

Employability: degrees of value

Johnny Rich

I WORKED
HARD TO GET
WHERE I AM
TODAY

(AN UNEMPLOYED GRADUATE
WITH £50,000 OF DEBT)



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HEPI Occasional Papers (known as 'yellow books') enable authors with long experience of the higher education sector to propose interesting new ideas. They are generally more polemical and personal than HEPI's analytical blue books.

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1. The background

I saw some graffiti recently. 'I worked hard to get where I am today,' it said. Underneath, in brackets, it added, '(An unemployed graduate with £50,000 of debt.)'

The evidence suggests that a degree is in fact a worthwhile investment.¹ But, like graffiti itself, the message leaves a stain. And with a growth in alternative pathways – such as apprenticeships and school-leaver schemes – this is not only a problem for students and graduates, but also for universities, for employers, for taxpayers and for policymakers.

Universities serve many functions but most students enter higher education hoping to secure fulfilling employment afterwards. If universities do not exist to give graduates a chance of a better career and to provide a more highly-skilled, economy-building workforce, then what are they for?

In his book asking that very question, Stefan Collini rejects the idea of any single purpose as simple as universities being a conveyor belt into work.² The Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU) goes further still in rejecting such instrumentalism.³

The question is not an easy one, but the development of sound higher education policy does need some practical answers because, if universities are to command public investment, then a public good has to be served and observed. The money could otherwise be spent on the ill, the

aged and the unhoused. Without equations to demonstrate impact, it is hard to measure the public good and, in an austere world driven by econometrics, what is hard to measure is hard to fund.

The quest for measurement has been the guiding hand behind many recent policy initiatives: the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Key Information Set (KIS) and the National Student Survey (NSS) to name but three. But what has been lacking is any measure of the actual value added by universities to students and to the economy.

Universities UK has made valiant attempts to tot up the macro-economic contribution, as has the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), but this leaves room for the possibility that certain universities, certain university teachers and even the assessment system itself are coasting (to use the Government's description of certain schools).⁴ In theory, universities could be admitting highly capable, independent learners and merely providing them with an amenable atmosphere for a few years. On graduation, the university gives the student a stamp of approval and takes credit for any personal growth or development they may have experienced. In reality the student may either have taught themselves or simply acquired three years of life experience. This may not be happening, but where is the contrary evidence?

What do universities actually do to or for their students? How do they actively transform them?

It is against this background that the Government has published its higher education green paper, *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* and announced the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).⁵

The explicit link between the TEF and funding (the intention is that the tuition fee caps will rise for those who deliver good teaching) is not merely about trying to use financial incentives as a lever to raise teaching standards (and there is much reasonable scepticism about whether relatively small fee rises will be an effective lever). It also reflects the complex interplay of higher education's power not only to increase the graduates' earning potential, but also their overall contribution to the economy and to society (the public good).

For the past fifteen years, in ever-increasing proportions, students have been the go-to solution to fund the expansion of higher education. The premise behind this is that students will act in their personal interest, financial or otherwise, measured through the graduate premium. For individual prospective students, however, measuring that premium is hard, let alone predicting it.

In the last Parliament, David Willetts's solution focused on improving information provision via the KIS, on the basis that students can make career choices using past data (which, in the case of Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE), is only a snapshot that is at least five years old by the time prospective students find themselves in the same

situation). This, of course, assumes that prospective students are prompted to use the data and are equipped to draw meaningful conclusions from it. In many instances, neither is true.

Meanwhile, better information has been coupled with an income-contingent loan system that provides, in effect, students with a guarantee that the cost will be proportionate to the premium. However, this guarantee re-opens the gap for the public purse to fill. Fee rises may widen it further.

We are therefore back at the need to demonstrate a public good. One way or another, in this instrumentalist world, higher education must either deliver increased earning potential (in which case it is valuable to the student), or deliver increased ability to perform a social function and/or make an economic contribution (in which case it is valuable to the public good and a subsidy is demonstrably justified). Of course, it can deliver both.

***70% of HE students
consider non-graduate
alternatives***

Given the expanding alternatives to a degree, it is important that these factors are demonstrated as cost-effectively as possible, or the argument for following the traditional (and more expensive) route of higher education may be eroded.

With this context in mind, Universities and Science Minister Jo Johnson is right to want to measure the impact of teaching.

How to understand 'learning gain' has been an ongoing discussion between BIS, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). However, as the green paper points out, the TEF's proposed 'common metrics' (from 2016-17) of DLHE, drop-out rates and student satisfaction are 'imperfect proxies'.⁶ That is an understatement: they have only a passing relationship with learning gain or public good.

The one metric that is both generally available and at the very least a clear precursor to excellent teaching (if not a necessary precondition) is whether teachers are appropriately qualified for the role. And yet the green paper has chosen to ignore that in the first incarnation of the TEF. Even that metric, however, is clearly insufficient to capture the essence of the student's development through their higher education.

Teaching excellence is a far more awkward idea than any of these indicators can articulate separately or even when conflated into a league table-style composite metric. The notion of teaching excellence implies that a teacher can be excellent regardless of their students. Taken to its absurd extreme a teacher could be excellent in an empty room. But education is not something a student gets. It is something they do. The student must engage with the teaching – and *vice versa* – in order for learning to take place.

So, as the green paper acknowledges, any TEF that is not to be merely a proxy for what the Government really wants to measure cannot possibly be disentangled from that same

nagging issue of learning gain. The problem, however, is that while we may think quantifying academic achievement is challenging, by comparison judging concepts such as 'teaching excellence', 'learning gain' and 'value' are subjective in the extreme.

In order to try to get a grasp on the protean qualities of these concepts, we need to look at their constituent parts. What exactly is it that we want students to gain through the process of learning? What are the characteristics of 'graduateness' that might make students peculiarly useful to an employer, or to society, not to mention to themselves?

