Integrating Academic Skills and Employability - Revisiting the Learning Journal

Mario Menz

Course Leader, LLM Financial Services Law, Regulation and Compliance | Guildhall School of Business and Law, London, e-mail: m.menz@londonmet.ac.uk

Abstract: Across the world, universities are more numerous today than at any other time in history, yet at the same time there is unparalleled confusion about their purpose and skepticism about their value. Based on an extensive literature review, a survey of the academic landscape and discussions with academics as well as employers, this reflective piece highlights the importance of academic skills development with regard to students' success at university, and illustrates the link between academic skills, employability and professional success. The article was prompted by the current discussion around universities' struggle to provide students with the necessary skills to succeed after graduation. The article argues that the differentiation between academic skills on the one hand and employability skills on the other is no longer relevant or appropriate in the 21st century knowledge economy, and invites universities to enhance their curricula with additional, mandatory skills development modules. It provides an innovative suggestion on how to link academic skills and employability in curriculum development, based on the existing academic literature around the scholarship of teaching and learning, as well as research into employability skills. The importance of academic skills on students' professional success can never be overstated. The article offers an innovative approach to linking academic skills, employability and professional success. It adds fuel to the discussion around employability from the perspective of industry practitioners. While this paper has been written specifically with undergraduate business degrees in mind, the principles and practices it outlines can also be applied to other academic disciplines.
Keywords: academic skills, employability, student development, curriculum development, learning journals.

Introduction

Across the world, universities are more numerous today than at any other time in history; yet at the same time there is unparalleled confusion about their purpose and scepticism about their value (see, for example Roberts, 2016; Sodha, 2018; Tse and Esposito, 2014). Political, economic and socio-cultural developments over the last half-century have made the discussion more complex (Scott et al, 2017).

The challenges faced by universities globally have been discussed at lengths in academic literature – see, for example, Biggs and Tang (2011) for a detailed discussion on the topic. In addition to these issues, universities continue to face increasing criticism for not doing enough to enable students to meet the needs and expectations of employers. Employability, as Poladashvili (2018) has pointed out, is one of the most researched subjects in microeconomic studies today. The drive to increase students' employability may be rooted in different social and political agendas. In the UK for example, it is based on government policies and targeted preparation for employment, while in the USA it appears to be grounded in institutional vision and a social inclusion agenda (Chadha and Toner, 2017). However, research has shown that there is a clear mismatch between what university graduates are able to do, and what employers expect (see CMI, 2018a; Poladashvili, 2018, and Blom and Saeki, 2016).

Many people outside academia still perceive universities as overly theoretical, removed from reality, and hidden away in the 'ivory tower of intellectual superiority' (Bond and Paterson, 2005). Although enhancing employability was one of the main aims of the Bologna Process (EHEA, 2016), recent research carried out by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI, 2018a) shows that 20 years on, only 52% of graduates are perceived to be able to solve problems effectively or engage in critical analysis, and only 48% are seen as able to work effectively as part of a team. According to the same research, 86% of graduates do not have adequate communication and interpersonal skills, and 84% are not able to manage projects. According to the same research, graduates often overestimate what they are able to do, or may need extensive guidance to complete simple tasks, and often deliver mediocre quality work even after a number of years in employment.

Many of the issues highlighted in the CMI's research in particular, and in the wider academic literature in general, are related to students not being able to think critically or express themselves clearly, either verbally or in writing. While the CMI's research has focused on the UK, similar issues have been found in the Asia-Pacific region, across Europe and the Americas (Batko and Szopa, 2016), as well as Africa (Sow, 2017). The world of work is changing, and with it the needs of employers (Dellot et al, 2019). After three to four years at university, and often also with a master's degree in their pockets - which is developing into a necessary advantage to secure a graduate job (Halman, 2016) - many students are not able to meet the demands of the professional business environment. While some academics argue that it is not necessarily their responsibility to improve the employability of graduates (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017), the link between education and economic development has been widely researched and proven according to Poladashvili (2018). This article first critically evaluates the higher education landscape around academic skills development, before providing an innovative suggestion on what universities can do to enhance students' performance, employability and professional success.

Academic Skills Development

Students come to university from a variety of backgrounds, with different learning experiences and often under-developed self-learning skills (Oliver, 2008). While students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning, undertake independent research and communicate their ideas in a concise way (Kitching and Hulme, 2013), these capabilities still need to be learned and developed at the early stages of their experience with higher education.

The Complete University Guide (2018) lists 131 universities currently active in the UK. A survey of the courses offered by these universities was conducted, and information was gathered by reviewing course catalogues and course descriptions on each university's website. The survey found that 94% (n=123) offer business degrees, but only 38% (n=47) offer mandatory skills development modules to first year undergraduate students. Such modules may include self-leadership and

academic skills, personal development and leadership, project management and professional development, or personal and professional development planning. The extent and quality of such courses, however, appears to vary.

