

---

---

---

# Personal Enquiry Project: Students' Perceptions of World of Work Initiatives; does anybody know that they're out there?

Colin Robertson and Mark A. Scott

---

## Abstract

*The influence of the current economic climate, and the inherent challenges that preside within it, mean that it is not enough for a modern graduate to approach the employment market armed with a good degree. It has become increasingly important that graduates have, and can evidence, employability skills. This has led higher education institutions towards a culture of employability and, as such, Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) responded with the implementation of the LJMU WoW™ (World of Work) initiative. Similarly, In 2005, the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at LJMU was recognised as a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL); the Centre for Excellence in Leadership and Professional Learning (CELPL), and subsequently introduced a local approach towards formally addressing employability needs. This article considers the students' perspective of such LJMU employability initiatives, in order to see how well recognised and valued these are amongst the student population.*

## Introduction

The culture of university has changed quite significantly over the past ten years, largely due to the introduction of tuition fees (Glover et al 2002), but arguably also due to the changing requirements of the economic sector. Both influences have led to something of a metamorphosis of what was once a philosophical experience into a culture that is driven by what customers want and need; that being, greater career opportunities and a higher earning potential. As such, new generations of undergraduates may come to request, and expect, some type of guarantee and measure of assurance that if they go to a particular university they will have a better chance of graduating with a higher classification of degree, or perhaps even a degree that has greater recognition within the employment market. Therefore, it will surely be expected that institutions of higher education implement curriculum mechanisms; processes guaranteeing that lectures, modules and programmes are designed to produce well

educated students that are equipped with the necessary key skills to enter the work force (Knight 2002). It is based upon this rationale that the World of Work phenomenon has become high on the agenda for institutions of higher education, and the notion of an employability model is rapidly becoming part of the infrastructure of higher education. That said, the task now is making its presence known and valued by both the wider world of economics and future populations of aspiring students.

The Yorke and Knight (2006) working definition of employability define such attributes as:

*'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'.*  
(Yorke & Knight 2006 p3)

Further to this, Fallows and Steven (2000) categorise employability skills as the following four key abilities, *the retrieval and handling of information; communication and presentation; planning and problem solving; and social development and interaction.* (Fallows & Steven, 2000 p75).

Although these four component parts are quite broad in their definition, offering general segments of description rather than rigid details, they do still provide something of a distinct idea of what employability is made up of; the sum being far greater than each of the constituent parts. Far less vague is the 38-item model that is offered by Yorke and Knight (2006), a model which is broken down into three broad areas: Personal Qualities; Core Skills and Process Skills. The Authors state that the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge and skills is already assumed – that is, not factored amidst the model independently – and also comment that the application of such understanding is merely listed as one item; covered by Process Skills. As such a significant aspect of what some might consider to be more 'traditional' approaches to learning in higher education (instilling a higher level of subject understanding amongst the student group) is summarised beneath one sweeping item within the model, it may be concluded that such concerns make up only a very small proportion of the requirements for employability. And, although distinctly different, the two models – Yorke and Knight (2006) and Fallows and Steven (2000) – both illustrate that the underlying philosophy of embedding employability into the higher education curriculum is one centred on the holistic development of the student, and that delivering discipline-specific material is regarded as something of a formality. That is, both models are somewhat indifferent to the process of embedding employability.

Within the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences (SPS) at Liverpool John Moores University there is a two-fold manifestation of the employability model. At a departmental level, the school has been recognised by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) – jointly awarded along with the Centre for Physical and Outdoor Education and the Centre for Sport and Dance Studies; the specific working title of the CETL being Centre for Excellence in Leadership and Professional Learning (CELPL). CELPL is, in itself, an employability initiative; focused upon the development of transferable skills from within a subject-specific, semi-vocational, degree course.

At an institutional level, Liverpool John Moores initiated the *LJMU plus* agenda; the plus being indicative of the 'value added' dimensions of the WOW philosophy. This institutional initiative – LJMU plus – has progressed more recently into 'degrees with added *WoW™* factor'. Although this development has more to do with how the concept is branded as opposed to how it is delivered according to statements published by the university in 2008 (LJMU 2008). This is largely because it is accepted that the culture of employability should flow from within the curriculum and not be additional to it (Knight & Yorke 2001). Even though concepts referred to by Knight and Yorke (2003) discusses *Skills plus*, and initial templates devised institutionally by Liverpool John Moores University described their initiative as 'plus', the concern was that both concepts alluded to the idea that something had been added and not, in fact, changed. Therefore, the change of branding for LJMU plus which now suggests that employability has, indeed, been added might seem to be little change at all, that the students will still merely become enriched by a side-order of World of Work skills as opposed to experiencing a degree programme that has been aligned with employability factors.