There are three components that a student may acquire and, by thinking about how we might measure each of them separately, we can start to understand not only how to measure learning gain and therefore how to measure teaching standards, but also how to enhance them both. Indeed, a better appreciation of the three components is critical not only to the success of TEF, but to establishing light-touch, low-cost higher education policies that support a thriving sector, successful graduates and a labour market that meets economic need.

The three components are: knowledge, skills and social capital. Together, they make up 'employability'.

2. Employability

I had been avoiding the word employability. It is an ugly word. It dates back only to World War II, when it described merely whether people were available for work.⁷ It has been defined in many different ways since, not least as 'having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required'.⁸

The debate has rumbled on between academics about the extent to which employability is an intrinsic quality of the graduate. The other options (not necessarily mutually exclusive) are, firstly, that employability relates to labour market conditions, and, secondly, that it is the ability of an individual to demonstrate – through a CV and interview skills, for instance – that they are employable.

For the purposes of this paper, I am most interested in how we might better draw out and develop that intrinsic quality. If graduates have that, they will be resilient to different labour market conditions. On the other hand, while the ability to sell yourself effectively to employers is important, this understanding of employability allows universities, far too often, to treat employability as an afterthought, an exit strategy for students. Universities imagine that it is something best delivered by the careers service (or as it is increasingly often called, the employability and careers service) – a part of the university that few students engage with before their final year (if at all), especially those most in need of support.

The side-lining of this issue is typical of the problems relating to employability in higher education. We will now look in detail at some of the other problems and the ways that policy and practice should be changed.

2.1 The problems

2.1.1 Employability is not employment

I have often heard vice-chancellors speak in self-congratulatory terms about their 'employability' record when referring to their DLHE scores. DLHE tells us (perhaps controversially) how many people got a job. That is not employability. It is employment.

This is more than a slip of the tongue. It betrays a fundamental lack of appreciation of the task at hand. If employment figures are your benchmark, the actions you take do not necessarily enhance the students' long-term value and resilience in the workplace, nor their ability to achieve their best-fit career – a career that reflects what they want to do and what they are best at, so that both the student and their employer are well rewarded by each other.

2.1.2 Academics do not prioritise employability

It is a generalisation to say that few academics think the development of students' employability is their responsibility. There are many exceptions, including many examples of outstanding concern and good practice by academics, faculties and institutions.

However, it is hardly surprising that people who have devoted their lives to study, research and teaching do not necessarily

have a great interest in – nor enthusiasm for – the attributes that the world beyond academia values highly. Some academics imagine – if they consider the issue at all – that these attributes are different from those valued in academia.

Employability is poorly understood by those who need to sell themselves to employers, let alone by an academic who may have only spent brief periods of their career outside the world of education.

For some academics, it goes further. Decades after C. P. Snow talked of the rift between the arts and sciences, we now have a new two cultures: with the students, universities and academics who are job-focused versus those who regard such material concerns as anathema to the purity of academic endeavour.⁹ We need to break down such divides on both sides. Phrases like ‘customer awareness’, they believe, have little role in a place of learning. The language of employability, as spoken by employers and by academics, needs to be a shared language. Both groups would find they value remarkably similar attributes. For example, while one culture values the ‘persuasive argument’, the other values a ‘compelling pitch’. The attributes involved – or rather, the skills – are analogous.

Academics are well placed to teach employability. It does not follow that they are either able or motivated to succeed

Even then, to ask or expect academics to ‘teach’ employability would not be playing to their strengths. While in theory

academics are well placed to teach employability, it certainly does not follow that they are either able or motivated to do so successfully. Indeed, there would be an irony in distracting academics from the pursuit and transmission of their discipline in order to teach students instead about pursuing their best-fit careers.

Developing employability and embedding it into the curriculum have to be achieved with the consent and enthusiasm of academics. To achieve that will involve a touch so light it could make choux pastry.

2.1.3 Employers think graduates are not job ready

Recently, the head of graduate recruitment for a major investment bank that employs some of the UK's highest-flying students, boasted to me that her firm had managed to reduce the time it takes for a graduate to make a positive commercial contribution from a year to just nine months.

I recognise that it takes time to settle in, but why nine months? Why not nine hours? Surely, graduates should be better able to hit the ground running?

I asked her what the graduates lacked (and what they acquired over the nine months) that made the difference. Apart from some obvious areas of knowledge and procedure that new employees have to learn, it turned out they did not arrive with the soft skills and business practices required to be useful team members. She talked about a 'culture shift' and about getting them to realise what was required of them to be useful.

Yet employers clearly still value graduates. Evidence suggests that unemployment rates among graduates (3.9 per cent) remain as low as ever relative to non-graduates (9 per cent).¹⁰ Graduates weathered the recession better than non-graduates and the graduate premium is reckoned to be around £200,000 over the course of a graduate's lifetime.¹¹ Importantly, insofar as comparable data are available, these figures seem to have remained stable or perhaps even improved despite the significant increase in the supply of graduates over the past two decades.

Graduateness, whatever it may be, is clearly valuable to employers, even if it does not mean job readiness. If we could articulate that value more clearly, we might serve students better, help employers find the graduates they need more efficiently and demonstrate more clearly the instrumental and societal public good of higher education.

2.1.4 The skills and productivity gaps

The drive for the expansion of higher education over the past three decades has been founded on the calculation that to be a competitive economy, the UK needs a highly-skilled workforce.¹² We are in danger, however, of delivering a highly-educated one instead. The two are not the same and, if highly-qualified individuals do not have the relevant skills, they are not able to be as productive as, for example, less educated people in other countries. This makes the UK less productive and less competitive, yet the educated workforce still expects to be compensated according to their qualifications rather than according to their proficiency and productivity.

