

# **THE ENTERPRISE CURRICULUM: ATTITUDES OF GRADUATES AND EMPLOYERS TO PERSONAL SKILLS FOR THE WORKPLACE**

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## **Introduction**

Enterprise became a key theme in Government policy in the United Kingdom in the mid 1980s. The early emphasis was on lifting the perceived burden of governmental bureaucracy on business, especially small business, which was believed to hinder its development and growth (Cmnd 9571, 1985, Cmnd 9794, 1986). Further initiatives encouraged the “freeing of the people to make fullest use of their talents to produce the goods and services demanded in the Europe of the 21st Century” (Cmnd 512, 1988 p.i.).

The enterprise initiative was extended to Higher Education in 1988 as Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) which has as its aim “Every person seeking a higher education qualification should be able to develop competencies and aptitudes relevant to enterprise, and those competencies should be acquired at least in part through project based work, designed to be undertaken in a real economic setting which should be jointly assessed by employers and students’ higher education institutes” (Training Agency 1988).

The University of Ulster was actively interested in joining this initiative but felt hindered by the lack of a systematic and detailed analysis of the nature of the

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enterprise competencies required to be developed in an EHE programme. This paper gives the results of such an analysis. Conclusions are drawn from the findings on the content and delivery of an effective EHE programme.

### The Nature of Enterprise

Enterprise is a broad concept. The EHE team believed that an important first step in the approach to implementation was the development of a view of enterprise which would be broadly acceptable within the University and would provide a strategic guide for action.

Two reports on the implementation of EHE in other institutions indicated a wide diversity of views. The Tavistock Institute (1989) reported three broad interpretations:

- **The entrepreneurial view** which concentrates on the development of business skills. In curriculum terms this is likely to result in the introduction of a bolt-on module which increases awareness of the business world.
- **Enterprise** in terms of work placements and projects carried out in an economic setting. This would result in the enhancement of employer networks and greater use of employer partnerships.
- **Personal skills** which are seen as enterprising. The outcome of this is seen as a programme which concentrates on curriculum and staff development.

The Training Agency (1990) stated that the interpretation of enterprise may focus on:

- **Entrepreneurship** – the qualities and skills which enable people to succeed in business enterprises.
- **Personal Effectiveness** – the qualities and skills possessed by the resourceful individual.
- **Transferable Skills** – the generic capabilities which allow people to succeed in a wide range of different tasks and jobs.

The EHE team was concerned by these interpretations. The concerns were two fold – first, a potential overemphasis on the personal skills required for graduates to enter ‘entrepreneurial’ businesses where a majority of the students enter occupations other than business, and secondly, a meaning of enterprise which places undue emphasis on individual success in contrast to the effective contribution of the

individual to society. Law (1990) expands this second concern to claim that the contemporary view of enterprise is a culture which promotes in:

Liberation	– from bureaucracy
Unconstraint	– in the exploitation of opportunity
Personal Gain	– not collective improvement, as prime motivation
Independence	– of traditional encumbrance
Detachment	– from merely social convention
Preference	– as the arbiter of quality
Freedom	– from state intervention
Unencumbrance	– by scruple
Short-term profit	– above long-term cost

In the light of these concerns, the EHE team decided on a focus which is the creation of a framework within which each full-time undergraduate student is to be given the opportunity to develop his or her enterprise competence as an integral part of their academic programme. The aim is that students would leave the University equipped with confidence; the ability and motivation to take on the challenges of work in the 1990s and beyond, and to make an effective contribution to social and community development.

The EHE team believed that the necessary University wide support for this aim would flow from its alignment with the objectives of the University which are (in part) “to advance education through a variety of patterns, levels and modes of study and by a diversity of means by encouraging and developing learning and creativity for *the benefits of the community* (author’s emphasis) in Northern Ireland and elsewhere” (University of Ulster 1984 : p.3).

### **The Enterprise Competencies**

The determination of the enterprise competencies required of, and by, graduates necessitates a clear definition of the meaning of competency. The word is in vogue in training and development but there is no one agreed definition or spelling, and there are many synonyms. The nationally set Occupational Standards for Managers (Management Charter Initiative 1989) uses the word competence. Other authors use skill and personality characteristics (Ferris, 1991), management skills (Whetten and Cameron, 1984), and transferable skills and personal effectiveness (Training Agency 1990).

