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Inclusion and employability: Supporting *all* students to become future-ready graduates through the curriculum

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Abstract

Whilst the notion of inclusive curriculum has become increasingly important in UK higher education (Hockings, 2010), employability is still a neglected aspect of this discussion in most non-vocational disciplines, as it continues to be perceived as a secondary concern of the university, predominantly addressed through extra-curricular activity rather than being an integral aspect of teaching and learning. This paper argues that it is critical for these two areas to be considered together through the curriculum design process to best serve the increasingly diverse student population accessing higher education today.

The paper will discuss how we can support *all* students to become future-ready graduates and reflect upon a post-1992 university's journey towards achieving this by integrating employability within the curriculum.

1 Introduction

Participation rates in HE are growing and, as a result, the demographic profile of the student population and their reasons for choosing university are changing. In response to this shifting profile, educators must review the assumptions made in curriculum design, taking into account the experiences of this diverse student population, and empowering them to achieve their personal aspirations by preparing them with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to successfully navigate life after university in an uncertain and ambiguous world.

Whilst the notion of inclusive curriculum has become increasingly important in UK higher education (Hockings, 2010), employability is still a neglected aspect of this discussion, as it continues to be perceived as a secondary concern of the university. This paper argues that it is critical for these two areas to be considered together through the curriculum development process, especially in universities that serve a diverse student population that probably would not have accessed university a generation ago.

2 What is the world that we are preparing students for?

Barnett and Coate (2005:53) describe the 21st century as being “characterized by (...) fluidity, fuzziness, instability, fragility, unpredictability, indeterminacy, turbulence, changeability, [and] contestability.” It is difficult to disagree with this, considering (1) how the world has changed in the 15 years since their paper was written and (2) the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all facets of our lives.

The Future of Skills: Employment in 2030 report investigates how employment will change moving forward. The research has identified key trends – including environmental

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sustainability, urbanisation, increasing inequality, and technological change – that will impact the types of jobs available and the skills required in the future. Through this study, they predict that approximately one tenth of current occupations will grow and one fifth will shrink, with the prospects of the rest unknown. As such, many graduates are likely to move into roles and career paths that have not yet been created.

3 What do students need to be able to do in this world?

Considering the ambiguous nature of the 21st century, then, future-ready graduates require not only specialised knowledge, but also broad-based competencies that allow them to remain resilient to change. As Lines (2012:7-8) argues, subject-specific skills “are likely to erode at an increasing rate as technology advances,” which is why “employers are seeking ‘change makers’ as much as those who can adapt to change.”

The Future of Skills report provides support for a focus on 21st century skills (World Economic Forum, 2015), including higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving; interpersonal skills, such as social perception and cultural competency; and systems thinking, “i.e. the ability to recognise, understand and act on interconnections in sociotechnical systems” (Bakhshi et al., 2017:14). Such capabilities will allow graduates not only to navigate but to thrive in an era defined by rapid technological change and globalisation.

4 How do we support, enable, and empower all students to achieve this?

Taking this into consideration, it is vital that universities recognise this future and prepare students accordingly by facilitating the development of relevant knowledge, skills and competencies. This will become their toolkit for success, arming them with the capability to self-assess, recognise opportunities, and continually grow their knowledge and skills. I argue that this is best achieved by integrating employability development within the curriculum. From this perspective, “Employability is (...) about learning” and “the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner,” with employment being “a by-product of this enabling process” (Harvey, 2003:3).

4.1 Understanding our students

As a post-1992 provider, Kingston University serves a diverse student population: two thirds meet at least one indicator of disadvantage, half are the first in their families to enter HE, and nearly 60% are from Black and ethnic minority communities. Wanting to understand the life-experiences of our students, I conducted action research which identified that students juggle multifaceted priorities alongside their studies, including financial, familial, and/or caring responsibilities. As such, they can be strategic learners, perceiving their studies as a means to an end – namely, a good job that will allow them to progress in life. Therefore, we have found that only a small percentage of students engage in extra-curricular activities, i.e. the traditional vehicle through which students develop the skills and experiences that prepare them for the world of work. The majority instead focus on completing the compulsory elements of their degree programmes, as this is what they are able to engage with and prioritise. With extra-curricular activities being less accessible to a diversifying student population, I argue that significant experiences must instead be facilitated through the core curriculum. This is why integrating employability is so important and why it must form an essential aspect of the inclusive curriculum agenda.

4.2 Integrating employability into the curriculum

Within teaching and learning scholarship, enquiry-based approaches are regarded as high-impact pedagogies (Pegg et al. 2012; Cress et al. 2010) that not only enable students to gain

disciplinary knowledge but also provide them with significant experiences that (1) facilitate the application of theoretical learning in authentic scenarios; (2) develop a range of 21st century skills and competencies; and (3) expose students to potential career pathways. Such significant experiences are an inclusive alternative to internships and placements, which have been proven to increase student success in securing graduate roles (Brooks and Youngson, 2016), but which are ultimately not accessible or scalable to *all* students, especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Enquiry-based approaches such as problem-based learning and design thinking also ask students to access and practice higher order skills to solve real-world problems, by connecting and applying their previous learning to create new ways of thinking and doing. Cultivating such entrepreneurial capability is vital when we think about the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) (Johansen, 2007) future outlined in the previous sections.

