Essential frameworks for enhancing student success: embedding employability

A guide to the Advance HE Framework

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Acknowledgements

This guide is designed to be used with the Advance HE Framework for Embedding Employability. The Framework is based on the HEA publication* Designing and developing your approach to employability: a framework for higher education institutions. The Framework has also been informed by feedback from institutions which participated in the HEA’s Embedding Employability Strategic Enhancement Programme (2014-15). Thanks are due to them and the authors of HEA publications whose work informed the Framework.

Contents

1. Embedding Employability Framework 4
2. What is embedding employability? 5
3. Why is embedding employability important? 5
4. Introduction to the Framework for Embedding Employability 6
5. How is the Framework structured? 7
6. Applying the Framework 8
   6.1 Stage 1: defining employability 8
   6.2 Stage 1: key issues to consider 9
   6.3 Stage 2: auditing and mapping employability provision 10
   6.4 Stage 2: key issues to consider 11
   6.5 Stage 3: actions 11
   6.6 Stage 3 activity: gap analysis 11
   6.7 Stage 3: key issues to consider 12
   6.8 Stage 4: measuring impact 13
7. References and resources 14
   7.1 References 14
   7.2 Resources 14
8. Appendix 1 18
   8.1 Action plan part 1: gap analysis 19
9. Appendix 2 20
   9.1 Action plan part 2: measuring impact 21
1. Embedding Employability Framework
2. What is embedding employability?

Advance HE views embedding employability as providing the opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes that enable graduates to make successful transitions benefitting them, the economy and their communities.

Employability is relevant to all students and at all levels of study. To be addressed effectively, employability should be embedded into all learning and teaching policies, processes and practices and considered throughout the student lifecycle, from the very start of a student programme through to completion of their studies. Graduates should be equipped to make successful transitions not just on graduation but throughout their life, and to manage their careers effectively.

All stakeholders, including academic and support staff, students, careers services, students’ unions and employers, have a role to play in embedding employability and should be encouraged to engage in and be involved in doing so. Employability should be integrated into the culture of the institution.

3. Why is embedding employability important?

The increasing pressure to meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders has driven the employability agenda and made this a priority for all higher education providers. Advance HE believes that student success can be significantly enhanced by embedding employability into the curriculum and into the culture of the whole institution.

Students: students and their families are investing in their futures and expect institutions to support them to make successful transitions, manage their careers and enhance their longer-term prospects and graduate employability.

Employers: all employers have specific – and ever changing – needs in terms of graduate skills, knowledge and attributes. These needs should inform strategies for higher education (HE) and business engagement, the curriculum and employability support.

Higher education providers (HEPs): excellence in graduate outcomes enhances an institution’s reputation and global standing and influences recruitment and employer engagement. The requirement to demonstrate how students are being supported to enhance their employability and achieve successful graduate outcomes (i.e., league tables, Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), National Student Survey (NSS), Graduate Outcomes Survey, Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) survey etc) has made embedding employability a priority within HE.
UK economy: graduate employability is a government priority as it is vital to the UK’s economic growth – regionally, nationally and internationally – and supports both social and cultural development.

Local communities: addressing the issue of graduate migration from the regions is a priority for the government and HEPs as retaining graduate skills supports the development of local communities and the regional economy. The Augar review\(^1\) emphasised that universities and colleges should work together to enhance and improve employment in their regions and, in May 2019, the Office for Students announced funding for regional collaborative projects (HEPs, colleges, LEPs and regional employers) to encourage graduate opportunities.

4. Introduction to the Framework for Embedding Employability

In 2013, the Higher Education Academy developed a resource – *Defining and developing your approach to employability: a framework for higher education institutions*\(^2\) – to provide HEPs with a rationale and approach for embedding employability. This was updated in 2015/2016 into *The Framework for Embedding Employability* in collaboration with the HE sector and drawing on extensive evidence, expertise and experience. It was designed to be adapted by a wide range of HE stakeholders, individuals and groups and applied to different disciplines, modes of study and institutional contexts. It is also aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework.

The framework provides a strategic and practical process for reflecting on and addressing current employability provision in your institution, faculty, college, school, department, programme(s) and subject areas. It seeks to facilitate discussion and provide support. It has been designed to engage a diverse range of people. It can be used at an institutional level but it also encourages and enables local ownership and development at a programme or a subject level.

