'But we are already doing so much!' – The importance of surfacing employability initiatives in undergraduate programmes

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ABSTRACT

Findings from an employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship (EEE) audit, which mapped institutional Employability Strategy Benchmarks (ESBMs) against existing provisions on 12 non-vocational undergraduate programmes in a post-1992 Scottish university, suggests that there is no direct link between the number of dedicated EEE initiatives that are embedded in a programme and a programme's National Student Survey (NSS) employability score (Q9). The results suggest that using reflection to surface skills and competencies students gain on their degree programme can compensate for a lack of dedicated EEE initiatives in programmes. This suggests that rather than focusing on applying a deficit model, i.e. identifying potential gaps in EEE provisions and getting programme teams to do more, an appreciative inquiry stance should be taken which focuses on surfacing existing dedicated employability initiatives as well as the plethora of transferable skills and competencies students gain more broadly through curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (including part-time jobs to fund their time at university). It is argued that reflecting on the broad spectrum of 'what employability looks like' allows programme teams to surface the strengths of the existing offer and consider ways to further enhance its design and delivery.

Keywords: non-vocational programmes, appreciative inquiry, employability surfacing, skills & competencies matrix, graduate identity

Introduction

Over the past forty years, UK higher education (HE) has been fundamentally reshaped by neoliberal policy, which introduced market principles, accountability, and competition into the sector (Cruickshank, 2016; Zhang, 2024) and pushed for greater alignment of education with labour market needs (Flavin & Thompson, 2024; Sin et al., 2019). Employability has become a key policy objective, with universities expected to produce 'oven-ready' graduates (Tate & Glazzard, 2024) equipped with skills for the global economy. Performance metrics such as graduate employment rates, starting salaries, and other market-oriented indicators have become dominant measures of institutional success (Flavin & Thompson, 2024), thus narrowing what is valued in HE and reframing university education away from its traditional broader intellectual, civic, or critical aims towards privileging economic outcomes and labour market alignment (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Gee et al., 2025; Saurbier, 2020).

These developments have generated significant tensions and pushback within the sector, as the priorities of policymakers and university leaders often diverge from those of educators, who are concerned that the employability agenda is encroaching on disciplinary depth, critical inquiry, and the broader purposes of

higher education (Gee et al., 2025; Pal, 2022 Speight et al., 2013). Discontent is further fueled when teaching for employability/ EEE initiatives and subject-based education are perceived to be separated, with the former seen to emphasize the acquisition of transferable skills linked to performative outcomes at the expense of intellectual autonomy and critical engagement. Walker (2012) suggests that this conflict can be overcome by approaching the curriculum holistically, i.e. by recognizing the interconnectedness of academic disciplines with personal development (which includes, but is not restricted to, employability-related skills). Examples of this approach include the integration of real world issues and social problems as vehicles to teach both academic content as well as tools for (authentic) assessment (Sotiriadou et al., 2020; Speight et al. 2013) or providing multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary curricula or learning opportunities (Hart, 2019; Striolo et al., 2023). Yet in the absence of academics' and students' clear and shared understanding of what employability means within the context of a specific programme, the links between subject-centered teaching and employability remain opaque. This potentially further reinforces the divide between teaching for employability and subject-centered teaching as neither stakeholder group fully realizes the employability-related opportunities afforded through the subject teaching that already takes place. This suggests that rather than adding more specifically labelled EEE opportunities to programmes, programme teams may wish to provide students with interpretative frameworks to help them understand how subject teaching links to employability.

Methods

As the programme leader for the BSc Psychology & Sociology (hereafter referred to as Programme 4) I was aware that the programme lacked dedicated EEE related activities that students on many other programmes or at other institutions benefitted from, and prospective applicants during Open Days asked about. The programme's poor National Student Survey (NSS) satisfaction score of 52.63% for the (then three) employability related questions in 2022 prompted me to earmark employability as a key area for development. In order to ensure that planned programme enhancements in this area would meet the needs and expectations of students, I conducted an online survey with 3rd and 4th year students in October 2022. The survey was structured around three research questions:

- What transferable skills, if any, do students believe they have gained from the programme?
- What career aspirations do students have in the short, medium and long-term?
- What gaps in transferable skills, if any, does the programme have in relation to students' career aspirations?

The survey was open for two weeks – during this time 19 students participated which equals a response rate of 31%. I shared the summary of the results with all students who had been invited to participate by email and had informal conversations with students in class. However, by the time the NSS survey closed in April 2023 no actions had been taken in response to the survey. Despite this lack of changes in terms of EEE provisions on the programme, the NSS satisfaction score for employability (Q9) - 'How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future?' - had increased by 25.94%, i.e. to 78.57%. In fact, the programme outperformed the average institutional score for Q9 by 1.28%, and was only slightly below the Scottish University (-2.29%) and UK (-3.09) averages.