A more precise definition of the generic term competency, was required by the EHE team to inform their actions. The definition was taken as a set of behaviours which can be practised and observed (a skill), the use of which is at the behest and within the personal power of the individual. The aspects, personality traits, attributes or characteristics which influence behaviour, were excluded for two reasons. First, the effort required to change deep seated aspects of personality developed since birth is impossible within the timescale afforded by a period of study for a degree, and second, by an unease with the ethics of dealing with issues of personality. The aims of EHE would be met if graduates left with the ability to utilize their personal skills with an understanding that personality influences their willingness to utilize these skills.

The survey method for the elicitation of the personal skills required that a comprehensive menu of skills was presented to the respondent. The sources utilized were threefold: The US literature on managerial competencies within management skills programmes designed for undergraduates and postgraduates (Porter and McKibben, 1988, Whetten and Cameron 1984); the small but developing literature on graduate skills largely inspired by the early EHE programmes (Kirby & Mullen, 1990, Oxford Centre for Staff Development 1989), and; the skills required of graduates by employers (Dutton, 1985 and Szczepura, 1990).

The comparison and contrast of the six views of personal skills provided the basis of the list of personal skills to be surveyed (see Table 1). It was felt important that the list was comprehensive and therefore a personal skill identified by only one author was included. In some cases where the level of disaggregation of skills was felt to be too detailed, the elements were included within one item. For example, Whetten and Cameron identify two elements – time management and delegation, which are viewed as part of coping with and managing personal stress, and are included within this item. Other items excluded were viewed as job specific, for example, budget formulation and selection interviewing. As discussed above, personality items such as brainpower were excluded. One personal skill added was company knowledge of which, it was believed, employers required evidence when recruiting.

It was felt that personal skill was a clearer and more understandable concept for employers and graduates within the survey. The phrase 'personal skill' as a synonym for competency, is used in survey design and results sections of the paper.

**Table 1: The Skills Within the University of Ulster Survey by Author Agreement**

University of Ulster Survey List	Author Agreement (max 6)
Communication	6
Leadership	5
Teamwork and Followership	
Problem Analysis and Solving	4
Coping with and Managing	
Personal Stress	
Decision Making	3
Achievement Drive	
Risk Taking	
Negotiation and Persuasion	
Flexibility	2
Proactivity	
Creating Opportunity	1
Self-awareness	
Managing Conflict	
Numeracy	
Computer Literacy	
Company Knowledge	0

### Survey Design

A random sample of 100 employers was chosen from the records kept by the Careers Service of the University of Ulster on the basis that they had been significant recruiters of graduates in the previous two years. The employers and graduates were asked to rank personal skills on a four point scale chosen to reduce the central tendency effect. The skills were defined in terms of observed behaviours. Employers were asked to rank:

- The importance to the employer of the skill in the prospective employee;
- The degree to which graduates are given the opportunity to display the skills in the workplace;

- The extent to which the employer felt the University had equipped or developed these skills in the graduate.

A random sample of 200 graduates within the last two years stratified by Faculty was asked analogous questions. In addition, twenty employers were interviewed face-to-face to validate the survey instrument. The interviews indicated that the behavioural definitions of the personal skills and the questions were clear and responses valid and reliable.

### Survey Response

Forty-seven employers responded (47% response rate). As shown in Table 2, the majority (60.4%) are in manufacturing and construction (31.4%), and other services (private) (29.0%). The balance of employers reflects the breakdown by category of employers in N Ireland.

