Enhancing research-teaching linkages as a way to improve the development of employability attributes

Dr Vicky Gunn
University of Glasgow

Introduction

This discussion paper accepts the following premises:

- the research-teaching linkage is central to learning and teaching enhancement in the higher education sector
- by enhancing research-teaching linkages it might also be possible to enhance opportunities for students to expand their employability attribute development
- sometimes opportunities to develop employability attributes are best provided outside of research-teaching spaces.

For those institutions that place improved research-teaching linkages at the heart of their approach to learning and teaching, four questions need to be asked:

1   When do enhanced research-teaching linkages provide opportunities that also cover in the curriculum the development of employability attributes?
2   When do enhanced research-teaching linkages provide opportunities that complement co-curricular opportunities to develop employability attributes?
3   What should we do for those employability attributes that seem completely separate from research-teaching linkages?
4   **Question for the workshop**: What practical enhancements can we make to our students' learning, teaching and assessment opportunities as a consequence of our answers to questions 1-3, above?

Integrating research-teaching linkages with employability attributes development

Background

The search to understand how we can improve the links between academic research practices and teaching approaches is not new. For over a decade it has been a central strand of quality enhancement within the higher education sector. The Research-Teaching Linkages Enhancement Theme was an integral part of this ongoing debate. Indeed, the outcomes of its recent projects clearly illustrate how enhanced research-teaching linkages offer opportunities for students to develop a broad range of attributes.

Additionally, economic influences over the last three years have added urgency to the pre-existing and ongoing debate concerning employability. How students might acquire, develop and articulate a range of attributes relevant to their life experience after studying in the academy is at the top of the higher education policy agenda.[1]

However, enabling our students to develop graduate attributes as an integral experience of study at all levels in the university sector is far from easy (Green, Hammer and Star, 2009).

Green, Hammer and Star outline the key obstacles as:
- lack of agreement about what graduate attributes are and how they are achieved (conceptual challenges)
- lack of agreement concerning the mechanisms and environments necessary for their development (pedagogic challenges)
- mixed messages in terms of what is perceived to be privileged in any particular institution (for example, recognition and reward structures that seem to favour research rather than teaching).

Additional to these are also:
- ideological concerns about what universities are for, especially in terms of engagement with the 'employability' agenda
- funding retraction across the UK sector and the associated pressures this places on academics to protect their disciplinary positions within the academy
- a general sense of initiative fatigue.

This discussion paper provides a framework for academics and policymakers to explore how enhanced research-teaching linkages can inform and assist in the development of attributes, including those relevant to the employability agenda. It is divided into five numbered sections:

1   an explanation of the general curricular context for the development of attributes
2   an outline of the key messages concerning the enhancement of research-teaching linkages
3   an introduction to the attributes associated with employability
4   a discussion of why the two Enhancement Themes (Research-Teaching Linkages and Employability) should be integrated
5   a conceptual diagram for bringing approaches to research-teaching linkages and employability together.

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[1] Compare, for example, Scottish Funding Council (2009) *Learning to Work 2,* and CBI and Universities UK (2009) *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the world of work.*
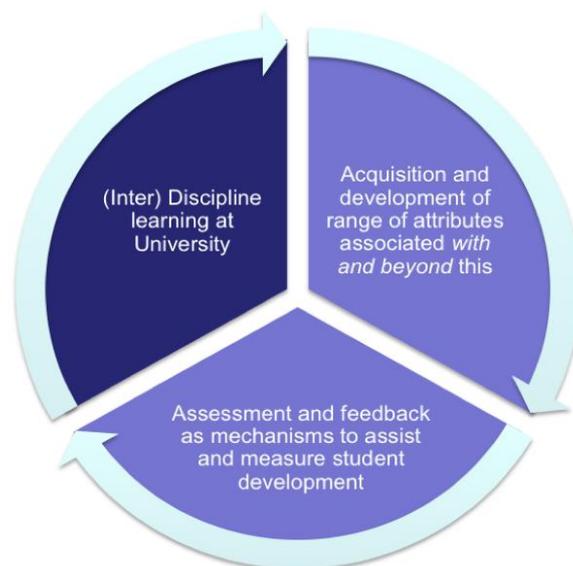
1   Context: basic assumptions

Figure 1: the circular context for the development of attributes.

