

Employability in the context of the Bologna process
Bled/Slovenia 21st-23rd of October 2004

Enhancing employability through the undergraduate curriculum

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Abstract

This paper will consider how employability has been addressed at various times in the UK. The term has been interpreted in various ways: the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team [ESECT] in England has chosen to adopt the following interpretation:

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.

An argument will be put forward for this interpretation, and the contrast will be drawn between employability and employment.

Approaches to employability have ranged from those underpinned by a relatively narrow skills-based conception to one that seeks to exploit an alignment with a pedagogy conducive to effective learning. The academic community in the UK has given employability a mixed reception, with some seeing it as being hostile to traditional academic values. If employability is to be fostered in higher education, an appreciation of the challenges posed by the concept for curricula and pedagogy is important.

The work of ESECT has focused attention on the gains that are possible when employability and effective learning are seen as related educational aims in undergraduate education. ESECT has developed a broad approach to employability whose acronym USEM integrates understanding, skilful practices in context, efficacy beliefs and metacognition – all of which are valued by employers. The paper will describe USEM and show that it has a level of theoretical and empirical underpinning that makes employability more attractive to the academic community in the UK than has hitherto been the case. It will also describe the ‘tuning’ of curricula towards employability – a ‘low pain, high gain’ activity that can be undertaken without necessarily requiring curricula to be sent through the full institutional quality assurance process. ‘Tuning’ does not, of course, preclude more radical approaches to curriculum development.