Employability is one of six strategic areas of priority which Advance HE regards as being key to achieving student success in HE. The other thematic areas are: *Transforming Assessment and Feedback; Student Access, Retention, Attainment and Progression; Student Engagement through Partnership; Flexible Learning; and Internationalising Higher Education.*

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All six frameworks were designed to enhance individual themes and to be interconnected to enrich policy and practice, inspiring teaching and transforming learning across the UK and internationally.

5. How is the Framework structured?

Areas of focus: the inner circle illustrates 10 broad areas of focus that are integral to graduate employability. You can use these to help you to reflect on, define and identify your priorities for employability provision. It is also important that you involve students, employers/employer organisations and other stakeholders in this process to ensure that you develop a clearer view of the type and combination of areas of focus that are right for your context and your stakeholders. The Framework is a guide so feel free to adapt the areas of focus to suit your context and your stakeholder needs. If the terminology does not reflect the language used in your institution/area you can change it to make it more relevant to you and your stakeholders.

Four stage cyclical process: the areas of focus are encircled by a cyclical process that is key to embedding employability across the institution and at a programme level. The process encompasses the four stages involved in developing a defined and cohesive approach to employability; defining employability, auditing and mapping, prioritising actions and measuring impact.

Principles underpinning employability: the outer circle illustrates the principles of inclusivity, collaboration and engagement that underpin how the areas should be applied in practice. These should be addressed when developing your employability strategies and provision.

The following questions will support your reflections on how you currently apply these principles and how they can be addressed to enhance students’ employability.

1. Do all students have opportunities to develop the skills, knowledge and attributes to make successful transitions, manage their careers, contribute to a global economy and society, and deal effectively with change?

2. Are there collaborative approaches to learning and teaching that support graduate employability? Is employability regarded as the collective responsibility of all stakeholders?

3. Is there a culture of employability which provides validity and supports student and staff engagement?

4. How do you ensure effective university business collaboration that provides opportunities, informs the curriculum and enhances graduate employability?
6. Applying the Framework

The Framework is designed to be used at a range of levels, from senior management to academic departments, course teams and the students’ union. Use existing opportunities such as departmental, faculty, school or programme meetings for initial discussions. In your initial meetings, discuss Stages 1 and 2, and plan for Stage 3. The employability action plans in the appendices provide examples of how you can record your approach. This can be adapted and changed as appropriate. Use the following questions as a starting point for your reflections and group discussions. Feel free to add to, delete or edit them to meet your own specific needs.

The following reflective questions relate directly to each stage of the Framework. Each grouping has been designed to support reflection and inform action in enhancing employability. We would advocate that this is undertaken at a programmatic level for the greatest impact but the questions can be adopted at a range of levels, including institutional or individual practitioner levels. Enabling dialogue and space around these questions can provide a valuable source of data from which to evidence or communicate achievements in your practice, whether that be to benchmark performance and impact or to inform planning and/or decision making for future developments. It is very much a development conversation to clarify how employability practices can be developed as well as to identify what areas should be further focused upon for development. Fundamentally, it also gives recognition to existing activity which contributes effectively to enhancing employability.

6.1 Stage 1: defining employability

Work with colleagues and identify relevant internal and external stakeholders to define your employability priorities and create a shared point of reference. This will help you to develop a clearer view of the areas of focus that are most appropriate for your context. This stage helps you arrive at your working model of employability.

The reflective questions below will help you explore what ‘employability’ means within your department/programme/subject/discipline area and to your stakeholders. After your discussions, you can agree upon a working definition for employability.

1. What does employability mean to you, your team and stakeholders?

2. What does your industry sector, employers, professional bodies or area of practice want to see in graduates? Are your graduates meeting their requirements? Are there areas they believe are lacking in graduates? Do you address these? Should these be addressed through the curriculum, through extra-curricular activities or both?

3. What are the students’ expectations of how you can enhance their employability? How are your students engaged with employability?

4. Can you agree on a working model/definition for employability in your context?
6.2 Stage 1: key issues to consider

**Stakeholders**: involve as many stakeholders as appropriate in your reflections, consider the full range of stakeholders, in particular for those programmes that do not necessarily have linear careers. Gaining alumni data is important to consider the wealth and breadth of external stakeholders with whom you may wish to engage.

