Break-Out or Break-Up?

Implications of Institutional Employability Strategies for the Role and Structure of University Careers Services

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1. Context

External agendas

1.1 The last few years have seen some of the traditional concerns of university careers services being linked to externally-driven agendas which are being given wide institution-wide prominence. Four of these merit particular attention: employability; enterprise; personal development planning; and employer engagement. In all four cases, institutions have been responding to largely economically-driven pressures from the government and its agencies.

1.2 Enhancing student employability has been a significant government concern. In 1998, the Department for Education and Employment in its funding letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) referred to the importance of ensuring that ‘given the substantial public investment involved… students in higher education are employable upon graduation’. Accordingly, performance measures relating to employment outcomes were introduced. The HEFCE circular letter to institutions for 2000 included as one of five national priorities:

‘Promoting innovation in the curriculum, particularly activity to increase the employability of graduates and diplomats, including work experience and developing key skills.’

Subsequently, HEFCE has funded the Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team (ESECT) to co-ordinate the efforts of various employability stakeholders and support organisations; it has also funded a number of Centres of Excellence for Teaching and Learning, some of which are focusing on student employability; and the Higher Education Academy has been producing a series of papers on ‘Learning and Employability’. A recent Government consultation paper reaffirms:

‘We want to see all universities treating student employability as a core part of their mission. So we believe it is reasonable to expect universities to take responsibility for how their students are prepared for the world of work’ (DIUS, 2008b, p.6).

1.3 The enterprise agenda in some senses predated that on employability, and initially subsumed it. The Enterprise in Higher Education programme (1988-96) was a major government initiative designed to promote institutional change in higher education. The term ‘enterprise’ was never firmly defined, leaving room for movement between three different definitions (Watts & Hawthorn, 1992):

- Business entrepreneurship – supporting students in setting up their own business.
• Working in enterprises – i.e. employability.
• Being enterprising – in the much more generic sense of capacity to innovate, create opportunities, take risks and respond to challenges.

More recently, since 2004, the government has funded the National Centre for Graduate Entrepreneurship, to provide support for activities related to business and social entrepreneurship in particular. The enterprise agenda has also been increasingly linked to the government’s concern to encourage innovation and knowledge transfer in higher education (DIUS, 2008a).

1.4 On *Personal Development Planning* (PDP), the Dearing Report recommended that all higher education institutions should introduce a Higher Education Progress File, to comprise an institutional transcript and what subsequently became known as PDP (National Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). Following a sector-wide consultation exercise, a target was set that all universities should implement transcripts by 2002/03 and PDP by 2005/06 (QAA, 2001). In practice, the two processes have been managed separately in most universities. The Burgess Report noted that the academic transcript had been taken up in some form by all higher education institutions, but that PDP and the Progress File itself had been less widely adopted (Universities UK, 2007).

1.5 Finally, a key current policy driver is *employer engagement*. Stimulated by the Leitch Review of Skills (2006), its main focus is developing the capacity of higher education to deliver workforce development in relation to high-level skills (DIUS, 2008b). It can also, however, be defined to embrace the engagement of employers in supporting work-based and work-related learning in the curriculum.

1.6 The four agendas overlap, and have been framed in different ways within different institutions. From a student perspective, however, the relationship between them can be framed as shown in Figure 1. In this view, employer engagement (in its broad sense) can support the delivery of programmes related both to employability and to enterprise. Employability and enterprise are in some respects complementary: the entrepreneurial aspect of enterprise provides a potential alternative to employment (self-employment); while generic enterprise skills add a further dimension to employability (intrapreneurship). PDP helps students to convert employability and enterprise programmes into the language of personal competences and career development.

**The changing role of careers services**

1.7 In seeking to address these agendas, some institutions have looked to their careers services to take a strong lead. But some have not.
1.8 The role of higher education careers services has changed considerably in recent years, and taken different forms in different institutions. A review of strategic directions for careers services conducted a decade ago (Watts, 1997) indicated that the traditional core of such services had been built around interviews, information and placement activities. This core was still in place, though the nature of each part was being transformed.

1.9 In addition, however, most services were undertaking a range of additional activities, which potentially could lead to a major restructuring of such services. Seven options for such restructuring were suggested. One of these was the ‘curriculum model’, in which the careers service becomes part of a delivery vehicle for, or part of a service designed to support academic departments in, incorporating employability skills and career management skills into course provision.

1.10 The report further noted that, paradoxically, the institutions in which there is greater scope for careers services to play broader and more diverse roles tend also to be the institutions in which they are least well resourced to take advantage of these possibilities. At traditional universities, the scope for linking employability concerns to the curriculum tends to be more limited: a strong but bounded careers service becomes a means of addressing such concerns but also containing them. At the newer universities, on the other hand, the boundaries around the careers service may be much more permeable, but its level of resource tends to be lower, and its functions more open to competing claims from other parts of the institution. It accordingly has greater opportunities, but is also subject to greater threats. The model offered by the more traditional universities may be an exemplar for such institutions, but may also be a distraction which inhibits them from finding a model more appropriate to their needs.
1.11 Conceptually, careers services have a strong claim for expertise in relation to the development of career management skills, increasingly now referred to as ‘career development learning’ (Watts, 2006; see also Butcher, 2007). There is an argument for this to be viewed alongside employability and enterprise as a third band of curriculum delivery, focused on helping students to learn how to develop a sense of career direction and how to sustain the utilisation and development of their employability and enterprise competences.

