

Embedding employability in the context of widening participation

Liz Thomas and Robert Jones

Learning and Employability Series 1 and 2

The Learning and Employability series is primarily intended for staff in HE institutions who are considering the enhancement of student employability. The publications will be of interest to colleagues new to the area as well as those who are already engaged in developing employability and who wish to broaden their understanding of the topic.

In response to demand we have updated and reissued a number of titles from the first series of Learning and Employability, originally published by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT). We welcome suggestions for new titles in the series: email employability@heacademy.ac.uk.

Titles currently available are:

Series 1

Employability and higher education: what it is – what it is not – Mantz Yorke

Employability: judging and communicating achievements – Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke

Embedding employability into the curriculum – Mantz Yorke and Peter Knight

Entrepreneurship and higher education: an employability perspective – Neil Moreland

Employability and work-based learning – Brenda Little and ESECT colleagues

Pedagogy for employability – The Pedagogy for Employability Group

Series 2

Work-related learning in higher education – Neil Moreland

Employability for research postgraduates – Janet Metcalfe and Alexandra Gray

Employability and part-time students – Brenda Little

Ethics and employability – Simon Robinson

Career development learning and employability – A. G. Watts

Personal development planning and employability

Embedding employability in the context of widening participation – Liz Thomas and Robert Jones

The series editor is Professor Mantz Yorke.

The Employability Publications Advisory Board reviews all Higher Education Academy Employability publications, and comprises Professor Mantz Yorke (Chair), Professor Peter Knight (Open University), Professor Lee Harvey (Sheffield Hallam University), Brenda Little (CHERI), Professor Kate Purcell (University of Warwick), Jane Artess (Graduate Prospects), Barbara Graham (University of Strathclyde), Rob Ward (Centre for Recording Achievement) and Val Butcher from the Higher Education Academy. Copy-editing has been undertaken by Dr Donald Millar (formerly of the University of Leeds) and Peter Thomas.

The Learning and Employability series is being extended by the Higher Education Academy and will reflect changing challenges and priorities in the relationship between higher education and the many work opportunities likely to need – or benefit from – graduate or postgraduate abilities. The views expressed in this series are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Academy.

Contents

1. Overview	2
2. Preview of the main points	3
3. Overview of widening participation and student diversity	5
4. Employability and diversity	9
5. Outreach to inform HE choices	12
6. Early Careers education to build commitment to institution and course	17
7. Pedagogical issues	20
8. Curriculum development to support employability	22
9. Proactive development of self-confidence, job search and application skills for students from disadvantaged groups	30
10. Improving employers' practices	34
11. Conclusions	35
12. Reflective questions	37
Biography	38
References	39

I. Overview

This publication discusses how the issue of employability relates to student diversity. It considers the breadth of diversity in the student population, and the particular barriers these students may face in relation to employability. It then illustrates how steps can be implemented throughout the student lifecycle to improve the employability of all students, but particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Like others in this series, this publication has adopted a working definition of employability as:

“a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.”

This and other definitions of employability are discussed in the introductory publication, *Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not*. (Yorke, 2004, reissued 2006)

This publication is relevant to those staff who have a diverse range of students within their institutions, and who wish to embed employability throughout the student experience. For the hard-pressed reader, the core features of this publication are in Sections 5-10.

2. Preview of the main points

- Widening participation aims to increase student diversity, not just to increase student numbers. Not only does this involve students from diverse backgrounds gaining entry to HE, but they need to be successful too.
- Students and graduates from non-traditional backgrounds can face additional hurdles in accessing higher education, succeeding within it, and making the transition into the labour market and postgraduate education.
- Higher education institutions can best improve graduate's employability and progression by taking action throughout the student lifecycle, rather than just towards graduation.
- Potential students need information about the graduate labour market prior to making entry decisions about higher education, in order to inform their institutional and course choices. Students from families with no history of participation in higher education often have a paucity of information about HE choices and employability, which can lead to early withdrawal.
- Institutional and course commitment is linked to students' motivation to study their chosen programme, and this may relate to notions of employability and achieving future goals. Institutions can build institutional and course commitment through pre-entry, induction, and first year activities which assist students from diverse backgrounds to understand what is expected of them in higher education and how they will benefit from it.
- Adapting to higher education learning and teaching approaches is challenging for many students, especially those with little or no family or peer experience of HE. 'Active learning' addresses many of the difficulties new students face in making the transition into higher education, and enables students to develop their employability. Teaching staff need to make the link between academic tasks and employability explicit.
- The curriculum should address the employability of students from under-represented groups in four ways: develop explicit awareness of employability; provide access to relevant work experience and reflection on what has been learnt from all employment opportunities; improve the confidence, self-esteem and aspiration of students with regards to applying for graduate employment; and improve familiarity with the labour market and develop appropriate search and application skills.
- Integrated approaches to curriculum development are more effective than

separate activities, as students from many under-represented groups find it difficult to participate in extra-curricular activities.

- Careers education can prepare students to search and apply for graduate positions by developing their knowledge, confidence and ability to apply for posts. Many students do not take advantage of careers services, or else do so only in their final year of study. Careers education therefore needs to be more proactive and to target specific groups to overcome the barriers faced by students from under-represented groups.
- Higher education institutions tend to focus on improving the employability of graduates. However, employers' practices can discriminate against graduates from under-represented groups. HEIs should promote good practice amongst employers, and demonstrate how good recruitment practices and employee diversity advantage the employer.

3. Overview of widening participation and student diversity

The term “widening participation” should embrace the idea of broadening diversity in HE, and should not be interpreted as implying solely an increase in numbers of entrants. In short, it calls for qualitative as well as quantitative changes in the student body. Understood thus, the focus is placed on engaging those from groups which are currently under-represented in HE. Moreover, the widening participation agenda encompasses not only the question of “access” to HE, but also the issue of student success. It should also be noted that achieving more diverse patterns of participation depends not on “normalising” students – i.e. slotting non-traditional entrants into traditional structures and practices. Rather, it is a matter of recognising different backgrounds, experiences and interests in order to develop more progressive, responsive forms of HE.

The UK government has a commitment to achieving a 50% rate of participation for all under 30s by 2010, and to facilitating participation by students from under-represented groups. Widening participation is thus actively promoted in each of the four countries of the UK. However, as Box 1 shows, the relevant policy mechanisms vary.

Box 1: Summary of widening participation policies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Thomas *et al* 2005)

England

- Aimhigher is the main vehicle for outreach activity to widen access to HE. This national programme involves regional partnerships of HE institutions (HEIs), FE colleges, schools and other agencies working together to raise the aspirations and achievements of young people in order to encourage, support and enable them to enter HE.
- The Higher Education Act (2004) permitted HEIs to charge ‘top up’ fees. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established to try to ensure that tuition fees do not have a detrimental effect on widening participation. Institutions’ Access Agreements provide details of outreach activity and bursary support for students from low income families.
- HEIs are required to demonstrate that they subscribe to the five principles of a fair admissions system, as outlined within the Schwartz report (2004).

- The Government is committed to moving closer to parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications. Lifelong Learning Networks, funded by HEFCE, are a key part of this strategy.
- HEIs receive a widening participation premium to support student success. Proposed changes to the funding of teaching are intended to support the widening participation agenda.

Scotland

- There is an emphasis on institutional collaboration within and between sectors to widen access. Four regional widening access forums have been established to span both further and higher education, and focus on delivering outreach activity programmes.
- There has been an emphasis on the role of FE colleges as providers of HE, and this has contributed to Scotland meeting the 50% participation rate. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications framework is being used to accumulate and transfer credit across institutions and sectors.
- Student retention and success has been promoted through SHEFC formula-based grants to HEIs to support students from targeted groups to succeed in HE.
- Scotland has not introduced top-up fees, which may lead to greater divergence between Scotland and the rest of the UK with regards to entry to HE for students from low income groups.

Wales

- Key policies include: the widening access premium funding, widening access funding based on HEI success in recruitment of students from lower socio-economic groups and 'Reaching Higher Reaching Wider', which facilitates a regional approach to organising outreach activities.
- A Skills Action Plan was launched with a view to improving vocational routes into HE and to support lifelong learning.
- Welsh-domiciled students will not pay top up fees to attend Welsh HEIs.

Northern Ireland

- There is an Aimhigher 'road show' to promote types of entry routes to HE to young people in Northern Ireland.
- Universities in Northern Ireland run outreach activities.
- HEIs receive a widening access premium to support the retention and success of students from low income families, calculated on the basis of the number of students who do not pay fees.
- Variable fees will be introduced for Universities in Northern Ireland, and the Department for Education and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI) will assume a role comparable to that of OFFA in England.

