

## UK Higher Education Institutions Role in Students' Skills Development for Employment

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### Article History

*Received: 08.06.2018*

*Accepted: 14.06.2018*

*Published: 30.06.2018*



**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to explore the key roles of higher education institutions based in the UK in terms of developing key skills to further prepare students for employment. The paper is exploring several key authorities and agencies based in the UK that have significant responsibility to assuring the quality of higher education in the country. The paper is focused on several key themes that are related to the research topic which can be summarised as the following: Culture, Graduate attributes and employability. The research is based on a review of a number of secondary sources from academic and professional articles as well as relevant agencies reports such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and according to the performance indicators published by the Higher Education Funding Council For England (HEFCE).

**Keywords:** Higher education, Skills, Culture, Graduate attributes, employability.

### INTRODUCTION

According to the performance indicators published by the Higher Education Funding Council For England (HEFCE) in November 2013 [1] that the role of HE institutions in the UK is becoming far beyond teaching and learning as it has become more involved in local communities, market place, businesses, and being generator of talent and workforce at a global scale.

Furthermore, there is a growing role of the HE institutions in the UK in enhancing innovative thinking and creativity to supply the demanding knowledge-based economy in a very intense and competitive markets. The role of HE institution has contributed to that by: First, by widening participation and increasing retention rates of students. Secondly, enhancing and supplying the knowledge-based market with the desired graduates who have the required skills, attributes, and competencies to enhance innovation and creativity in the workplace. Thirdly, enhancing the concept of lifelong learning [2].

The HE environment and the graduate labour market are changing in a very fast pace as more diverse students' body started to be obvious i.e. students' age, sex, background, prior experience, prior education, financial circumstances, desires and ambitions, and student's expectations and aims of HE.

Another dimension of diversity within HE institutions in the UK is the changing learning mode and level as there is more technological advancements,

and other changes in students' learning preferences such distance delivery and the use of online portals to enhance learning.

According to [2] the nature of freshly graduates jobs have transformed and diversified as many students are in a part time employment already or they have previous experience. Also the increasing numbers of Non-Traditional students into HE has contributed to the changing culture of graduates employability.

More increasingly, widening participation factors involved in many different aspects of the students' experience such as starting, support, retention throughout the course, participation, graduation and finding proper employment. Also, the focus of employability has shifted from "how to find the right job" and "Job hunting techniques" to the development of skills, competences, and graduate attributes throughout the delivery of the course. There is increasing emphasis on encouraging students and empowering them to exploit their educational

experience in enhancing their employability and professional skills [3, 2].

### CULTURE

Despite that vocational education has always been a part of the UK higher education, more recently there has been a cultural shift of the emphasis in higher education towards student's skills development and preparing them for the demanding job market as discussed by as competition has become more intense amongst HE institutions in the UK [3, 2], employment of new graduates has become as a performance indicator according to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) published in November 2013 [1]. However, despite the fact that there is growing emphasis on development of employability skills and student's empowerment through their educational experience, there is some reservation as debates continue regarding the main purpose of HE and the way it should be delivered.

Some academics perceive the idea of embracing employment, attributes, skills, and competences as a break into academic autonomy. However, there is a noticeable shift from educating students to training students which was not desired by employers, and that "*employers are not looking for oven ready graduates*" [3, 2, 4] argue that training is only one part of education whereas education is a process of learning which leads to unknown outcomes and requires appropriate knowledge, skills, and repeated experience of problem solving through learning.

### Graduate attributes

The job market is changing rapidly as many graduates prefer employment within SMEs, freelance, and self-employment. Despite the fact that there is a cultural shift in HE in providing and emphasising on the soft skills alongside and through their course delivery, there is still some concerns in the job market and employers regarding graduate attributes as they are not only looking for a degree, they are looking for appropriate skills to match with their job criteria and requirement.

According to [5, 6] that graduate attributes can be identified as the following:

- Knowledge and information management: A graduate is able to evaluate, analyse, and apply current and relevant information to enhance understanding of particular situations, problem solving, and enhancing innovation and creativity in workplace with ability to execute tasks effectively.
- Results: Graduates should have the ability to be results focused, able to allocate and organise available resources, find solutions based on findings, application of logical and critical thinking towards effective problem solving.