Between May – August 2023 I embedded a number of institutional Employability Strategy Benchmarks (ESBMs) into the programme. By the start of academic year 2023/24 I had incorporated twice yearly career advice sessions for all students into the curriculum and had set-up a dedicated employability Canvas (virtual learning environment) site through which I regularly shared information on mentoring programmes, career fairs, volunteering, and exchange opportunities as well as information on the 'Start for Future' and other entrepreneurial training and support. Yet, despite increasing the number of EEE initiatives on the programme, in 2024 the NSS satisfaction score for the employability question (Q9) had dropped to 70.9%, a decrease of 7.67%, while the overall institutional satisfaction score for this question rose by 3.33% to 81.9%.

Although fluctuations in NSS scores could, amongst other things, be due to the overall small sample size, I was beginning to question how closely the employability score was related to the provision/absence of EEE opportunities per se, and what role, if any, 'foregrounding' i.e. making explicit the links between learning on the programme and skills and competencies students perceive as valuable to their future careers, have on it. In order to explore this idea further, I undertook an EEE audit of non-vocational programmes (n=12) in my School during October-November 2023 with the aim (i) to map all EEE related activities embedded in these programmes against institutional ESBMs and (ii) to assess whether or not there is a link between programmes' NSS Q9 satisfaction score and the level of engagement with ESBMs in programmes.

Results and discussion

The audit showed that programmes' NSS 2023 satisfaction score for Q9 ranged from (two programmes with) 100% to 41.18%. Two programmes in the sample did not reach the NSS threshold number of participants and thus no data was available for these.

Table 1 NSS scores, Number of ESBMs and Placement Opportunity by Programme

Programme	Division	NSS satisfaction score for Q9	Number of ESBMs met by programme	Placement
BA (Hons) Programme 1	2	100%	8	Yes
BA (Hons) Programme 2	2	100%	9	Yes
BA (Hons) Programme 3	1	79.31%	9	Yes
BSc (Hons) Programme 4	**3**	**78.57%**	**8**	**No**
BA (Hons) Programme 5	2	72.97%	8	Yes
BSc (Hons) Programme 6	3	66.67%	8	No
BA (Hons) Programme 7	3	53.85%	7	No
BA (Hons) Programme 8	2	53.33%	8	No
BA (Hons) Programme 9	2	53.33%	7	No

BSc (Hons) Programme 10	3	41.18%	7	No
BA (Hons) Programme 11	2	Not available	8	Yes
BA (Hons) Programme 12	2	Not available	8	Yes

The audit further showed that two programmes met all nine ESBMs, seven programmes met eight ESBMs, and three programmes met seven ESBMs. The two most commonly missing ESBMs were 'student engagement with mentoring', missing from seven programmes, and 'placement opportunity', missing from six programmes.

The results of the ESBMs audit suggest that there is no direct link between the overall number of ESBMs met by a programme and its corresponding NSS Q9 satisfaction score. However, whether or not a programme offers students a placement opportunity may have an impact on how students rate employability provisions on programmes. As Table 1 shows, four of the five highest scoring programmes for NSS Q9 satisfaction have placements. This could indicate that students rate placement opportunities higher than other EEE initiatives on programmes, perhaps because the strong association between placement and graduate career success is well established (Brooks & Youngson, 2016). In comparison, the benefits of other EEE interventions such as mentoring for example, though shown to be highly effective in bolstering students' employability skills (Bolton-King, 2022), may not be as well understood by the majority of students and may hence be less impactful on their perception of the quality of EEE provisions offered on a programme.

If we were to narrowly interpret the audit results using a deficit model, we may simply conclude that low scoring programmes ought to consider including placements on their programme. Indeed, this may well be beneficial to students and I do not wish to diminish the benefits placements can offer, however, looking at the performance of Programme 4 there might be an alternative interpretation why some programmes are scoring higher in employability satisfaction than others. It could be argued that encouraging students to focus on the transferrable skills their programme offers and asking them to reflect on their learning in relation to their career aspirations is adding value to a programme in its own right. Indeed, engaging students in such discussions may also strengthen programme teams' own appreciation of how subject teaching links with employability and may promote a shared understanding between academics and students of what employability means within the context of their programme.

Thus, rather than feeling compelled to do more (or to take the same approach everywhere) we should consider surfacing the skills and competencies students gain on their programme, as well as through co- and extra-curricular activities, through reflective exercises. A tool that can be particularly useful in this context is a skills audit (Breeze et al., 2016) as it not only allows students to record and reflect on their skills and competencies, but it can be a useful aid in identifying students' personal development objectives. Used cumulatively over the course of their degree programme, it can aid students in articulating their employability skills during and post-university (Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019) and can be a powerful means for making their personal development journey from student to graduate identity (Tomlinson et al., 2017) visible.