Summarily, the focus of much UK policy is on students from low participation neighbourhoods or lower socio-economic groups, and on students with disabilities. In 1997 49% from upper socio-economic groups were in higher education, against 18.4% from lower groups, and 14% from the lowest socio-economic group. More recent data indicate that, despite widespread efforts to widen participation the gap has yet to narrow significantly. The UNITE Student Living Report 2003 (UNITE, 2003) found 17% of students were from the lowest socio-economic groups (C2, D and E), which represented a decline compared to their previous surveys. Furthermore, UCAS and HESA data show that roughly 4% of undergraduates disclose a disability, which can be compared with 18% of the working population (according to the Summer Labour Force survey). (There may of course be different incentives for disclosure which vary with context and circumstances.)

Currently the majority of students with two or more A-levels (or Scottish Highers) progress to higher education. However, the same is not true for students holding vocational qualifications: fewer than 50% of vocational learners go on to HE, compared to over 90% of all A-level students progressing to HE by the time they are 21 years old (Action on Access, 2005). The 67% growth in full-time undergraduates between 1988 and 1994 is perceived to have led to a saturation of the market by traditional middle-class A-level students (Abramson and Jones, 2004). To increase participation rates in HE, and to improve the class differences, some authors (e.g. May and Harper, 2005) argue that vocational students must form an important part of the expansion.

It is also important to acknowledge that under-representation in HE is not solely a matter of class. Other factors, such as those of ethnicity and gender, can be shown to correlate with lower rates of participation - e.g. Bangladeshi women and Afro-Caribbean men. One caveat should be entered here, however. In general, students from non-white ethnic groups are “over-represented” in UK HE - but with marked differences relating to institutional type. Thus post-1992 institutions attract markedly more entrants from ethnic minority groups than pre-1992 universities. Also, while there are now more women than men in English higher education, stubborn subject differences remain. For example, only 14% of engineering students in the UK are women. Conversely, subjects such as biosciences and psychology display a dominance of women entrants.

A further factor warranting acknowledgement is that of age. The mature student cohort (i.e. entrants over 21 years) currently constitutes around 20-24% of the full-time undergraduate intake each year through UCAS. Mature students have lower rates of completion and success, and are concentrated in part-time provision (95%)¹. Also, those mature students from low-participation neighbourhoods are twice as likely to leave their course prior to completion

¹ It should be noted that the admission of part-time students is not co-ordinated through UCAS.

compared to their younger counterparts; although it should be recognised that the reasons for mature students' non-completion tend to differ from those of younger entrants (Yorke 1999).

Part-time study offers the opportunity for students to combine employment with academic development, and is particularly attractive to mature students and those from low income backgrounds. For example, research in the North East of England surveyed over 500 Foundation Degree students from 13 colleges and two universities (Dodgson and Whitham 2004). The findings suggest that Foundation Degree programmes are successful in attracting non-traditional learners: the majority were mature, first generation students, with alternative entry qualifications and studying part-time. Further research is needed to know the extent to which Foundation Degrees are attracting new learners who would have accessed other provision if the Foundation Degree programme had not been available. It should be noted that in England in particular there is a lack of financial and practical support for students on part-time routes, and institutional disincentives to offer part-time learning opportunities.

4. Employability and diversity

Students and graduates from non-traditional backgrounds can face additional hurdles in accessing higher education (Archer *et al* 2003), succeeding within it (Yorke 1999) and making the transition into the labour market (see for example, Blundell *et al.* 2005 and Blasko *et al* 2003) and postgraduate education (Hoad 2001). In relation to progression into the labour market, a recent review of literature (Thomas 2005, incorporated into Gorard *et al* 2006) demonstrated that graduates from all non-traditional backgrounds experience disadvantage in the labour market. The findings, drawn from 44 research studies, are summarised in Table I.

Some of the barriers these students and graduates face are long term and closely related to the widening of participation more generally. They include issues such as the paucity of information provided, and the quality of advice and guidance made available (Quinn *et al* 2005, UCAS 2002). Further disadvantage may arise in relation to their comparatively low reserves of cultural capital (i.e. knowledge relating to higher education and graduate employment) that can be called upon from family, school and other spheres (UCAS 2002). This may reduce their confidence to enter and engage in higher education processes, and hinder them further when they make the transition beyond undergraduate education. Many students from non-traditional backgrounds report that they do not feel as if they belong within higher education institutions or that they are outsiders (Thomas 2002, Read *et al* 2003); this can reinforce social inequalities (Bamber and Tett 2001). Students from non-traditional backgrounds may also lack social capital – i.e. networks of contacts to provide “hot knowledge” about higher education and the labour market, and to assist them to adjust to higher education and secure suitable graduate employment. In addition, a lack of economic capital makes many non-traditional students, especially those from working class families, more reliant on part-time employment, which hinders their engagement in academic and extra-curricular activities within higher education, further reducing their opportunities for acquiring additional social capital.

Higher education cannot solve all the challenges related to access, success and employability, as many of these need to be addressed earlier in the education system. However, HEIs can play a role in supporting students from diverse backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education and as graduates to progress into the labour market and beyond. As with many aspects of widening participation, employability and progression issues arise throughout the student lifecycle. It is thus important to avoid regarding these as matters to be addressed only towards the final stages of a programme of study. The student lifecycle (see HEFCE, 2001) incorporates the idea of intervention and change which takes place at different stages of the students’ experience, including outreach work and pre-

entry support, admissions, induction and the first year experience, learning and teaching, student success and graduate progression. We therefore propose in this publication that employability and student diversity should be addressed jointly throughout the student lifecycle. These issues are discussed further below, and are illustrated with examples of the ways in which universities and colleges are seeking to address employability issues at different points in the lifecycle. Most of these examples (unless otherwise stated) have been collected as part of a broader study on widening participation in the UK (Thomas *et al* 2005).

Table 1: Graduate progression by specific target groups

Target group	Main conclusion
Socio-economic status or proxy	For people from lower socio-economic groups (SEGs) being a graduate offers labour market advantages compared to non-graduate peers, especially for males (Dearden <i>et al</i> 2004). But SEGs are disadvantaged compared to traditional graduates (Purcell and Hogarth 1999, Smith <i>et al</i> 2000).
Disabled graduates	Disabled graduates have lower earnings than non-disabled graduates (Hogarth <i>et al</i> 1997), but they are more likely to progress to further study (Croucher <i>et al</i> 2005). The difference is less pronounced for graduates with unseen disabilities (Croucher <i>et al</i> 2005).
Ethnic minorities	Ethnic minorities experience more difficulty in securing employment after graduation than white graduates (Connor <i>et al</i> 2004 and Blasko <i>et al</i> 2003), and men in particular are more likely to be unemployed. Once they have secured employment there is evidence of parity or better with majority graduates (Connor <i>et al</i> 2004 and Blasko <i>et al</i> 2003). Different minorities have different trends, and there is some disagreement about these.
Mature graduates	Male and female mature graduates experience greater disadvantages in the labour market than younger graduates (Conlon 2001). In part this is due to discrimination by employers, especially in some fields.
Women	Women graduates earn less than men (Hogarth 1997 and Metcalf 1997), and this difference is greater if they have a family and a career break. However, being a graduate is an effective way of redressing gender inequality in comparison to non-graduates.
Vocational sub-degree qualifiers	Data are very limited about this group. Vocational students progress to further study and employment, while unemployment appears to be very low. There are however distinct subject variations. Labour market returns are significantly lower than for first degree graduates. (Little <i>et al</i> 2003)
Part-time graduates	Part-time students have different labour market expectations, as the majority are in employment while they are studying, but many do report labour market gains. This is mediated by subject, gender, age and ethnicity. (Brennan <i>et al</i> 2000)
Non-traditional groups and multiple disadvantage	Some studies do not delineate specific under-represented groups, or look at multiple disadvantages. These studies show that non-traditional graduates experience disadvantage in the labour market compared with their traditional counterparts, and these are related to both personal characteristics and educational choices.

5. Outreach to inform HE choices

Many higher education students, especially those from under-represented groups, do not access careers provision until their final year (Hills 2003) – at which point it may be too late to be acted upon. For students without access to information from family, friends and schools, advice and guidance relating to courses, institutions, and the graduate labour market can be crucial – both prior to entry and within higher education. In order to enable informed decisions to be made about course and institution choice, it is vital to make relevant information fully available prior to entry.

However, some research suggests that the provision of such information may often be of a low standard. Thus UCAS (2002) found that careers staff and teachers had often not kept abreast of developments in HE. Consequently their advice was sometimes out of date or erroneous.

Low levels of awareness on the part of the potential entrant may result in ill-informed choice of courses, consequently reducing commitment to programmes of study and to higher education more generally. In recent research with working class students who withdrew from courses, the chief reason cited was poorly chosen course (Quinn *et al*, 2005). See for example Box 2.

Box 2: Peter's story (from Quinn *et al* 2005)

Peter comes from a working-class background and was the first in his family to go to university. He views his family's attitude as supportive, and most of Peter's friends are students. His ambition was to join the police force and the school's careers adviser suggested taking a university course in social science first. Peter then entered university, attending as a day student and stayed between two and three months before withdrawing:

'To be perfectly honest, I think it was as much my fault as anybody giving me advice. Looking back now I should have certainly looked into the course and seen what was there... I was a bit gullible... When I got there I didn't really know what was involved in the course, sociology and psychology and things like that, which I wasn't really too interested in.'