Sixty-seven graduates responded (33.5% response rate). The majority of graduates (57.8%) found employment in two categories – Other Services (Private) and Public Administration. The imbalance between the percentage of employers (6.1%) and graduates (26.9%) employed in Public Administration, is due to the comparative size of public sector employers. The largest public employer in N. Ireland – the Eastern Health and Social Services Board has 38,000 employees

**Table 2: Comparison of Employer Responses Versus Graduate Response  
(% response by classification)**

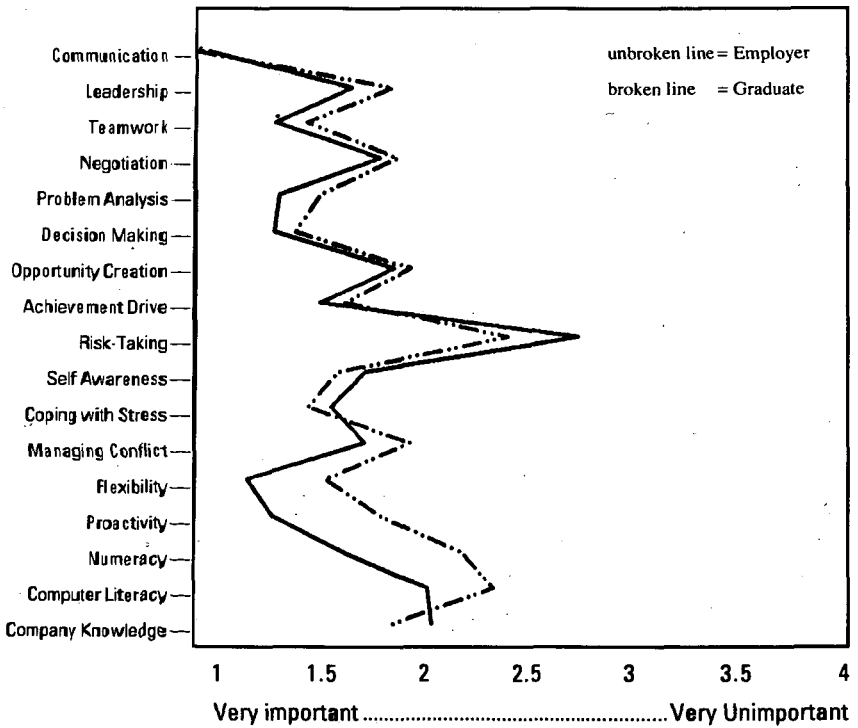
Classification	Employers	Graduates
Manufacturing and Construction	31.4	14.9
Other Services (Private)	29.0	26.9
Retail and Distribution	14.8	4.5
Banking and Financial Services	14.4	7.3
Voluntary Sector	4.3	1.5
Public Administration	6.1	26.9
Other/Unemployed/Further/Higher/Education		18.0
	N = 47	N = 67

whereas Shorts Bombardier, the largest in the private sector, has approximately 8,000 employees.

### Importance of Personal Skills

The ranking of the personal skill by the employer was measured by the skills importance as a criteria used in the process of selection for employment. The ranking to the graduate was based on the graduate's perception of the importance of the personal skill to his/her successful selection for employment. The ranking was on the scale 1 = very important to 4 = very unimportant. The analysis of response is shown in Figure 1 which uses all the responses to calculate an average for each skill. For example, 92% of employers scored communication as 1 (very important) and 8% as 2 (important), which gives an average of 1.08.