The results of the ESBMs audit also suggest that programme teams should be encouraged to reflect on how the various EEE initiatives they offer support students' employability skills, and how they can pull these together into a coherent narrative around employability that will bolster students' understanding of the value of *all* EEE opportunities on offer including, but not limited to, placements.

The above suggestions are in line with Schonell and Macklin's (2019) suggestion that programme teams should reflect on the strengths of the existing offer and consider ways to enhance the design and delivery. A useful approach in relation to this is appreciative inquiry which involves a four-stage process starting with identifying existing positive practice; envisioning ideal future developments; devising action plans to achieve ideals; and actioning of plans (Mishra & Bhatnagar, 2012). By focusing on existing positive practice (i.e. the skills and competencies afforded through subject teaching and the plethora of EEE initiatives programme teams already engage in) and envisaging ways to build on/improve practice, appreciative inquiry can become a useful tool to counter-balance deficit models' push for 'doing more'.

Next steps

As highlighted in the above discussion, foregrounding skills and competencies requires a dual approach. On the one hand we ought to nurture students' reflective practice to aid them in identifying the broad spectrum of transferable skills and competencies embedded within curricular, co- and extra-curricular activities (including part-time jobs), and encourage them to consider how these are linked to their career aspirations. On the other hand we ought to encourage programme teams to engage in appreciative inquiry to surface what employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship looks like in relation to their programme/discipline and for their particular students, and to use these insights to develop a clear narrative for students (and themselves) around EEE within their specific context. To test these recommendations, I am currently working on the following approaches.

(1) *Development of Skills & Competencies tool*s for students (i) to record skills and competencies gained through curricular, co- and extra-curricular activities and (ii) to identify areas for personal development in relation to their career aspirations. The tool will be initially introduced to a cohort of students in year 2 and opportunities for follow up engagement will be created in years 3 and 4. Focus groups will be conducted with students to evaluate the usefulness of the tool to raise their employability skills awareness.

(2) *Appreciate Inquiry Staff workshops* will be organised with programme teams to encourage a shared narrative of what employability means within the context of their programme, discipline and for their cohort of students. Programme teams will be encouraged to reflect on the full spectrum through which their students experience EEE, i.e. both dedicated EEE initiatives as well as through their learning on the programme more broadly. To evaluate the success of these workshops feedback will be sought through a staff survey.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings of this study encourage a move away from a deficit model, and instead champion an approach which seeks to re-focus our efforts on what is there, i.e. on our existing positive practice.

Appreciative enquiry validates the value of our existing work and any initiatives framed under this auspice might receive greater buy-in from academics than those asking them to add yet more.

Surfacing may also be a useful tool to counter negative discourses around the value-added element of higher education. If we can help students to recognize the broad plethora of transferable skills and competencies they gain during their course of study and encourage them to link these to their aspirations beyond academia – not just narrowly in relation to career prospects, but more ambitiously in relating to their wider contributions to society – we can speak to the continued relevance and value of higher education in today's world.

Biography

Susanne Schulz is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology and has more than ten years experience of programme leadership. Susanne is currently working as Associate Head of Division. Her particular areas of interest are work-based learning; curriculum development for multi-disciplinary programmes, and closing the feedback loop. Susanne can be contacted by email: sschulz@qmu.ac.uk

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Appendix

In order to measure EEE engagement in programmes, key objectives were extrapolated from the institutional Employability Strategy (ES) that are directly attributed to activities of individual programme teams. Overall, nine relevant objectives were identified in the institutional Employability Strategy which were used as benchmarks (ESBMs) to gauge programmes' level of engagement with EEE activities.

Institutional Employability Strategy Benchmarks (ESBMs)

   i.   Embedding employability and careers education in programmes through programme teams.
   ii. Programmes offer work-based learning, placement or internship opportunities.
   iii. Programmes provide opportunities for reflection and career planning.
   iv. Programme teams draw on industry insights, for example through Subject Advisory Panels (SAP), in curriculum development.
   v.   Career services deliver careers information, advice and guidance to students through sessions integrated into programmes.
   vi. Divisions/programme teams promote careers fairs, events and training opportunities for students.
   vii. Divisions/programme teams promote co-curricular activities such as optional placements and overseas exchanges.
   viii. Students from all programmes engage with mentoring opportunities.
   ix. Divisions/Programme Teams promote enterprise/entrepreneurship to students (e.g. through Business Gateway, Start for Future etc.).