

Tackling the wicked problem of student & graduate employability through a lifewide concept of learning, education and personal development

Norman Jackson

Chalk Mountain Education and Media Services (chalkmountain.co.uk)

Lifewide Education Community Interest Company (lifewideeducation.co.uk)

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Being employable and being able to earn an income to live an independent life, is an essential aspect of human development and living for most people. Being employable is time, place, context and situation dependent and it involves a continuously evolving set of capabilities, personal quality and value attributes, and dispositions that an individual develops, applies and integrates into who they are and who they want or need to become.

There are lots of definitions and interpretations of what employability means in the context of higher education students and graduates. These interpretations are increasingly codified in institutional policies and curriculum documents which identify the skills, knowledge, attitudes and experiences necessary to be successful in the world of work.

Pragmatically, being employable means everything an individual can bring to the situation of choosing, finding, gaining or creating a particular work role, and performing and developing themselves in that role and other simultaneous life roles. By doing this they are more able to progress to other existing or self-created work roles, and ultimately be and become the person they want to be. But economic and social changes, rapidly changing patterns of work, and rapid organisational responses to downturns mean that discontinuity and disruption in employment and life narratives are fast becoming the norm. The coping strategies needed during these transition phases, as well as the ability to flexibly adapt and re-invent self when faced with such situations, become a key component of employment capability.

Capability is the power or ability to do something or to perform a certain role. For example, the power to gain employment and perform a role in an employment/self-employment setting. Capability (together with will) is a fundamental concept in education and human development. It refers to 'the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that [a] person can achieve' and reflects a 'person's freedom to lead one type of life or another' (Sen 1992:40). Our capability represents 'the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value' (Sen 1992:31). Adopting a pragmatic, individualist, holistic and capability-oriented view of what being employable means in the context of a higher education student preparing themselves for life beyond university, I will examine the value of a lifewide concept of learning, education and personal development drawing on the work of the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education ([SCEPTRE](http://www.sceptre.ac.uk)) at the University of Surrey.

Norman began his professional life as a geology teacher/researcher and field geologist but his emergent employment narrative, partly by choice and partly through disruption, took him through a series of roles - inspection, QA, research and evaluation, policy creation, enhancement and educational development in the field of higher education. He is currently coping with the transition from employment to self-employment.

The HEPP Research Seminars are organised by Robin Middlehurst, Professor of Higher Education at Kingston University. For further details or to RSVP, please e-mail Kate Dracup-Jones at kate.dracup-jones@kingston.ac.uk.