In either context, there does seem to be something of an assumption associated with the notion of employability at higher education. That is, that the student engages with processes of employability, and the opportunities contained therein, until ultimately 'getting' employability as a set of working skills. In essence, it would seem that making the curriculum employability focused is enough for the students; sufficient in itself for students to both become skilled and likewise be able to evidence such skills. But such a notion merely raises the question of 'is this enough?' Is it really enough to simply provide? Is there not also a responsibility to raise awareness and even, perhaps more importantly, assess such factors?

As a member of CETL staff, appointed to both embed and facilitate this initiative, it is relatively straightforward to see what curricular and extra-curricular changes have taken place in the past three-years. Highlighting these transformations within the context of the School's working model of employability (familiarisation, skilling-up and engagement) provides a very tidy pedagogic schematic. However, there are questions that remain unanswered. These are:

1. Are students actually aware of CETL/LJMU plus (WoW™ added) initiatives?
2. Do students perceive such initiatives as a valuable part of their university experience?

The WOW skills are there within the curriculum, and can be proven, but is there any evidence that anybody – other than those responsible for making the changes – actually knows that they are there? As students of the School of Sport and Exercise are, potentially, subject to both influences (CETL and LJMU WoW™ added), and therefore possibly benefiting doubly from these initiatives, it is surely vital that they are as aware of this dimension of their studies as they are the theory they strive to master. Knowing and

understanding that such enrichment skills are part of what students take from their degree courses will surely make evidencing such factors to potential employers easier, whilst also helping to shape the curricular choices that the students make for themselves (both programmes and modules)? All of this will surely have a direct impact on both how teaching is delivered and consequently upon how the students learn?

The focus of the Personal Enquiry Project (PEP) presented here is motivated by similar questions as those directed by Towns et al. (2000), although within something of a different context. Based on the findings of an action research project, Towns et al. (2000) recommend that it is of utmost importance to obtain a complete understanding of the active learning dynamic and that the 'voice' of students involved in these activities is heard. The authors also suggest that in order to do this, the researcher must implement a qualitative methodology (focus groups; questionnaires and interviews) that is centred on examining what students think, know, and feel through what they say, write, or do (Towns et al., 2000). As the purpose of the study presented here was to register and consider the student voice – their perceptions and opinions of employability and WOW skills - engaging the students in the research required that an active learning style of format and interaction be employed. Therefore, the recommendations and philosophy of the Towns et al. (2000) study have shaped the way in which this research was developed.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In December 2008, three undergraduate students (age 19-23) representing each of the three undergraduate courses provided by the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences (Sports Science, Science and Football and Exercise Science) participated in the personal enquiry project (PEP). Based on the Peer Learning Group

(PLG) tutorials, and in particular, the input from the PLG mentor, a small sample size of three students was deemed sufficient for the PEP focus group. Depending on the aims of the project and resources of the project focus group sample sizes can quite typically be as small as four and reach as many as fifty groups (see Kitzinger 1994). The three students were selected from the entire school's student cohort, where the selection process was based on the degree to which the student had engaged in activity within the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning facility. Due to the limited time constraints for the PEP this selection process was based on personal observations of the students' activity levels and not through a statistical measure such as questionnaire data or sampling across the year. Each student provided informed consent and was advised that they could leave the focus group at anytime point.

### **Rationale and Procedure**

A qualitative focus group was selected for the personal enquiry project presented here, as the method monopolises on communication between research participants in order to generate data about a particular topic through specific group interactions (Kitzinger 1994). This methodology is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences, which is directly relevant to the subject area presented here, and can also be used to examine what people think, how they think and why they think in that particular way. The structure of the focus group session was in three stages:

**Stage 1:** Students' perceptions of employability and the World of Work agenda.

**Stage 2:** Do students value the skills associated with WOW?

**Stage 3:** Are there any perceived differences between LJMU WoW™ added and CETL?

These stages were constructed such that instead of asking individual questions of each student, a generic question could be posed at each stage and the students were encouraged to talk to one another, ask questions, exchange experiences, comment on those experiences and ultimately share in their points of view.