The curricular context in which students learn is central to the development of their **ways of thinking and doing** and, to a greater or lesser extent (depending on the discipline in question), on their **ways of acting and interacting**.

The acquisition and development of a range of attributes directly associated with this learning environment are also relevant beyond it. The assessment and feedback practices within the curriculum are mechanisms that can assist with the development of attributes as well as measures of the degree to which they have been acquired.

There are now considerable resources for conceptualizing research-teaching linkages, redesigning teaching activity around these conceptions, and thinking about enhancement of the research-teaching linkages strategically at an institutional level. The core ones from which to generate debate and develop strategies currently are: Healey and Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins, 2009; Kreber, 2006; Jenkins and Healey, 2005; and Breen, Brew, Jenkins and Lindsay, 2003.

The Research-Teaching Linkages Enhancement Theme also articulated a general set of research-type attributes and the associated projects supply attributes and skills at a discipline level.[2]

One way of summarizing this material is to divide the curricular context into three parts.

Part 1   Learning and teaching activities and environments that directly encourage research-like and research-actual enquiry and are seen to lead to disciplinary 'ways of thinking'.
Part 2   Research-like and research-actual outputs as forms of assessment (for example, posters, articles, literature reviews, presentations, project proposals, project reports which involve a peer and tutor review process as well as a final grade) that encourage the development of research-mindedness and the ability to express this appropriately in writing and orally.
Part 3   Utilizing the social and professional spaces in which academics generate new knowledge as the places where students learn about both ways of thinking and also ways of interacting with 'professionals' or 'practitioners' of the given discipline.

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[2] Publications and outcomes from the Research-Teaching Linkages Enhancement Theme can be found online at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/ResearchTeaching.

2   Key messages from research-teaching linkages

Evaluating the impact of enhanced research-teaching linkages in terms of the attributes inculcated is notoriously difficult. For the purposes of this paper, it is accepted that these enhancements clearly have a qualitative effect if not yet a clearly measured quantitative one.

Work on research-teaching linkages to date illustrates that the sector now has many examples of where part 1 (curricular review and redesign to promote research 'ways of thinking') and part 2 (reconfiguring discipline-specific types of research outputs as a way of designing and implementing assessment) are occurring.

Part 3 (resituating the learning in the socio-cultural context of the professionals/practitioners), however, is less well represented. Pedagogy is currently often dependent on classrooms, lecture theatres and laboratories. There are, of course, disciplinary variations, especially in those disciplines where fieldwork is undertaken or were technical, professional or performance ability forms an explicit part of the curriculum. In the main, however, teaching and learning are done in protected spaces from the rest of the academic workplace. It is arguable that students learn **how to be in** these abstracted spaces rather than **ways of being** that can be adapted or transferred elsewhere.

In summary, the literature on the practices around research-teaching linkages shows that the sector is increasingly recognising the need to engage students in such a way that their **ways of thinking and doing** and their **ways of disciplinary action and interaction** are improved.

3   Attributes particularly associated with employability

In the same way that there are endless lists of institutional-level graduate attributes, as well as discipline and professional ones, there is also a plethora of employability related attributes. Large international companies articulate some of their own, governments and their education ministers produce them, and educationalists argue about taxonomies of them. For ease of discussion, this paper uses two recent publications to underpin possible discussion about curriculum enhancement:

- CBI and Universities UK (2009) *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the world of work*. This document defines employability 'skills' as: 'A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace - to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy'. The skills then described include self-management, team-working, business and customer awareness, problem-solving, communication and literacy, application of numeracy, and application of IT, underpinned by a 'can-do' approach and demonstrating relative innovation, creativity, collaboration and intellectual risk taking.
- Vitae (2009) *Researcher development framework consultation*. This provisional document discusses the attributes career researchers should develop and is particularly useful in the context of research-teaching linkages as it provides an idea of the attributes currently valued by employers of career researchers, that is, universities. In its taxonomy, as well as knowledge base and cognitive skills, it includes personal qualities, self-organisation, career development skills, professional conduct, project management, communicating effectively, working with others and leadership, relating to the broader context, and application of research and knowledge exchange.