4.3 Tailored support

To ensure that we are preparing students accordingly, Kingston University has established a Curriculum Team within the Careers and Employability Service. This team provide academic colleagues with discipline-specific guidance and practical support to integrate employability into the curriculum, by mapping employability development across the student learning journey with a focus on high-impact teaching and assessment methods (see Figure 1). This process enables course teams to identify (1) what future-ready graduates from their programmes require; (2) how this is currently being achieved at each level of study; (3) any gaps or opportunities for enhancement; and (4) plans for continuous improvement.

Student Development Journey

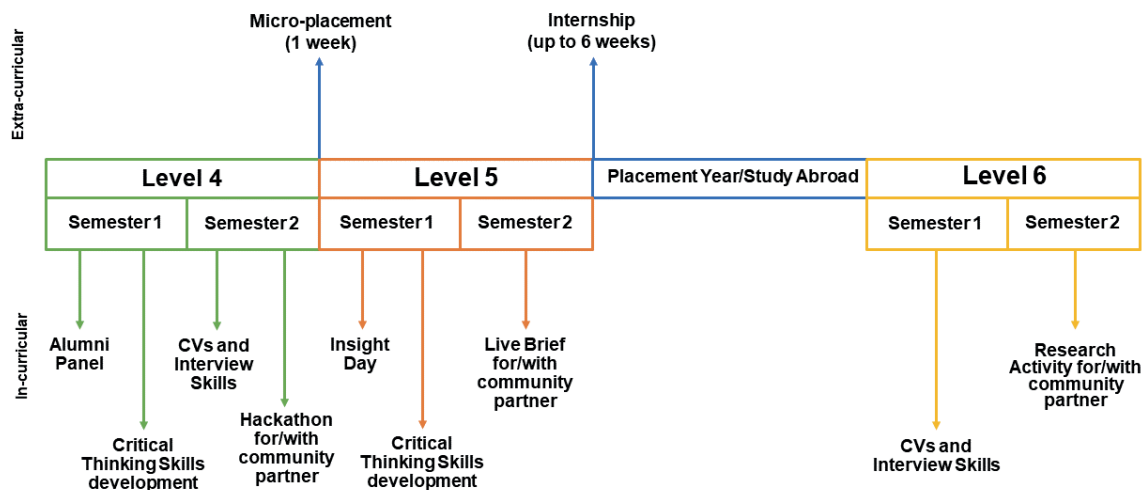


Figure 1: Example of a student development journey incorporating experiential learning activities and community/industry engagement

Opportunities for enhancement are focused on the implementation of high-impact pedagogical approaches and assessment methods that are delivered through community and industry engagement. This is because such real-world learning within the core curriculum provides *all* students with the opportunity to cultivate their social and cultural capital (Tomlinson, 2017) through engagement with external partners.

4.3.1 *Lessons learned*

The main lesson we have learned through this work is the need to support the cultural shift in thinking around curriculum design and development.

For traditionally theoretical disciplines, e.g. the humanities, academic colleagues can find it difficult to connect subject content with real-world experiences. Therefore, we have endeavoured to identify and demonstrate how subject matter within these disciplines can be delivered through experiential approaches.

For course teams who are used to implementing only certain teaching and assessment methods within their subject areas, e.g. the primacy of multiple choice tests in the sciences, we have sought to demonstrate how practice can be diversified to assess development and mastery in ways that are more authentic and enable students to gain significant experiences.

Therefore, an important aspect of our role has been to support academic colleagues and teams through this cultural change process, so that they feel confident in designing the student development journey as well as the disciplinary learning journey, and that this becomes the norm within their curriculum development practice.

4.3.2 *Plans moving forward*

To address scale-up implementation, we are developing a community of practice with three key elements:

1. **A toolkit** – a set of tools to easily implement high-impact pedagogical approaches and assessment methods in different disciplinary areas.
2. **Training** – an interactive training package introducing employability concepts and demonstrating how these can be incorporated within individual and team practice.
3. **Research** – a range of collaborative research partnerships between academic teams and the Careers and Employability Service to establish best practice for diverse student cohorts in different subject areas.

5 **Conclusion**

This paper has overviewed the need for integrating employability into the curriculum as a central aspect of the inclusive curriculum agenda, sharing the experience of a post-1992 provider in the UK. It has outlined the future that HE is preparing graduates for and offered a means by which this preparation can be achieved within the curriculum to ensure that *all* students have the opportunity to gain the knowledge, skills, and experience to become future-ready graduates.

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