Peter realised that he was not enjoying the course and started speaking to police officers who told him that he could join the Police Force via other routes. At this

stage he had made no contact with individual tutors so went to administration staff to inform them of his plans. They requested a letter from him informing them formally of his withdrawal, but made no suggestion to talk to discuss his decision with course tutors.

‘With hindsight and looking back, it was a bit strange that they thought ‘why has he picked this course and thrown in the towel already’, I thought looking back someone might have wanted to discuss it with me.’

Peter said his situation arose from ‘...a combination of bad advice and my naivety just to dive straight in with someone else’s advice.’

Quinn *et al* (2005) found these students tended to leaf through prospectuses with little idea of how to select courses on the basis of personal interest, academic ambition or career aspirations. For those entering via the clearing system problems were magnified, as time was short and the need to get a place on any course outweighed the need to identify the most suitable programme.

In attempts to address some of the above matters, a number of institutions have taken steps to integrate careers advice into their outreach activities, and to inform young people and their parents of graduate employment opportunities. For example, as part of their CAMPUS widening participation programme, the University of Stirling offers careers advice to pupils and their parents. Similarly, in order to promote lifelong learning the Living and Learning Centre at the University of Gloucestershire provides information and advice on work, education and training opportunities. An innovative programme has also been developed at the University of Manchester, which works with school teachers and others who advise young people. The aim is to provide them with up to date information on graduate employability and higher education, which can then be used to influence young people’s decision making processes.

Example 1: HE Uncovered and ‘Wise Up’ summer school, University of Manchester

HE Uncovered provides up to date information on graduate employability and higher education to teachers and advisers working with young people. It is a two day event which takes place at the University of Manchester. A series of presentations and information sessions is given to teachers and advisers, and they receive a resource pack to take away with them. The first day covers issues such as application advice and student finance, and there is an admissions tutor panel and a student panel which enable staff to ask questions and clarify issues. Staff also participate

in other widening participation activities. The second day focuses on the support available to students from the Careers Service, sessions on graduate employability, a presentation from a graduate employer and a session on useful graduate resources for students considering higher education. The internally conducted evaluation found the event to be considered extremely useful by the participants.

Other widening participation initiatives provide information about specific career areas with the intention of inspiring young people, their families and other potential entrants. For example, the Glasgow access to primary education project and the Edge Hill initiative both promote school teaching as a career choice for people from lower socio-economic groups. The latter institution also focuses on minority ethnic groups, due to the shortage of teachers from these backgrounds.

Example 2: Glasgow access to primary education project, Glasgow City Council, University of Glasgow and University of Paisley

The Access to Primary Education Project is co-ordinated by Glasgow City Council, the University of Glasgow and the University of Paisley. The project is aimed at young people in schools with low participation rates in Higher Education who are interested in entering a career in primary teaching. The project involves aspiration awareness activities plus additional support, in order to help them achieve progression into Primary Teaching Degrees. The ultimate aim is to produce skilled professionals who can return to their communities as positive role models for others. The project concentrates on promoting students' self-esteem, academic achievement and motivation. In turn it creates opportunities for students and their families to familiarise themselves with university studies, life and location. The Access to Primary Education Project supports pupils through secondary school years 5 and 6¹ and continues as they enter a primary education degree programme. It gives pupils the opportunity to join a group of young people from different schools who are all striving towards the common goal of becoming primary school teachers. The project promotes participation in various events/activities, which focus upon improving pupils' self-esteem, academic performance, confidence and motivation – for example, residential weekends, motivational afternoons, revision days and parents evenings. Each school also appoints a link teacher who attends the project Steering Group and has a role in co-ordinating school support. The project directors argue that more work should be done with pupils from low participation communities in order to encourage them to view higher education as appropriate where it fits with their career aspirations.

Example 3: Promoting teaching as a profession for members of minority ethnic communities, Edge Hill

The project aims to raise aspirations and promote teaching as a profession for ethnic minority students. It makes a range of presentations to schools, colleges and community groups. Taster events are held at Edge Hill and other partner Higher Education Institutions. In addition a mentor programme is ongoing and students receive advice and guidance on career planning. Students are also supported through the UCAS application process through a programme of mock application forms and mock interviews. Equivalency tests are available through this programme for students who do not have the required GCSE qualifications. The project targets minority ethnic students, particularly those from Asian and Black communities as they are currently under-represented in the teaching profession.

A number of higher education initiatives promote learning and careers in the health and social care sectors (see Jones and Thomas 2006). For example, the University of Birmingham has a couple of such initiatives, including “Insight into NHS Careers” and “Introduction to the Health Care Professions”. In Scotland, a partnership between all the medical schools has created the “Working in Health Access Programme”, which promotes medicine and health care practice learning and careers to young people from lower socio-economic groups.

Example 4: Insight into NHS Careers and Introduction to the Health Professions Summer School, University of Birmingham

Insight into NHS Careers aims to provide year 12 students from lower socio-economic groups with an awareness of the full choice of NHS careers open to them, and to support them in their decision making process. Students from schools and colleges local to the University of Birmingham are invited to spend a day in a hospital environment. They are given talks and presentations by a wide range of medical and health staff, including doctors, nurses, radiographers etc. The students also have interactive sessions and learn about basic life support training in the clinical skills unit.

The Introduction to the Health Professions Summer School aims to increase the number of applicants and enrolments from under-represented groups into health related professions; to encourage them to apply to research-led institutions and to broaden their awareness of courses and careers in the health professions beyond simply medicine. During the summer school, year 11 students experience a range of lectures and interactive seminars highlighting a broad spectrum of health related HE courses and their related career paths. Undergraduates from the School of Dentistry, Medicine, Nursing and Physiotherapy are used as mentors

to support the participants during their stay at the University. Students also visit the clinical skills unit at a local hospital and get involved in demonstrations and using equipment. This allows the students to experience at first hand a hospital environment.

Example 5: University of Glasgow: Working in Health Access Programme (WHAP)

The Widening Access to Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and the Health Professions (WHAP) initiative is a collaboration between the Scottish medical schools (Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St. Andrews), the Scottish veterinary schools in Edinburgh and Glasgow and Stirling University's Institute of Education. WHAP aims to raise awareness of the career possibilities in medicine, veterinary medicine and the health professions for young people in lower socio-economic groups and to explore the usefulness of psychometric testing in the area of medical student admissions. It was developed to interest young people in healthcare, particularly medicine and veterinary medicine, and to influence the appropriate supply of professionals in the field across Scotland. Concern over a possible future mismatch between demand for health services and supply of health professionals in specific areas of expertise and in some geographical locations is at the heart of the rationale for this initiative. The under-representation of poorer socio-economic groups in successful medical admissions, coupled with concern over the selection procedures used in admissions, also produced a determination on behalf of the project partnership to provide equality of opportunity for young people interested in a career in healthcare. Parallel projects looking at new methods of selecting medical students are also underway.

6. Early Careers education to build commitment to institution and course

As was signalled in section four above, institution and course commitment is linked to students' motivation to attend and study their chosen programme. In part, commitment may be generated by a belief that the programme of study will enable them to achieve their future goals, which may relate to employment or progression to postgraduate study (Thomas *et al* 2001, pp.41-2). Glover *et al* (2002) conducted a survey with 400 students on commencement and on completion of their university course and found that economic motivation was more important to students than the pursuit of knowledge. The authors argue that simply graduating from university is not a sufficient basis for continued personal and institutional investment in higher education and as a result, higher education courses will be expected to be increasingly directed towards future employment.

Quinn *et al* (2005) found that, once on courses, many students failed to see the links between study and future employment opportunities (p.19). Concern also arises regarding students who enter higher education via the clearing system and who have particularly low levels of commitment to the institution or subject. This is particularly true for those who originally applied to enter a different course and/or institution (Thomas *et al* 2001, p.67). Institutions can build institutional and course commitment through pre-entry and induction activities, and throughout the first year experience, as discussed below.

Pre-entry activities, such as preparatory work in schools and colleges and via summer schools, are used by institutions to develop students' confidence, expectations and study skills, to develop social networks and to familiarise them with the higher education environment (e.g. Jones and Abramson 2003). For example, Newcastle University Careers Service delivers sessions during the pre-entry summer schools to raise students' awareness of the employability and careers guidance available through the Careers Service. It encourages students to use the service as soon as they enter the University.

Example 6: Graduate Employability Roadshow, University of Manchester

The Graduate Employability Roadshow aims to provide up to date information and advice about higher education and employability to students from lower socio-economic groups. It includes presentations on topics such as: graduate employability, researching careers using the internet, subject specific sessions such as careers using maths and employability skills.