**Model**: the intention is not to prescribe a model but to encourage a flexible and collaborative approach to the integration of employability in your institution.

**Ownership**: employability is a university-wide responsibility. It requires a combined effort, working in partnership with colleagues across services and departments. It should also involve collaboration with external partners such as alumni, employers, professional bodies, etc.

**Enterprise, entrepreneurship education and support**: employers value creative, dynamic and free-thinking graduates, so offering support in these areas will benefit all students whether they decide to progress into employment or self-employment. The QAA defines Enterprise as:

> “the generation and application of ideas, which are set within practical situations during a project or undertaking... It combines creativity, originality, initiative, idea generation, design thinking, adaptability and reflexivity with problem identification, problem solving, innovation, expression, communication and practical action.”

QAA 2018 p73

Enterprise education thereby aims to produce learners with the mindset and skills to come up with ideas that make a difference in response to identified needs and shortfalls. Critically, it is the development and ability to act on these ideas that enterprise education seeks to develop. Enterprise education is therefore about facilitating learners; moving from ideas to action and, in so doing, supports and aligns with a broader approach to developing employability among learners.

> Entrepreneurship education is defined as “the application of enterprise behaviours, attributes and competencies into the creation of cultural, social or economic value. This can, but does not exclusively, lead to venture creation.”

QAA 2018, p74.

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4 ibid
Entrepreneurship education therefore focuses on the development and application of an enterprising mindset and skills in the context of creating a new venture and managing entrepreneurial episodes required to develop and grow a business. These skills and mindset are not just the domain of the business schools. While entrepreneurship education does create the additional layer regarding business concepts and new business development, all forms of entrepreneurship should be considered: sustainable, green, digital, social etc.

Enterprise and entrepreneurship education is a core area aligned to employability, and in 2019 Advance HE in partnership with EEUK, IOEE, ISBE, SIFEDI and the QAA launched the Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Framework.

6.3 Stage 2: auditing and mapping employability provision

1. What is your employability model or definition?

Reflect on which specific features of employability you currently address and to what extent (ie subject-specific skills; subject knowledge; graduate attributes, generic skills; personal development; reflective practice; work-based and work-related learning and enterprise education).

+ what works well?
+ how is employability reflected in programme/module learning outcomes?
+ how is employability assessed and/or validated? How do you measure the impact of employability activity and support?

2. How do you engage your students with employability?

+ are your students aware of how they are enhancing their employability through the curriculum and extra-curricular activities?
+ are your students encouraged to take ownership of the employability process? If not, how might you begin to address this?
+ do your students understand how their learning/experiences are transferable? Can they articulate this, for example, through an application or in an interview setting?
+ can your students effectively engage in a range of external environments? How are they prepared for this, supported and encouraged to reflect on outcomes?
+ is a personal development planning process used to encourage your students to reflect upon and articulate their development in terms of employability?
+ how is feedback collected from your students to ascertain development and impact?
3. Are there any gaps in provision?

+ map your current programme provision against the definition of employability that was shared and agreed at Stage 1 of this process. Are there any gaps?

+ do you utilise the support of colleagues from across your institution eg alumni office, careers centre; employability team; enterprise unit; business unit; placement support; part-time job shop; library and information services; students’ union, etc?

+ how do you seek to develop your students’ emotional intelligence, social capital and their ability to work with a range of people beyond their usual peer groups?

6.4 Stage 2: key issues to consider

Language: is there a shared understanding of the terminology used to refer to employability by colleagues, students and employers?

Ownership and collaboration: are all colleagues engaged with this and is there shared responsibility? How do you access support from your colleagues across the institution?

6.5 Stage 3: actions

Consider the next set of reflective questions to help you with this process.

+ how and when are students introduced to the concept of employability? How will you share your agreed model/definition of employability?

+ do you have a process in place for effective employer engagement? If not, how might you develop one?

+ how do/can you engage with professional bodies to inform discipline-oriented practices?

+ how are students currently supported to reflect on, record and articulate their academic and personal development planning?

See Appendix 1 for Action plan part 1: gap analysis.