The focus group participated in a 60-minute session with a facilitator. As each stage progressed an interventionist style was adopted so that certain points were encouraged into a broader debate. Therefore the session was as much explorative of ideas as it was accountable. This interventionist strategy was performed, particularly, in order to account for two possible areas of conflict:

1. Inconsistencies between participants
2. Disagreements within the group

Actively steering the group encouraged the participants to clarify their point of view and to explain why they thought as they did. This approach was carried out throughout the three stages, and each phase was tape-recorded for analysis purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

Traditionally, researchers will analyse focus group data by transcribing the sessions accurately and subsequently coding the data through a particular scheme (Thomas et al. 2005). However, the PEP project the focus group data presented here was analysed by transcribing the audio taped sessions such that the individual questions were grouped together. Once the data had been grouped, key aspects of the students' discussion were then pulled out and a list was created of points per question. This allowed for a drawing together and comparison of discussions of similar themes, and also an opportunity to examine how these findings related to the general state of literature in this area.

## Results and Discussion

### Stage 1: Students' perceptions of employability and the World of Work agenda.

Whilst there was some disparity between responses given to this theme, there remained recognition of the values associated with the attainment of a degree within the wider economic sector. Respondent 1 stated that: *"As a mature student, I always thought of a degree as something that gave you better job prospects on its own. It never dawned on me that there would be something else that I would have to achieve alongside it."* A comment that sums up much of the talk and debate centred on employability, more so the topic of reconceptualising employability (see Knight & Yorke 2003) and changing perceptions of what a degree is meant to represent. Likewise, Respondent 2's comment tells us something of the modern perception of the undergraduate degree: *"I've always wanted to work in football, and what I've learnt since doing this degree is that in football a degree on its own isn't worth a lot. People, players and that, won't just listen to you because you've got a degree; they want to know what you can do as well. So, employability is important for what I want to do."* Albeit unknowingly, Respondent 2 is echoing a statement put forward by West (2000):

*'Others, again, on the employment side, have expressed scepticism as to whether education of itself can provide much by way of meaningful preparation for work, arguing that experience of the 'real world' is all that really matters'.* (West 2000, p575).

The sentiment being that it is recognised that degrees should represent more, and in order to do so they should provide more; and more precisely, undergraduate programmes should provide experience. Hereby, reconsidering Respondent 1's comment, which at face value might seem somewhat dismissive of WOW factors, it could be taken that rather than be additional to, Respondent 1's expectations are that employability would come from within the

degree course? And this is a notion strongly supported within research literature (see Knight & Yorke 2003; Yorke & Knight 2006 and Moreland 2005 for examples). The difficulty lies within differentiating what has been added to a curriculum and what aspects of the curriculum have changed or become aligned. Respondent 3 commented that: *"Employers always ask for experience, even if you've got a first-class degree they always want to know what you've done. The more of this you can do at university the better."* The prospect of providing 'experience' opportunities is not something of a fresh idea at higher education (Little et al. 2006), but equally it is not one that lends itself to contemporary approaches to curriculum alignment (Biggs 1996). However, there is a subtlety regarding the manner in which these 'experience' opportunities are provided which better places them *within* a curriculum rather than alongside or to the main body of the module/programme, and this will be discussed later in this paper. Suffice to comment here, all of the responses given to stage 1 of this PEP were given mindful of the employment value of a degree qualification, and similarly expectant that the programmes of study had a role to play in preparing them for the job market.

### Stage 2: Do students value the skills associated with WOW?

This was an area where once again the student voice sang unanimously regarding the value of employability factors. Put in the simplest of terms, Respondent 1's comment sums up the collective tone: *"I think it's a good thing that universities are concerned with this, most people want a degree just so that they can get a better job."* All of the students that contributed towards the PEP data presented here identified that, to them, the attainment of a degree was all about enhancing career prospects. This is consistent with the findings of Watts (1994), and the general cyclic nature of this is summarised nicely by West (2000):

*'Employers recruit graduates, individuals seek to enhance their future careers through higher education, university research can lead to the formation of new industries or destruction of existing ones, and governments – investing in higher education on behalf of the public – often wish to see some general economic payback. (West 2000, p573).*