1.12 The relationship between the three concepts is complex, and merits further exploration. Within higher education, there has been a tendency for employability to be implemented primarily through the curriculum, enterprise primarily through extra-curricular learning experiences, and career development as a student service. In principle, however, all three could be integrated in more inter-woven forms.

1.13 If careers services can claim distinctive expertise in relation to career development, their claims in relation to the other areas outlined in Figure 1 may be strong but may also be more open to contestation. In terms of the agendas outlined in paras.1.2-1.5 above, the role of careers services has in practice varied considerably. In relation to the EHE programme, for example, some careers services took the lead within their institution, whereas others played only a marginal role (Watts & Hawthorn, 1992). Again, Kumar (2007) reports that some careers services have been brought centre-stage within PDP-related initiatives, while others have struggled to carve out a niche in relation to the PDP agenda.

1.14 The report of the Harris Committee (2001) stated that a careers service ‘with an agreed mission which supports the institution’s business plan and contributes towards its graduate employability objectives, is better placed to secure the cooperation it needs’ (p.30). This however begs the question of whether such involvement may transform the nature of the service.

1.15 The impact of these developments on the roles and structure of university careers services has been cumulative. There are however signs that major developments are currently taking place in a number of institutions, which may be bringing these processes to a head.

The current project

1.16 The pilot study reported here is designed to explore the role of careers services in relation to institutional strategies for employability and related agendas, and the implications of such strategies for the role and structure of careers services. It is hoped that this will lead to a more extensive investigation of these issues.

1.17 For this pilot study, four institutions were selected: two pre-1992 universities (one old – Birmingham; one new – Lancaster) and two post-1992

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1 Maguire (2005) found that in 53% of institutions, the careers service was located in student services.
universities (Central Lancashire; Liverpool John Moores). The selection was based on anecdotal information that, in all four cases, substantial restructuring of the careers service was taking place, linked to their role in relation to institutional employability strategies.

1.18 In three cases (Birmingham, Lancaster, Liverpool John Moores), one-day visits were made during February-March 2008 to the institution, in the course of which interviews were held with:

- The pro-vice-chancellor/s (or other senior manager/s) with responsibility for careers, employability and enterprise.
- The head of the careers service (plus, where appropriate, key senior careers service staff involved in implementing employability/enterprise strategies across the institution).
- The head of any other unit involved in implementing employability/enterprise strategies across the institution.

Use was also made of comparable information from Central Lancashire, where one of us (AGW) had conducted similar interviews as part of a consultancy project.
2. Employability Strategies

Drivers within institutions

2.1 Within all four institutions, student employability is being given greater prominence than in the past. There appear to be two main drivers for this.

2.2 The first is the significance attached to the university’s position in the first-destination employment league tables. The definitions on which the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) statistics are based were revised from 2002/03, making it possible to distinguish graduate-level jobs from other jobs. The data are based on destinations six months after graduation. It is widely recognised that this represents a crude outcome measure: some graduates choose to travel after graduation, and longitudinal studies have shown that a fair number take three years or more before they enter graduate-level jobs (Purcell et al., 2005). Accordingly, the possibility of a regular longitudinal survey is currently being explored by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Meanwhile, however, the DLHE statistics are extensively publicised in league-table form.

2.3 In the two pre-1992 universities, concern about the university’s position in this league table has had a significant impact:

- In Birmingham, there is concern that in The Times Good University Guide 2007, for example, Birmingham was ranked 15th out of the 20 Russell Group universities in relation to graduate employment.
- Lancaster views itself as a research-intensive as well as student-centred university, and is proud of the fact that in recent Research Assessment Exercise ratings it has been placed in the top 12 universities in the country. On most other criteria, it is in the top 20. On first employment, however, its performance has been relatively low. When the previous first-destination ratings were replaced by the DLHE ratings with their stronger attention to graduate-level jobs, Lancaster’s position fell from 79th (in 2001/02) to 94th (in 2002/03).

In both cases, there has been concern that this could adversely affect student recruitment, particularly as tuition fees rise and the cost of investment in higher education grows. This could become increasingly significant as – not least for demographic reasons – the market becomes tighter.

2.4 In Lancaster, the prominence given to this issue is demonstrated by the fact that the Centre for Employability, Enterprise and Careers (CEEC) now convenes

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2 A report by Ramsden & Brown (2008) estimates that, on current demographic trends, the full-time undergraduate student population of UK higher education institutions will fall by 4.6% by 2020 – i.e. by 70,000 full-time undergraduate places.
significantly termed a Graduate Destinations Policy Committee, which is chaired by a Pro-Vice-Chancellor, and includes the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the Associate Deans from the three faculties, and the Director of Undergraduate Studies. This committee receives and discusses the university’s employability strategy and annual graduate employment key performance indicators (including KPIs for CEEC itself). The Director of CEEC also reports once a term to the University Management Group (UMAG), which includes the university’s senior managers including the faculty deans: it meets weekly, and keeps a watching brief on graduate employment issues (in addition to the termly report, these come up in other forms two or three times a term). UMAG monitors CEEC’s work. It also monitors departments’ first-employment performance, along with their support for CEEC’s work: those departments requiring attention, in either respect, are identified, and Deans and Associate Deans are encouraged to initiate appropriate action.3

