Towards Re-thinking Graduate Employability


1. Introduction

There is little doubt that the profile of graduate employability is rising year by year and is becoming a major issue for university decision making bodies. Given that the element of employability is one of the key elements in measuring university performance it is increasingly no longer the case that the responsibility of graduate careers can be safely hived off to careers services to get on with. For it is a fact that poor employability figures – the ability to get students into graduate employment – may pull a university department down the Good University Guide league table, potentially undoing all the good work that may have done in teaching and research. Of course, it is generally recognised that this can be grossly unfair, especially as the employment figures are taken only six months after graduation, not to mention the tendency towards over-simplification inherent in league tables. At the same time, this attests to the lack of control universities have over the employability agenda in terms of both delivery and presentation. It is just as well that students do not choose their universities solely on the basis of employability figures.

The current preoccupation with employability and skills for employment is unsurprising, given that education can always be viewed as one important element of human capital. That is, education contributes to the development of capital assets – in the form of skills and training – that can, in principle at any rate, be identified and measured as an economic input. Given a market-orientated economic environment, the human capital element of education is inescapable, though it does not follow that education should be driven solely by human capital imperatives. By and large, successive governments have accepted, albeit sometimes reluctantly that human capital is not the only driver of higher education. What has happened, though – and both universities and government have acquiesced in this – is that the human capital element of education is conceived extremely narrowly, once this has been converted into the discourse of employability. For this discourse has two elements: the skills agenda and self audit. Yet the evidence that either of these contribute to employability is at best dubious. It is also even dubious that this is all what employers really want.

Although the preoccupation with skills can be traced back to the initiatives for bringing entrepreneurship into the curriculum over twenty years ago, the current emphasis on employability usually refers back to the Dearing Report on Higher Education (Dearing 1997). It is an interesting document because despite the fact that its terms of reference stipulated that “learning should be increasingly responsive to employment needs and include the development of skills widely valued in

1 See [http://www.thegooduniversityguide.org.uk/single.htm?ipg=6524](http://www.thegooduniversityguide.org.uk/single.htm?ipg=6524

2 See Winch(2000), pp. 3-5 for a brief account of human capital. The **locus classicus** account within the discipline of economics can be found in Becker (1993)
employment” (p. 3) it in some ways shies away from this brief. The aims of higher education (p. 72) include the development of capabilities to contribute to society, serving the needs of a knowledge-based economy and playing a role in shaping a democratic society but do not mention skills as such. Out of ninety-three recommendations, only two of these (20 and 21) are directly concerned with skills. They were, however, potent recommendations as they concerned:

a) the requirements of degree programme specifications and setting out learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, cognitive skills, subject skills and key skills

b) enabling students to monitor and reflect on their personal development.

So the basic elements of employability – skills development and self-audit are there, in Dearing, though as I say, not quite as prominent as one might have expected. In addition there are two recommendations (18 and 19) on developing work experience programmes.

Nearly ten years on from Dearing, the Leitch review carried out a comprehensive review of skills in the United Kingdom at all levels in order to engender a “shared national commitment to world class skills”. But it seems for Leitch that the whole of human capital developed through education can be encapsulated in terms of skill. And the definition of a skill is correspondingly broad, so that virtually any economic or educational activity can be viewed in terms of skill:

“Skills are capabilities and expertise in a particular occupation or activity. There are a large number of different types of skills and they can be split into a number of different categories” (Leitch, 2006, p. 6)

What you won’t find in Leitch is any extended discussion as to what skills are other than what employers say they are at any particular moment. And although the report writes encouragingly of developing a learning society (e.g. p. 106), what this learning is to consist in is learning skills. It is just this focus I wish to question. As far as higher education is concerned I wish to suggest that employability can be a richer concept than skills development alone. Furthermore, it is unclear that employers themselves are only interested in skills. Even a cursory examination of the central chapters of a recent book that has examined the recruitment process (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) will show that employers are looking for more than skills, including creativity, resilience and an indefinable ‘substance’. It therefore behoves those of us interested in graduate employability to start thinking beyond key skills.

