From the library to the workplace

How information professionals can support the development of employability skills

Megan Wiley
Llyfrgellydd / Librarian
Coleg Brenhinol Cerdd a
Drama Cymru / Royal Welsh
College of Music and Drama
megan.wiley@rwcmd.ac.uk

Background

Employability is now an unavoidable term in UK Higher Education.[1] As institutions compete for prospective students, graduate destination statistics have become key.[2] There is an increasing drive to equip students with the right skills to help them find employment upon graduation and to attract the attention of a limited pool of graduate recruiters.

In 2014 SCONUL's User Experience and Success Strategy Group commissioned a review of the literature on current practice in the development of employability skills.[3] It aimed both to demonstrate the relevance of Information Literacy (IL) and to provide the basis to develop an advocacy tool for libraries in the future. Since its publication there have been further initiatives in this fast-moving area[4] and many examples cited in the original SCONUL review have since changed. However, this article seeks to highlight some of the key points and to provide background for anyone new to employability skills development.

Defining employability

There is a tension between the idea of employability as a checklist of 'skills, understandings and personal attributes' and the difficulty of defining this (Higher Education Academy, 2012, p. 4). Ultimately, employability skills include whatever makes graduates 'more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations'.[5] Graduate attributes are therefore generally recognised to encompass more than an academic degree, whilst not being purely skills-based. This was well summarised in 2013 by the president of Universities UK: 'Employability is in the end a complex blend of skill, attitude, experience, motivation and interest, underpinned by the ability to learn and to apply that learning to the challenges that work presents (Snowden, 2013).'

Employers also vary in their understanding of graduate attributes, but many place 'motivation and interest, organisational fit, skills and work experience higher up their list of desirable criteria' than academic achievement (Pennington, Mosley and Sinclair, 2013, p. 9). This makes the whole area of 'commercial awareness' a key one, since it is how students can come to understand the organisation and sector and so demonstrate their interest. Commercial awareness is also an area in which employers repeatedly complain that candidates and recruits are not strong enough.[6] This is perhaps the most pertinent area for librarians, who are well-placed help to equip students with the skills for finding and evaluating information about businesses. In doing so, they can also help to improve other areas where employers frequently bemoan the lack of graduate skills: problem-solving and IT.[7]

Careers and employability frameworks

Careers practitioners in different institutions use a range of models to support their approach to career planning and guidance.[8] These typically include a 'research' element,[9] but the role of information professionals in providing or interpreting careers information is not well established and few careers services employ professionally qualified librarians.[10] Although recent models of career development have looked explicitly at the role of online careers information in particular, they are written by guidance professionals and make no mention of libraries or information professionals: 'The easy availability of online information masks the fact that there is considerable skill in knowing how to ask the right questions of this sort of information and interpret what you are being told' (Longridge, Hooley and Staunton, 2013, p. 6).

This description is instantly recognisable as IL, and the same can be said for many elements of Hooley's 'Seven Cs' framework, which includes 'critiquing': 'the ability to understand the nature of online career information and resources, to analyse its provenance and to consider its usefulness for a career' (Hooley,

From the library to the workplace
How information professionals can support the development of employability skills

2012, p. 6). Hooley acknowledges the presence of IL but highlights the criticism it has attracted for undervaluing 'socially transmitted forms of information'. He argues that this would be 'a considerable limitation in any attempt to repurpose the concept for career, where implicit and socially transmitted forms of knowledge and information are recognised as being of crucial importance' (*ibid.*).

However, librarians are already involved in helping their users to navigate socially mediated online information.[11] Indeed, the ANCIL (A new curriculum for information literacy) model of IL includes 'Finding and using people as information sources', including in person and online through social media (Secker and Coonan, 2011, p. 12). Perhaps, as Abson and Lahlafi (2013, p. 14) suggest, the main reason why librarians 'are missing an opportunity to demonstrate our value' in relation to IL in the workplace is simply our 'choice of language'.