2.5 At the two post-1992 universities, on the other hand, the main driver is the prominence attached to student employability in the distinctive positioning of the institution:

- At Central Lancashire, the university’s Strategic Review 2007-2017 stated that: ‘We will transform support for employability in the University, significantly improving our ranking for graduate employability and be widely recognised as the University for Careers.’
- At Liverpool John Moores, there is a recognition that the higher education marketplace in the North-West is very crowded, and that the university needs to find a distinctive niche within this marketplace. This is to focus around ‘connectivity’ to the world of work, so that students will be attracted by the promise not just of a good course but also of it providing access to good career opportunities.

In principle, this provides a basis for a focus on employability which goes beyond immediate post-graduation employment:

- This is particularly the case at Central Lancashire, where the strategy includes extending the ‘contract’ with students beyond the acquisition of a degree, to support for their career development – in terms not only of helping them into graduate jobs, but also of maintaining a continuing relationship with them post-graduation. Alumni are viewed as playing four roles in the strategy: as a source of feedback on the effects of being at UCLan; as resources for current students and for learning; as customers for further courses and other services; and as ambassadors for student recruitment and for research and knowledge transfer.

3 While it is recognised that it is too early to judge the success of the strategy, a measure of early impact is that in the latest Times league table, Lancaster has gone up 21 places, from 94th to 73rd. This reflects a rise of 12% in the proportion of Lancaster graduates in graduate-level jobs six months after graduation.
2.6 There is clearly overlap between these two drivers. Thus, as the Central Lancashire statement in 2.5 indicates, distinctive positioning needs to be supported by league-table performance (though such performance could be regarded as necessary but not sufficient as a measure of success). Moreover, even where distinctive positioning is not focused specifically around student employability, it can significantly influence the employability agenda:

- At Birmingham, efforts are being made to define the distinctive characteristics of ‘the Birmingham graduate’. This is linked to efforts to define the ‘unique selling points’ of the university as an institution – a civic, research-led university, with strong regional but also international links – and effectively represents an attempt to convert these into the language of student competences and to elaborate them in terms of defining a distinctive ‘educational offer’. Aspects currently being discussed include international citizenship (which might incorporate awareness of climate change and some form of international experience).

The influence is however likely to be stronger where employability is viewed as central to distinctive positioning:

- At Liverpool John Moores, work is being undertaken to define a set of higher-level employability skills which might give the university’s graduates a distinctive advantage in the labour market. A series of World of Work (WoW) Skills has been identified (the term has been copyrighted): they include areas like project-management and entrepreneurial skills.

In both of these cases, the efforts to define a distinctive profile are significantly influencing the design of additional awards (see 2.12-2.13 below).

**Employability strategies**

2.7 The nature of the employability strategies within the four institutions is taking different forms.

2.8 In the case of the two post-1992 universities, the strategies are more radical in nature, but are based on different principles. In one case, the strategy focusing mainly on change in the *curriculum*:

- At Liverpool John Moores, ‘World of Work’ (WoW) is the term being used to describe how the student experience will have ‘added value’ through an explicit strategic focus that will encourage and enable all students to develop skills demanded and valued by employers. The key curriculum requirements of the University Modular Framework (UMF) have been amended to ensure that, from 2007/08, all undergraduate programmes of at least 240 credits incorporate an element of Work-Related Learning plus a range of transferable
Graduate Skills, including identified opportunities within the curriculum for these skills to be taught, practised and assessed. To implement the changes, six project teams have been established, each including a representative from each faculty: these report to a WoW Board, which is chaired by a Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

In the other, it is more *structural* in nature:

- At Central Lancashire, the Careers Service, the Centre for Employability, and Northern Lights (an enterprise centre with business-incubation facilities) are being integrated into a new Centre for Employability, Careers and Enterprise (CECE), on a ‘hub and spokes’ model (i.e. some centrally-located parts, and some parts based in the faculties).

There is overlap between the two: at Liverpool John Moores there is some restructuring, including the establishment of a new Graduate Development Centre (see 3.3 below); at Central Lancashire part of the design of CECE is that it will induce curriculum change. But the core of the strategy differs.

2.9 At the two pre-1992 universities, the strategy is again primarily structural in nature, but built around the principle of extending the role of the careers service:

- At Birmingham, the careers service is being restructured as a Careers and Employability Centre (CEC).
- At Lancaster, the careers service has been restructured as a Centre for Employability, Enterprise and Careers (CEEC).

In both cases, the staffing of the service has been enlarged, its role has been extended, and it has been given (or, in Birmingham’s case, is to be given in a year or two) a more visible central location.