2. The Skills Agenda

Key skills rapidly became the major component of graduate employability after the Dearing report. This was endorsed in a series of reports in the years following 1997 from Government, the CBI, higher education agencies and graduate recruitment bodies (Mason, p3). Universities began investing heavily in skills development partly to improve employability but also to comply with QAA auditing requirements. However, it should not be thought that universities simply spent the minimum needed for audit compliance. On the contrary, many universities themselves became enthusiastic advocates of the skills agenda and promoted this not only to students but also to academic staff. In most cases this uptake was spread across a variety of initiatives including:
• Employing skills development officers and advisers whose job it was to enhance and supplement the careers advisory role
• Developing online skills portfolios, many of which were developed in-house at considerable expense (well into five figures and often more than this in the larger universities)
• Running stand-alone skills courses and modules
• Encouraging academic staff to embed skills learning in the curriculum and to design assessment so that the skills element in teaching and learning could be identified
• The development of programme specifications that included the separate identification of key skills, cognitive and subject skills in learning outcomes
• Taking the responsibility of skills development away from Careers Centres and placing it in Teaching and Learning centres and departments, the better to emphasise the centrality of skills in learning itself
• Investing in staff to develop the skills element of postgraduate training programmes

In addition to all these initiatives, developments at a national level also took place, encouraged by the QAA and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (and its precursor the Institute for Learning and Teaching). The most striking initiative undertaken by the QAA was the development of subject benchmarks in 2000-2001, of which skills were a substantive component. These benchmarks have subsequently been researched and promoted by the different subject centres in the HEA. For example most subject centres have issued employability statements of skills aimed at students. Should students wish to enumerate for an employer the skills gained from their degree course the task is simple: a whole bunch of skills can be readily taken from the statement and presented in an easy-to-read, impressive format (see, for example, the HEA publication Where next? Unlocking the potential of your philosophy degree in which all the skills that a philosophy degree is supposed to deliver are conveniently listed out on pages 5 and 6). There is no excuse now for students not to know just what skills their degree has given them.

Despite the ubiquity of the take-up of the skills agenda, there were early notes of caution and scepticism. For example, a report entitled The English Degree and Graduate Careers (Brennan, 2003) had identified twenty one separate initiatives devoted to skills development across higher education institutions in England, including one project that was part of a wider EU initiative. But the report ends by observing that employability is likely to be influenced by the institution attended and the graduates’ own social and cultural background. It goes on to suggest that “issues of confidence raising, self-esteem and aspirations are more important than skills and competencies in securing good employment for graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds and certain ethnic minorities” (Brennan, p.30).

This caution in respect of skills development was re-enforced by a comprehensive analysis of employability undertaken by Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke in their Learning, Curriculum and Employability in Higher Education. The two authors were part of ESECT (Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team), established by the HEA in 2002. They advanced a model of employability that drew both on the

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3 See http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/
deeper learning and the broader student experience traditionally associated with a university education. Advocating the ‘USEM’ model (understanding, skilful practices, self-efficacy beliefs and meta-cognition) they sought to develop a sophisticated concept of employability that went beyond the narrow skills agenda. In particular, they identified a series of problems with an approach to employability centred only around skills development. For example, they objected to the supposition that for any activity (e.g. communicating) there must be a correspondent skill and to the naïve assumption that transfer is easy (see Knight and Yorke, pp 32-33). Interestingly, the authors also implicitly criticised excessive modularisation by arguing that the kind of experiences underpinning the USEM model could only be delivered through a unified, incremental degree programme. They argued that degree programmes could be designed not only to enable disciplinary understanding but also to develop reflective practices, increase self confidence and self-awareness as well as develop IT skills, communication and problem working (they preferred this term to the glib ‘problem-solving’). Crucially, Knight and Yorke argued that their USEM approach would not only facilitate good learning but also employability and that the two could go together and were not antithetical to each other. They also observed that successful degree programmes already embodied much of what was implicit in the USEM model but that more could be done in order to make explicit to students how they were learning and why.