Employability frameworks and skills awards

Secker (2012, p. 8) posits that employability frameworks like the Higher Education Academic Record (HEAR) may provide 'impetus for change' when trying to convince academics of the value of IL. HEAR provides a standardised approach for undergraduate students to record their achievements at university so that these can be shared with prospective employers.[12] However, there is still debate around how meaningful HEAR is for employers,[13] and usage by libraries was hard to find.[14]

One of the stated aims of HEAR[15] is to promote the increasingly prevalent institutional skills awards.[16] These are typically managed by the careers service or students union and are usually not based on shared models but developed individually.[17] This represents a challenge for librarians attempting to contribute to their delivery, since there will be no single approach to content or management.[18] However, most awards do include something similar to 'business and customer awareness' (CBI, 2011, p. 13) and this is often a core component. There is therefore often an opportunity for librarians to provide stand-alone content for awards – sometimes working collaboratively with colleagues from other departments – or for existing IL sessions to be accredited, thus potentially increasing student uptake.[19] Alternatively, libraries can provide support with what Mann (2011, p. 5) records as the top three challenges: scalability, staff resource and academic buy-in.

Framing Information Literacy for employability

As the ANCIL framework clearly outlines, the same skills to find, critically evaluate and use information that students need for their degrees are readily applied to the workplace.[20] There is not room here to provide detailed examples of library involvement in employability skills development, but these are now available.[21]

The majority of employability skills training run either entirely or in part by information professionals relates to researching an employment sector or individual organisation.[22] The emphasis tends to be that finding and using information effectively not only helps with career decisions but also ensures that applicants stand out in application processes[23] and throughout their careers. Training often uses library resources such as electronic databases but is, to a large extent, an easier 'sell' than traditional IL sessions, since many students will be concerned about their future careers. Other sessions relate to using social media effectively for a job search or to manage digital identity.[24] A different kind of session mentioned by Luker and Nephin (2013, p. 13) is 'information literacy skills in the workplace', which asks students to imagine themselves as a researcher in a role relevant to their own degree.

From the library to the workplace
How information professionals can support the development of employability skills

There are examples of librarians and careers advisers delivering training jointly, with a focus on their individual areas of expertise.[25] Oakley (2013, p. 25) provides a helpful overview of the advantages of collaboration with other parts of the institution: both the obvious contribution to the employability agenda and as another way of promoting information literacy: '[...] used critically, social media is a valuable information source for current awareness and learning materials'.

Key messages for information professionals

- Explicitly address employability skills in existing IL sessions (and their promotion)[26] to demonstrate relevance to the wider institution and students.

- Seek to have a link on the websites of other university departments and services (such as careers and the Students' Union) in order to reinforce the relevance of the library's training to employability skills development.[27]

- Be proactive about contributing to existing awards and training – make contact with other services.

- Careers and other student services vary greatly in structure and responsibilities – find out how they operate in your institution.

- Accredited involvement in a core component of the institution's skills award or employability framework is the ideal.

- Business and customer awareness and digital literacy are elements well suited to delivery by librarians.

- Find out what training already exists so that you can add to it rather than creating stand-alone content.

- Work with other parts of the institution to decide how best to market your skills and training (the name chosen for the individual training sessions is important).

- Opportunities to co-present with someone from a non-library background may result in a larger audience and advantages for both departments.

- Consider running training for colleagues in other services both to raise your profile within the institution and to increase the chance of working collaboratively in the future.

- Improved relationships across the institution help everyone, including students.

- Help to promote and grade existing award schemes,[28] even if delivering training yourself is not an option.

- Universities will have an employability strategy and there may be a group you can join in relation to this.

Notes

1   Examples include: Harvey, 2003; Higher Education Academy, 2015b; Thompson et al., 2013; Woods and Murphy, 2013. Employability and IL was also a theme for the Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference in 2013: see LILAC, 2013.

2   Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2015; Universities UK, 2010

3   Wiley, 2014

4   More recent initiatives include activity collated by InformAll, 2015, and CILIP, 2015. Both mention the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) Information Literacy group and a literature review on employability and IL by Inskip, 2014.

5   Higher Education Academy, 2012, p. 4

From the library to the workplace

How information professionals can support the development of employability skills

6   See reports from the Confederation of British Industry: CBI, 2011, p. 15; CBI, 2013, p. 57.

7   CBI, 2013, p. 13

8   See, for example: Careers Group, 2014

9   Pennington, Mosley and Sinclair, 2013, p. 9

10 Wiley, 2011

11 Oakley, 2013

12 Higher Education Academy, 2015a

13 Pennington, Mosley and Sinclair, 2013, p. 7

14 Higher Education Academy, 2015a

15 Higher Education Academy, 2015c

16 AGCAS (the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services) has established a Skills Awards task group; their 2011 survey elicited responses from 67 different institutions that run awards, many of which had been 'developed collaboratively' across institutions (AGCAS, 2012, p. 1).