While some universities appear to focus on critical thinking courses and unlocking individual potential, assessments appear to be based on simple exercises, such as 50 minute Excel exams and summative reports at the end of the module. Of the 62% (n=76) of universities who do not offer any mandatory courses, most still claim that students will emerge from university with developed management skills. Some are also highly ranked in 'academic support' in the National Student Survey.

All universities, however, offer optional skills development tutorials, lectures, courses or workshops at no extra cost and often for no extra credits. The extent of this support appears to vary significantly across the academic landscape. More often than not, academic skills development is not embedded into the curriculum to the extent that it could be.

The move from secondary into higher education is a stressful experience for most students (Oliver, 2008; Baik and Greig, 2009). Learning to live as independent adults, managing their own time and money, building new relationships, combined with the need to modify existing ones with family and friends, and adjusting to academic life can lead to emotional and mental stress (Parker et al, 2004).

While all universities have academic skills tutors and courses that students can attend if they feel they need to do so, it is ambitious to believe that students are likely to use these resources if they are not required to do so; the need to express themselves unsupervised by parents and guardians and to find their own identity may outweigh the desire to take additional non-mandatory courses during their first year. Students' expectations and motivations for studying at university also vary (Briggs and Tang, 2011).

This survey indicates that universities still focus their curriculum on subject knowledge, rather than skills development. The observation by Harvey et al (1997) that employers tended to value generic skills more than subject knowledge seems to have gone largely unnoticed. Whereas this is clearly not the case for all academic disciplines - graduates of medicine and law, for example, need extensive knowledge

of their respective subjects to succeed - generic, or 'soft' skills are still at the top of employers' wish lists.

The term 'academic skills' itself invokes the idea of something that is predominantly concerned with and mainly useful in the context of university, but this could not be further from the truth. A closer examination of the nature of academic skills shows that these skills - properly developed and deployed - provide the basis for professional success. Cottrell (2013), for example, has provided a detailed list of academic skills that students need to develop to succeed at university. Most, if not all, of these skills can easily be translated into what is often referred to as 'employability skills' - see Holmes (2017) for a discussion on the latter.

Teaching academic skills only during the summer months, in preparation for dissertations or projects or before students even begin their study, may be useful, but research indicates that longer skills modules could be more beneficial for students' development (Pryjmachuk et al, 2012).

Academic skills go beyond the idea of 'how to use the library'. Academic skills in the context of this article refers to the abilities to think critically and independently, find information, draw comparisons and develop solutions to problems. They include self-reflection, a desire for personal and professional development, and the ability to communicate ideas in a clear, effective and concise way. In the 21st century knowledge economy, these are the skills that employers want and universities should aim to teach (Fallows and Steven, 2000).

Bridging First and Third Year Skills Development and Employability

The importance of stand-alone academic skills modules on first year students' development has been highlighted extensively in the academic literature – see, for example, Bovill et al (2011), Brandt (2008), and Austin et al (2010). Academic skills modules not only benefit students but can help universities deal with issues around increased student numbers, student participation and engagement, flexible learning, as well as student attendance and performance, and can mitigate the risk

of financial loss and penalties from student dropouts (Pryjmachuk et al, 2012).

Briggs and Tang, (2011) suggest engaging students in describing, explaining, relating, applying and theorising as activities to stimulate cognitive abilities and achieve intended learning outcomes. This in turn helps students develop problem solving and communication skills. The link between academic skills and employers' expectations about what students should be able to do is undeniable.

To address the skills gaps highlighted above, universities could implement a stand-alone academic skills model that bridges first and third year students' skills development, and supports critical thinking, communication and self-management, as well as management and leadership skills. This could allow first year students to develop the necessary academic skills from the outset of their time at university, and could enhance third year students' skills and abilities by revisiting the material they encountered during their first year through mentoring (and managing) first year students on the module.

Research shows that skills development modules should use an Assessment for Learning (AfL) as well as Assessment as Learning (AsL) approach by utilising a learning journal (McGuire, Lay & Peters, 2009). Moon (2006) has noted that learning can only be assessed through the representation of learning – either in written, spoken, graphic form etc., and that learning journals aim to capture this "presentation of learning". The use of a learning journal therefore allows students to present their learning in different forms and enables them (through reflection and feedback) to ascertain which presentation style needs to be enhanced. Many professional bodies require their members to engage to some extent in reflective practice (see, for example, CMI, 2018b). Using a learning journal can lay the foundation for future professional development and reflective practice, which should not stop after graduation but should become an integral part of any professional (Eraut, 1994).