3. Personal Development Planning

At around the same time that Knight and Yorke were developing their ideas of an enriched concept of employability (and they were extensively circulated well before the publication of their book in 2004) the QAA had started to develop and market the concept of Personal Development Planning (PDP). The origin of this came straight from the Dearing Report in which recommendation 20 asked HE institutions to develop “the means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development”. Perhaps the key insight underpinning PDP is the idea that students should become more accustomed to personal reflection on their development as learners. This reflexive element is missing from traditional academic programmes in which there is, to be sure, plenty of reflection but directed more or less exclusively at the subject matter at hand rather than at the learner herself. And although PDP could take place separately from mainstream learning activities it could also be incorporated into assessment procedures (for example, by asking the learner to comment on what had proven difficult/easy in the undertaking of an assignment).

Moreover, the PDP approach to learning asks the student to put their learning in a context of aims enabling the construction of what Phillip Brown and Anthony Hesketh term a self-identity and a “narrative of employability” (Brown and Hesketh, p145). In particular, they show the importance of students and graduates using their analytical skills to identify those aspects of their experience (both academic and non-academic) that meet the requirements of an organisation. Interestingly, they flatly contradict the comments, noted above, by Brennan (2003), to the effect that social position can be a more important factor than skills development. Drawing on a series of observations during graduate recruitment interviews and assessments they demonstrate that a favourable social position alone is not enough:

“What sounds impressive on the surface is, in actual fact, discounted by assessors if it is nothing more than an account of where they have been or what they have
done without being able to closely relate these experiences to the specific attributes recruiters are examining.” (Brown and Hesketh, p.179)

In particular, confidence in self–presentation was not enough if recruiters perceived that the candidate “lacked substance” or was not good at “thinking on her feet” (p.178). Something more than the evidencing of key skills is clearly required for employability if the recruiters researched by Brown and Hesketh are anything to go by.

Does, then, the adoption of PDP give us a workable concept of employability that builds on and goes beyond the skills agenda? There is some evidence that this is indeed the case, although there is also plenty of evidence that the skills agenda still occupies a central place. Moreover, where the skills agenda has been downgraded its place seems to have been taken up by another strand in human capital theory, namely the role of self-presentation and self-audit. If we take the HEA publication Personal Development, Planning and Employability (2006) then early on (p. 6) PDP is seen in terms of developing “self-confident, self directed learners” who “relate their learning to a wider context”. But by page 13 it is the qualities of “self-motivation, self-evaluation and self-management” which are emphasised in which reflection becomes a critical tool for disciplining the self. And although the USEM model is discussed (p 12) this quickly gives way to a discussion of “self-regulatory capacities” and the need “to develop habits and behaviours” needed to develop “strategic and managerial skills”. These themes are continued throughout the document: for example, students must develop “realistic self knowledge” and “make judgements about their skills and abilities which accurately reflect their performance” (p. 30). Although a critical note is introduced, in the same discussion, when students are urged to develop their own values and to “recognise when they are under threat” this theme is not sustained as subsequent discussion emphasises the need for institutions to develop self-audit tools in order that students to gain insight into themselves (p. 41). Subsequent examples of PDP in practice, drawn from a range of institutions confirms that PDP is seen primarily as a vehicle of self audit and of evidencing skills through a variety of tools. These include producing employability skills records (p. 51), a personal development planner for evidencing skills (p. 56) and reviewing strengths and weaknesses for first year students (p. 68).

Finally, just in case there can be any doubt that skills will underpin conceptions of employability for the future, one need only look at the Burgess report (2007) which explores options for developing a fuller transcription for recording degrees. In a number of places the report emphasises the role of PDP, recomending that PDP be used as a “vehicle for measuring and recording skills and achievements that students acquire through extra-curricular activities” (p. 41). The original guiding conception of PDP was that it be seen as a means of engaging students in reviewing, reflecting upon and representing their own learning. It has largely been turned into a tool for self audit and skills monitoring and any critical or creative dimension to reflective learning has simply been, in the main, bypassed.