**Figure 1: Importance of Personal Skills; Employer and Graduate Results**



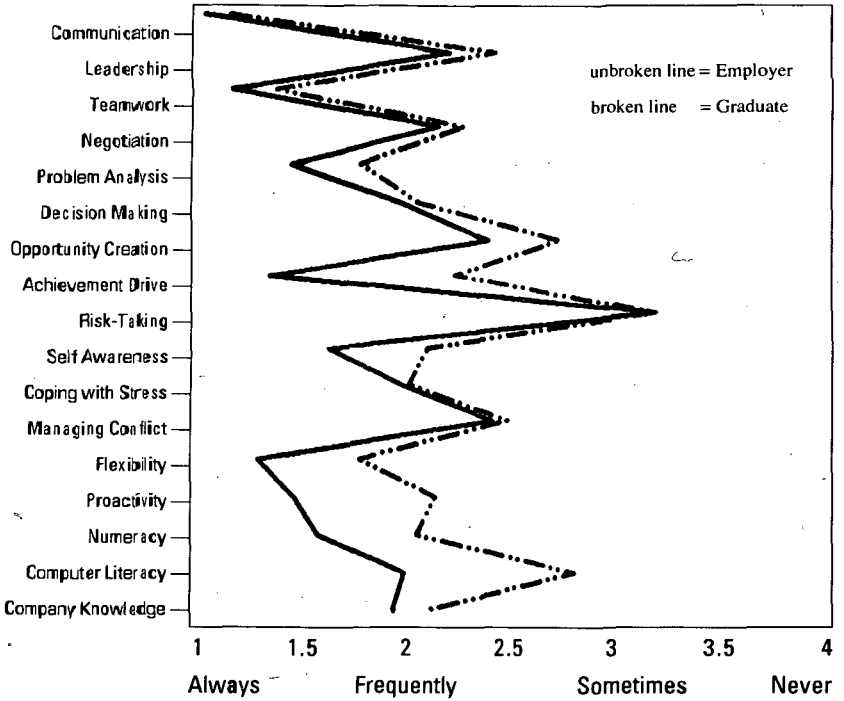
Both employers and graduates in general view all personal skills as important to very important. The skill with the highest importance ranking was communication. Over 90% of both employers and graduates ranked communications as 'very important'. The least important and only skill which, on average, is close to a ranking of 3 is 'risk-taking'. Risk taking is often viewed as a key skill in senior management jobs but is unlikely to be developed further by the graduate if seen as unimportant in an entry level job. The view of risk taking may be due to an interpretation which encompasses incautious rather than calculated behaviour.

It is clear that in general graduates give lower ratings across the board to the importance of personal skills than do employers. Graduates consider self-awareness and coping with personal stress to be more important than do employers. This may indicate to employers that they underrate the stress involved in the first job. This stress is often indicated by the induction crisis which causes a significant proportion of new employees to leave within the first six months of employment.

There are four skills, flexibility, proactivity, numeracy and computer literacy, which graduates view as much less important than employers. It would seem that graduates undervalue the importance of their computer literacy and numeracy skills. This may be due to the emphasis given to these subjects in many degree programmes and the consequent familiarity which leads graduates to fail to appreciate their importance. The differences in employer and graduate rankings of flexibility and proactivity may be a consequence of the specialised focus of degree courses which reinforces the perception of the graduate that employers employ them for their degree skills rather than for their overall capability and potential, as evidenced by success in a degree.

Employers were also given the opportunity to add skills not on the survey list of sixteen. They listed organisational ability three times. Others mentioned once were ability to socialise, presentation and public speaking skills, commercial awareness, impact, financial awareness, and personality. This limited response appears to validate the original list in terms of personal skills, as few items are mentioned, and of those mentioned many would fit within the original skills list. For example, organizational ability is likely to be a skill of communication, teamwork, and proactivity. Personality is not a behavioural skill and as discussed, is excluded.

**Figure 2: Opportunity to Use Personal Skills; Employer and Graduate Results**



### Opportunity to Use the Skills

The presence of the personal skill in the graduate is not the only issue. It would be a somewhat futile exercise if EHE was to develop skills for which, even if considered important, the graduate did not have the opportunity to use in the work place.

Graduates were asked to score on a four point scale from 'Always' to 'Never' on their opportunity to use the skills. Employers were asked to score on the same scale the opportunity they provided for the graduate. The comparison between employer and graduate responses is shown in Figure 2.

Overall the most striking feature is the similarity of shape between the two response profiles. With the exception of negotiation and persuasion, where there is a major difference of opinion, graduates and employers rank the opportunity

provided to use the skills as very similar. In part the explanation for the divergence of opinion on negotiation and persuasion may lie in an employer identification of this skill in the workplace as narrowly concerned with the industrial relations function rather than as a skill required for day-to-day interpersonal negotiation on all aspects of interpersonal activity.