We run the risk of making a public investment into a high level of education that will not produce a higher level of skills. I believe the conversion of education into skills is a small challenge relative to educating students in the first place, but for it to happen effectively, it must be a deliberate and conscious activity.

2.1.5 Students mistake a degree as proof of employability

In recent years, the desire to improve career prospects has emerged more clearly as the primary reason students cite for going to university.¹³ Understandably, this has led to a growth in demand and supply of vocational courses. Some vocational courses – Medicine, for instance – have high employment rates in a relevant career. For others, such as Computer Science, the picture is more mixed.

For example, Forensic Science courses have expanded in recent years (in what was dubbed ‘the CSI effect’ after the television programme) and yet Forensic Science careers have not. At any given point there are around 8,500 students studying for Forensic Science degrees, but each year there are only around 50 entry-level jobs in the field and, even for these, Chemistry is in fact every bit as good a qualification, if not better.¹⁴ A wider and more transferable education, it turns out, would make Forensic Science graduates more employable in the career that, judging by their choice of course, they had hoped for.

That does not mean, of course, that Forensic Science graduates will not go on to desirable jobs, but there is a

mismatch between what they imagined their course might provide and what it actually delivers.

I am not dismissing Forensic Science as a valuable discipline in its own right, but students should not expect it – nor any course that does not necessarily lead to a profession (which is almost all of them) – to be a career passport, even though the name of the course might set them up as such. Many higher education applicants, particularly those who have had limited advice, imagine that the relationship between a course of study and a career is mechanistic, that higher education is about direct preparation or training for a job.

In fact, courses that are focused on a narrow career run the risk of producing graduates who may have transferable skills, but who appear to employers less interested in other roles for which they are just as well qualified as graduates with less specialised qualifications. Moreover, as the years roll by, they may even find their qualifications becoming increasingly obsolete (as may be the trouble with certain Computer Science qualifications).

Graduateness, whatever it may be, is clearly valuable to employers, even if it does not mean job-readiness

Higher education cannot reasonably offer guarantees to students. We need to shift the way we frame the student experience, to be more transparent about what they will really gain from it. In the end what they really gain is more valuable than what they currently believe they get.

2.1.6 Employability does not excite students

As already mentioned, students often do not engage with their university's careers service until their final year. Like almost everyone else, students confuse employability with employment. It is all too easy for them to let the awkward reality and the drudgery of needing to secure employment slide down the list of priorities when there is studying to be done (which, as explained above, they believe makes them employable), life to be managed (which, as they struggle financially, is an ever-present challenge) and the pleasures of student life to be experienced (which few would begrudge).

Students need to be supported to be more aware of – and enthusiastic about – the need to develop their employability. Students must be inspired to engage with the issue as early as possible, because, like steering an ocean tanker, a small intervention early on is far more effective than frantic efforts at the last minute.

Inspiring and engaging students also means celebrating employability. After all, it is potentially the key to their future happiness through securing a best-fit career. We need to find ways of addressing the topic that reflect this promise; ways that are interesting and enjoyable.

3. What is employability?

My definition of employability comprises three elements: knowledge, skills and social capital.

To get a job, to keep a job and to get on in a job require all three, even if only in limited quantities. Even someone stacking shelves needs to know where and how goods are to be stacked, the skills to be able to do it and the social capital to engage appropriately with other people in the process.

3.1 Knowledge

Universities are generally good at developing their students' knowledge. After all, it is the traditional function of teaching that knowledge should be transmitted. Courses are designed around this purpose and assessments attempt to provide assurance that a successful transmission has indeed taken place.

This knowledge is, of course, not limited to the esoteric. Much of it is directly work related, especially in vocational courses where the express purpose is to equip the student with what they need to know (as opposed to what they need to be able to do).

3.2 Skills

Many vocational courses will go further and enhance job-specific competencies or hard skills. (They are called hard because they are not malleable and cannot be easily applied in other situations.) A medical student, for example, will learn to suture. Hard skills might be seen as part of a continuum that links knowledge and skills, because it is 'know-how', the knowledge of how to do something.

Soft skills, on the other hand, are rarely explicitly taught. These are the transferable skills that employers say time and again that they want.¹⁵ Given the demand for graduates, it seems reasonable to suppose that their experience in higher education does develop these soft skills, even if they are not taught explicitly.

How much more might be achieved by making the development explicit? The student would more clearly comprehend the skills they have acquired. The university might frame its teaching more effectively to promote this kind of learning gain. And employers might be better able to understand what graduates have to offer. Meanwhile, for the Government, it could be the basis for an employability metric to feed into the TEF. The desire to raise graduate employability is stated as a core aim of the green paper in its very first paragraph and it is explicit also about the intention to incorporate new metrics of learning gain after the 2016/17 assessment round, subject to finding measures that are 'robust' and 'comparable'.

As the rest of this paper explains, it is this area of employability more than any other that could be transformed by light-touch changes in practice and policy.

3.3 Social capital

The term 'social capital' is provocative, evoking class privilege and nepotism. The opportunities that are presented to different graduates are indeed inequitable for precisely these reasons, but the aspect of social capital that I regard as part of the student's intrinsic employability are – for the most part

– within their capacity to develop. Only ‘for the most part’ because some elements of social capital – such as height – are beyond the individual’s control.

Other elements of what I am calling ‘social capital’ include the graduate’s accent, their understanding of the etiquette appropriate to a given situation, amiability and character, their attitude to work and their social network. Students can learn to adjust these, although the idea of such adjustments being improvements is controversial. Some may argue that ‘social capital’ is not the correct term to use. I accept that criticism and I could have used the term ‘cultural capital’ or even the vaguer ‘attributes’. However, I have chosen this term precisely because it should highlight the fact that social capital, despite being part of a graduate’s employability, has a complex relationship with their actual ability to do a job well.