Example 7: Pathways to the Professions: Opening the doors to Law, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, University of Edinburgh

The Pathways to the Professions project's main objective is to encourage the progression of school pupils from under-represented social groups into Law, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, especially at the University of Edinburgh. Careers information is integral to the project, and is delivered through outreach activities. For students attending the University there is a series of careers oriented interventions. All students in the participating schools can register with the project and can attend careers events. Those students who are the first in their family to undertake higher education are designated as 'Pathways Plus' students, and offered additional information, support and guidance. All students have the opportunity to benefit from: information on course and extra-curricular requirements from secondary school year 4 onwards; guidance on relevant work experience opportunities; attendance at 'So you want to be a Lawyer/Doctor/Vet' careers days; Pathways open day activities; and access to Summer Programmes. Additional support for 'Pathways Plus' students includes one-to-one pre-application guidance; work observation and career exploration programmes in Law and Medicine; the opportunity to meet current undergraduates; on-campus science activities; visits to see the legal profession at work e.g. Courts; undergraduate mentoring; and Higher revision support courses in Chemistry and Biology. Post-entry students receive further pastoral support and careers guidance, and 'Pathways Plus' students receive mentoring throughout their first academic year from undergraduates in the same subject area. There is a structured programme of meetings, study skills sessions and other associated events.

Example 8: Stepping Stones to Higher Education, Bournemouth University

Stepping Stones is a web-based resource (<http://sim/steps/index.html>) that students are encouraged to access as soon as they accept their place at Bournemouth University. It provides activities and reading to be completed prior to induction and it also presents information about studying at University that the student can assimilate in their own space and in their own time. It provides an opportunity for the students to become involved and engaged with their course before induction.

From Hartwell and Farbrother, 2006. See also Keenan 2005.

Induction is a key way in which institutions seek to ease the transition into higher education, especially for students from families and schools with limited prior experience of HE (Yorke and Thomas 2003). Yorke and Thomas found that for those institutions that had exceeded 'benchmarked' numbers for widening participation and retention, the induction period usually extended beyond the traditional period of up to a week. Extended induction was seen to not only prepare students for the academic experience, but helped to develop the 'academic match', and to build expectations about what studying for a qualification in higher education would be like (Keenan 2005). Some induction programmes explicitly include careers education in their induction programmes, for example, Canterbury Christchurch University.

Some institutions now include careers education early in the first semester, which can be seen to contribute to the development of institutional and subject commitment, as students learn of the possible career paths relating to their course. This approach may be particularly beneficial when the institution and/or course are not the students' first choice.

Pre-entry, induction and first year initiatives such as those described above assist students from diverse backgrounds to develop social and cultural capital to enable them to succeed in higher education; some explicitly address employability issues.

7. Pedagogical issues

For many students the transition into higher education is challenging as they seek to adapt to different teaching approaches and ways of learning. This problem is accentuated for many students from non-traditional educational backgrounds and under-represented groups. Students with little or no family or peer experience of HE are less likely to know what to expect, are less likely to know how to manage their time and workloads, and often they feel lost and out of control (Thomas and Quinn, forthcoming). Teaching and learning presents problems such as:

- different learning and teaching styles and methods
- more “adult” teaching and reliance on independent learning
- large classes and not enough emphasis on interactive and practical work
- more distant relationships with staff
- unable to ask for help
- lack of formative assessment and feedback about progress.
(Thomas and Quinn, forthcoming)

Some of these issues are illustrated in Sarah’s story in Box 3.

Box 3: Sarah’s story (from Quinn *et al* 2005)

Sarah was the first person in her family to go to university. She was keen because she was told at school that was what people should do to get qualifications leading to a good job, and most of her friends went either to college or university. She didn’t know what she wanted to study but eventually chose multimedia and web design, and she lived at home while attending university. Sarah attended college before going on to university and felt that college lecturers gave far more help and support to their students than university lecturers did: “You don’t want to bother the lecturer because we don’t think they care”.

Sarah described the difficulties of sometimes not understanding lectures but not wanting to be the person to say so in front of the class. She also said that sometimes two lecturers teaching on the same course held conflicting views, which was confusing for the student: “It was up to us to flag up problems but... nobody wants to be seen as the one who doesn’t understand”.

Sarah expected university to be different from college but did not expect it to be so difficult to ask for help: “Someone to listen to [me]... is not a big thing to ask from a university”.

Developing a pedagogic approach that promotes employability is compatible with good learning as it is understood by many. The primary feature is 'active learning', which engages the student in deep as opposed to surface learning (Ramsden, 1992). The Pedagogy for Employability Group (2004, reissued 2006, p12-15) suggest that pedagogical approaches that promote student engagement and employability might include:

- Requiring students to work on learning tasks, where possible, in authentic and/or richly-resourced contexts (e.g. problem-based learning, analysing case study material, summarising complex material into a short briefing paper for a specific audience and similar activities);
- Involving collaborative work where appropriate (e.g. group projects, the establishment of learning communities, preparation of group reports and presentations etc);
- Providing cognitive 'scaffolding' to help students towards achievements currently beyond their unaided capability and progressively removing it as their capability develops (e.g. role playing, working in progressively larger groups to produce a response to a particular challenge, the use of formative assessment and resubmission); and
- Encouraging the development of metacognition (e.g. reflection and self-regulation via PDP, writing critical commentaries and reviews, presenting a case and being prepared to justify it).

These types of learning activities both address many of the difficulties new students face in making the transition into higher education and enable students to develop many employability skills (see below). Teaching staff however need to take the opportunity to make the link between academic tasks and employability explicit. Students can be encouraged to reflect upon the broader learning that has taken place and, for example, document them in their personal development planning (PDP) portfolios. Developing appropriate pedagogic approaches is discussed in more detail in the publication 'Pedagogy for employability' (The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2004, reissued 2006).

8. Curriculum development to support employability

In the previous section we have focused on how learning takes place and how this can promote students' employability. In this section we consider how the curriculum contents might be developed to enhance the students' employability.

Research (see Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2004, reissued 2006) shows that employers expect graduates to exhibit the following attributes:

- imagination/creativity
- adaptability/flexibility
- willingness to learn
- independent working/autonomy
- working in a team
- ability to manage others
- ability to work under pressure
- good oral communication
- communication in writing for varied purposes and audiences
- numeracy
- attention to detail
- time management
- assumption of responsibility and for making decisions
- planning, co-ordinating and organising ability.

All students benefit from developing their employability - and awareness of it – throughout their learning experience. This is particularly true for those with access to less relevant social and cultural capital through family support and familiarity with graduate employers.

In addition to these qualities, relevant experience is also highly valued by some graduate employers. But as many students now combine work with their higher education learning, access to employment-related experiences is unlikely to be problematic, but these experiences may not appear relevant to graduate employment. Students can benefit from opportunities to participate in more relevant work-related activities, and from reflecting on what they have learnt from seemingly unrelated employment.

Research on the experiences of graduates from lower socio-economic groups and ethnic minorities suggests that raising confidence, self-esteem and aspirations may be more important than skills and competences in securing good graduate

employment (Brennan and Shah 2003). Furthermore, students often leave finding out about the graduate labour market and recruitment processes too late, and do not research potential employers and their recruitment practices sufficiently.

In summary, research evidence therefore suggests that the curriculum should be addressing the employability of students from under-represented groups in four key ways:

- Development of explicit awareness of what employability is and what it entails
- Access to relevant work experience and reflection on what has been learnt from all employment opportunities
- Improving the confidence, self-esteem and aspiration of students with regards to applying for graduate employment
- Improving familiarity with the labour market and developing appropriate search and application skills.

As noted in a previous publication (Embedding Employability into the Curriculum, Yorke and Knight 2004, reissued 2006, p13), there is a spectrum of ways in which the curriculum can be developed to support student employability. These include:

- Employability through the whole curriculum
- Employability in the core curriculum
- Work-based or work-related learning incorporated as one or more components within the curriculum
- Employability-related module(s) within the curriculum
- Work-based or work-related learning in parallel with the curriculum

Following Warren (2002), curriculum development to support employability can be understood to take 3 forms: separate, semi-integrated and integrated. (Warren 2002). A separate approach implies that the intervention of support is offered in addition to mainstream teaching, for example supplementary instruction or skills modules. A semi-integrated approach includes initiatives which are closely aligned to course curriculum and are developmental rather than 'remedial'. Integrated approaches make the development central to the learning experience within the discipline context. Thus, in relation to employability, some institutions provide generic modules about employability and careers education (separate); others make use of subject specific employment modules or work experience (semi-integrated); while integrated approaches include work-based learning and the introduction of vocationally-oriented programmes. Warren (ibid) suggests that semi-integrated and integrated approaches are more effective than separate interventions.

However, before seeking to reform the curriculum it is useful to consider the extent to which the existing curriculum contents support employability goals. For example, Hughes' Employability Audit Tool

(www.heacademy.ac.uk/2644.htm) offers a quick way to assess the curriculum content and its relationship to the world beyond higher education.