6.6 Stage 3 activity: gap analysis

Reflect back on the discussions from stages 1 and 2 and, in the boxes below, list three priority areas/gaps that need to be addressed. For each decide:

+ how will you address, prioritise and develop provision to fill these gaps? Do you require specific resources or staff development?

+ what are the proposed outcomes and what timescales will this involve?

+ who will be responsible and how will you engage colleagues and external partners?
+ how will you monitor progress and measure impact?

+ who can support this work, both internally and externally? Do other departments offer similar activities that you could use as a point of reference?

6.7 Stage 3: key issues to consider

**Horizon scanning:** employability policies and strategies should be resilient to change. We know that technology will continue to advance at a fast pace – as it has over the last 50 years – changing the way we learn, communicate, work and live. This has implications for the skills, knowledge, experiences and attributes that our graduates will need. Consider and discuss the following:

+ how do you anticipate, consider and prepare for future changes, opportunities and challenges?

+ what are the emerging trends that could impact on the graduate labour market – regionally, nationally and globally?

+ how will emerging technological advances impact on graduate roles and how we work? How will this impact on the knowledge, skills, experience and values that your graduates require?

+ how do you ensure that your graduates are prepared for and have the adaptability, agility and/or resilience to cope with uncertainty and change? How do you future proof them?

**Research and scholarship:** gather evidence, as part of the review process, to document the results of your work. How can you record and share practice across the institution and, possibly, externally?

**Engaging with and involving employers to support employability:** how do you optimise opportunities for work-based and work-related learning activities for each year group? What support is available pre- and post-placement? It’s important to remember that just because an option is available to everyone it does not necessarily mean that all students have the equal opportunity to undertake this and it’s therefore important to consider if opportunities are truly inclusive.

**Utilising alumni support:** alumni case studies can provide a more longitudinal view of employability as an ongoing, lifelong concept rather than a single measure. Students also value the opportunity to engage with, listen to and learn from alumni.

**Mapping your employability network:** as a team consider and map out who can support you and your students within the institution and external to it?
6.8 Stage 4: measuring impact

The questions below and the employability action plan on page 12 will help you to generate the evidence required to verify the status of employability within your department/programme. Responding to these questions and completing the action plan supports continuous measurement, helping you to track progress and identify areas for attention.

1. Do you have a defined, cohesive and comprehensive approach to employability?
   + What evidence do you have that your approach to employability is effective?

2. How have you assessed impact?
   + What methodologies have you used? How rigorous is this process? How do you use feedback to inform future practice?

3. Are you actively engaging with alumni?
   + If yes, how do you measure impact and build on good practice?
   + If no, reflect on barriers to engagement and how you could start to address them.

4. Sharing impact and disseminating good practice
   + How do you share good practice with your colleagues, both internally and externally?
   + Are you aware of support available from organisations, such as Advance HE, to aid the development and dissemination of good practice?

See Appendix 2 for Action plan part 2: measuring impact.

Spend time using this action plan to reflect on and capture two examples of good practice.
7. References and resources

7.1 References


7.2 Resources

Advance HE, ‘Advance HE Connect’. Available at: https://connect.advance-he.ac.uk

Advance HE Connect hosts a range of networks, including an online employability network. The aim is to encourage people to share, connect and collaborate. In addition to developing networks, the online platform will also host useful resources, research, guidance and case studies linked to employability.

Advance HE, ‘Embedding employability in higher education’. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/teaching-and-learning/embedding-employability


HESA, *Graduate Outcomes Survey*. Available at: www.graduateoutcomes.ac.uk/about-survey


Morgan, S for AGCAS Scotland and QAA Scotland (2019), ‘Focus on Graduate Skills: Graduates and Employers views of graduate skills development’. Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/focus-on/graduate-and-employer-views-on-graduate-skills.pdf


8. Appendix 1
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<th>Gaps identified</th>
<th>Action(s) planned</th>
<th>Proposed outcomes</th>
<th>Timescale and review date</th>
<th>Monitoring and review process</th>
<th>Resources required</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
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9. Appendix 2
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<th>Module/area</th>
<th>Evidence of good practice</th>
<th>How will you share with others?</th>
<th>How will you sustain/build on this?</th>
<th>Resources/support required?</th>
<th>Actions required</th>
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