Whatever we call it, developing social capital is something that certain universities do well. It is hard to deny the cachet of being an Oxbridge graduate. The very *imprimatur* has value, regardless of the individual’s abilities (although cause and effect feed one another). Moreover, collegiate universities with regular formal dinners, balls, debating unions and influential alumni set students up well for the social aspects of high-flying employability.

These are not the only ways of achieving these ends, however. Voluntary social action and work placements have a similar effect and they do not have the same overtones of a presumed social order. In our armoury to fight for social mobility, higher

education has nuclear potential: building positive social capital is a key part of deployment.

Universities where students lack social capital could explore what more they can do to embed both its development and an awareness of it into curricular and extra-curricular activities. For this purpose, among many others, a strong alumni network is as important to the future of the students as to the university.

A number of universities are embracing initiatives that any institution could adopt to plug the social capital gap. At Brunel University, Prof Zahir Irani, a leading expert on employability, has introduced a generic credit-bearing module which, as well as developing knowledge and skills relevant to employability, also focuses on students' behaviours and attitudes. This supports the key components of social capital, but does so by adding a module rather than allowing the student to learn from their existing activities. While commendable, weaving the learning into the wider weft of their course would be better still.

Meanwhile, Nottingham Trent University is just one of the many universities that have sought to engage their alumni in creating employability (rather than merely employment). It has created an employer mentoring scheme (and actively promotes student membership of the Institute of Directors).

The higher education green paper, despite all its discussion of social mobility, fair access and disaggregated data, does little to acknowledge the awkward truths about social capital and the role universities and more skills-focused teaching could have in addressing unfairness.

4. A framework for soft skills

There are many ways of slicing up the soft skills pie, but essentially it is the same pie, comprising a set of key transferable skills. Employers often struggle to define the skills they need, but they know those skills when they see them. (This is particularly true of small and medium-sized employers, who employ two-thirds of graduates, as opposed to the big recruiters who employ less than one in five, but tend to dominate the agenda.) Given that most graduate jobs do not require a specific degree subject and that most degree subjects do not guarantee a job, it is these soft skills that open doors for students and for which the employer is willing to pay a graduate premium.

The very fact that soft skills are hard to define demonstrates that they do not receive focused attention from:

- the students themselves (as a means of increasing their value);
- from academics (in knowing how to support students' development);
- from universities (in creating curricula, environments and assessment regimes that enhance skills); and
- from employers (in terms of understanding and requesting the skillsets they need).

Even though the Teaching Excellence Framework represents a significant opportunity to make employability count, the Government plans shy away from confronting the skills argument for investing in higher education.

It is important to recognise that not all soft skills are equally useful to all careers. While almost everyone has some level of all soft skills, some people have aptitudes (that can be developed) for certain skills. And, while almost all careers require some ability across the range of soft skills, some careers require certain skills more than others.

This is a critical point because it is a key element in achieving the best fit for the graduate and employer. No student can ever offer all soft skills across the board in equal and superlative measure, but no employer needs or even necessarily wants that. Depending on the person specification of the role they need to fill, they are looking for strengths in certain areas only. Crucially, graduates do not necessarily make themselves more employable by claiming strengths in all skills. Rather, by failing to demonstrate their distinctive strengths, they may dilute what it is that makes them peculiarly appropriate to a role.

To this end, we need a common way of talking about soft skills that reflects the range of skills and the differences in levels. For example, we might say that there are the following ten soft skills:

- 1. Initiative:** being a self-starter, willing and able to initiate activity
- 2. Resourcefulness:** being a problem solver, able to deploy analytical and critical thinking to a range of situations
- 3. Communication:** verbal, written and personal

4. **Numeracy and mathematical skills**
5. **IT skills**
6. **Teamwork**
7. **Organisational skills:** the ability to plan and prioritise, manage time and resources effectively
8. **Enterprise:** awareness of customer needs and the driving factors of business success
9. **Creativity:** the ability to think creatively and to do manual creative work
10. **Learning:** the intellectual capacity and willingness to absorb new information and skills.

This is my own list, a cobbling together of many lists and models slicing the pie into between four and 23 skills.¹⁶ The main differences are around how the skills are grouped and defined rather than what is included. Sometimes a skill might be regarded as separate, such as leadership. For our purposes, the exact list is not important and mine is merely an illustration.

The only real requirement is that it is simple. In order to be inspiring and engaging, it must appear to be little more than common sense, simple enough to be immediately and simultaneously understood by students, by academics and by employers. In a world where these groups normally speak different languages, the framework must be a Babel fish.

Once we have a list, we need then to agree on how to measure the level of development of each skill through common descriptors. Again, we do not need to concern ourselves with the exact descriptors right now, the development of which would be a sophisticated undertaking. However, the groundwork has been done many times: for example, since 2012, as part of a project with the HEA to embed employability into and throughout its curriculum and the University of Bolton has been using a model of three-level traffic light descriptors across 36 indicators for a student-led employability audit.¹⁷

***Three-quarters of students
rated interventions to
promote their employability
as the highest priority for
investment by universities***

For our purposes and by way of example, we might use eight grades of description for each of our ten soft skills. The lowest

level of communication skill might be something along the lines of: 'The student demonstrates experience of successful communication of their thoughts and findings through at least one of the following methods: written communication; one-to-one conversation; group discussion; public presentation; visual or other media.' With each grade, the descriptor would become more demanding until, at the top grade, the student would need to demonstrate that they can communicate at a level consistent with a definition of advanced expertise in that skill.

