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Enhancing student employability

Universities must not only provide opportunities for students to develop professional skills, but also ensure they understand why these skills are so important, explains **Catherine Shephard**



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Enhancing student employability has evolved into a key priority in higher education. The trend towards vocational degrees, including law, continues. The latest CBI/Pearson Education and Skills survey highlighted that universities have a critical role in ensuring their leavers are work-ready and suitable for whatever job they step into after graduating.

Lord Neuberger has stated his belief that there is real scope for the development of skills programmes as part of a law degree. The SRA has announced its intention to incorporate practical legal skills assessments into the proposed solicitors qualifying examination.

So how can we ensure that law students graduate with the

professional skills which will make them employable?

Value for employers

First, we must ensure that students understand the value which graduate employers place on skills and so recognise the importance of taking every opportunity to learn about them at university.

Choosing not to attend a talk by a graduate employer, complete a skills exercise which 'doesn't count' towards their final grade, or properly proofread a job application are all sacrifices students make routinely for the sake of exam revision. While the pursuit of attaining a good degree classification is a laudable one, universities must enlighten students at the first opportunity that this will take them only to the threshold entry requirement for a graduate role.

Teaching professional development planning from year one will help students emerge as graduates who understand the skills employers want and – crucially – can evidence that they have them.

There is an issue of cultural capital here. Students with professional parents are likely to arrive at university with an understanding of issues such as how professionals communicate, the need to network, the phone calls taken out of hours dealing with difficult clients, the

resilience required when things are going wrong, and the (im) practicalities of the pursuit of perfection.

If universities are serious about helping widen access to the profession then it is incumbent upon them to seek to level the playing field from year one, not only by providing ample opportunities for all students to learn these professional skills (which are readily available) but also by ensuring all students understand why these skills are so important.

Employers, too, must do their bit to demonstrate the value they place on professional skills – to what extent, for example, might demonstration of excellent professional skills trump other considerations such as university status or degree classification?

Softer skills

Second, there must exist a shared understanding between students, lecturers, and employers as to what constitutes employability. Students can regard with suspicion, even derision, teaching about body language and eye contact. Yet understanding both is vital to communicating effectively as a professional, and failure to demonstrate these skills at interview can be fatal.

Ironically, it may be that by incorporating the more widely

recognised employability skills into the classroom (team working, presentation, problem solving, and oral communication skills) universities unwittingly imply that other, 'softer' skills (body language, eye contact, multi-tasking, leadership, and resilience) are less important.

Teaching culture

Finally, students must be given the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the subject. The word 'employability' can provoke a negative reaction in students and staff. The culture required is one where every lecturer and student truly understands what employability entails.

Careful thought needs to be given to curriculum design; tasks which genuinely develop skills as well as knowledge require much more thought and time to design, and the chance of duplication is high. Lecturers who have not recently worked outside of the university environment may themselves require training to allow them to engage in teaching the subject with confidence.

Employability teaching can be rewarding; the opportunity for quick wins is high. Employers are saying they want it, students are saying they know they need it, and universities seeking to deliver the best possible value for money to students must ensure they teach it effectively. **SJ**