

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS FOR EMPLOYMENT: THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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To be successful in today's ever changing turbulent environment businesses require highly skilled personnel. Enterprise skills or personal transferable skills are those competencies which enable and assist students to be successful not only throughout their student career but also in their subsequent personal and professional work lives. Today's student needs to be able to translate theory into practice – not just “know how to” but to actually perform. This requires not only academic training but also life skills training. Industry, Business and Commerce are interested in the development of personal transferable skills and recognise the key role that higher education plays in this process.

Personal Transferable Skills

Self-Awareness

The understanding of one's own motivations and fears enables individuals to appreciate their reactions to certain events, requests and situations and prepares them to make the appropriate response. Nowhere is this more relevant than in the area of 'change'. The benefits are immeasurable, to both individuals and companies.

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They are the ability to realise and grasp the basic principles of the change process and its effect on people – especially oneself; the ability to view it positively – not just change for change's sake but for what can be achieved by it; the ability to initiate it and drive it to meet and exceed expectations.

Ball (1992) states that, "In developing nations and re-developing countries like the U.K., it is becoming clear that the quality of education and training of the workforce is the single most important factor in determining economic competitiveness." Statistics have shown that most people make four major career changes in their lives and this figure is rising in the hi-tech world. One of the factors that drives this change is technology. Industry needs people who have the requisite technical skills but it also requires people who understand how to use technology as a tool to aid them in their everyday lives and in their work; people who can make it work for the benefit of themselves and the companies they work for. Technical and knowledge skills that people have today will be redundant tomorrow and it is imperative that people recognise and acknowledge the need for re-training. They also need to explore and understand their own personal strengths in order to maximise these, together with identifying the areas where there is a need for development.

The acceptance of the concept and application of life-long or continuous learning is fundamental not only to being able to 'cope' with what life dispenses, but also to being able to achieve one's own expectations and goals. In order to accomplish this more readily, an insight into how people 'learn' and which of the preferred learning styles fits the individual, is key. A basic knowledge of these areas will aid individuals during their time in Higher Education and prepare them for their life after academia. In addition it will also benefit the 'world of work' that many of the students will choose, since it helps to produce the flexible and adaptable workforce that a successful UK requires.

Teamwork

One of the major differences between most Higher Education Institutions and Industry is the way they view teamwork. In general, the Education system in the UK insists on individual work, collaboration is frowned on and seen as 'cheating'. The examination system presents the highest awards to the students who can learn facts, analyse these on their own and regurgitate them at a specified time. Understanding and being able to apply what has been learned to a real-life problem

is neither examined nor rewarded. On the other hand, a key element in Industry is the ability of its people to be able to work and co-operate with colleagues. One of the hardest lessons young graduates learn is that they do not have all the answers and that other people also have very good ideas.

Teamwork, whether it be in the work or social/leisure environment, demands a great deal of the individual. Besides being able to understand the process of group problem solving and of accepting responsibility for the manner in which the team works, it is necessary to be able to work for the good of the team rather than just self and further to recognise that each person has much to offer in the different areas which go to make up the whole. The more a person understands the mechanics of how teams operate and experiences how those manifest themselves, the more it enables the team to be more effective. Few graduates realise the importance of the need to empathise with, and be sensitive to, other people's feelings and words. Neither do they recognise how to interpret non-verbal communications nor the weight of the requirement of trust and sharing. They often have a distorted view of leadership, seeing it as the person with 'power'. Although this is sometimes the case, even here it means being able to draw out the best in everyone and be supportive of the other members' approaches. But, more frequently within teams, this role is shared, depending on the skills and abilities required at different points in the process. An element of both leadership and team membership is to actually 'actively listen' which is a skill that is very different from the traditional meaning of 'listening'.

Communication

Communication is one of the hardest skill areas. It is an area that tends to be spoken about without much understanding. For students, the emphasis of written communication is inclined to be on their ability to write answers to examination questions. Within life, the skill required is to be aware of, and able to use, the appropriate format and to be able to tailor the written communication to the targeted audience. For example, writing a management survey of one side of A4 with the relevant back-up documentation; using befitting language when using electronic mail; the variety of styles to be used when writing letters, CVs or academic reports.

Verbal communication necessitates the individual recognising when and how to change approaches when endeavouring to make verbal contact with others. This will include, among others, being able to establish rapport; to empathise; to use support media; to use the telephone; to be persuasive; to negotiate; and to present ideas and recommendations in one-to-ones, small and large groups, interviews and team meetings.

Analysis and Problem Solving/Decision-Making

Most circumstances in life call for the ability to look at a situation – in depth if necessary – explore alternatives, make a judgement and finally to make a decision or recommendation. Very often those same circumstances also require the capability to review the results of that course of action to see if there are lessons to be learnt. In order to do this more readily and effectively the individual needs to be able to understand the processes that are involved.

Time-Management

Time-management is crucial to most areas of life although not often regarded so by students. Effective time-management should be part of an individual's continuous development plan and as such it requires the individual to analyse their own time-management and to use and adapt those techniques that are right for them, their personality, their strengths and their profile. It is a case of asking oneself "why you are doing what you are doing." The leading writer on management, Peter Drucker, points out that 'Efficiency is doing the job right; effectiveness is doing the right job' (Guirdham and Tyler, 1992).