The more objective these descriptors are the better, but each grade might also be further standardised by a series of questions feeding in to a scoring mechanism. While it is desirable to achieve consistency, the primary aim is to create a common currency for skills and the grades would be a shorthand for proficiency levels, rather than a replacement of the need to demonstrate achievements. Therefore, rigorous standardisation would not be as necessary as it is for, say, academic achievement (and few would defend the consistency of degree classifications across different institutions).

This gives us a framework for describing the levels of soft skills achieved by the graduate. Different study programmes will have different profiles of skills that they provide. For example, at a particular higher education provider, the profiles of three courses might look like this (see overleaf):

Soft skillset: course objectives			
	Engineering	Philosophy	Business studies
Initiative	■	■	■
Resourcefulness	■	■	■
Communication	■	■	■
Numeracy	■	■	■
IT skills	■	■	■
Teamwork	■	■	■
Organisation	■	■	■
Enterprise	■	■	■
Creativity	■	■	■
Learning	■	■	■

An approach like the chart above would give us a valuable tool for talking about the soft skills that should be developed by students during the course of their studies. It provides a profile that employers can recognise. Better yet, they can advertise vacancies on the basis of the skillset required.

The following chart illustrates how that might work (but it should be borne in mind that hard skills and knowledge will also be needed):

Soft skillset: employer requirements			
	Engineer	Teacher	Accountant
Initiative	■	■ ■ ■	■
Resourcefulness	■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■
Communication	■	■ ■ ■ ■	■
Numeracy	■ ■ ■	■	■ ■ ■
IT skills	■ ■ ■	■	■ ■ ■
Teamwork	■ ■	■ ■	■
Organisation	■ ■	■ ■	■ ■ ■
Enterprise	■ ■	■	■ ■ ■ ■
Creativity	■	■ ■	■
Learning	■	■ ■	■

This would allow the student to see the jobs to which they are best suited as well as aid automated searches for vacancies and opportunities. Meanwhile recruiters could use it for highly-targeted selection processes.

Something similar is already happening with the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which has been growing in popularity since 2010. On Gradintel, just one of the digital platforms hosting HEARs, there are now over 600,000 reports.¹⁸ The figure has approximately doubled each year and Gradintel predicts it will continue to do so over the next couple of years at least.

Particularly interesting on the Gradintel platform are the opportunities for enhanced HEARs, capturing data about students' skillsets, psychometric patterns and other information useful for finding a best fit with employers. Employers can then search this data and send invitations to individual students who match their criteria not just on the basis of course and grade, but also skillset. As the store of HEARs grows, the potential of this big-data recruiting could fundamentally change the milkround of large employers on a competitive recruitment drive.

Whether an enhanced HEAR will ever reach this tipping point remains to be seen. It may be that more open online alternatives, such as LinkedIn, will get there first. Either way, a commonly recognised, simple to understand, searchable skills framework will draw that future nearer.

On its own, this consistent framework is no more than a light-touch way of measuring a particular aspect of learning gain. Even then it is only a description of what the student is supposed to gain, not a personalised measure of what they have learned.

How can a sector-wide framework be deployed to actually improve employability?

5. A framework to improve employability

Simply having a consistent framework for employability will not only make it measurable, but will also help to enhance it.

A key obstacle in the development of skills is that we do not talk about them. In the minds of

students and academics, it is not what higher education is for. Students apply to study a subject. Academics teach subjects as part of a discipline-based department. Any discussion of skills is generally the exception or an afterthought.

A key obstacle in the development of skills is that we do not talk about the development of skills

We can use the skills framework to promote skills development before, during and after a degree course.

5.1 Before

As discussed, the title of a course has profound limits as a signpost of employability. Past employment data is little better. For applicants for whom employability matters, which should be all of them, it would be more transparent to articulate which skills the course aims to develop and to what extent, as per the proposed framework. Students would be able to apply to courses on the basis of the skillset they would hope to develop, bearing in mind the careers that may require that skillset.

In the case of (nominally) vocational courses from which employment opportunities are in fact limited this would be

an important way of demonstrating to the student the true value of what they are studying. As destinations data and labour market information improve, descriptions of such courses might be required to reveal (through KIS or some future extension of it) that only a certain percentage achieve employment and a significantly smaller percentage in a career related to their field. However, this is unlikely to act as a disincentive to most students' choices because they may hope that they will be the outliers in the data.

If, on the other hand, the university could also show that the student will develop a skillset equivalent to a student on an alternative course (for those doing Forensic Science, it might be Biochemistry, for instance), then the applicant can make an informed choice about which course will equip them best: the one that looks like a preparatory course for a career they are unlikely to get, or the one that possibly has a broader application.

On its own, advertising the intended skills outcome of a course is unlikely to influence student choice. Like other sophisticated information, it would have a negligible impact without the context of good careers advice and guidance. However, if there is no information to articulate the lessons, then advisers are unlikely to be any more explicit about the need for skills than anyone else. Currently, I do not know of a higher education provider that systematically promotes the skillset that a potential student might develop on a course-by-course basis.

In any case, students tend to make decisions on the basis of instinctual drivers, and therefore the role information plays is often merely a *post hoc* rationalisation of that choice.¹⁹ If the information runs counter to the choice, sometimes it can force a student to reconsider. In that context, seeing a skillset bar chart that looks very different to the one you need for the career you want might either be enough to force a rethink or, at the very least, to recognise the shortcomings and address them through extra-curricular experiences. Either way, this would place the issue of skills on both students' and universities' agenda.

5.1.1 Self-awareness and reflection

Quite apart from aiding degree choice and career planning, simply raising awareness of the skillset that a student is likely to develop is more likely to bring about that same skills development.