However, there remained some division in how the students perceived that the degree made them more attractive within the economic market. Respondent 1's second statement on this specific dimension of the PEP suggests, quite clearly, that the academic notoriety of the degree award was their priority: *"I think that WOW stuff is important, but getting a good degree is more important. If it means deciding which I must do, then my coursework and revision come first every time because I still believe that that is what will get me a better job."* Whereas Respondent 2's comments were quite to the contrary: *"Not everyone at university wants to be the brainiest person on the planet, some of us just want to learn so that we can do things better, and that's what employability seems to be about to me."* And further to this Respondent 2 states: *"Maybe you should have two types of sports science degree, the really theoretical one and the more practical one; an academic or an employability option? That way you could let students choose for themselves, I'd bet that most people on our course would go down the employability line."* Both statements by Respondent 2 are indicative that the degree is required to offer more than just an academic foundation to this individual. And Respondent 3 joins this debate by adding: *"If the job market is changing then education has to change as well, and employability will surely be the process by which these changes happen? So many more people get degrees nowadays, world of work issues will probably be what potential employees are judged on in the future."* Thus, whilst the recognised strength of the degree in the market place is agreed by the PEP cohort, the specific nature of

it remains somewhat contested, and perhaps this will prove to be the key stumbling block when attempting to evidence employability factors to potential employers. It might be that addressing the differences of perception amongst groups, as opposed to those that exist merely between them, is the first challenging step to be taken along the road of establishing the employability agenda within the wider public consciousness.

### **Stage 3: Are there any perceived differences between LJMU WoW™ added and CETL?**

There was far more of a consensus of opinion in the responses given to this stage of the PEP, and the majority of that commonality centred upon how the students perceived the two initiatives worked in practice. Respondent 2's initial comment captures much of the overall sentiment relating to the difference between CETL and LJMU WoW™ added: *"To be honest, I've never heard of LJMU WoW™ added but I have heard of CETL. I think that most students think that CETL is where the real stuff happens."* There seemed to be an emphasis that placed CETL beneath a very 'active' light and LJMU WoW™ underneath an almost administrative glare. Respondent 3 adds to the comment made by Respondent 2, stating that: *"The LJMU WoW™ added initiative doesn't seem to have actually done a lot. I don't really see where it sits in the university; I can't see what it's added? Whereas CETL is a place you go to, where things take place and you can be a part of it."* And perhaps this is the main problem with an initiative that claims to be a 'plus' factor, or one that considers itself as 'added'? As Yorke (2006) states:

*'Hence it is inappropriate to assume that students are highly employable on the basis of curricular provision alone: it may be a good harbinger but it is not an assurance of employability. Employability derives from the ways in which the student learns from his or her experiences.'* (Yorke 2006, p7).

Yorke's (2006) comment underlines the importance of 'how' engagement is facilitated, and quite literally detracts from concepts simply based about 'what' has been provided. Both Respondent 2 and Respondent 3 allude to action when they refer to CETL, and this notion is taken forward by Respondent 1 when she states: "*I've seen some stuff on the website that talks about LJMU WoW™; it all just looks like ideas and concepts where you have to tick boxes. The CETL experiences I've had have always been very active, hands-on kinds of opportunities, the exact opposite almost.*" All of which returns to a problem put forward at the outset of this report, that being the issue of evidencing aspects of employability to the wider economic sector. Both the students' perceptions of, and expectations of, employability are ones that hinge of experience and opportunities to participate in work-related activity. However, it cannot be argued that by merely providing 'work experience' opportunities the CETL initiative is out-doing the LJMU initiative. For, as Little et al. (2006) states, "*Work experience itself is not necessarily intrinsically beneficial. It is the learning that an individual derives from the experience that is important.*" (Little et al. 2006, p14).