Personal development planning (PDP)

The introduction of PDP into undergraduate programmes offers an opportunity to assist all students to develop their employability. For example, students are not always able to translate their qualities and skills to meet employers' recruitment criteria, and yet the ability to connect with recruitment criteria is highly valued by employers. The QAA (2002) states that PDP should help students to:

- Become more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners;
- Understand how they are learning and relate their learning to a wider context;
- Improve their general skills for study and career management;
- Articulate their personal goals and evaluate progress towards their achievement; and
- Encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life.

PDP is now a core curriculum requirement in the UK, and thus enables employability to be semi-integrated into undergraduate programmes.

Example 9: PDP at the University of Liverpool

PDP has been implemented in a number of disciplines as a pilot, but has followed a common pattern. Two review meetings are offered to each student, one in each semester. To prepare for the first meeting (in about Week 5), students are asked to review two records they have already entered in LUSID (an electronic tool developed to support the implementation of PDP and reduce the administrative burden) at the very start of their programme:

- Initial statement: Why I want to do this course at Liverpool;
- Initial concerns – about the programme itself, studying, accommodation, finance, leaving home and so on.

They are asked to add a third record:

- First impressions – how they had found the first five weeks.

These three records are then formatted by the system and sent to the tutor by e-mail.

To prepare for the second meeting (in about Week 4 of the second semester),

students are asked to collect together any feedback received, whether verbal or written feedback on assignments. Their module marks from the end-of-first-semester exams are also displayed to them (by accessing their Transcript using a link into the University's Student Record System). They are then asked to:

- check their understanding of any comments made or marks received;
- identify any patterns which show strengths;
- identify any patterns of weaknesses (or if preferred, areas for development);
- make a plan for addressing weakness or development of these areas.

Again, when completed the formatted records are sent to the tutor by email.

The preparation for the second year review meeting repeats the exercise of reflecting on feedback received, but has additional sections and questions about work experience, skills developed and overall goals. Students have the option to e-mail these records directly to a careers adviser rather than to their personal tutor.

The electronic system enables departments to tailor these standard exercises to their own needs. Typically a department will use the standard preparation and agenda for the first year, then start to adjust the preparation questions to include those aspects of their own course they particularly want students to reflect on.

From Strivens 2006

Work-experience, volunteering and part-time employment

Many of the recommendations and interventions in the literature relating to improving the employability of students from under-represented groups focus on building a suitable curriculum vitae. Emphases often fall on participation in work placements (Blackwell *et al.* 2001, Mason *et al.* 2003), volunteering, extra-curricular activities (Blasko *et al.* 2003 and Brown and Hesketh 2003) and overseas study (Blasko *et al.* 2003). All are held to be advantageous to graduates in the labour market, while participation in part-time employment - unless related to field of study - tends to be regarded as detrimental to both fruitful study (Bamber and Tett 2000) and success in the graduate labour market (Blasko *et al.* 2003).

However, for the majority of students from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups and mature students, participation in part-time employment is essential (Susan and Williams 2002). Research in Scotland found that 68% of students were working part-time in 1999-2000, compared with 43% three years earlier in 1996/7 (Sinclair and Dale 2000, p.10). Furthermore, the study showed that almost a quarter of first year

students in 1999/2000 were working more than 16 hours per week. Noble (2004) found that generally students who were in paid employment worked more than the maximum 12 hours recommended by the Select Committee on Education and Employment. This led to difficulties in meeting the academic demands of their courses. Likewise, by the end of Walker's (1999) longitudinal project, two thirds of participants were engaged in part time employment, many working for more than 20 hours a week. Only one was in a job relevant to their course. Nevertheless, some institutions have recognised that part-time employment is now the reality for many students, and have developed modules to enable them to extract and reflect on skills developed there, and to relate them to their field of study and career aspirations.

By contrast, course-relevant work experience has a far more positive impact on graduates' experience in the labour market. Blackwell *et al* (2001) do not specifically focus on students from under-represented groups, but they provide data about the potential impact of work experience on employment in the graduate labour market. Of particular interest is a study reported by Blackwell *et al* that draws on HESA data for 74,922 graduates in 33 subject areas. This shows that sandwich courses have a positive impact on labour market employment: graduates from sandwich courses have higher post-graduation employment rates (69%) than students on equivalent non-sandwich courses (55%). In particular, graduates of thick-sandwich courses usually outperform those on equivalent thin-sandwich courses. There are, however, differences across disciplines.

Students from lower socio-economic groups and mature students in particular are less able to participate in relevant work experience and extra-curricular activities due to personal and financial constraints, such as caring for family members, and the need to retain paid employment throughout participation in HE. This exacerbates the labour market disadvantages they face (Brennan and Shah, 2003).

Purcell *et al* (2002) suggest that HEIs and employers need to develop work experience opportunities within undergraduate degree programmes – which offer students relevant work experience and enable them to develop demonstrable skills and competencies. A number of institutions therefore offer or encourage all students - irrespective of discipline - to participate in course-related work placements (Thomas *et al* 2005).

Example 10: HEAdFurther, University of Hull

The HEAdFurther project aims to raise the educational aspirations and achievements of young people, aged 14-16, who are in the public care system in Hull. This is achieved through a mentoring scheme and customised events and activities. Central to the success of this initiative is the mentoring relationship between current university students and young people in care, or who are at risk of being in care. The mentors are recruited by the Learning Partnerships Office; they receive training and are paid a nominal sum of £10 plus expenses for each mentoring session. Students studying for a social work degree are encouraged to apply and benefit from receiving remuneration and accreditation for the hours worked on the project. The mentor maintains regular contact with the young person through email and mobile telephone access. They also meet face-to-face in a venue and at a regularity to suit the young person. Student mentors provide pastoral and academic support by helping the young people to consider educational choices and options, to develop interview skills, and by supporting them through difficulties encountered in school. The mentors in turn receive supervision from the project manager and allocated social worker. It also gives them the opportunity to work with external organisations such as Social Services, the Young People Support Service (YPSS), the Local Education Authority, Connexions, Barnardo's and teachers in schools.

Example 11: Voluntary agencies partnership project, Leeds Metropolitan University

The voluntary agencies partnership project has two strands. The volunteer strand provides volunteers working in partnership agencies with the opportunity to use their volunteering experience as a first step towards gaining a university certificate in Health and Community Care. Volunteers working with partner agencies are invited to compile a portfolio evidencing their vocational and volunteer work. The portfolio has been designed by Social Care staff at Leeds Met and helps provide the necessary advice to assess suitability for social work training. Volunteers receive support from staff at the agencies and from a Project Volunteer Coordinator. The student strand provides quality experience opportunities for FE students which include training and support to enable them to prepare for progression into HE and a career in the social care field. The 8 voluntary agencies take students from the Social Work Access to HE course at Thomas Danby College on work experience. This counts as the work placement required to complete the course. The students complete a number of hours and produce a portfolio for assessment which has been designed by social work staff at Leeds Met to provide the necessary evidence and support from a member of the staff at the agency and from a Project Student Coordinator. The enhanced opportunities for training within the agencies also allow students to make an informed choice about their future career goals.

New vocationally-oriented and work-based learning programmes

Some HEIs maintain that the provision of new vocationally-oriented courses is – almost by definition - attractive to a wider range of students, and perhaps signifies a progressive, forward-thinking institutional approach to provision. In England the introduction and expansion of two-year Foundation Degrees (DfES 2003), which should involve employer collaboration (Foskett 2003), has provided an opportunity for many institutions to create new courses, which are perceived to be of interest to students from under-represented groups, and which are relevant to labour market needs. It should be recognised however that using Foundation Degrees to widen participation may ghettoise students from under-represented groups in lower level qualifications (Jones and Thomas 2005) and give rise to limited labour market opportunities. Work-based learning not only implies radically different curriculum contents, but also has pedagogical implications. Learning can be more relevant to students, but requires teaching that promotes reflection and the ability for students to make links between real world experiences and conceptual understanding.

Example 12: Community Radio Project, University of Glamorgan

The Community Radio Project aims to widen access to education to the local community. It involves running a community radio station (in partnership with a local group). The local radio service is broadcast from the University to the town, reinforcing the University's role in the community and breaking down perceived notions of 'town versus gown'. The project seeks to make education more interesting and accessible to local people by providing a radio training programme which includes 'life skills' such as communication literacy and numeracy alongside more conventional radio production skills. The project also offers local school students radio-related activities and training on the University campus, providing them with an alternative view of higher education. Local and student volunteers work together at the radio station improving relations and providing opportunities for informal learning about the HE sector. Approximately 200 local young people per year become involved in training and broadcasting.

Example 13: Foundation Degree in Music Technology, North Devon College

The Foundation Degree in Music Technology was set up to provide a vocational training with state of the art industry standard equipment, which gives graduates the opportunity to end up in a range of possible careers. In addition, the course seeks to increase progression into Higher Education in North Devon, especially for students from lower socio-economic groups.