2.10 At Birmingham, the implementation of the strategy is viewed as being the joint responsibility of CEC and of the colleges (faculties). It is hoped that the strategy will lead to curriculum change, but its nature is not being prescribed. Instead:

- The implementation of the strategy is being significantly driven by the university’s performance assessment procedures. These are expected to increase in importance as a result of the university’s reorganisation into five academic colleges (from 19 schools) and the replacement of a formulaic resource allocation model with a new ‘framework for managing institutional performance’.
- The new framework places responsibility on heads of colleges to develop three-year strategies, and to identify success criteria and annual performance targets against which they wish their success to be assessed; these are then challenged and agreed through the annual planning process.
• The expectation is that employability will form one area for performance assessment for all colleges. In addition, graduate destinations are one of the university’s Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which means that there is accountability to the University Council for performance in this area.

• Work is under way to disaggregate the university’s KPIs and targets at college and subject level. The results of this process will form the basis of a dialogue with colleges, to determine the targets and relevant indicators, striking a balance between aspiration and attainability.

• The hope is that, by identifying employability as one of the ‘measures of success’ of the academic areas, this process will drive curriculum innovation and increase employer engagement.

• To support the process, the colleges will be able to draw upon consultancy support from the CEC and also from the Learning Development Division of Academic Services.

• The decision to restructure the schools into colleges is designed in part to make it possible to achieve a more cohesive approach to change and development, with more consistency of approach and more spreading of good practice between cognate areas. Each college is to have a Learning and Teaching Committee, and not only a Head of College and a Head of Research but also a Director of Education (to be on a par with current Heads of School) and an Academic Practice and Organisational Development (APOD) consultant.

In general, however, the main focus at Birmingham is on CEC-led activities:

• The current Learning and Teaching Strategy document refers to the need to ‘embed the contribution of the Careers Centre to student employability at discipline level and align it more closely with the discipline context and needs of students and programmes’.

2.11 At Lancaster, too, the lead lies strongly with the extended careers service:

• The core of the new strategy is a Career Timeline produced by CEEC, which identify the key tasks that need to be addressed at each stage of the undergraduate student’s course, and means of addressing them. A copy of this was sent in early autumn 2007 to all first-year students prior to enrolment, with a letter from the Vice-Chancellor, and is now embedded within the university’s Essential Learning Guide for future cohorts: it is hoped that this will stimulate parental encouragement, as well as indicating the importance which the university attaches to it. All departments are then required to make available an hour each term for CEEC staff to run a session for all students in each year, at which they elaborate the stage reached on the timeline, the actions required, and the resources that are available to support them. In short, the main role for teaching departments has been providing access for CEEC-led activities.
• In addition, departments are increasingly engaging in other activities to embed employability within the curriculum, including alumni-led career days, business games, and credit-bearing work-based learning. A number of departments also have their own employer forum. CEEC provides support for some of these activities.

Additional student awards

2.12 At all of the institutions, a potentially central role in the employability strategy is being played by the notion of an additional student award to run alongside the degree:

• At Birmingham, a Personal Skills Award (PSA) has been offered for several years now. It is based on accredited participation in some of a range of modules, some of which are run by the Careers Centre and some in academic schools. Because the PSA is resource-intensive, only 200-300 students have been able to take it, with others on a waiting list. The plan now is to redesign it as PSA Plus, in a form which will enable it to be expanded, so that it can be linked more closely to the emerging employability strategy. PSA Plus will be based on a points system, and designed not only to cover participation in modules but also to accredit skill development based on participation in extra-curricular activities. The current proposal is that it will be offered at three levels: silver (with students receiving a certificate to cover participation elements, without any accredited modules); gold (which will include an accredited ‘reflection’ module, and may also includes other accredited modules); and platinum (which will include a higher level of activities, plus a successful interview with a panel that will include an employer).

• At Liverpool John Moores, a series of higher-level employability skills (WoW Skills) has been identified (see 2.6 above). Each area of the university is being invited this year to identify groups of students that can be engaged in developing a variety of approaches to developing these WoW Skills, either inside the curriculum or outside it. From these it is hoped to identify best practice that can be built upon in 2008/09. The intention is that some of the students graduating in 2010 will have a WoW Skills certificate alongside their degree. It will be an optional extra: there is some anxiety that if students are forced to take it, this may deter some potential recruits as being too demanding. But students will be positively encouraged to take it. No formal targets for participation levels have yet been set, though it is hoped that in the first student cohort to enter the university with WoW Skills on offer (those entering in September 2008), up to three-quarters of students (i.e. around 5,000-6,000) might take part.

• At Central Lancashire, the concept of a separate award – to be called UCLan Plus – is being explored. It is particularly designed to cover a range of experience-based (‘learning at work’) enhancements of the curriculum. It is as yet unclear whether it will be designed to be for all students, or only for some.
• At Lancaster, a curriculum-based higher-level skills award is being explored, to be run in conjunction with academic departments, associate deans and CEEC. Meanwhile, a more limited award is being run: a course operated by the Centre for Employability, Enterprise and Careers which leads to a Certificate for Enterprise and Commercial Awareness (CECA). Sponsored by KPMG, this is a 10-hour course set up on a ‘master class’ basis over two afternoons, designed to help students to develop the enterprise skills and commercial awareness that are increasingly required by employers as well as being helpful for those interested in becoming self-employed (including those interested in entering the creative industries and the media). The courses are run once a term, each for a maximum of 40 students.

