# Contextual Studies and Employability

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## Abstract

*Recently the importance of student employability has taken centre stage of the Higher Education (HE) agenda. The HE pedagogic rationale has shifted from students acquiring knowledge for its own sake to students attaining a set of employability attributes that will ready them for employment. Although anecdotal evidence suggests Contextual Studies (CS) within the Art, Media and Design (AMD) Faculty of Staffordshire University is frequently viewed as 'academic' by students, it actually includes a number of activities and skills that feature repeatedly in lists of key employability attributes as published by the UK Government, academics and employers.  The purpose of this paper is to challenge the prevalent student view of CS by looking into the positive contribution it can make to a student's employability.*

Keywords: Employability, Contextual Studies, Skills

## Employability

The last decade has seen the importance of employability enthusiastically expressed by academics, the UK Government and employers (Mooreland, 2005.  Yorke, 2006.  Tomlinson, 2007.  Dyson, 2010.  Cable, 2010.  Lowden et al, 2011.  Peg, et al, 2012).  The National Conference for Graduate Employability held by Policy Review TV (March, 2011) featured members of The Association of Graduate Recruiters relating examples of how they struggled to fill graduate targets (25% of positions went unfilled) citing that it was not that students did not possess the right qualifications, but that they did not possess the correct or suitable employability skills (Argent, 2011).

Unlike 'employment skills', which are needed to perform a job effectively, 'employability' is multifaceted and complex, as such attempts to describe its essential qualities are often indistinct.  Aware of the fuzziness inherent in

descriptions in employability this paper uses Yorke's (2006) apposite definition; he views employability as,

> "*a set of achievements – skills, understandings and attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations"* (p 8).

As well as defining what employability is, outlining the multiple aspects which constitute employability can be difficult.  Several authors offer combinations and measurements of skills requirements (Gravells, 2010.  Cranmer, 2006.  Tomlinson, 2007).  Dr Paul Redmond of the University of Liverpool takes a quantitative view and sees employability in terms of a formula;

$$E = (Q + WE + S) \times C$$

employability equals qualifications, work experience, the application of appropriate job search strategies - multiplied by contacts (Redmond, 2011).

Knight and Yorke (2003) present an extensive register of 39 loosely ranked skills placed within three categories; Personal Qualities, Core Skills and Process Skills (see appendix).  However, Gravells (2010) offers a more concise set of employability skills, which she feels is suitable for young people, graduates and adult learners.  She suggests,

- Team working

- Independent enquiry

- Self-management

- Reflective learning

- Effective participation [work-related engagement]

- Creative thinking

## Contextual Studies

Elsewhere known as Theoretical and Historical Studies or Critical Studies, Contextual Studies places art, media and design into broader cultural, societal and political contexts; the key philosophical and historical questions considered are why? (purpose and statement, messages and meanings – the significance in objects, graphics and moving images – theorising) and when?  (the examination of moments in design thinking – important movements and styles that define time and place) as

opposed to the practice centric, studio based questions of what?  (the examination of materials and processes - physical attributes – practical considerations) and how? (technical instructions – uses of equipment and the means of production – application of theory).

Through the participation in a number of CS modules at Staffordshire University, AMD students are introduced to and required to practice several employability type skills and attributes.  The three significant skills of research, analysis and reflection are discussed here.

## Research Skills

Knight & Yorke (2003) list 'information retrieval' and the 'management of information' (the ability to access information from various resources and organise it appropriately) as fundamental graduate attributes.  Likewise Gravells (2010) feels graduates have to have the ability to successfully undertake 'independent enquiry' as part of a group of employability skills. These graduate attributes or capabilities strongly align with the increasingly relevant pedagogic theories around Inquiry Based Learning through Information Literacy. Information Literacy can be understood as having the ability to access representations of meaning, commonly as language in the form of text, but also voice, images, performance and meaningful objects that capture ideas which communicate information, reflection and knowledge (Hepworth & Walton, 2009). Healy & Jenkins (2009) see inquiry based learning as enabling students to become producers, not just consumers of information and knowledge. Comparable to the fundamental attributes required within the creative industries (art, media and design) to be a successful practitioner, Hepworth & Walton (ibid) feel information literacy empowers learners to see alternatives to a problem or situation in a critical light and form or choose a range of solutions or strategies.  Research (information gathering) has always been at the heart of all CS modules at Staffordshire University; in reality the creative disciplines in AMD are at their core essentially research exercises (in the case of the 'design' disciplines, Crouch & Pearce (2012) view design as fundamentally a 'research … and knowledge management exercise') and CS content and delivery constantly strive to reflect this core investigative element.

## Analytical Skills

Having uncovered interesting and important information and insights, it is not enough for students to simply report findings without analysing them first;

the ability to analyse findings is a key skill needed to be successful in the majority of CS modules.  Analytical thinking is also a major attribute of employability.  In Knight & Yorke's (2003) 'core skills' of employability (see appendix) they list 'critical thinking' (being able to 'deconstruct' a problem or situation) and 'creativity' (original, inventive, 'lateral' thinking).  'Creative thinking' is also noted by Gravells (2010) and is highlighted by Lowden, et al (2012) who report employers constantly stress the increasing importance of recruiting graduates who can demonstrate 'critical and evaluative skills'.  Irrespective of the types of data, information or insights collected, all research analysis involves detailed reading of research material to identify and tease out the strong themes, patterns, trends and essence of what is revealed (Creswell, 2003.  Crouch & Pearce, 2012).  This is a skill that students find very challenging.  To imbue and to be able to evaluate critical thinking and analytical skills, CS modules are generally guided by Cottrell's (2005) model where learning to think in critically analytical, evaluative and creative ways means students have to use mental processes such as attention, categorisation, selection and judgement.