Learning is improved by self-reflection – or 'metacognition' to use the terminology of Knight and Yorke's seminal USEM model of employability.²⁰ By way of illustration, if a group of students is asked to work together on a presentation to the class about, say, epigenetics, most will slip into a loose group working pattern and consider the content of what to say. They are unlikely to consider how they might effectively work together or how best to communicate their work. However, if the students are made aware that the task is not only to learn about epigenetics, but also about developing teamworking and communication skills, then most will instantly recognise the wider learning opportunity here.

By outlining the skills that are to be developed before the beginning of a course (as well as on modules and in individual pieces of work), the student is more likely to enter into the course recognising the value of those skills. They are also more likely to want to accrue them through conscious, rather than passive, learning.

The same goes for the teacher. The skills framework would also have an impact on how courses are designed. Just as the student learns more by being asked to reflect on the skills they could gain from a course, the academic will be more aware of these skills if they map the learning outcomes against a skills framework. By ensuring the descriptors of each skill level are applied to their course, academics are not being asked to make any allowances or compromises to what they think is most appropriate to teach. However, it will nudge them into considering ways in which their course on, for example, business marketing might support a student's development of their IT skills. Course designers would feel a gentle desire to justify slightly higher descriptors across the skillset, which might nudge them into adapting the way the course is studied. For instance, at the University of Greenwich, Dr Jonathan Wilson, Programme Director at the Business School, requires students to submit work as digital projects via YouTube. This not only expands their skills, but means they also create a public portfolio for their work.

5.2 During

Once a student starts their course, the framework continues to make a difference. Ideally from day one there should be an increased focus on employability during induction.

The framework should apply to individual modules as much as to the whole course – perhaps more so. Students should have the ability to personalise their course and their skills profile according to their needs and ambitions. For example, many universities offer students taking courses that might be regarded as purely academic an opportunity to take more vocational modules and *vice versa*. This kind of choice helps students obtain a rounded education, but we should be thinking in terms of them developing a rounded skillset rather than just knowledge and sometimes experience of ‘the other side of the fence’.

During the course, accruing skills – or, to put it another way, gaining credits on the framework – should be a rewarding and integral part of a student’s life. Many universities operate an employability award scheme, allowing a student to ‘stand out from the crowd’, to use the description of Loughborough University’s Employability Award, for example.²¹ Like most award schemes, this one credits all kinds of co-curricular activities. These activities are valuable in developing employability and, along with enhanced HEARs, employability awards are an excellent way of recognising and promoting them. The limitation, however, is that they separate employability from the curriculum. There is even a danger of

disadvantaging students whose background or personal circumstances may not allow them to take up all the extra-curricular opportunities that student life offers.

Working with Birmingham City University a couple of years ago, Push – the not-for-profit organisation that I run – developed a different approach to embedding employability into everyday student life. Working with the students' union and careers service, Push ran employability training as entertainment, hosted by stand-up comedians. This sort of event aims to provide an inspiring and lasting reflection on the skills needed for employment and how their student life was helping them develop those necessary skills.²²

Offering such events as part of freshers' week, for example, would help orientate students' aspirations. The aim is to create a positive feedback loop between their academic studies and their wider student experience, all in support of clearer goals about what they want to achieve and what they need to do.

5.3 After

A widely used common framework would help graduates and employers find each other more efficiently, achieving better job matches along the way. Even a narrowly used framework – so long as it is effective – would confer an advantage to those who used it. This has been seen in the use of Gradintel's enhanced HEAR and, for example, through the Skills Audit scheme at Durham University.²³

The idea of Durham's Skills Audit – and similar initiatives – is

to highlight early on to students the skills they will need, the skills they are developing and the skills they lack. Having this insight allows the student not only to plug any gaps but also to project the strengths they do have more clearly.

There is no reason why the framework should stop being used when the student graduates. If employers found it useful in entry-level recruitment, it could also aid recruitment and staff development throughout their careers. For that matter, there are good reasons to think skills' profiling of this sort should start far earlier in the education system too.

***They separate
employability from
the curriculum***

6. Minimising the burden on academics

No scheme to embed employability into the teaching of higher education can happen without the teachers' consent and this is not currently a high priority. De Montfort University has devised an HEA-supported initiative to address this issue through boosting academics' understanding and confidence about employability.

More generally though, perhaps the desire to avoid upsetting academics' apple carts is the reason so many universities sideline employability into careers advice. Similarly, the green paper seems almost deliberate in its avoidance of measures directed at encouraging individual academics to further learning gain of any sort, let alone developing employability.²⁴

It is important to have realistic expectations about the burden that can be placed on those who are to implement the framework. All that academics should be required to do is to state how the skills grades are reflected in their courses. Even that process could be made simpler through a series of questions that would help them score both their course design and practices against the framework.

It is of course desirable that academics will choose to adapt their teaching to improve the development of employability skills. Many already do so, but the framework could help them to see how to do it better, yet retain the autonomy to teach as they see fit. This is nudge, not shove.

Of course, there is the potential for academics to become involved in assessing students' skills development. After all, although it may be intended that a student will develop a certain skillset as a result of a course, it is certainly no guarantee that they will do so.

7. Assessment

A good case can be made for doing away with assessment altogether when it comes to an employability framework. The proof of the employability pudding lies with an employer's willingness to employ a graduate, keep them employed and

Student satisfaction is a function of expectation at least as much as provision

promote them. Even with the targeted automated recruitment shortlist that would be possible with a common framework stored on a platform such as Gradintel's, employers are not going to abandon the need for

demonstrable evidence of a graduate's professed skills. A framework is the scaffold, not the brickwork.

Having said that, where universities and academics are willing, they could devise their own formal assessments around testing the student against the grade descriptors. If these proved useful to employers and students, the momentum would quickly gather for the practice to be copied.

In this instance, self-assessment may be more appropriate, not least because it endorses the importance of self-reflection in supporting skills development. Just as course designers would use a questionnaire to define the appropriate grade descriptors, students could respond to a parallel set of questions to determine the skillset they have acquired.