2.13 An interesting issue is whether the more ambitious awards become established as the extra-curricular (or, in US terms, co-curricular) complement to the curricular accreditation provided by the degree; or whether they become established as the skills-based complement to the largely knowledge-based degree. The two models have rather different foci: the latter, for example, might focus significantly on the skills development that takes place through the mainstream curriculum; whereas the former would focus instead on providing a currency to attach instrumental value (alongside existing intrinsic value) to extra-curricular activities.

Links to other themes

2.14 At all four institutions, the employability strategies have included attention to the three other themes outlined in Section 1: enterprise, employer engagement, and PDP.

2.15 Enterprise is, to differing degrees, a significant component of the strategy in all of the institutions:

• At Birmingham, the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Centre is now an integrated part of the Careers and Employability Centre (CEC). It used to be part of Research and Commercial Services (RCS), which is concerned with knowledge transfer and developing commercial services to the business community: this includes training and supporting academic staff in developing entrepreneurial skills, with some synergy with developing students’ enterprise skills – many of the methods are the same. Close links with RCS remain, but the focus on students’ skill development seems to fit more closely within the CEC, and adds an extra dimension to its work. This includes learning experiences and incubation support for business start-up (entrepreneurship) (of interest to a minority of students), but also potentially embraces more generic enterprise skills (including intrapreneurship) (in principle, relevant to all students).
• At Central Lancashire, the Northern Lights team, which runs a variety of enterprise-related activities including business-incubation facilities in a new ‘Media Factory’, is being integrated into the new Centre for Employability, Careers and Enterprise.

• At Liverpool John Moores, key aspects of the WoW Skills (see 2.6 above) relate to enterprise, in its generic sense. In addition, the Graduate Development Centre (GDC) runs courses relating to self-employment, and includes a ‘hatchery’ providing hot-desk facilities for students seeking to develop their own business (this is linked to the Student Enterprise team within the Business Development Centre). The GDC promotion leaflet states that through this programme, graduates have successfully established 40 new companies, with a further 1,500 students attending workshops on how to set up their own business.

• At Lancaster, one of the activities of the Centre for Employability, Enterprise and Careers is – as noted in 2.12 – a course which leads to a Certificate for Enterprise and Commercial Awareness. This is clearly distinguished from entrepreneurship activities related to business start-up that operate in the management faculty.

2.16 Similarly, all of the strategies attach considerable importance to employer engagement (in a broader sense than that focused upon in recent policy statements):

• In Liverpool John Moores, all courses are now required to include some element of work-related learning including evidence of employer engagement. To support this, a Customer Relations Management system is being developed to record all external connections, to ensure that the connections are expanded but also protected from overload. The development of this system is being managed by the Business Development Centre; the Graduate Development Centre (GDC) will play a major part in running it. In addition, the GDC will run a placement service for work-based learning (particularly for curricular areas where more generic opportunities are required); and will facilitate the growth of employer networks to support employment-focused events within the GDC and in faculties, and to act as moderators for the WoW Skills Award (see 2.6). The GDC is also expected to develop income-earning business functions: these include pre-selection services for graduate recruitment (providing ‘oven-ready’ recruits); and providing training and assessment services to employers that wish to outsource such functions. There could potentially be role-conflict issues here, particularly if these services are carried out by the same staff as those aiming to provide impartial guidance to students.

4 As noted in 1.5, the main focus of such statements – stimulated by the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) – has been on developing the capacity of higher education to deliver workforce development in relation to high-level skills. This policy theme opens up some interesting issues for higher education careers services, in terms of using their employer contacts to broker relationships between employers and programme designers within their institution, and offering career development support to employees taking courses at their institution as part of the package. Since however the main concern of the present project has been on strategies addressed to current students, these issues have not been explored within the project.
• In Central Lancashire, part of the strategy focuses specifically on employer engagement: this includes the management of student placements, of employer involvement in the curriculum, and of commercial research and consultancy work. Many of these contacts are made at course level, and the ‘owners’ of such contacts tend to protect their address books. The case for some co-ordination is however recognised: to avoid competing demands on the same employer; to improve efficiency through a dedicated resource with critical mass; and to spread access to courses where such contacts are weak.

• In Birmingham, a key facet of the strategy is to increase the number of course-related placements (which tend to be handled within schools and departments) and other forms of employer (and alumni) engagement.

• In Lancaster, CEEC’s placement work covers internships, summer work and voluntary work as well as graduate vacancies. It also helps with some course-related placements, though the management faculty has its own placement officer.

Most have set up specific mechanisms for active employer involvement:

• In Liverpool John Moores, an important role has been played by an Advisory Group of senior business figures from national and international companies: the Vice-Chancellor personally engaged many of them in one-to-one discussions. In addition, in autumn 2006, a series of meetings were held with local and regional employers (large and small, public and private sectors). It was on the basis of these various discussions that the WoW Skills (see 2.6 above) were identified, with the endorsement of the Advisory Group. It is hoped that the assessment of these skills will be carried out by employers rather than by academic staff.

• In Central Lancashire, an employer advisory group has been established, which reports direct to the Vice-Chancellor.