Example 14: The Derby Learning Through Work Scheme

The overall aims of the Learning Through Work Scheme is to enhance personal employability and organisational effectiveness by stimulating the demand and extending the provision for learner managed work-based learning. The Scheme makes available to learners a quality assured, flexible, readily accessible and supportive framework for the delivery of undergraduate and postgraduate awards achieved through work-based learning. The Scheme makes wide use of learning through work, the Learndirect electronic learning environment for work-based learning. During the first three years of the scheme 505 learners have been engaged, and more than 200 awards have been made, ranging from short awards to full first and master's degrees.

Example 15: FD/BA/BSc in Professional Development, Canterbury Christchurch University

The programme is designed for people with experience and responsibility in the workplace who wish to integrate study of an academic or vocational subject with academic study that focuses on the workplace. The purpose of the programme is to provide an alternative approach to part-time study through which experiential learning from a student's workplace develops students into reflective practitioners and is rewarded with academic credit. The programme offered is a generic programme, accessible to all irrespective of occupation or subject specialism, which utilises the resource of the academic and vocational courses offered within BA/BSc Scheme. The kernel of this programme presents a model which allows integration of elements achieved by work based learning with any academic or vocational subjects chosen whether obviously vocationally relevant or not.

9. Proactive development of self-confidence, job search and application skills for students from disadvantaged groups

Graduates from non-traditional groups can be understood to face two forms of barriers in relation to success in the labour market. Blasko *et al* (2003) use the terms direct and indirect barriers to success – the former refer to those where students from particular backgrounds experience disadvantage in the labour market when compared to contemporaries with similar educational backgrounds and experiences. For example, two people who gained the same degree classification from the same institution may be treated differently as a consequence of personal characteristics such as class, ethnicity, age, gender etc. Blasko *et al* group these and other characteristics under the umbrella term ‘socio-biographical’ background. In the case of indirect barriers, disadvantage occurs primarily as a consequence of earlier educational opportunities, and subsequent choices, including primary and secondary schooling, higher education institution attended, subject studied, and degree classification. These two types of barriers are discussed in more detail below.

“Indirect” barriers in the labour market

Some employers discriminate quite systematically and explicitly, selecting graduates with specific educational characteristics, such as good A-levels, perceived status of HEI attended, subjects studied (Pitcher and Purcell 1998). Brown and Hesketh’s research provides one example of how such discriminatory selection operates. One organisation they studied received 14,000 applications for 428 vacancies; graduates from Oxford University had a one in eight chance of success, while applicants from new universities had a one in 235 chance (Brown and Hesketh, 2003). Related studies by Chevalier and Conlon (2003) examined cohorts of graduates from 1985, 1990 and 1995, and used econometric modelling to explore the impact of institutional type on the economic return to graduates. These authors controlled for personal characteristics (e.g. class), and still found that more prestigious universities (especially from the Russell Group) create higher financial returns to their graduates when compared to those from other institutions. Predictably, this trend becomes more pronounced when the returns to graduates from elite universities are viewed in relation to those from post-1992 institutions. This reinforces social and cultural divisions in the labour market, because the Russell group and other pre-1992 universities enrol fewer

students from non-traditional and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, and because working class students are concentrated in post-1992 universities (Keep and Mayhew 2004, Leathwood 2004). It should also be acknowledged that non-traditional graduates (e.g. those from lower socio-economic groups) may lack the financial resources required for geographical relocation, and may therefore be less able to capitalise on career opportunities (Dolton and Silles 2001).

Finally, it is relevant to note that large and prestigious employers tend to focus their recruitment drives in particular HEIs - usually pre-1992 universities requiring high A level entry scores (Connor *et al* 2004). This will serve to create barriers to career progression for many ethnic minority students (Shiner and Modood 2002), and other under-represented groups.

“Direct” barriers in the labour market

Some research suggests that graduates from non-traditional backgrounds do less well in the labour market, even when other variables such as entry qualifications, institution attended, subject studied and degree classification are controlled for (see e.g. Hogarth *et al* 1997). It can be argued however that this is not surprising, as recruitment procedures often serve as a process of filtering – though not one which is in any way restricted to grading on the basis of certified skills and merits. For Brown and Hesketh (2003) such processes can serve to debar those lacking the relevant cultural markers: “It is very difficult for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain elite credentials, let alone the ‘social’ education that is a crucial feature of elite employability.” (Brown and Hesketh, 2003, p.7).

Brown and Hesketh (2003) conclude that for graduate jobs in ‘blue-chip’ companies a degree is a prerequisite, but that thereafter positions are allocated on the basis of social capital, favouring those from upper and middle class backgrounds. Purcell *et al* (2002) find in their qualitative research that many employers do not believe that social class is a significant variable in graduate recruitment. However, Purcell *et al* maintain that discrimination occurs – albeit in implicit ways. This may take effect in certain types of competency-based recruitment processes, which require the confidence that middle class ‘cultural capital’ typically creates. Purcell *et al* studied various aspects of the practices employed in this context, and found that “most of the assessment centres ... included structured events that allowed self-confident and articulate candidates to shine” (p.15).

There may also be some senses in which non-traditional graduates exclude themselves from application processes for posts for which they are qualified. For instance, Hills (2003) presents evidence suggesting that working class students may wrongly assume that they are unsuitable for some graduate posts. Also, they may fear that they will not fit in with colleagues, once recruited. With respect to ethnic

groups both Connor *et al* (2004) and Hills (2003) identify a lack of ethnic minority role models, especially at middle and senior management levels, a situation which they believe contributes to creating low expectations amongst such students, and those in HEIs who advise them.

Age can also be seen to position graduates in a negative way. Hill argues that some employers appear to prefer younger graduates, particularly in fields such as Law (Hills 2003). However, in the study by Purcell *et al* (2002) the question of self-disqualification is again raised. Here, employers maintained that mature students de-select themselves from 'fast-track' programmes on the grounds that they are more likely to have dependants, are less likely to be geographically mobile and may be less willing to undertake the kinds of activities (frequent travel, long and unpredictable working hours and/or moves within the UK or abroad) expected of graduate careers.

Many students do not take advantage of careers services, or else do so only in their final year of study (Hills 2003). There is also the perception amongst employers that many students are ill-prepared for selection procedures (Purcell *et al* 2002). In relation to managing the process of gaining employment and developing their careers, Brown and Hesketh (2003) identify two typified approaches used by students, those of the 'purist' and the 'player'. Whilst the authors emphasise that these two approaches represent the ends of a broad continuum of the ways in which students can – and do – engage with the context of graduate employment, the distinction is useful when addressing the evolving attitudes of learners and graduates to developments in the labour market. In contrast to purists, who hold fast to notions of meritocratic recruitment practices (and the belief that the candidate who can best fulfil the role will be appointed), players will be more instrumental and calculating in their endeavours to secure appropriate employment. The authors identified a range of job search strategies adopted by the "players": they make greater use of careers information services, are more likely to attend workshops simulating group exercises at assessment centres; they practice psychometric testing and capitalise on social contacts in order to develop and refine their strategies.

One important issue raised here is how far non-traditional learners are positioned within this spectrum – do they generally emerge as players, or are they more likely to adopt purist-style approaches? It may be possible to anticipate that because such students lack access to information and reserves of social and cultural capital, they may be less able to employ the tactics of the players.

Finally, under-utilisation of career services and low levels of confidence by students from non-traditional groups indicates that careers education needs to be more proactive. Indeed, Hills (2003) found that careers staff recognise this, as many students do not know where to look for information, or fail to use it. Student services in general are becoming more centralised and proactive in reaching

students who have the most to benefit from their services (Layer *et al* 2002), but there is still a need for greater effort to reach those students (Dodgson and Bolam 2002 and Thomas *et al* 2002). Some institutions are now seeking to reach students from under-represented groups through mentoring schemes and specialised activities and events.

Example 16: Diversity Mentoring project, University of Manchester

The Diversity Mentoring project targets students from lower socio-economic groups, minority ethnic students and disabled students. It aims to aid the retention of the targeted students by providing mentors from their chosen career field, to assist students to see the benefit of higher education in relation to the chosen career and to improve their employability skills. Mentors come from the private, public and voluntary sectors. Mentoring is supported by job skills workshops which are delivered by graduate recruiters.

Example 17: The Impact Project, Universities of Huddersfield, Bradford, Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan

The Impact Project is designed to enhance the employment skills and opportunities for ethnic minority students. It offers intensive information, guidance and job-search support to UK ethnic minority students at each of the four institutions. Activities include one-to-one discussions, workshops on CVs and application forms, and training for interviews and employer assessment procedures. The Project also works with employers who are part of the Employers' Supporters Club. This provides employer-led events on the opportunities and requirements in different sectors and provides opportunities for mentoring and work experience. All the activities are designed to raise the confidence of ethnic minority students and to give them the skills to help them progress more effectively into employment. Evaluation shows that the Project has had a positive impact on employers, students and graduates.