4. Limitations of the Skills Agenda
The focus on skills development as the central element of employability is understandable. It is what employers have insisted on, it will be said. And there is little doubt whatsoever that this is the case: nearly all employers place high importance on communication and teamworking skills, across all sectors of
employment and all sizes of employer. From this fact, it certainly follows that at some point in the process of job-seeking, students and graduates must be able to reflect on skills with a view to presenting a skills narrative in their written applications and demonstrating their competence at employer assessment centres and interviews. That is, at a critical point, an intervention is needed in career development, namely that an applicant review their experiences (both academic and non-academic) and articulate these in terms of the prevailing skills discourse. To do this it will be helpful if their academic programme has involved a range of assessment methods and their non-academic experience includes examples of teamworking and taking on responsibilities. So much can be taken as read. What is less convincing, however, is the supposition that students need to be exposed to an employability skills discourse throughout the degree programme, as opposed to and distinct from, a range of rich experiences on which they can draw at the critical stage of career development. What would make a difference in advancing the merits of the importance of skills development would be the citing of two kinds of evidence: firstly, that an emphasis on employability skills learning and teaching made an appreciable difference to securing employment and second, that students greatly enjoyed and, indeed positively welcomed the learning of skills in their academic studies. It has to be said, however that there is no evidence forthcoming on either count.

We do, in fact, have a report (Mason, 2003) that attempted to assess the impact that employability skills development had on employment prospects. It caused a minor splash in the THES (29/08/2003). The report reviewed evidence comprehensively: samples of students and experiences were taken from both pre- and post-1992 universities across a range of five subject areas, including biology, history and computing. In all, 34 departments and 3589 graduates constituted the research base. It was noted that in biology departments there was a strong emphasis on embedding skills into the curriculum, in contrast to the approach of history departments, whether in old or new universities. Unsurprisingly, there was a high correlation between those undertaking work experience sandwich-type degree programmes and graduate employment. But controlling for gender, age, A-level results and degree class the report states:

"There is no evidence of a significant independent effect of the efforts devoted by university departments to the teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills.” (p. 41).4

Perhaps this result is unsurprising in the light of the authors comments on the ‘situated’ nature of knowledge and skills as far as employment settings are concerned with the suggestion that little in an academic skills-based course prepares one for the need, as they put it, to “re-situate” forms of knowledge and skills acquired in another context (p. 8-9).5 What is somewhat unnerving, however, is the suggestion that students/graduates who had little exposure to extensive employability skills training were as successful as those who had in producing a convincing skills narrative that satisfied recruiters. What it does suggest is that once potential applicants are so minded they can indeed engage with a skills discourse.

It is worth noting that the opinion of graduates as to whether their university courses had helped them develop employability skills used in employment was strongly positive (see summary of report, p. 12). But this refers to the experience of the

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4 The crucial summary is to be found in Table 3.3, p. 39, Column section 2.
5 A point addressed at some length by Hinchliffe(2002).
learning of subject knowledge and not to the separate employability skills provision in these courses. That is, it is an engagement with the subject matter in depth that provides the potential for developing employability skills rather than the separate provision of key skills. This finding is re-enforced by the employers perception of the graduate skill-deficit:

“a large proportion of the initial skills deficiencies identified by employers related to areas of skill and knowledge which are best acquired (or can only be acquired) after starting employment rather than beforehand.” (summary, pp. 13-14).

Moreover, of employers interviewed, only one fifth said that they expected graduates to be immediately “work ready”. Two fifths “strongly disagreed” with the statement “we need graduates to have skills and knowledge required to do the job as soon as they arrive” whilst another two fifths of managers agreed with this statement “to some extent” (p. 14). The upshot appears to be, then, that not only does the provision of dedicated employability skills have no discernible affect on graduate employment but that also managers and employers are largely indifferent to such provision.