However, it would be a shame if only some students took the time to complete a self-assessment of their skills. It is more than likely that only the most motivated, or the least in need, would chose to do it. Setting it as a required assignment at the end of each module would provide exactly the sort of opportunity for reflection that would also help to consolidate the learning.

Furthermore, in order for the framework to meet the green paper's stated requirements of 'robustness' and 'comparability' for future metrics that may be used in the TEF, some assessment would be essential. However, the National Student Survey (NSS) may provide a parallel here. It too relies on self-reflection by students. Why should self-assessment not therefore be a good mechanism for measuring skills?

Indeed, it could be argued that self-assessment is more appropriate in determining skill levels than in determining a useful measure of satisfaction. Students' satisfaction is likely to be shaped by their expectations at least as much as by what was delivered. They also have no counterfactual point of comparison. Their subjectivity and their background skew the data. However, if the students were to self-assess their skills at the start and end of the course or module, their subjectivity would largely be cancelled out because the important measurement would be the difference between their beginning and end scores rather than the absolute values of either.

8. Regulation

In the spirit of light touches, my first impulse would be not to regulate how the framework is adopted or applied. A clear and common framework would bring sufficient benefits to all concerned to minimise the desire to try to game the system. In particular, the fact that there is a need for a diversity of skills across the job market, rather than all employers wanting or needing every skill would make it hard to gain advantage by, for instance, claiming to deliver skills across the board. That is because students with skills across the board will not appear as close a match as those with the specific skills required.

Other market pressures would also weigh in to keep the system honest:

- Students claiming skills they are unable to demonstrate with examples would get no further through a recruitment procedure than they do at present, even if they manage to insinuate themselves on to a longlist by virtue of looking like a good match. All they will achieve is to generate invitations to apply for jobs that they will never succeed in getting. This scatter gun approach to career searching is time-consuming, ineffective and results in poor matches.
- For the same reason, universities and courses that pump up the skillsets they claim to deliver will not do their graduates any favours in the job market. That will reflect badly on them and will damage their employment data.
- Nor would universities attract more students by claiming to deliver an exaggerated skillset. For once, applicants'

incapacity to make informed, rational judgements would mean there is as little to be gained in overblowing the skills as there is in making untrue claims about contact hours. As mentioned previously, this information is used retrospectively to rationalise or to challenge a choice, not to make it. So applicants might use the skillsets to choose a subject to study, but would be unlikely to use it to differentiate between providers. Applicants who did so would be what behavioural economists call 'maximisers' of information sources. Maximisers would expect to see evidence supporting any claim that is significantly different from other universities offering a similar course.²⁵ If the difference can indeed be demonstrated, then there is no problem. If not, the overhyping may backfire.

Having said all that, if demonstrable learning gain through an employability skills framework were to become part of a significant level of TEF-dependent funding, then all bets are off in terms of no regulation. As increasing amounts of money hang on to the delivery of high-quality skills, the system would require greater probity. The good news is that, given the slow introduction of fee rises proposed by the green paper, we have time for a few years of a self-regulated solution to test what levers it would be necessary or sensible to implement.

9. Best fit

The secret factor when it comes to knowing whether someone will be good at a job is not their employability. It is their enthusiasm for their work. There is a reason why we talk about people being ‘willing and able’ and we put them in that order.

No one loves every minute of every working day, but we can at least hope to match people not only with jobs they are able to do well, but with jobs that reward them with the things they value.

The store of human happiness is rarely the basis for a policy initiative

Money is the most obvious reward, but work-life balance, a sense of achieving something worthwhile, or even fame and power might be part of what we

could – in keeping with the idea of a skillset – term a ‘reward set’. As with skills, the reward set (the rewards you get and in what ratio) is more or less unique to each person and each job.

For a career to be truly fulfilling for both the employee and employer, a simple exchange must take place. The prospective employee must want a reward set and offer a skillset. And *vice versa* for the employer. Where the two match, the career will be a best fit.

To this end, we might look beyond a skills framework and start considering a universal rewards framework for careers and courses, although the economic imperatives for this are far less easy to demonstrate. It would merely add to the store of happiness in people’s lives. Sadly, that is rarely the basis for a policy initiative.

10. Implementing the framework

Individual universities could go it alone in developing their own skills framework. Durham is an example of a university doing just that, but there are several others. For the sector as a whole, the HEA has developed what deserves to be regarded as the definitive framework.²⁶ Unlike the model I have proposed, it is a guide to best practice for higher education providers developing policy and practice in this area. The HEA has also led the way by supporting initiatives throughout the sector. There are currently 37 higher education providers participating in the HEA's Strategic Enhancement Programme (SEP) on embedding employability into the curriculum, representing a rich variety of ideas and approaches.

There is much to be admired here and no doubt a number of successful strategies will emerge and be shared or copied. But, amidst all this bounty, the problem is that much of the benefit is lost if there is not a systematic framework, a common language that can be spoken by any student, any university and any employer.

Furthermore, there is precious little public value for money demonstrated by a menagerie of different jargon-ridden skills models. Like Linnaeus imposing order on species, only a common, simple framework can be part of a learning gain metric that might be part of the TEF in the future. While these things often evolve and emerge into acceptance, in the absence of a market-leading framework, the Government – and perhaps the funding councils – need to step in to create it.

In the rush to create the TEF, the green paper is clear that neither the first incarnation nor even the second is intended to be its final form. The Government's immediate plan is to build the TEF from what is on the shelves already, but in the long run it recognises that new tools are needed for a new job. An employability skills framework must be part of the picture.