From Thomas *et al* 2002, pp.28-29

10. Improving employers' practices

Higher education institutions tend to focus on improving the employability of graduates. However, employers' practices can discriminate against graduates from under-represented groups. There may therefore be a role for HEIs to promote good practice amongst employers. Purcell *et al* (2002, p.16) conclude from their research that good practice adopted by employers encompasses the following characteristics:

- Recruitment is intertwined with marketing – in other words employers have a business case for diversity and use new approaches to reach students from different institutions, backgrounds and ages.
- They are very clear about the skills and competencies sought, and therefore avoid requirements that indirectly exclude some graduates (e.g. flexibility of working hours and/or place).
- They develop effective networks with professional associations and HEIs to help ensure they reach the type of graduate they need, and that these potential employees are encouraged to apply.
- They offer flexible work patterns.
- They align practice with policy and manage human resources strategically, even when aspects of the recruitment process are outsourced. This involves staff training to help eradicate bias from the recruitment process, and ensuring commitment at all levels of the organisation, e.g. via a 'senior champion'.

11. Conclusions

Over the best part of the past decade, the widening participation agenda has evolved considerably. If initially the focus was upon recruitment and – more specifically – classed patterns of engagement in HE, more recently the agenda has sought to accommodate other issues such as retention, student success and employability. The preceding discussion has examined some of the ways in which employability has been addressed throughout the student lifecycle. It is apparent from existing research that the opportunities for under-represented groups to succeed in the graduate labour market do not compare favourably with those from more established backgrounds. Non-traditional graduates face both direct and indirect barriers in the labour market, leading to lower rates of success in gaining employment, and less likelihood of gaining graduate-status posts. Direct barriers are related to the personal characteristics of these graduates, such as class, ethnicity, age, gender etc. In the case of indirect barriers, disadvantage occurs primarily as a consequence of earlier educational opportunities, and subsequent choices, including primary and secondary schooling, higher education institution attended, subject studied, and degree classification.

We suggest that employability, as with widening participation more generally, needs to be addressed throughout the student lifecycle, and not just as an additional option for final year students. Thus students need information and support in relation to employability issues from an early stage, and such provision should be embedded into the learning experience, as there may be limited opportunities for these students to engage in extra curricular activities or to access the appropriate services. It is essential that higher education fosters the cultural and social capital of all students, particularly those who have less access via family, friends and previous experiences, to enable them to have the confidence, skills and knowledge to succeed in the labour market. In addition higher education institutions can play a role in improving employers' practices which currently disadvantage certain segments of the labour market.

Information on graduate employment and progression opportunities can be made available to those still in compulsory education in order to assist them to make better informed decisions about which courses and institutions will best meet their employability needs.

Students' disciplinary and institutional commitment and motivation can be enhanced in the early stages of engagement with an HEI through pre-entry, induction and first year activities. These activities should include information and guidance about employability issues, as for many students this is an important reason for embarking on higher education study.

Pedagogy and curriculum are key vehicles through which students from under-represented groups in particular can be supported to make both a successful transition into higher education, and to develop the skills, confidence and experiences that will enhance their employability. Pedagogy needs to be active and engaging. The curriculum should be designed to offer integrated opportunities for students to develop awareness of their employability skills and attributes; to participate in and reflect upon work experience opportunities; to improve their self-confidence particularly in relation to the graduate labour market; and to improve their search and application skills. PDP offers a semi-integrated approach to reflection and the development of employability skills awareness. The integration of work experience, and the application of subject-relevant learning to volunteering and part-time employment can assist students, especially those who are less able to participate in extra curricular activities. Alternatively, vocationally-oriented and work-based learning programmes can be offered. An integrated approach, aligned to the curriculum, is particularly important for students who are unable to commit additional time to HE-related activities due to work commitments and other responsibilities. In addition, students can be assisted to hone their job search skills via proactive strategies, e.g. through engaging in specialist events, mentoring and networks. However, it should be acknowledged that even in combination, such initiatives are unlikely to fully resolve patterns of comparative disadvantage amongst graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds. It is only via a lifecycle approach, involving the integration of employability activities into the wider remit of higher education, that these students will be able to develop their understanding, commitment, contacts and skills to prosper in progressing beyond degree level into the graduate labour market or postgraduate education.

12. Reflective questions

These questions are intended to assist you to take a lifecycle approach to developing employability, which will have the maximum benefit for students from under-represented groups.

- i.** Is information about general and subject-specific employability opportunities included in outreach activities with young people and their parents, and for potential adult entrants?
- ii.** Do pre-entry, induction and first year activities encourage institutional and disciplinary motivation and commitment by improving awareness of links to the graduate labour market?
- iii.** Is teaching sufficiently active, engaging and collaborative to improve the transition into higher education and enhance the development of employability skills?
- iv.** Does the curriculum design facilitate the development of the awareness of employability skills and attributes?
- v.** Does the curriculum offer integrated opportunities for “work experience” and reflection to enable all students to develop their CV?
- vi.** Does the learning environment develop the confidence, self-esteem and aspiration of students with regards to applying for graduate employment?
- vii.** Are students from under-represented groups proactively supported to develop their confidence, job search and application skills?
- viii.** To what extent does the institution engage with employers to improve their recruitment practices with students from under-represented groups?

Biography

Liz Thomas is senior adviser for widening participation at the Higher Education Academy. She is actively involved in research, policy and practice related to widening participation and improving students' learning experience. Liz is particularly interested in the retention and success of students from under-represented groups and in institutional change to support this. She has managed and participated in national and international research projects on these and related issues. She is co-editor of the peer reviewed journal *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* and a member of the editorial boards of *Higher Education Quarterly* and the *Journal of Access Policy and Practice*.

Rob Jones is an education researcher, working in the fields of higher education policy, learning and teaching and student diversity. Rob's PhD used a critical discourse approach to examine the implementation of widening participation in the context of further education. He has since worked at the Higher Education Academy's Sociology, Anthropology and Politics Subject Centre at the University of Birmingham, researching the impact of widening participation for staff and students within these disciplines. He has also worked at the University of Edinburgh, in the Centre for Educational Sociology. Rob is book reviews editor for the journal *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*.

References

- Abramson, M. and P. Jones (2004). Empowering Under-represented Students to Succeed in Higher Education. In Saunders, D., Brosnan, K. and Walker, M. (eds) *Learning Transformations: Changing Learners, Organisations and Communities*. London: Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education, pp.347-353.
- Action on Access (2005). Progression to higher education from vocational, work-based and work-related learning. *Making a Difference: The Impact of Aimhigher*. Bradford: Action on Access.
- Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class. Issues of exclusion and inclusion*. London: RoutledgeFalmer
- Bamber, J. and Tett, L. (2000) Transforming the learning experiences of non-traditional students: A perspective from higher education, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22 (1). pp.57-75.
- Bamber, J. and Tett, L. (2001) Ensuring integrative learning experiences for non-traditional students in Higher education, *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 3 (1), pp.8-16
- Blackwell, A., Bowes, L., Harvey, L., Hesketh, A.J. and Knight, P.T. (2001) Transforming work experience in higher education, *British Educational Research Journal* 27 (3), pp.269-285
- Blasko, Z., Brennan, J., Little, B., Shah, T. (2003), *Access to what?: analysis of factors determining graduate employability*. London: Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, Open University.
- Blundell, R., Dearden, L. and Sianesi, B. (2005) Evaluating the Impact of Education on Earnings in the UK: Models, methods and results from the NCDS, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A* 168(3), pp. 473-512.
- Brennan, J. and Shah, T. (2003) *Access to what? Converting education opportunity into employment opportunity*. London: Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, Open University.
- Brennan, J., Mills, J., Shah, T., Woodley, A. (2000), Lifelong Learning for Employment and Equity: the Role of Part-time Degrees, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 54 (4), pp.411-418

Brown, P. and Hesketh, A.J. (2003), *The social construction of graduate employability*. ESRC research report. Available from: www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/esrcinfocentre/plain_english_summaries/econ_performance_and_development/economic_growth/index330.aspx

Chevalier, A. and Conlon, G. (2003) *Does it Pay to Attend a Prestigious University? [Discussion Paper No. 33]* London: London School of Economics, Centre for the Economics of Education.

Conlon, G. (2001), *The Incidence and Outcomes Associated with the Late Attainment of Qualifications in the UK. [Discussion Paper No. 13]* London: London School of Economics, Centre for the Economics of Education.

Connor, H., Tvers, C., Modood, T. and Hillage J. (2004) *Why the difference? A closer look at Higher Education minority ethnic students and graduates, [Research Report 552]*. London: DfES Publications

Croucher, K., Evans, M. and Leacy, A. (2005) *What happens next? A report on the first destinations of 2003 graduates with disabilities*. Sheffield: Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services Disability Development Network

Dearden, L., McGranahan, L. and Sianesi, B. (2004) *Returns to Education for the 'Marginal Learner': evidence from the BCS70. [Discussion Paper No. 45]* London: London School of Economics, Centre for the Economics of Education.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2003) *The future of higher education, Cmd 5735*. London: The Stationery Office

Dodgson, R. and Bolam, H. (2002) *Student retention, support and widening participation in the North East of England*. Universities for the North East. Available from: www.unis4ne.ac.uk/unew/projectsadditionalfiles/wp/retention_report.pdf. (Accessed 10 September 2006).