17 Mann, 2011, p. 3

18 See Wiley, 2014, for a snapshot of the continually changing employability skills awards landscape.

19 See the January 2015 case study from Library Services at University of West of England (UWE), who worked with the Careers and Employability Service to include library-related content in the employability award and also developed new sessions jointly (SCONUL, 2015).

20 Secker, 2012

21 See Wiley, 2014, and case studies from SCONUL, 2015.

22 Students are likely to be shown how to ascertain a company's structure, function, aims, recent news and competitors.

23 Whitmell, 2012

24 Wiley, 2014

25 See: Woods and Murphy, 2013; University of Durham, 2015; Wiley, 2012.

26 An excellent example of this is the University of Sheffield Library, 2015. Their pages about 'information literacy in the workplace' are extremely clear and demonstrate the relevance to employability.

27 Even the simple act of a careers service providing a link from its own website to the library's helps to demonstrate the relevance of training offered. See, for example, the University of Leeds, 2014, which encourages users to seek out library sessions to develop their skills.

28 Some libraries help with the marking of skills award submissions (Wiley, 2014).

References

Abson, C. and Lahlafi, A. (2013). The application of IL to gain and undertake graduate employment: a collaboration between the library and the careers service at Sheffield Hallam University [presentation at LILAC 2013]. Available from: http://

From the library to the workplace
How information professionals can support the development of employability skills

www.slideshare.net/infolit_group/abson-and-lahlafi [accessed 28 June 2015]

AGCAS (2012). *Skills Awards: an AGCAS position statement.* Available from: http://www.agcas.org.uk/pages/position-statements [accessed 28 June 2015]

Careers Group, University of London (2014). *Careers – in theory.* Available from: http://careersintheory.wordpress.com/ [accessed 28 June 2015]

CBI (2011). Working towards your future: making the most of your time in higher education. Available from: http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1121431/cbi_nus_employability_report_march_2011.pdf [accessed 28 June 2015]

CBI (2013). *Changing the pace: CBI/Pearson education and skills survey 2013.* Available from: http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education_and_skills_survey_2013.pdf [accessed 28 June 2015]

CILIP (2015). Do employers want information literacy skills? [online] Available from: http://www.cilip.org.uk/cilip/blog/do-employers-want-information-literacy-skills [accessed 20 June 2015]

Harvey, L. (2003). Transitions from higher education to work: a briefing paper prepared by Lee Harvey (Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University), with advice from ESECT and LTSN Generic Centre colleagues. Available from: http://bit.ly/oeCgqW [accessed 28 June 2015]

Higher Education Academy (2012). *Pedagogy for employability.* Available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/pedagogy_for_employability_update_2012.pdf [accessed 28 June 2015]

Higher Education Academy (2015a). *About HEAR.* Available from: http://www.hear.ac.uk/ [accessed 28 June 2015]

Higher Education Academy (2015b). *Employability.* Available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability [accessed 28 June 2015]

Higher Education Academy (2015c). *The Higher Education Achievement Report: what might it mean for academic colleagues.* Available from: http://www.hear.ac.uk/other_sites/resources/detail/hear/HEAR-what-it-means-for-colleagues [accessed 28 June 2015]

Higher Education Statistics Agency (2015). *About HESA.* Available from: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/3087/804/ [accessed 28 June 2015]

Hooley, T. (2012). How the internet changed career: framing the relationship between career development and online technologies. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC)* [online]. 29 [accessed 9 February 2014]

InformAll (2015). *Transferable know-how* [online]. Available from: http://www.researchinfonet.org/infolit/ridls/transferable-skills/[accessed 28 June 2015]

Inskip, C. (2014). *Information literacy is for life, not just for a good degree: a literature review* [online]. Available from: http://bit.ly/1HpURKe [accessed 28 June 2015]

LILAC (2013). LILAC 2013. Available from: http://www.lilacconference.com/WP/past-conferences/lilac-2013/ [accessed 28 June 2015]