The second piece of evidence I turn to strongly suggests that students (quite rightly, in my view) are not minded to engage in a skills discourse until this becomes critical. In a report (see Hayward G. and Fernandez R, 2004) that surveyed the further education sector, 16-19 students are simply voting with their feet, given half the chance. The authors suggest (p.137): “only 12% of key skills awarded between 2000 and 2002 were at Level 3”. They conclude (p.142): “Persuading young people, and their schools and colleges, to participate en masse in key skills learning programmes in their current form will probably prove to be an uphill struggle.” What is true of the 16-19 sector is even more true of the higher education sector. There is not the slightest piece of evidence that students will engage, voluntarily, with skills development outside of the curriculum. Therefore the whole thrust of employability, as far as skills development is concerned, is to make the latter an accredited part of the degree: this is the only way in which students will engage with it. The tragedy is that even if they do engage with the skills agenda whilst at university their employability is not significantly enhanced if the first report that we have looked at is valid.

This research supports earlier theoretical criticisms (Norris 1991, Hyland 1997) of skills and competence-led learning and assessment. A modified, contextualised approach to skills learning was defended by Bridges (1993) and Hinchliffe (2002) but more recently, Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) have argued that even the modified approach does not fully address the need for critical thinking and judgement. And even if the contextualised approach to skills development does incorporate critical thinking it is of little use in the development of employability. For the root problem of employability is that certain attributes and abilities are to be developed out of context (i.e. out of the context of employment): that is what the employability agenda is all about. Hence the almost mythical and unquestioned status attached to the concept of transferability of skills: the concept of employability is completely dependent on conceptions of assumed transferability as far as skills are concerned.

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6 The report by Mason has been usefully summarised by Sue Cramner (see Cramner 2006) and the conclusions drawn by her are also ambivalent in respect of the connection between skills development and employability.
5. Exploring the concept of capability

If we take the broader-based approach to employability associated with the USEM model – reinforced by the comment by Brennan (2003) that “confidence, self esteem and aspirations may be at least as important as skills and competencies in securing good employment” (p. 4) then perhaps a different perspective to employability from the skills and audit-driven approach is needed. Employability is currently driven by the following question: ‘what is the best way of developing employment skills compatible with academic requirements?’ I suggest replacing this with the following question: ‘what kind of capabilities should be developed to enable graduates realise their potential?’ in which the link to employment is left deliberately implicit. This question then enables us to focus on the capabilities a graduate needs to develop if he/she is to engage with the world, the public domain. In asking this broader question we see graduates as potential public actors: the focus is broader than employability but not so broad as to include everything about a graduate - for example, personal relationships and the like fall outside the scope of our question.

When Amartya Sen first theorised the concept of capability he suggested (in the context of asking questions about social re-distribution) that perhaps we should focus not so much on goods and resources as what people could actually do. The idea was that what persons were capable of doing may not be directly measurable by how much income they have: but if we are interested in the quality of life then we need more than measures of income to judge whether redistributive policies really do make people better off.

Sen suggested that capabilities – what people could do with their lives – could be conceived in terms of substantive freedoms. For as well as income and resources persons need the ability and the opportunity to turn these into activities that they value. Freedom is therefore seen not only as the absence of constraints but also in terms of effective choice and action. This idea was further theorised by Sen in terms of ‘functionings’ or modes of being and doing. The idea is that a capability can enable a range of possible functionings that an agent has reason to value. A ‘capability set’ is therefore, according to Sen, a combination of functionings. The key point here is that there is no one-to-one correlation between capability and functions – capabilities enable a range of functionings. It follows that the development of capabilities – if it takes the notion of substantive freedom seriously – needs to have in view their empowering dimension: capabilities enable persons to do more with their lives.

Within the capabilities approach there are two distinct lines of enquiry, though they are related, and, indeed, have certain overlapping areas. The first is concerned to analyse the opportunities for functioning – what are the legal, social and economic barriers to functioning ? For persons may have capabilities yet the opportunity for their effective exercise may be lacking. Here, policy is directed towards the reduction of barriers. The second line of enquiry is concerned with the development of capabilities themselves. Here we are concerned with the internal capacities of persons and their ability to make the most of the opportunities available. Thus persons may have plentiful resources and income (at least compared to those worst off living in developing countries) yet still have a diminished range of functioning because the

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relevant capabilities are underdeveloped. The prime concern of education is with the
development of capabilities.