• In Lancaster, an Employer Forum has been established, with a rotating membership of local, regional and national employers, large and small. In addition, the Centre for Employability, Enterprise and Careers has been moved from being under Academic Services to being the joint responsibility of the Director of Research and Enterprise Services and of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience and Colleges: the former is designed to place it in a business-facing environment, both in terms of contacts with employers and in terms of capacity for enhanced resourcing through income generation; the latter to establish a link to student learning, but also to students more generally, through the Students’ Union and the colleges. The dual accountability in principle develops a creative tension and potential synergy between the service’s employer-facing and student-facing activities (the more successful it is in attracting each of these groups, the more successful it is likely to be in attracting the other).
Finally, several of the institutions are hoping that the implementation of the employability strategies will lead to more systematic provision for Personal Development Planning (PDP). Current provision is limited:

- In Birmingham, it is based on the ‘Progress’ software developed with Loughborough University. Perhaps some 2,000-3,000 students use it, mainly because they are required to do so as an adjunct to their degree programmes (often in vocational areas, linked to professional practice).
- In Central Lancashire, there is a requirement for all courses and departments to incorporate PDP, but the way in which they do so varies. In the Business School, PDP is an assessed unit and is viewed as a means of ensuring that Employability is part of the spine of the degree programme. A few other parts of the university adopt similar approaches, but others do it differently.
- In Lancaster, a portfolio is now available in web-based form to all students, and just over 1,000 students have used it to date (though the extent and quality of their usage varies considerably). No systematic support for it is provided, and it is not linked to the tutor system, which in the first year (when students normally take three subjects) is based in the colleges (each tutor is assigned 8-10 students, and sees them at least one a term). In the second and third years, students have access to a named person within their department (usually a Department Adviser or Scheme Tutor), and there are hopes to extend support for PDP within departments.
- At Liverpool John Moores, the PDP process is built into programmes, though its effectiveness varies. All faculties have a personal tutor system, and one-to-one support is offered mainly by these tutors, commonly through meetings once or twice a semester. Some training for them is provided by the Learning Development Unit, on a voluntary basis.

In three cases, however, enhancement of PDP processes is seen as playing an important role in relation to the employability strategy:

- In Birmingham, within PSA Plus (see 2.12 above), students will be required to use the university’s PDP system to record their activities and to provide a basis for the proposed reflection module.
- In Central Lancashire, awareness is growing that if Career, Employability and Enterprise are to be linked effectively to student learning, attention to PDP is essential, making visible and transparent to students the transferable skills they are acquiring from both curricular and extra-curricular learning during their time at the university.
- In Liverpool John Moores, it is hoped that PDP will help students to articulate their ability to do particular graduate jobs in terms of the language of their Graduate and WoW Skills (see 2.6 and 2.8), both on application forms and in interviews. An e-portfolio has been developed by the Learning Development Unit to record evidence of their personal and professional skills development on-line. This can be used as part of PDP discussions as well as in providing evidence to potential employers.
In several institutions, creative links have also been made with other institutional strategies, including internationalisation:

- In Central Lancashire, it is recognised that there is a need to establish synergy with the university’s strategy on internationalisation, which includes placements in other countries, as well as recruitment of overseas students whose career-development needs might require distinctive attention. A new Careers Adviser has been appointed to focus particularly on international students.

- In Birmingham, it is noted that there are some interesting potential synergies between the university’s regional strategy and its internationalisation strategy, because of the multi-ethnic nature of business development in the region and the links of many small and medium-sized enterprises with businesses in their owners’ countries of origin.

- In Lancaster, an Insight into International Careers week is being planned, and a CV Adviser has been allocated specifically to work with international students, who often need more intensive support in this respect than UK students.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that the employability strategies take different forms at the four institutions. They tend to be stronger at the two post-1992 universities, both in terms of restructuring and of curriculum change. In the two pre-1992 universities, they have been built more organically by extending and reframing the role of the careers service.
3. Implications for Careers Services

Structures

3.1 These employability strategies have radically different implications for the structure and role of careers services.

3.2 In the two pre-1992 universities, the remit of the careers service has been extended to embrace the employability agenda, and its staffing has been increased accordingly:

- In Birmingham, the number of Careers Advisers has been increased by around 30%; five of them are to be redesignated as Careers and Employability Consultants, and promoted to higher-level posts. In addition, a couple of other new posts have been created, and further posts have been moved into the Careers and Employability Centre from elsewhere in the university.
- In Lancaster, the number of core professional full-time-equivalent staff has risen from 4 in 2003 to 6.8 in 2008, with an additional 2.5 professional staff supported by project funding.

3.3 By contrast, in the case of the two post-1992 universities, the careers service is in effect ceasing existence as a separate entity:

- In Central Lancashire, most of its staff will form the core of one of the teams within the new Centre for Employability, Careers and Enterprise.
- In Liverpool John Moores, the careers advisers are being integrated into a new Graduate Development Centre, which is conceived and designed as a training and assessment centre, rather than as a walk-in careers service; while the employability advisers are to be part of Campus Centre Teams (on each of the university’s main campuses) supporting Learning Resource Centres – these are replacing conventional libraries, and are seen as 24x7 one-stop shops for a variety of student services.

These changes have induced staff anxieties relating to location, to changed roles, and to losing existing team identity.