As a component of skills development modules, feedback could be provided by using the 5Rs framework developed by Bain et al (2002). This framework leads students from report (R1) to responding (R2) and relating (R3), and then further to reasoning (R4) and reconstructing (R5) a situation, issue or incident. At the beginning of the learning journal, it could be expected that students simply report minimal

description of a situation, event or issue, or at best provide sufficient detail to allow anyone who reads their entry to draw their own conclusions about a particulate situation, event or issue.

Over time, however, as cognitive abilities develop, and students understand that they are expected to form their own opinion, they learn to respond to situations by drawing attention to important aspects or expressing their feelings and opinions. As they develop further, Bain et al (2002) argue that students learn to express how they relate or make a connection between a situation, event or issue and their own skills, experiences learning or understanding. Once students begin to fine-tune their ability to reason, they highlight in detail important factors underlying the event or issue and show why these factors aid understanding of the event or issue. The students start to express why certain details are important under certain circumstances, how they affect the situation, and what questions this raises for the future.

Eventually students develop their skills further in reframing or reconstructing events, issues and situations by coming to their own conclusions or by developing a plan for future action, which is based on a reasoned understanding of the event or issue on which they are reflecting. Self-assessment guidance could be provided to students in line with the 5Rs framework as well, which can provide significant assistance to students in evaluating their own journal entries, even without formal feedback from academic staff (Bain et al, 1999). While first year students could work from a core text designed for undergraduate skills development, third year students should be provided with more challenging and stimulating material, such as coaching or mentoring literature. Academic journal articles may be useful, but a concise handbook that can still support them once they enter the workforce might be more appropriate.

First year students journal entries could be assessed by third year students, who could revisit academic skills and engage in 'learning by teaching and mentoring' (Royce Sadler, 2009). Gosling (2009, p. 121) for example has highlighted that peer mentoring schemes can work well if students are motivated to support other students and if they have structures available within which they can work. It also helps if student mentors receive credit or recognition for this type of work. By revisiting material previously learned, being required to assess the quality of first year students and providing guidance on how to improve their

performance, third year students could develop a deeper understanding of the material which would lend support for their own major projects.

Employing academic skills development modules can also benefit third year students, who are preparing for their dissertation or major project. Considering the emphasis on subject knowledge and the continuing resourcing restraints at many universities, one way of addressing this issue is to roll out a module that provides academic skills development for first year students, and uses third year students to mentor them.

One module leader could supervise the module, and guide third year students on how to mentor first year students and provide feedback to them. Third year students could develop management and mentoring skills, and could revisit critical material related to academic skills. This is likely to increase their employability prospects (Fallows and Steven, 2000) and may also increase the standing of those universities who apply this model.

If employers know that students who have completed their degrees at certain universities have the skills they need, over time such universities are likely to establish themselves as 'centres of employability'. To have a lasting impact, academic skills development should not be a one-off exercise, but has to continue throughout the first to final year.

To bridge the gap between first year and third year students' skills development, reflective practice and journaling should also form part of the second-year curriculum. Review of and feedback on journal entries made by second year students should ideally be provided by module leaders.

Conclusion

Simple answers are hardly ever possible when discussing any topic that is worth our attention (Cane, 2010). What remains to be said is that universities should aim to do better when it comes to enabling students to be successful during their time at university as well as post-graduation. The debate around the purpose and nature of university has created much noise and division (Collini, 2012). A close look at the CMI's (2018a) research shows that expectations in both camps may

require adjustment. To expect students to come out of university with management experience might be desirable, but it is not always realistic; however, to expect students to be able to communicate effectively in writing and verbally is clearly not unreasonable.

As more and more academic research about the lack of employability skills emerges, universities would be well advised to reflect and ask themselves if they have conceded academic skills in favour of subject knowledge, student satisfaction surveys and technology. While universities need to continue to foster an entrepreneurial environment and use technology and innovation to remain relevant, only a small margin of students will go on to become successful entrepreneurs. To prevent the great majority of students from falling short of employers' expectations, universities should do better in delivering and developing core skills development.

Although the approach discussed in this paper is not entirely novel and innovative, evidence suggests that it can work well. Continual innovation in education is commendable, but if the pace of innovation no longer enables people to the measure the impact of their practices in the mid or long-term, then the approach has clearly become short-term. This short-termism can be detrimental to professionalism and mental health, as well as to the development of students. Sometimes a reminder that there are 'tried and tested' methods can help to improve and refocus practice.

There is sufficient research in the academic literature to show that mandatory academic skills development modules benefit students and universities alike. It is time to put this knowledge into practice and make academic skills development modules mandatory for all students.

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