Dodgson, R. and Whitham, H. (2004) *Learner Experience of Foundation Degrees in the North East of England: Access, Support and Progression*. Newcastle: Aimhigher in the North East

Dolton, P. and Silles, M. (2001), *Over-Education in the Graduate Labour Market: some evidence from the Alumni data. [Discussion Paper No. 9]* London: London School of Economics, Centre for the Economics of Education.

Foskett, R. (2003) *Employer and needs-led curriculum planning in higher education: a cross-sector case study of foundation degree development*. Paper presented at the *British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

- Glover, D., Law, S. and Youngman, A. (2002) Graduateness and Employability: student perceptions of the personal outcomes of university education, *Research into Post Compulsory Education*, 7.3, pp.293-306.
- Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H, Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006) *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*. Bristol: HEFCE
- Hartwell, H. and Fairbrother, C. (2006) Enhancing the first year experience through personal tutoring, in Thomas, L. and Hixenbaugh, P. (eds) *Personal Tutoring in Mass Higher Education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books Ltd, pp.59-71.
- HEFCE (2001) *Strategies for Widening Participation in Higher Education. A Publication to Good Practice*, Report 01/36. Bristol: HEFCE. Available from: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2001/01_36.htm (accessed 15 May 2006)
- Hills, J. (2003) *Stakeholder perceptions of the employability of non-traditional students*. London: London Metropolitan University. Available from: www.londonmet.ac.uk/employability/projects/gem/publication/home.cfm (accessed 15 May 2006)
- Hoad, J. (2001) NPC/98/10/B: *Widening participation in higher education: funding proposals HEFCE consultation 98/39. Summary of responses sought and submission from the National Postgraduate Committee (NPC)* Hogarth, T., Purcell, K., and Wilson, R. (1997), *The Participation of Non-traditional Students in Higher Education*. Warwick: Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick
- Jones, R. and Thomas, L. (2005) The 2003 UK Government Higher Education White Paper: A critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda, *Journal of Education Policy*, 20 (5), pp.615-630.
- Jones, R. and Thomas, L. (2006) Participation in learning related to health and social care, in Uden, T. and Aldridge, F. (eds) *Widening Participation in Learning Strategy. Report of the Better Information Task Group*. London: Widening Participation in Learning Strategy Unit, Department of Health, pp.44-78
- Keenan, C. (2005) Stepping Stones 2HE: Students working to bridge the transition gap, Innovations in Student Success Conference, February 2006. Available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/4227.htm (accessed 22 September 2006).
- Keep, E. and Mayhew, K. (2004) The Economic and Distributional Implications of Current Policies on Higher Education, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 20 (2), pp.298-314

Leathwood, C. (2004), A Critique of Institutional Inequalities in Higher Education (or an Alternative to Hypocrisy for Higher Educational Policy) *Theory and Research in Education*, 2 (1), pp.31-48

Little, B, Connor, H, Lebeau, Y, Pierce, D, Sinclair, E, Thomas, L and Yarrow, K (2003) *Vocational higher education – does it meet employers’ needs?* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Mason, G., Williams, G, Cranmer S. and Guile, D. (2003) *How Much Does Higher Education Enhance the Employability of Graduates?* Bristol: Institute of Education, University of London and HEFCE, available from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2003/rd13_03/default.asp (accessed 15 May 2006).

May, H. and Harper, H. (2005) *Vocational Admissions Literature Review*. York: Higher Education Academy (unpublished).

Metcalfe, H. (1997) *Class and higher education: the participation of young people from the lower social classes*. London: Council for Industry and Higher Education.

Noble, J. (2004) *Student responses to early leaving*. Available from www.staffs.ac.uk/institutes/access/docs/28604uk2.doc (accessed 15 May 2006)

Pedagogy for Employability Group (2004, reissued 2006) *Pedagogy for employability, Learning and Employability Series One*. York: The Higher Education Academy and ESECT. Available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record§ion=generic&id=357 (accessed 15 May 2006).

Pitcher, J. and Purcell, K. (1998) Diverse Expectations and Access to Opportunities: is there a graduate labour market? *Higher Education Quarterly* 52 (2), pp.179-203.

Purcell, K. and Hogarth, T. (1999) *Graduate Opportunities, Social Class and Age: Employers’ Recruitment Strategies in the new graduate labour market*. London: Council for Industry and Higher Education.

Purcell, K., Morley, M. and Rowley, G. (2002) *Employers in the New Graduate Labour Market: recruiting from a wider spectrum of graduates*, Bristol: Employment Studies Unit, University of the West of England

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2002) *Progress files for higher education*, available from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/default.asp>

Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. and Noble, J. (2005) *From life crisis to lifelong learning. Rethinking working-class ‘drop out’ from higher education*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available from: www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubid=730 (accessed 15 May 2006).

Ramsden P. (1992) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* London: Routledge

Read, B., Archer, L. and Leathwood, C. (2003) 'Challenging Cultures? Student Conceptions of 'Belonging' and 'Isolation' at a Post-1992 University' in *Studies in Higher Education* 28 (3), pp.261-277.

Shiner, M. and Modood, T. (2002) 'Help or hindrance? Higher education and the route to ethnic equality' in *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23 (2), 209-232.

Sinclair, H. and Dale, L. (2000) The effect of student tuition fees on the diversity of intake within a Scottish new university. Paper presented at *British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*, 7-9 September 2000, Cardiff University.

Smith, J., McKnight, A. and Naylor, R. (2000) Graduate Employability: Policy, and performance in higher education, *Economic Journal*, 110 (464), pp.F382-411.

Strivens, J. (2006) Transforming personal tutors into personal development tutors at the University of Liverpool. To be published electronically by the Higher Education Academy. Available from:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/curriculum/ecasebook_strivens.pdf

Susan, C. and Williams, J. 2002 'The reluctant workforce: undergraduates' part-time employment', *Journal of Education and Training* 44 (1), pp.5-10.

Thomas, L. (2002) Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus, *Journal of Education Policy*, 17 (4), pp.423-442.

Thomas, L. (2005) Progression beyond higher education. Paper presented to the *British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*, Glamorgan University, September 2005.

Thomas, L. and May, H., with Harrop, H., Houston, M., Knox, H., Lee, M. F., Osborne, M., Pudner, H. and Trotman, C. (2005) *From the margins to the mainstream: embedding widening participation in higher education*. London: Universities UK.

Thomas, L. and Quinn, J. (forthcoming) *First Generation Entrants in Higher Education: An international analysis*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Thomas, L., Quinn, J., Slack, K. and Casey, L. (2002) *Student services: Effective approaches to retaining students in higher education*, Institute for Access Studies: Staffordshire University.

Thomas, L., Yorke, M. and Woodrow, M. (2001) Access and retention in Layer, G. (ed) 2002 *Student Success in Higher Education*. Bradford: Action on Access.

UCAS (2002) *Paving the way*. Cheltenham: UCAS

UNITE (2003) *Student Living Report 2003*. London: MORI

Walker, L. (1998) Longitudinal study of drop-out and continuing students who attended the Pre-University Summer School at the University of Glasgow, *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 18 (3), pp.217 – 233.

Warren, D. (2002) 'Curriculum Design in a Context of Widening Participation in Higher Education.' *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 1 (1), pp.85-89.

Yorke, M. (1999) *Leaving Early: Undergraduate non-completion in higher education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer

Yorke, M. (2004, reissued 2006) *Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Available from:
www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record7section=generic&id=336 (accessed 15 May 2006).

Yorke, M. and Knight, P.T. (2004, reissued 2006) *Embedding Employability into the Curriculum*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Available from:
www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record§ion=generic&id=338 (accessed 15 May 2006).

Yorke, M. and Thomas, L. (2003) Improving the Retention of Students from Lower Socio-economic Groups, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 25 (1), pp.63-74.

Embedding employability in the context of widening participation

Published by:
The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York YO10 5BR
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1904 717500
Email: enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk
www.heacademy.ac.uk

ISBN 978-1-905788-32-3
Price: £10
© The Higher Education Academy
February 2007

All rights reserved. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, criticism or review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, graphic, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, taping or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of the publishers.

To request copies in large print or in a different format, please contact the Higher Education Academy.

The Higher Education Academy

Our mission is to help institutions, discipline groups and all staff to provide the best possible learning experience for their students. We provide an authoritative and independent voice on policies that influence student learning experiences, support institutions, lead and support the professional development and recognition of staff in higher education, and lead the development of research and evaluation to improve the quality of the student learning experience. The Higher Education Academy is an independent organisation funded by grants from the four UK higher education funding bodies, subscriptions from higher education institutions, and grant and contract income for specific initiatives.