**Reflective Practice**

Reflective practice is a contemporary theory and discipline which can be described as an individual paying critical attention to the practical views and themes which inform everyday action (Boulton, 2010).  Moreover, being reflective is to view the self as a stranger (Johns, 2009).  As an employability attribute, reflective thinking and practice is emphasised by Gravells (2010) 'reflective learning', Knight & Yorke's (2003) 'reflectiveness' (a disposition to reflect evaluatively) and by the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2009) through the use of Personal Development Planning (PDPs) (a structure for students to reflect upon their own learning, performance and achievements).  Many of the level five and six CS modules at Staffordshire University include elements of reflective practice as part of the assessment criteria; in a number of projects students are obliged to keep on-going reflective logs of their projects as well as undertake occasional presentations to elucidate their reflections and help adopt what Johns (2009) describes as 'a curiosity about oneself'.  As AMD disciplines are replete with both practical and philosophical considerations, contextual studies at Staffordshire University is developing reflective thinking content and delivery strategies that will satisfy employers' wish to have graduates that are self-aware as well as aiding students to engage in purposeful learning.

## Final Thoughts

Historically AMD students in Staffordshire University have viewed theoretical/critical studies as 'intellectual' and lacking beneficial, career orientated applications.  Yet through the emphasis on research skills and information literacy, the constant promotion and assessment of analytical skills and continuously stressing the importance of purposeful reflection and self-awareness, contextual studies can be seen as actively developing numerous useful and significant employability skills and attributes that employers require (demand) from students.

Moreover, contextual studies for AMD is timely in its promotion of employability attributes as employers are recognising the importance of human capital to their businesses. If the concept of a knowledge economy has any validity, undergraduate education has to comprise an understanding of, and an ability to, research, analyse and reflect. To paraphrase Harvey (2003), with the emphasis less on 'employ' and more on 'ability', the contextualisation of studies now includes not only history and theory, but employability as well.

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## Appendix

Knight & Yorke's (2003) extensive register of 39 loosely ranked employability skills.

### A. PERSONAL QUALITIES

1 Malleable self-theory: (belief that attributes [*e.g.* intelligence] are not fixed and can be developed)

2 Self-awareness: (awareness of own strengths and weaknesses, aims and values)

3 Self-confidence: (confidence in dealing with the challenges that employment and life throw up)

4 Independence: (ability to work without supervision)

5 Emotional intelligence: (sensitivity to others' emotions and the effects that they can have)

6 Adaptability: (ability to respond positively to changing circumstances and new challenges)

7 Stress tolerance: (ability to retain effectiveness under pressure)

8 Initiative: (ability to take action unprompted)

9 Willingness to learn: (commitment to on-going learning to meet the needs of employment and life)

10 Reflectiveness: (the disposition to reflect evaluatively on the performance of oneself and others)

### B. CORE SKILLS

11 Reading effectiveness: (the recognition and retention of key points)

12 Numeracy: (ability to use numbers at an appropriate level of accuracy)

13 Information retrieval: (ability to access different sources)

14 Language skills: (possession of more than a single language)

**15** Self-management: (ability to work in an efficient and structured manner)

**16** Critical analysis: (ability to 'deconstruct' a problem or situation)

**17** Creativity: (ability to be original or inventive and to apply lateral thinking)

**18** Listening: (focused attention in which key points are recognised)

**19** Written communication: (clear reports, letters etc.  Written specifically for the reader)

**20** Oral presentations: (clear and confident presentation of  information to a group [also 21, 35])

**21** Explaining: (orally and in writing [see also 20, 35])

**22** Global awareness: (in terms of both cultures and economics)

### C.   PROCESS SKILLS

**23** Computer literacy: (ability to use a range of software)

**24** Commercial awareness: (understanding of business issues and priorities)

**25** Political sensitivity: (appreciates how organisations actually work and acts accordingly)

**26** Ability to work cross-culturally: (both within and beyond the UK)

**27** Ethical sensitivity: (appreciates ethical aspects of employment and acts accordingly)

**28** Prioritising: (ability to rank tasks according to importance)

**29** Planning: (setting of achievable goals and structuring action)

**30** Applying subject understanding:  (use of disciplinary understanding from the HE programme)

**31** Acting morally: (has a moral code and acts accordingly)

**32** Coping with ambiguity and complexity: (ability to handle ambiguous and complex situations)

**33** Problem solving: (selection and use of appropriate methods to find solutions)

**34** Influencing: (convincing others of the validity of one's point of view)

**35** Arguing for and/or justifying a point of view or a course of action (see also

   20, 21)

**36** Resolving conflict: (both intra-personally and in relationships with others)

**37** Decision making: (choice of the best  option from a range of alternatives)

**38** Negotiating: (discussion to achieve mutually satisfactory resolution of

   contentious issues)

**39**. Team work: (can work constructively with others on a common task)