The above represent only some of the personal transferable skills. Others would include those which make up the interactional skills and the skills/qualities that contribute to the individual's ability to demonstrate initiative and efficiency. The belief that education is about more than the acquisition of subject knowledge lies at the heart of the EHE philosophy. In-depth study of a chosen subject is imperative and the quality of that academic study must not deteriorate, but a broader perspective enables the individual to appreciate other points of view. Hence there is the necessity also for a good, well-rounded general education.

The Role of Higher Education

What then is:

- the role of Higher Education in this process of preparation for life and with so little resources, lack of time and increased demands from many quarters, and
- how can HE be expected to help?

In answer to the first point, it is critical that HE helps to engender in its students the love of learning and to help them see this as a continuous process for the rest of their lives. Together with this is the fact, that no matter what discipline or course is being studied, the students need to have an understanding of, and experience in, the use of technology.

HE can also aid the students by raising their awareness of the emphasis employers are putting on the development of the personal transferable life skills; helping them to recognise circumstances when the skills have been developed; showing them how to use the skills they learn when writing CVs and in interviewing situations and making them aware that employers do assess these skills when making their selections.

In relation to the last statement, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that when an employer is faced with a number of students from the same institution, having studied the same course, who have attained the same classification of degree, the features that will select one student to be offered the job are those very same life skills. In the sifting of the applications, employers look for the ability of the students to demonstrate their written communication skills and in interviews, they look for them to show how they have applied the knowledge they have gained.

The second point asked how HE and tutors could actually help. Many tutors are already developing these skills in their students, however the students themselves do not recognise what it is they are being taught. One area, therefore, could be to help to draw out of the learning situations the key skills that are, or have been, developed. Furthermore HE must appreciate that, in order to manage the increased numbers of students entering HE and to provide the additional support in these areas, it may need to offer a different approach to teaching and learning and to the methods of delivery. It will in all probability, mean looking at traditional 'no-go' areas such as assessment and seeing how these can be managed. In this particular example, assessment could be applied to self, peer and employer, as well as tutor and institution.

The inclusion of life skills training as an integral part of courses is another area in which HE can play a vital role. Ensuring, for example, that students learn the techniques of presentations and then actually carry these out will give them the ability and the confidence they often need. Also encouraging students to take risks and to learn from mistakes creates an environment in which the students can grow.

To undertake some of these activities will not be without problems, not the least of which is the problem of staff development. Many staff would be delighted to help but feel they cannot since they do not have sufficient skills themselves; many also need to see that these offer opportunities and not threats to them as individuals. Time is itself a problem. With the increase in student: staff ratios and the many demands made on staff time, technology will become even more critical. This will include technology of all types, be it video, computer based training, study packages or even more sophisticated products. Of the new teaching and learning methodologies, many include the use of technology which staff have never been able to take advantage of in the past but which could provide the space to enable other areas such as the tutorials to be retained and developed.

Expectations from three quarters – students, institutions and staff themselves – can create another potential problem area. Many students will be coming through the education system already exposed to forms of learning that have emphasised skills development; and they will expect the same from HE. There will be many different groups of students in future. There will still be the traditional 18 year old, white Anglo-Saxon who has completed ‘A’ Levels but in much smaller proportions. Increasingly students will have non-traditional qualifications, be mature, be in employment, or come from ethnic minority backgrounds. All will demand different approaches.

The institutions will be looking for increased productivity due to political changes that they need to respond to. The HE culture currently does not often encourage an environment in which individuals are able to ask for, and obtain, help and support in new areas; but they still expect those individuals to deliver. Neither does the culture encourage the reward of anything other than research – particularly in Universities.

Staff often ask questions such as, “can I do this?”, “why should I do this?”, “what’s in it for me?”, “it’s been good enough for all these years, what’s different now?”, “where’s my recognition going to come from?” All very valid questions, but they frequently become frustrated with the lack of answers.

Where then is the help and support going to come from? There are two main areas – EHE and the employer partnerships. In fact the first leads to, and encourages, the second. Thus the main area for the University of Ulster is the new Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative. This is a superb method to help partnerships with employers to develop. It generates opportunities to try new ideas and to gain experience with support. It helps to tackle some of the problems identified from staff development to resources. It also carries the support of the institution, employers and from Government. Given this it means that changes have to happen but in a much more structured way.

Employers are encouraged to help in many different ways and the outcomes of this could be staff looking, and asking, for help from various company sources – be they small, medium sized or large – in their related areas: in running courses in CV preparation, interviewing techniques, presentations; providing work placements to students and/or staff; allowing students and staff to visit their premises; or providing prizes where appropriate. There could be the possibility of asking people from Industry to be lecturers on their speciality or to run seminars/workshops.

Employers can provide live projects for students to work on which can therefore be of mutual benefit. They can also provide, on occasions, places on in-house training courses for staff; or sponsor staff to go on external courses. Since companies assess their own people they can provide valuable help by sharing their experiences and the 'tools' they use. Curriculum development and validation of courses can ensure that courses are up to date and relevant. The Employer investment is usually in terms of time, advice, experience, resource and materials although some employers will occasionally also invest money.

The key factors in the partnership are trust and mutual respect. It is essential that Higher Education and Industry work closely together to the benefit of all three partners – HE, Industry and, most importantly, the students.

References

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