply that students should produce a poster on a particular topic, the instructions can be phrased along similar lines to that above, for example 'You are working for XXX and have been asked to produce an information poster outlining the key geomorphological features of...'

### Discussion and recommendations

There is clearly a requirement to produce 'employment-ready' graduates to match the expectations of both students and employers. If this can be done effectively, without a major overhaul of programmes, then it is likely to be adopted by a greater number of practitioners. There are many advantages to using assessment design to both embed employability skills and highlight the employability context of material

covered within a course:

1. The strategies above do not require any radical rewriting of courses or additional modules, and yet can provide a much greater awareness of possible employment avenues, and the relevance of course material.
2. Employability-focussed material does not have to be incorporated at the expense of existing or core material, as there are many opportunities to 're-orientate' core material/skills to a more employability-based context.
3. By emphasising the need to produce professional standard 'consultancy-style' reports, particularly where this can be emphasised by a contributing employer representative, this can highlight to students the importance of practising and developing generic skills, such as referencing and clear, unambiguous and concise writing, areas that students are often reluctant to see as worthy of attention.
4. The current generation of students are quick to question and criticise perceived irrelevance in their degree programmes. By aligning course materials and assessments to clear employment contexts, the relevance and applicability of course content is clearly signposted to students.
5. Students are most easily motivated to engage with course materials, skills and content where there is an element of assessment; therefore, embedding employability context in assessment design may prove the most successful strategy for embedding employability in a way that students will fully engage with.
6. Working with employers on course innovations has many potential benefits for employers, academics and students, including greater employer awareness of graduate skills associated with different disciplines, and ensuring that such innovations are clearly grounded in 'real world' practices.

### Conclusions

This article has outlined several strategies for re-orientating existing material, and designing assessments to embed a clear employability context, and highlights some of the additional opportunities and benefits of embedding employability context in course material. These strategies are appropriate across a range of disciplines and different teaching formats. In summary, during the design of assessments aimed

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at enhancing employability skills and employability context, the following should be considered:

- The type of assessment. For example, it is arguable that a report-style assessment will provide more specific employability-related writing skills than essay-based assessments.
- The phrasing of coursework instructions. For example, to include an element of role play for the student in different employment roles or to highlight the 'real world' relevance of a particular assessment style.
- The integration of skills and knowledge as used by employers. For example, the use of internet-based data resources.

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