It might be helpful at this point to make one or two contrasts between skills and
capabilities. A skill can be regarded as a performance that follows certain rules or
procedures. Furthermore, a skill has an outcome that can either be directly measured
or can be evaluated in accordance with fairly tight criteria. But a capability may be
exercised in a number of ways across differing functions. Thus two people with
similar developmental capabilities may have differing sets of functionings: to put the
point differently, they have simply exercised their freedom in different ways.
Moreover, capabilities are value-laden in a way that skills are not. Indeed, it is a
critical feature of skills discourse that the exercise of skills is value-neutral, in keeping
with its human capital origins. Whereas it is a critical feature of capabilities that they
do enter into value-formation and they do this because of the close connection
between capabilities, flourishing and the ends of life. In exercising capabilities across
a range of functionings I am engaged in both working out and enacting, through both
reflection and actual activity, that which has value in my life.

The fact that the concept of capability, unlike that of skill, yields no easy definition
should be regarded as a strength. For it means that persons themselves have to work
out, in context, those capabilities that are important for them – that let them undertake
activities they have reason to value. Theoretically, therefore, it is important to hold on
to the one-to-many relationship between capabilities and functionings. For to equate
capability with function in a one-to-one relation would, in effect, convert capabilities
into competencies that can be defined, measured and ticked off. Capabilities do not
and cannot displace skills, however. In particular, occupational skills as well as skills
associated with basic schooling (reading, writing, speaking) remain as important as
ever, especially if they are learnt within a capability framework.  

6. Three Capabilities
I propose that there are three capabilities that underpin graduate capability: the
capability for voice, for deliberation and for action.

We might think of the capability for voice as being the ability to express one’s
opinions and thoughts and to make them count in the course of a public discussion
(Bonvin and Thelen, 2003, p.3). This is more than the skill of self-assertion which is
primarily directed to ensuring recognition of the self by others. Capability for voice
implies an ability to make effective interventions both at the valuational and strategic
level. It is more than the ability for getting oneself heard, it implies also a capability
for dialogue as well. This capability therefore includes the essential component for
Arendtian action, namely the capacity for self-disclosure through speech. Moreover,
as already noted, since self-disclosure need not be confined to speech, the capability
for voice may also be a surrogate for self-expression through visual and auditory
signs. It should be noted that the capability for voice is not simply a self-regarding
capability: for it suggests that the ability to make one’s voice count depends in part on
the recognition of the voice of others. Crucially, therefore, the capability for voice
implies that other voices are heard and understood; it is a capability that is exercised
in the context of recognition of others.

9 The above account closely draws on an earlier version in the journal Prospero – see Hinchliffe (2007)
A capability for voice presupposes a capability for deliberating both ends and means. This implies that at least sometimes we deliberate over values. For a particular situation we try to work out which value frame it best instantiates. For example, we might be unsure whether someone is a victim of some kind of bullying or whether the real problem is that they can’t stand up for themselves. We may be reluctant simply to accept a victim’s account of a situation as ‘bullying’ until we have satisfied ourselves that they really are victims. We might decide that what is fair, if insensitive, criticism of a person has been interpreted (mistakenly) as bullying. The process of deciding how to frame ethically a situation requires deliberation in terms of understanding context, individual perspectives and motivations as well as consequences. But deliberation is also practical: it yields a belief-set (‘this situation is of such and such a kind’) that engages and commits the deliberator. Deliberation involves engagement with the world: in characterising a situation as being of a particular kind with a particular character the deliberator is making a judgement. And, in judging thus, an agent is disclosing herself to others and so then has to account for and justify that judgement.