Longridge, D., Hooley, T. and Staunton, T. (2013). *Building online employability: a guide for academic departments.* Derby: International Centre for Guidance Studies and Career Development Centre, University of Derby. Available from: http://derby.openrepository.com/derby/bitstream/10545/294311/1/building online employability_finaljm.pdf [accessed 28 June 2015]

Luker, W. and Nephin, E. (2013). Embedding digital literacy at Leeds Metropolitan University [presentation at LILAC 2013]. Available from: http://www.slideshare.net/infolit_group/luker-nephin [accessed 31 March 2014]

From the library to the workplace

How information professionals can support the development of employability skills

Mann, V. (2011). *AGCAS Award Task Group: initial findings from the skills and employability awards survey*. Available from: http://www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/334-Skills-Awards-Task-Group-careers-information-resources [accessed 9 February 2014]

Oakley, S. (2013). Information literacy meets employability: social media training and the library. SCONUL *Focus* [online]. 58, pp. 25–26 [accessed 9 February 2014]

Pennington, M., Mosley, E. and Sinclair, R. (2013). *AGCAS/AGR Graduate Success Project: an investigation of graduate transitions, social mobility and the HEAR*. Available from: http://www.agcas.org.uk/assets/1519-Graduate-Success-Project-downloads [accessed 28 June 2015]

SCONUL (2015). *Employability*. Available from: http://www.sconul.ac.uk/page/employability[accessed 28 June 2015]

Secker, J., and Coonan, E. (2011). *A new curriculum for information literacy*. Available from: http://ccfil.pbworks.com/f/ANCIL_final.pdf [accessed 28 June 2015]

Secker, J. (2012). *Librarians as teachers integrated with the curriculum*. Available from: http://www.slideshare.net/seckerj/librarians-as-teachers-integrated-with-the-curriculum [accessed 28 June 2015]

Snowden, C. (2013). *President's address to 2013 Members' Annual Conference: the enduring value of universities*. Available from: http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/PresidentsAddress2013AnnualConference.aspx [accessed 28 June 2015]

Thompson, L., Clark, G., Walker, M. and Whyatt, D. (2013). 'It's just like an extra string to your bow': exploring higher education students' perceptions and experiences of extracurricular activity and employability. *Active Learning in Higher Education* [online]. 14 (2), pp. 135–47 [accessed 31 March 2014]

Unistats (2015). *About Unistats*. Available from: http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/find-out-more/about-unistats [accessed 28 June 2015]

Universities UK (2010). *Changes in student choices and graduate employment* [online]. Available from: http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2010/ChangesInStudentChoices.pdf [accessed 28 June 2015]

University of Durham (2015). *Archived Training Resources 2012–13* [online]. Available from: https://www.dur.ac.uk/library/research/training/archive/20122013/ [accessed 28 June 2015]

University of Leeds (2015). *How to develop your skills* Available from: http://careerweb.leeds.ac.uk/info/4/make_yourself_employable/179/how_to_develop_your_skills [accessed 28 June 2015]

Whitmell, C. (2012). How to research a company: top tips on gathering information about employers. *Career choices* hub [blog]. 30 January. Available from: http://careers.theguardian.com/careers-blog/research-employers [accessed 28 June 2015]

Wiley, M. (2011). For your eyes only? Why careers information teams need to demonstrate professionalism. *Impact: journal of the Career Development Group* [online]. October 2011. Available from: http://careerdevelopmentgroup.org.uk/2011/10/for-your-eyes-only-why-careers-information-teams-need-to-demonstrate-professionalism/ [accessed 28 June 2015]

Wiley, M. (2012). *Present #1*. Formal shade of grey [blog]. Available from: http://formalshadeofgrey.wordpress.com/2012/09/27/presenting/ [accessed 31 March 2014]

Wiley, M. (2014). *A review of the literature on current practice in the development of employability skills* [online]. Available from: http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Employability%20Literature%20Review%20June%202014_0.pdf [accessed 28 June 2015]

From the library to the workplace

How information professionals can support the development of employability skills

Woods, E. and Murphy, E. (2013). Get the Digital Edge: a digital literacy and employability skills day for students. *Journal of Information Literacy* [online]. 7(2), pp. 156–57 [accessed 31 March 2014]