Instrumentalist though this may seem, I would like to think that Collini, the CDBU and those who – like me – value education for its own sake would welcome an initiative that demonstrates how what they hold dear is also exactly what makes our higher education sector so valuable to our economy and to the taxpayer. Pure knowledge is as critical to employability as skills and often the two are no more than different faces of the same prism. Meanwhile, the fact that the outcome is employability should satisfy those who want to see a utilitarian and mechanistic advantage.

The reason everyone should be happy is that this approach models what is best about higher education's power to transform individuals. The change comes about in diverse ways, but once transformed, part of the metamorphosis is that the individual can then deploy their education in a host of ways (to earn more, to serve a social function, to study and research, to create and innovate – none of which is mutually exclusive).

As soon as possible, Jo Johnson needs to embed employability into the TEF in order to demonstrate the value of higher

education to the instrumentalists, in order to keep the academy happy and, perhaps most importantly, to ensure that higher education continues to enhance the lives of students.

This last point is critical because no higher education policy, the TEF included, should be simply about a ritual of buck-passing between Government and universities. Good policy should be about improving the experience for students and driving up standards in a focused way. The end result must be something students can engage with, so that it does not create some league table of good teaching, but rather a guide to getting the most out of higher education.

***A common language
that can be spoken by
any student, any
university and any
employer***

Not every aspect of my proposed solution will meet with everyone's approval. Some of it may prove impractical, but it is an inexpensive, non-invasive approach, aligned with the needs and concerns of all stakeholders. Come what may, we need to take a fresh look at the systematic problems in enhancing employability and see if there are not simple, workable, affordable solutions that the sector – and the Government – could adopt.

Footnotes and references

1. For example, see *Destination of Leavers from Higher Education 2013-14*, HESA, 2015 (bit.ly/hepidlhe), which records 70 per cent of graduates in professional or managerial positions just six months after graduation.
2. Collini, S. (2012) *What are universities for?*, Penguin.
3. According to the Council for the Defence of British Universities' website (cdbu.org.uk), the 'core purpose' of universities is 'the production of knowledge in all its guises'.
4. For example, in Universities UK's *Why invest in universities* (June 2015), it is claimed universities contribute £73 billion to the UK economy. Walker, I. and Zhu, Y. (August 2013) *The impact of university degrees on the lifecycle of earnings: Some further analysis*, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (bit.ly/hepi-earnings).
5. *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, November 2015 (bit.ly/hepi-greenpaper15)
6. *Fulfilling our Potential*, as above.
7. Gazier, B. (1999) *Employability: Concepts and Policies*, *InforMISEP Reports* No. 67-68, Birmingham, European Employment Observatory. (bit.ly/hep-empobs)
8. Hillage, J. and Pollard, E. (1998) *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis*, Research Brief RR85, Nottingham: Department for Education and Employment.
9. This culture clash is perhaps not so new. David Lodge's 1988 comic campus novel *Nice Work* wonderfully juxtaposes the lives of an academic and the manager of an engineering firm.
10. *Graduate Labour Market Statistics January-March Q1 2015*, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, June 2015 (bit.ly/hepi-glms).
11. Walker, I. and Zhu, Y., as above. A marked difference is noted in the premium between graduate males (£168,000) and females (£252,000).
12. See, most notably, Leitch, A. (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*, *Leitch Review of Skills* (bit.ly/hepi-leitch).
13. See, for example, Kandiko Howson, C. (2012) *Student expectations and perceptions of higher education*, Kings College London and Quality Assurance Agency (bit.ly/hepi-howson).
14. As The Forensics Library states, 'Despite the vast array for forensic science courses available, a degree in chemistry or a similar subject is generally preferred' (bit.ly/hepi-forensics).

15. See, for example, *Working Towards Your Future: making the most of your time in higher education* (2011), Confederation of British Industry and National Union of Students (bit.ly/hepi-nuscbi).
16. See, for example: Knight, P., Yorke, M. (2004), *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*, RoutledgeFalmer; Dacre Pool, L. & Sewell, P. (2007), *The Key to Employability: Developing a practical model of graduate employability*, *Education + Training*, Vol 49, No 4; *Working Towards Your Future* (2011) and *Backing soft skills* (2015), both as above. Also, among many others: Lowden, K. et al (2011), *Employer's perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates*, The University of Glasgow SCRE for the Edge Foundation (bit.ly/hepi-edge); *The Flux Report - Building a resilient workforce in the face of flux* (2014), Right Management/Manpower Group (bit.ly/hepi-flux); *The Top 10 Employability Skills* (2014) STEMNET (bit.ly/hepi-stemnet).
17. This initiative is part of the HEA's Strategic Enhancement Programme and establishes a framework for employability across the university, but leaves individual academics to decide how best to use the framework to shape their teaching. See bit.ly/hepi-bolton.
18. According to Gradintel, 600,000 HEARs have been processed on their platform to date, covering 3,858,722 module results. They have 300,000 students registered on their system, of which 250,000 now have HEARs and, of those, around half have an enhanced profile beyond the straight-forward HEAR.
19. See, for example, Diamond, A., Roberts, J. et al. (2014) *UK Review of the provision of information about higher education: Advisory Study and Literature Review*, CFE Research and Higher Education Funding Council for England, (bit.ly/hepi-cfe).
20. Knight, P., Yorke, M. (2004), *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*, RoutledgeFalmer.
21. See bit.ly/hepi-loughborough.
22. See bit.ly/hepi-push.
23. See bit.ly/hepi-durham.
24. For example, had the Green Paper (*Fulfilling our potential*, as above) proposed using a measure of whether academics are qualified to teach, it would have created an additional driver among academics to pursue their continuing professional development as teachers.
25. Diamond, A., Roberts, J. et al as above.
26. Cole, D. and Tibby, M. (2013), *Defining and developing your approach to employability*, The Higher Education Academy (bit.ly/hepi-heaemployability).

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