Deliberation can also take place when knowledge is uncertain, or, to be more precise, where the consequences of certain courses of action are uncertain. In this case, deliberation takes the form of identifying the source of uncertainty. Deliberation is then resolved by ascertaining extra information or explanation. The problem in hand may be entirely technical. Nevertheless, in resolving to act one way rather than another to resolve a problem I will still form certain beliefs which have to be accounted for and justified. Even in the technical arena, self-disclosure is perfectly possible and dispositions of courage and steadfastness may be called for. The reason for this is that although the problem itself may be technical the consequences of how it is resolved may reach far and deep in terms of the impact on persons’ lives. Viewed from this perspective there may be an implicit value framework in the most technical of problems. One might think that there must be at least some technical problems whose consequences, one way or another, are slight – but this kind of assessment of ethical importance also figures, I suggest, in the deliberating process. In this case, it may lead to much higher risk taking than might otherwise be the case.

Our analysis of the capabilities for voice and for deliberation have shown that these are sufficient for action to take place, in the sense of engaging with the world and of committing the agent. However, voice and deliberation may indeed issue in action but possibly on a very small stage, well within the compass of an agent’s comfort zone. Therefore, the capability for action designates a capability for intervention in the public domain with all the exposure and visibility that entails. In taking an action an agent is taking a risk. Criticism may come from quarters never even imagined; consequences may take the form of growing ripples of events that cannot be controlled or foreseen; and in self-disclosure a person may find herself severely tested over an extended period of time.

Thus in action in the strong, Arendtian sense, a person may be willing to contest publicly certain assumptions. Or again, a person (or group of persons acting together) may be prepared to try and seize the imagination of the public with a set of ideas. They may try to challenge directly the policy of government or some major institution.

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10 See Arendt (1958) for the classic account of action in a public space.
or business organisation. Their actions need not be adversarial at all: they may be such as to try and reassure an apprehensive public on some matter of concern. Or the intervention may be cultural or even religious. But whatever form the action takes, there is the implication that it is in some sense creative, that is, that an intervention is also a beginning of an action that has already a story and narrative embedded in it. Through the deployment of voice and deliberation an event has happened that would not have otherwise occurred.

7. Capability and Employability
It is not proposed that the development of the three capabilities should entirely replace concern with developing and reflecting on skillsets. What I do want to say is that something more than skill development is needed in the development of graduate employability. In a UNESCO survey, cited by Brennan (2003, p. 29) there was considerable international consensus over expectations of graduates by employers. These included:

- Flexibility
- Contribute to innovation and be creative
- Be able to cope with uncertainties
- Acquire social sensitivity
- Understanding of various cultures
- Becoming entrepreneurial

No amount of reflection on skills is going to yield these attributes. What is needed, rather, are a set of experiences in which those attributes are required or may be developed. It is unlikely that they will be engendered through the standard delivery of academic courses. Interestingly these attributes may not necessarily be engendered through work experience either, particularly if it is strongly task-based. Between them (standard academic delivery and orthodox work placements) they may well deliver a key-skillset but they may not develop the capabilities needed to address the kind of attributes uncovered by the UNESCO survey. What, then, can be done?

One can say, first of all, that most university degrees do something to develop the capabilities of voice and deliberation. What is more difficult is additionally to incorporate the capability for action in a way that is not artificial and that is congruent with the subject matter of a particular discipline. Nevertheless, here are three suggestions:

1) Research-based project
Although the concept of research-led teaching and learning is a familiar one it still remains the case that it is often easier and more efficient to deliver course content through the standard methods of seminar, lecture and essay. But I suggest a research project have the following features:

- It addresses an area where the current state of knowledge is uncertain
- Encourages the collaboration of shared knowledge (not co-operation which simply achieves results through an agreed division of labour)
- Some emphasis is placed on varying ways of presenting findings - websites, visual displays, summary reports - as well as oral presentations
• Research outcomes should be in two versions – one for academic audiences, one for non-experts.

2) **Public Impact Project**

The idea here is that students are encouraged to make some kind of intervention in the public domain on an issue broadly related to their academic studies. For example, this could involve any of the following:

• Proposals for influencing government (central or local) policy and how this might be effected
• Proposals for influencing the policy of some major institution in the locality (it could be the university itself)
• Contributing to a public debate and finding space (e.g. through local radio or internet) to put a case
• Building or contributing to a community based-resource
• Working with the not-for-profit sector on a project that utilises, in part at least, subject-based knowledge.

