# 7STEPS
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# 7 Steps to:
# Enhancing Student Employability

## Overview

Students have multiple reasons for coming to university. However, they repeatedly voice that the desire to increase their long-term job prospects is of most importance (e.g. Options 2015). The significant cost of a university education further raises the significance of employability for students, HEIs and staff. This is manifested in the ways that the quality of HE provision is judged. Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data are used to rate institutions on their employability performance through university league tables. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is also using employability metrics as a way of judging university performance. This is also reflected in the axiom 'a degree is not enough', which has been around since the massification of HE in the 1990s; with large numbers of graduates needing to do more than just have a degree to make themselves stand out in the graduate job market (Tomlinson, 2008).

Employability is not just about getting a job but rather it is about developing '*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*' (Yorke, 2004, p8). Addressing employability successfully requires staff engagement and a pedagogic approach that infuses the curriculum; making room for work experience, employer involvement, career management, personal development planning, and the opportunity to develop graduate attributes (Pegg et al, 2012). However, employability need not conflict with discipline teaching and traditional academic standards. Examples of good practice that enhance employability are typically creative, rich, challenging and motivating experiences for staff as well as students and therefore represent examples of effective teaching.

## 1. Examine what you are offering

Understanding your employability offer is key to knowing what you do well and what could be improved. The DLHE data is used to construct league tables (e.g. The Complete University Guide) and it is to be included in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Use it to think about how your programme compares to that of your competitors. Are they doing better, and if so, why? Conduct an employability audit of your curriculum (e.g. the HEA Mapping Employability Toolkit). This will establish a more detailed picture of how employability is handled in your area and will facilitate conversations with colleagues about practice and how to improve it.

## 2. Enable professional work experience

It is established that graduates with work experience, particularly professional quality work experience, are more employable (Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Hall et al 2009, Lowden et al, 2011). Employers seek work-ready graduates with work experience (e.g. High Fliers, 2016; Wakeham, 2016) because it provides exposure to the skills, attributes and experiences that employers require in the workplace e.g. commercial awareness, problem-solving, interpersonal skills and resilience. Academics also report discernible improvements in motivation, attitude and attainment after students return from work experience (Jones et al, 2015); there is therefore a wider academic argument for the inclusion of work experience in the curriculum. Does your programme offer work experience? If it is optional, what is the uptake? What can you do to get more students taking up work experience? The Careers and Employability Service supports students seeking work experience opportunities.

## 3. Involve employers

Beyond providing work experience, employers and alumni can be used in numerous ways such as: to host field/workplace visits; as guest speakers; through External Advisory Panels to input into curriculum development; to provide case-studies/real world examples/project ideas; to provide research/consultancy projects; to get involved with assessing students presentations; and to act as mentors. Employer engagement requires nurturing, but these connections have the potential to lead to varied opportunities for staff and students. They offer students relevant experiences, and this helps them to promote their relevant knowledge and experience when they enter the job market. Does your programme maximise opportunities for employer engagement? Stanbury et al (undated) provide a toolkit on engaging employers to enhance teaching and learning that will help you think about your options.

## 4. Develop and promote skills and attributes

At the heart of employability is a need for students to evidence and articulate their competencies and experiences. Students therefore need to have relevant and rich experiences that allow them to develop and demonstrate the skills and attributes employers value. These are typically the same qualities that we as academics value too e.g. verbal and written communication, analytical skills, and initiative.

Gedye, S and Ivaldi, F. (2016). 7 Steps to: Enhancing Student Employability, 7 Steps Series, Teaching and Learning Support (TLS), University of Plymouth.

# References

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Yorke, M. (2004). Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not. Learning and Employability Series One. ESECT and The Higher Education Academy, **https://www.heacademy. ac.uk/sites/default/files/id116_employability_in_higher_ education_336.pdf**

Programmes should therefore have a coherent approach to skills across the curriculum, providing rich opportunities for skills development in both teaching activities and assessments, and helping students to recognise, reflect on, and articulate the skills and qualities acquired through the curriculum. The Plymouth Compass supports skills and attributes development and recognition, identifying key skills and attributes in four areas - academic, civic, professional, and personal.

## 5. Develop students' careers management and workplace understandings

Unless encouraged to engage, undergraduates commonly delay taking careers action until late into their programme. Embedding career management and getting students to think about this from Stage one is critical if students are to take control of their career planning and engage with the opportunities that are available to them. Some programmes embed careers learning across the curriculum, and others opt for discreet modules. Whatever your design, a good programme will be developmental in nature and the Careers and Employability Service offer programme teams tailored support with this.  Programme teams should also consider possibilities to embed workplace understandings by using applied examples/case studies, real world activities (e.g. mock consultancy), and workplace relevant assessments (e.g. present work as a funding application).

## 6. Support Personal Development Planning

Work experience, skills development, and applied learning opportunities are most effective when combined with personal development planning (PDP). This is because students do not necessarily understand what is valuable about their experiences. Students need support to reflect and to articulate what they have gained from their experiences, and to work out what else they need to do within and beyond the curriculum to enhance their employability. The university e-portfolio Pebblepad can be used to assist with this. Through discussions and tasks (such as a mock job application), Personal Tutors can facilitate their tutee's ability to understand their experiences, qualities, and aspirations. They can encourage tutees to tailor their plans to meet their own needs, and to be pro-active in taking up extra-curricular opportunities (e.g. Plymouth Extra, Plymouth Connect). Students can demonstrate how they stand out from the crowd when seeking employment, by providing more details about this additional learning and achievement through their Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) and the Plymouth Award.

## 7. Promote employability beyond the curriculum

Beyond a degree programme, a wide range of support services and opportunities are available. Some students access these independently but not all students are confident and pro-active about their career development. Academic staff can play an important role in encouraging uptake by showing an interest in their students' aspirations and development, and promoting the various opportunities the university has to offer. Careers and Employability provide a wide range of services including: employer talks, insights from alumni, Accelerate skills workshops, networking events, careers fairs, employability and enterprise competitions (FLUX and Hotseat) and tailored careers guidance. Students can get involved with enterprise such as through the Futures Entrepreneurship Centre, the BETA Enterprise Programme, and the Formation Zone. Even if students do not want to set up their own business, enterprise activities can help them develop highly regarded workplace skills such as creativity and initiative. The university provides opportunities for volunteering, summer projects, work experience, sports, clubs, societies, expeditions etc. You can find out more about these and promote these to your students via Plymouth Extra  and through University of Plymouth Student Union 'Activities'.

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