- Innovation and creative thinking: A graduate should have imaginative thinking to be able to think out of the box and find creative solutions based on the available resources. Should have the ability to analyse and plan to meet the demands of the challenging and changing environment. Initiator, planner, with organisational skills to be used to contribute to innovative solutions in a situation.
- Expertise: Graduates can understand the fundamentals of their discipline (Theories and Concepts) in their field. Demonstration of ethical learning skills to ensure continues improvement (personal and professional development).
- Communication: A graduate has well spoken and written communication, and able to demonstrate effective listening, speaking, reflecting skills. Able to demonstrate understanding of technical and graphical communication. The ability to communicate with different audiences selecting different communication techniques depending on the situation and culture.
- Team work: Demonstrate the ability to work within teams, able to have effective team collaboration and cooperation to maximize the outputs of the whole team. Able to work with different gender, age, cultures, religion, and level of knowledge or experience. Ability to resolve conflicts.
- Managing and leading: A graduate should be able to lead, control, organise, and plan teams effectively and able to initiate projects, inspire others, take full responsibility and accountability, engage with teams to achieve shared goals.
- Autonomous: A Graduate should be able to learn and develop themselves, continues improvement of skills and competences, self-management, and able to learn from previous experience.
- Quality: A graduate should be able to be the best version of them (good citizen), has ethical awareness, commitment, and compassion.
- Adaptability: A graduate should be able to manage and anticipate change, work within different demanding workplaces, able to cope with unexpected situations, able to adapt and be part of diverse community/workplace.
- Learning and reflection: A graduate should demonstrate the ability to reflect on own learning and experience, the ability to revise behaviour based on constructive feedback given from own reflection or from others.

### Employability

Employability as a concept has been argued and discussed for years and years, but interest grew more in the last decade regarding graduate employability. As the interest was and still growing in graduate employability many studies and research papers have been focused on this concept which lead to creation of different lists of the main and core required

employability skills for graduates to find the right employment appropriate to the level of graduates' education. Skills such as transferable skills, generic skills and common skills.

Employability has many different definitions but according to [3] that employability can be broken down into two different groups. The first set is straighter and equips students with the ability to get a job after completion of studies. The other set is empathising on enriching and increasing the student's skills, competences, abilities, and general attributes, and the knowledge required to empower the students to enable them to have lifelong learning.

Based on [7] that most employers are aiming to employ graduates who are proactive, and having the ability to "*analyse, critique, synthesis and multi layered communication to facilitate innovative teamwork*". According to [8] that employability is a social responsibility which includes individuals who must be responsible about decisions they have made, employers as they determine what kind of employability skills are desired in the workplace, and public institutions such as schools, FE colleges, and universities to equip individuals with those desired employability skills in the job market, also other public institutions are directly involved in employability such as local and national government agencies which they exist for the purpose of securing appropriate employment for all citizens.

It has been indicated [8] that different employments require different set of skills, values, attitudes and abilities. For example, '*what are required skills, values, attitudes and abilities for the retail industry or travel and tourism may be less required or even unrequired in healthcare*'. According to [7, 9] those employers in the job market are looking for graduates, who have the ability to adapt to different cultures, have the required skills to be part of and participate in the organisation and contribute to innovation through teamwork. They are also looking for and appreciate graduates with high ability to reflect and think critically about workplace situations as that will enhance the culture of change.

According to the published research '*How much does higher education enhance the employability of graduates?*' [10], that the focus of employability skills is now moving towards development of communications, proven ability of numeracy skills, use of technology, and the ability to learn. Recently, more employers and authors started to give more attention towards more understanding of what the graduate attributes; skills and competences should look like to help freshly graduated students in finding their way into the career ladder [11]. Suggested that to be able to understand whether individuals have the desired attributes, skills, and competencies, more contextual factors should be highlighted: Firstly, understanding the

academic performance during the student's studies and their engagement. Secondly, the student's confidence in themselves and their abilities to succeed. Thirdly, student's ambition to move forward and learn new experiences. Fourthly, the reputation of the university which the student study's in as that can be adding an advantage for their readiness for the job market. Fifth, student's awareness of the current available opportunities in the job market and what the options are for them to select from.

## CONCLUSION

The research has indicated that there is a growing pressure from external factors that is leading for UK higher education institutions to be far beyond teaching and learning through being involved in its surroundings such as communities, market place as well as businesses to further understand their key challenges and requirements. The paper has also indicated and explored key challenges generated by other external factors such as the labour graduate market, changes in learning modes and the increasing influence of technology, as well as changes in students' prior experience since there is an increasing number of non-traditional students.

The research has indicated that higher education institutions in the UK have a significant role in the process of skills development and preparation for the job market since there has been a cultural shift across the sector due to the consideration of new graduate employment as a performance indicator. Furthermore, it is viewed that higher education institutions should further focus on education rather than training students to further enhance knowledge and skills.

The research has indicated that there is a growing concern in the job market and employers regarding the key attributes of graduates as the job market is not just looking for the degree, it is rather looking for key skills and knowledge such as team working, quality, result focus and communication. The research has identified a list of key graduate attributes based on the QAA [6] and [5]. Furthermore, the research has stressed that higher education institutions have a significant responsibility in identifying key skills required in each sector, and to react by equipping students with the required skills to be matched with the requirement of the job market.

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