It seems to me that there is no discipline (including humanities-based subjects) that cannot form the basis of making a public intervention. Of its nature, this kind of project encourages group working but whilst the results of the overall project need to be assessed so also do the individual contributions.

3) **Work-Based Project**

I would suggest that it is not place of universities to find work placements but to support students (through their career services) in seeking them (finding work in itself can be learning experience). Projects could then take the form of critical reflection that includes:

• Identifying a skillset that was developed
• Identifying deficits experienced either in skills or capabilities, focusing on opportunities ‘for functioning’ that were lacking
• Researching the commercial/business environment (in the example above one could ask who the competitors were, why the reliance on migrant labour, whether powerful customers could dictate their price)
• Estimating the impact on the environment of the work activity.

Relatively modest experiences can generate a whole list of research questions which take us well beyond the traditional assessment disciplines of self-audits and reflection on key skills.

8. A Possible Objection

I want now to consider a possible objection to the line of argument sketched out so far. It maintains that capabilities are simply competencies in disguise. In particular, in assessing student capabilities of voice, deliberation and action a list of criteria will be needed and these will naturally focus on performance. To this objection there are two replies.

First, the whole idea of a capability is that it cannot be reduced to a series of performances in the way envisaged. Recall that capability includes an evaluative
dimension in which students assess not simply their own performance but also the opportunities for and constraints on functioning. The scope of reflection and self-evaluation goes well beyond self-audit in that reflection on a capability could include a reflection on cultural assumptions, policy constraints or lack of resources. Self-assessment of performance is a part of graduate capability but only a part. The whole point behind the capability approach to employability is to heighten the degree of critique: it is the contention of this paper that a focus on ‘evaluating one’s own performance’ actually narrows and constrains critique. In academic subjects, students are encouraged to broaden their scope of critique - such an ability is one of the factors in awarding a first class honours degree. So why, when it comes to employability, need the scope of critique be so narrow and cramped?

The second reply is that the equation of capability with competence completely misunderstands the idea of Sen that a capability is an opportunity for functioning. Given that students have the potential for developing the capabilities of voice, deliberation and action we could ask: do universities provide the possibility for them to function? What functioning opportunities do students really have? This is then a question not so much for the student but for the university itself. So far from turning it into a another version of competency assessment the capability approach to employability asks universities and providers to ask if they are providing their students with a capability set, that is with an array of opportunities to function. The capability approach quite deliberately does not lay the responsibility for developing employability at the door of the student alone. It also permits us to evaluate what the university is doing to help a student develop her capabilities. Furthermore, the university does not develop student capability through prescribing which functionings a student should or should not undertake. The point behind the capability approach is the link to effective freedom: capabilities are best developed through the free take-up of possible opportunities.

9. Conclusion
It is likely that the demands on universities to produce employable graduates will increase – they are certainly not likely to decrease. It is therefore wise for universities to do what they can to shape and determine employability, both in terms of its concept and in terms of what it means in practice. What happens at the moment is entirely reactive: non-vocational students are fed an employability skills curriculum usually based on what is perceived to be what employers and government want. It is time that universities took their own initiative, based on research as to what employability actually means. It is the contention of this paper that employability goes beyond key skills and self-audit. Furthermore, students will not be engaged in the employability process unless it does. Reflection on skills and the ability to be self-critical and realistic about ones own abilities are certainly key elements of employability: of that there is no doubt at all. But the business of reflection requires that there be prior quality experiences and it is to this that universities need to pay more attention. Once students are engaged in employability (typically when they wish to pursue actively an employment opportunity) they are perfectly able to engage in the process of reflection and many only need a few prompts and a little directed guidance. They do not need to spend hours and hours perfecting skills portfolios that employers will never look at. What they do need are those quality experiences in which they can develop creativity, worldliness and resilience as well as an array of skills. What they need are experiences that are both challenging and, it should be said, enjoyable.
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