3.4 The changes at Liverpool John Moores in particular seem to define employability as a teaching and learning issue, with the role of career guidance within it being left somewhat unclear. This risks inadequate attention being paid to the issue of career direction, and how to help students to clarify the path they want to choose, around which they can then build their employability skills. There are plans to address this through support within the curriculum from the Graduate Development Centre careers staff.
3.5 More generally, the changes in principle raise questions about at least two aspects of conventional careers service practice. The first is the future of one-to-one career guidance. This has been questioned at Birmingham, for example, on the grounds that it is not ‘scaleable’: in other words, it can operate well enough for a minority of students, but is not capable of being scaled up to cater for all or a majority of students. The response here has been to continue to provide some career guidance from Careers Advisers, but to seek also to respond to service demands from students through:

- An upgrading of information-staff roles.
- The use of postgraduate students to provide peer advice (notably in the preparation of curricula vitae).
- Extending web-based services (with more staff time being devoted to this).

This will be linked to a triage system to focus in-depth guidance on students at particular risk of unemployment or under-employment.

3.6 The second is the future of career resource centres. Several of the services have noted a decline in student usage of such centres in recent years. This is attributed largely to the growth of web-based information, including information from employers (students no longer have to visit the centre to access this) and the careers service’s own website. At both Central Lancashire and Liverpool John Moores, possibilities are being explored for integrating such centres into broader learning resource centres, with 24x7 access and extensive internet facilities. This raises issues, however, about the level of access there will be to skilled personal support in the effective use of these resources. Most careers services have introduced ‘duty adviser’ schemes, under which Careers Advisers are available in resource centres for short interventions. How feasible will it be to provide such support within more broadly-based and (in the case of Liverpool John Moores, because the resource centres are to be spread across a number of campuses) diffused resource areas?

3.7 A further important issue which applies particularly to the two pre-1992 universities is the implications for the enlarged careers service of their increasing learning and teaching functions:

- At Lancaster, the teaching work carried out by the Centre for Employability, Enterprise and Careers (CEEC) includes an extensive programme of centrally-run workshops, a course leading to a Certificate for Enterprise and Commercial Awareness (see 2.12 above), and career development learning modules within a number of departments, some of which are accredited. As in many other universities, such work tends not to be regarded as ‘proper teaching’ as carried out by academic staff. But, particularly where CEEC staffs are involved in delivery of accredited modules within the curriculum, this view is open to challenge.
- At Birmingham, an important question in this respect is whether a funding model could be developed for expanding the number of assessed modules, and
the number of students taking them. Because the Personal Skills Award (see 2.12 above) is accredited (with learning outcomes, marking schemes, and an examinations board with an external examiner), it has established credibility both with academic staff and with students, and appears alongside degree performance on the student’s transcript. At present its funding is effectively top-sliced from schools. If however it could be funded on a credit basis, like other teaching activities, it would be more readily expandable. Since however many of the modules are taught by the Careers and Employability Centre, this would effectively mean the centre being funded like a teaching department, competing with other departments on their own terrain.

This has also arisen as an issue at Liverpool John Moores:

- The stated activities of the Graduate Development Centre include ‘providing general careers advice, usually in a group setting’. The aim, according to the annual report, is ‘widening access to, and participation in this type of activity to all LJMU students’. This includes ‘providing training in the development of specific “ready for work” skills, including interview techniques, CV development, etc.’ Delivery is now to be based on an institutional policy, rather than on a mix of professional judgements by careers staff and of demand from programmes. This will require careers advisers to work with larger groups, under the kinds of delivery pressures that academic staff are accustomed to – something they are not perceived as having been used to in the past.

3.8 This issue is linked to the nature of the careers services’ relationships with teaching departments. These are to be more tightly managed in Birmingham than in Lancaster:

- In Birmingham, the relationship of the Careers and Employability Centre (CEC) with the colleges is viewed as that of a ‘business partner’; the consultants will be CEC ‘account managers’ for their college. A service-level agreement will be agreed with each department, with delivery being subsequently reported against the agreement. In line with the partnership principle outlined in 2.10 above, the agreement will be expected not just to define the CEC services for which departmental access will be provided, but also departments’ own provision related to enhancing students’ employability. This will include placements and other forms of employer (and alumni) engagement. It might also include such issues as providing mentoring support for students who are interested in exploring academic and research careers. But the level of CEC resource allocated to each department will in future be allocated on the basis not of demand from students and their departments but of student need as revealed through the analysis of management information.

- In Lancaster, departments are required to nominate one of their members as a Careers Tutor, but their role is fairly minimal: at its most basic, to arrange the termly one-hour sessions run by Centre for Employability, Enterprise and
Careers staff linked to the Career Timeline (see 2.11) and to disseminate information on events related to employability and career planning. Some Careers Tutors participate in these sessions; some attend them; some do not. Yet students tend to pay more attention to messages from departments than from outsiders: this would seem to suggest the need for a more active role for Careers Tutors in these sessions. Student attendance, too, varies (it tends to be higher in departments which do not run a careers programme of their own; in those that do, it may be seen by some students as being superfluous). Some Careers Tutors are involved in other activities – setting up workshops, for example – but many are not. There appears to be little if any pressure on departments that do not currently offer careers education modules (see 3.7 above) to do so. In short, the policy appears to be for departments to support the strategy, rather than be actively involved in shaping and delivering it.