Also, as Holmes and Miller (2000) reported, work experience is hardly a revolutionary notion within the field of higher education, as certain highly vocationally orientated areas can date these practices back to their very origin. Thus, the manner in which these learning opportunities are delivered must, surely, be at the heart of their success? Which, perhaps, goes some distance towards explaining why the students of the PEP presented here demonstrated something that might be regarded as quite an apathetic attitude towards the LJMU WoW™ added initiative? As this is a process which, perceivably to this student group at least, facilitates less actual engagement. Returning to the theme of evidencing aspects of employability in a

meaningful manner to potential employers, it might just be that reporting an acquired skill-base is easier when there is a background of experience to support it. Based upon the responses presented here there is clearly something about the CETL initiative that 'works' for the students. This much can be derived solely from Respondent 1's comment: "*Rather than have LJMU WoW™ added, why doesn't each school just do its own thing like sports science has?*" The fact that this student would suggest that each school merely rolls-out its own employability model is indicative of problems associated with instigating national agendas at an institutional level (see Yorke 2006). Terms such as 'added' indicate towards concepts of *more*, and perhaps 'more to do'? Whereas, changing the curriculum both in order to enhance opportunities and in terms of teaching delivery styles modifies what the student experiences and engages with as part of their studies. There is no clash of opinion or aim when it comes to the LJMU WoW™ added and CETL initiatives, it could even be argued that all that CETL is actually doing is implementing an institutional measure at a departmental level. In fact, Respondent 2 even comments that: "*The WoW™ added info and the CETL statements look like they are working towards the same thing, they're just doing it differently.*" A statement identifying that the unity of ambition, between institution and school, is clearly important. That noted, the students that took part in this PEP identified something of a difference between how LJMU WoW™ and CETL functioned, and were likewise able to express something of a preference. This prospect is of concern should it ever become a factor that influences the choices of aspiring undergraduates when deciding at which university they should study.

## Conclusion

The challenge that faces institutions of higher education, regarding the employability agenda, and as presented in this paper, would appear to be two-fold; alignment and evidence. For lecturers, and teaching and learning coordinators alike, the data put forward in this report would suggest that this challenge should be centred upon a better understanding of how we can create environments where students feel that they can actively engage in experiences that will help develop them to be able to function within a professional work setting, whilst also expressing themselves more critically from an academic perspective. Whether this is an institutional or departmental initiative is probably of minor concern, so long as the delivery is engaging and experiential.

However, when it comes to evidencing such factors to the wider economic market there really does seem to be an inherent complexity that reaches far beyond just employers' needs, and from the modest output of this report it would seem that the undergraduate degree is undergoing something of an identity crisis and the steps required to address this issue are still somewhere off on the horizon.

- **Colin Robertson** is Exercise Science Support Officer in the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences.
- **Mark A. Scott** is Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) Leader, School of Sport And Exercise Sciences.

## References

- Biggs J B (1996) Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment *Higher Education*, 32, 1-18
- Fallows S & Steven C (2000) Building employability skills into the higher education curriculum: a university-wide initiative *Education and Training*, 42 (2), 75-82
- Glover D, Law S. & Youngman A (2002) Graduateness and Employability: student perceptions of the personal outcomes of university education. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 7 (3), 293-305
- Holmes A & Stuart M (2000) A case for Advanced Skills and Employability in Higher Education, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 52 (4), 653-664
- Kitzinger J (1994) The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interactions between research participants, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 16, 103-21
- Knight P & Yorke M (2001) Employability through the curriculum. Skills Plus Project
- Knight P & Yorke M (2003) Employability and Good Learning in Higher Education, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8 (1), 3-16
- Little B & ESECT colleagues (2006) Employability and work-based learning. *Learning and Employability, Series One* The Higher Education Academy, York.
- Liverpool John Moores World of Work (WoW™) Handbook (2008)
- Moreland N (2005) Work-related learning in higher education. *Learning and employability, Series Two*, The Higher Education Academy, York
- Moreland N (2007) Entrepreneurship and higher education: an employability perspective (second edition). *Learning and employability, Series One*, The Higher Education Academy, York

- Thomas J R, Nelson J K, & Silverman S J (2005) *Research Methods in Physical Activity*, 5th edition, Human Kinetics, USA
- Towns M H, Kreke K, & Fields A (2000) An Action Research Project: Student Perspectives on Small-Group Learning in Chemistry, *Journal of Chemical Education*, 77, 111-115
- Watts A G (1994) *Lifelong Career Development: Towards a National Strategy for Careers Education and Guidance*. Cambridge: Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC)
- West J (2000) Higher Education and Employment: opportunities and limitations in the formation of skills in a mass higher education system, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 52 (4), 573-588
- Yorke M (2006) Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not. *Learning and Employability, Series One*, The Higher Education Academy, York
- Yorke M & Knight, P T (2006) Embedding employability into the curriculum. *Learning and Employability, Series One*, The Higher Education Academy, York