It was suggested above that students learn **how to be in** select spaces within the university. What is asked for in employability attributes however, even those suggested as essential for career researchers, is that they can draw on their experiences of understanding, acting and interacting and **adapt** these experiences to new workplace locations. Bringing the requirements of both employability and career researcher development together as a lens through which to enhance undergraduate attributes would assist two agendas at once.

4 Bringing the two together: finding some consensus

Employability skills and attributes are often seen as being developed in the places of the university with which academic staff are less comfortable; developed in the places of the university that many students aren't too sure about either. Research-teaching linkages as locations of employability enhancement are much less problematic. There are fewer ideological misgivings attached to them, they have as a starting point the thing nearest to the hearts of the academics (their discipline) and they can occur in a way that aligns to current thinking on researcher careers. Using *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the world of work* and *Researcher development framework consultation* as the initial frames of reference, the diagram below introduces a model for beginning to consider how research-teaching linkages could be enhanced to inculcate employability attributes.

5 A possible model for beginning to review programme design for enhanced research-teaching linkages

Meaningful links through course design?		
In common to the discipline:	**Complementary to employability and work-related learning**	**Employability standalone: career skills**
How do students learn how to: • **do** the subject? • **understand** the subject? • **interact in the classroom** as appropriate to the subject?	How do students learn how to: • **adapt what they learn** in the classroom to situations outside of the academy? • **be and act in different places** such as an institutional or corporate environment? • **present** themselves professionally?	How do students learn how to: • **do** CVs? • **find out** about jobs? • **write** job applications? • **reflect on aligning strengths** with careers? • **present** themselves professionally?
Enhancing research-teaching linkages ←——————————————→		

Hopefully, by engaging with the career attributes of researchers it might also be possible to mediate academics' ambivalent relationship with employability. Even if one ignores the CBI and Universities UK documentation and that of Vitae, it is clear that linking research-teaching with approaches that inculcate employability-like attributes need not be impossible.

References and resources

CBI and Universities UK (2009) *Future Fit: Preparing graduates for the world of work,* London: CBI, available at: www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/20090326-CBI-FutureFit-Preparing-graduates-for-the-world-of-work.pdf.

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Healey, M and Jenkins, A (2009) *Developing undergraduate research and inquiry*, available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/publications/DevelopingUndergraduate_Final.pdf.

Jenkins, A (2009) *Research-Teaching Linkages: enhancing graduate attributes, Overview: the aims, achievements and challenges from the Enhancement Theme,* Glasgow: QAA Scotland, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/ResearchTeaching/QAA292Overview260509.pdf.

Breen, R, Brew, A, Jenkins, A and Lindsay, R (2003) *Reshaping teaching in higher education,* London: Routledge.

Jenkins, A and Healey, M (2005) *Institutional strategies to link teaching and research*, York: The Higher Education Academy.

Kreber, C (Ed) (2006) *Exploring Research-Based Teaching. New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, No 107, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

QAA Scotland Research Teaching-Linkages Enhancement Themes publications, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/ResearchTeaching/outcomes.asp.

Scottish Funding Council (2009) *Learning to Work Two - developing the Council's employability strategy: consultation outcomes, action plan and invitation to develop proposals*, available at: www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CircularsSFC4109/sfc4109.pdf.

Vitae (2009) *Researcher development framework consultation* (incorporating UK Grad Programme and UKHERD), available at: www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf.

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

enhancement themes