In both cases, however, it seems clear that the main burden of delivery of learning programmes related to employability is likely to continue to fall on the extended careers service.

3.9 In the two post-1992 universities, by contrast, the strategy is based on a more equal balance between the central services and the faculties:

- In Central Lancashire, as noted in 2.8, the structure is based on a ‘hub and spokes’ model. The hub is to comprise three elements: a service hub; an administrative hub; and an enterprise hub including business-incubation facilities. The spokes are seen as having a catalytic role within their faculties, supporting the development of curriculum materials within each department for embedding within the subject of study. The process is being complicated by the fact that the faculties are currently being broken down into schools, with most resourcing devolved to school level (the reverse of the change being adopted at Birmingham – cf. 2.10).
- In Liverpool John Moores, the Graduate Development Centre is seen as providing support for, and assessment of, the development of WoW Skills (see 2.6), as being the focal point for relationships with employers, and as delivering a range of programmes for students. But in addition, each faculty has set up a WoW Implementation Group, which has prepared a strategic implementation plan.

Staff roles

3.10 A final important issue for careers services – and for the other structures that may in some cases succeed them – is the implications of these various developments for the roles and continuing professional development of relevant professional staff. This has particularly arisen as an issue at Birmingham:
• As noted in 3.2, five of the Careers Advisers are being redesignated as Careers and Employability Consultants, and promoted to higher-level posts. One is to be attached to each of the five colleges. Part of their role will be as ‘the tip of a flying wedge’, brokering between departments’ needs and services that their colleagues in the Careers and Employability Centre can provide. In addition, though, they will be expected to help departments to map and then to strengthen departments’ own contributions to students’ skill development, including placements and other forms of employer (and alumni) engagement, as well as other aspects of their course provision. The likely initial balance between the two roles (brokerage and consultancy) is estimated as 70:30.

• To prepare these consultants for their new role, a careful process of ‘tooling up’ is taking place. This includes a staff-development programme at MBA level in consultancy skills, including negotiation skills, assertiveness, stress management, and the like.

3.11 An interesting issue is whether the Careers and Employability Consultants represent a new role in higher education careers services, or an enhancement of the existing Careers Adviser role. If some of the staff development provision for these consultants is at MBA level, could it lead to an MBA qualification?

3.12 A parallel issue is whether there is also a case for recruiting staff with, or offering existing staff opportunities to gain, qualifications in learning and teaching. At Lancaster, it is estimated that the Careers Consultants now spend around 60% of their student-contact time with groups, and only 40% one-to-one. The proportion devoted to group-work at Liverpool John Moores in future is likely to be even higher, and there are questions about whether the expertise of the Careers Advisers, and the services they can distinctively offer, will survive and flourish in the new structure, or not. Will individual career guidance, and distinctive career development learning, remain part of the offer to students? Or will the Careers Advisers gradually be merged into a generic training and assessment role?

3.13 Finally, in both these cases, should consultancy and/or teaching-and-learning represent additional qualifications to staff with a core career guidance qualification? Or could they represent alternative skill-sets within a multi-professional team?
4. Conclusions

4.1 The key issue which arose from the earlier review of strategic directions for higher education careers services (Watts, 1997) can be summarised as: ‘Can the centre hold?’ In other words, can responses to new challenges and opportunities be built around the traditional core roles of careers services? Or do they imply some radical restructuring of such services?

4.2 On the basis of this limited pilot study, it seems that there is evidence of both processes in response to the challenges represented by institutional employability strategies. In two universities, the role of the careers service has been extended; in the other two, the service in its traditional form is being broken up and integrated into alternative structures.

4.3 The evidence has also supported the proposition, noted in 1.10, that there may be a difference between traditional, research-intensive universities and newer, teaching-oriented universities in this respect. The former tend to have better-resourced careers services and have sufficient critical mass to carry credibility in taking on broader institutional roles. At the same time, there may be more resistance to curriculum change in such institutions. Accordingly, giving the leadership role on employability strategies to such services may be seen as a way of addressing employability concerns but also containing their impact.

4.4 Other factors seem likely to be relevant too. One is the quality of leadership within the careers service. Another is the extent of sympathetic understanding of careers service roles among senior management.

4.5 This has, however, been a limited study. There is a strong case for extending it, in two ways:

- Through a quantitative survey of all universities throughout the UK, to identify the extent of the trends mapped in this report.
- Through further qualitative case-studies to extend the range of models represented in the present study (particularly with reference to the developing employability-related learning provision and the respective roles of teaching departments, careers services and other central units in relation to such provision).

4.6 We also suggest that this might be linked to two further studies with a more specific focus:

- A comparative study of the nature of additional awards and their impact (see 2.12-2.13). These represent a major development within higher education, which could transform the potential institutional attention to student employability, enterprise, career development and PDP.
• A study of the changing nature of professional and paraprofessional roles within higher education careers services and related structures, and their implications for initial training and continuing professional development.
References


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With the following objectives...

to assist practitioners to consider
how research informs practice
to assist researchers to develop questions
and themes relevant to practice
to develop innovative approaches to practice issues
to coordinate with other relevant initiatives
to disseminate activities openly
to contribute to policy formulation

...and outcomes:

networked learning community
focused on provision of CEG in HE
range of CEG materials
available electronically
short, accessible publications