### **The Development of Personal Skills**

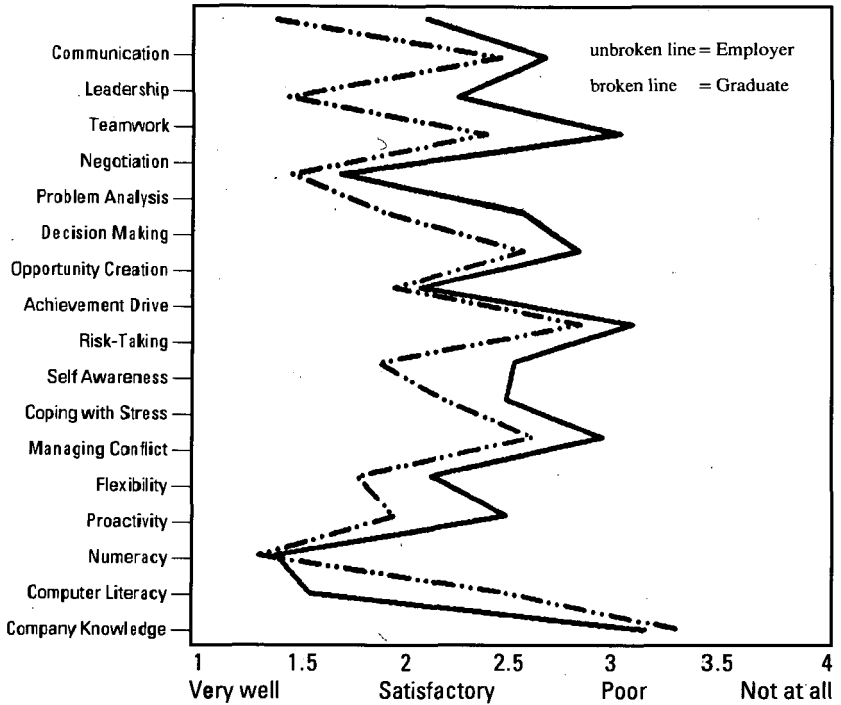
The results presented so far have indicated employers' and graduates' views of the skills and the opportunity to use them in the workplace. No account has been taken of the existence, or lack, of these skills in the graduate workforce. Analysis of skills development allows a more focused assessment of the gap between what Universities currently do well and the deficiency on which EHE must focus attention.

Graduates responded to the questions which examined their perception of the extent to which their university course developed or equipped them with a personal skill. Employers responded with their perception of the extent to which the skills have been developed in graduates. Responses were on a four point scale ranging from 'very well' to 'not at all'.

The results shown in Figure 3 show a general dissatisfaction with the development of personal skills on the degree course with no scores of 'very well' and only employers scoring computer literacy and numeracy as 'satisfactory'. The graduates did not score any skill development in the 'very well' category. None fell into the 'not at all' category. The poor scores were company knowledge, risk leadership, negotiation, creating opportunities, managing conflict and computer literacy. The best developed skills were communication and problem analysis and solving.

Employers have, in general, a much less positive view of how the University develops skills in graduates. In a striking 14 out of the 17 categories they view the University's ability to develop the skill less favourably than the view of the graduates, with the gap being largest in the personal rather than group skills. They do not consider that graduates have learned to be proactive or flexible. Employers would see the development of conflict management, risk taking, creating opportunities and negotiation and persuasion as poor. Well developed are leadership, problem analysis and solving, numeracy and computer literacy. Employers are less impressed with the development of communication skills.

**Figure 3: The Development of Personal Skills: Employer and Graduate Results**



**Conclusion**

The survey provides a clear direction for the content of the enterprise curriculum. Of the seventeen personal skills surveyed, sixteen are reported by employers and graduates as important for the transition from education to work. The skill which is given less importance is ‘risk-taking’, which may simply be due to lack of clarity in the behavioural definitions. Employers and graduates do not identify any additional personal skills beyond the sixteen. There is also marked agreement on the opportunity provided to use the skills in the workplace by both employers and graduates.

There is greater concern about the ability of the existing University programmes to develop the personal skills. Of particular concern is the mismatch between the importance of the skill and its development. Employers perceive the University to be poor at developing the skills which they view to be relatively more

important. These skills are flexibility, communication, proactivity, teamwork, followership, and, problem analysis and solving. Skills of relatively less importance to employers are seen to be well developed. There is a need if the aims of EHE are to be met, to explore with the Course Committees, the curriculum organisers, the balance of learning on current and future courses. A further concern is the attitude of University staff to skills education. Experience in the US is not encouraging. Serey and Verderber (1991), in a review of the US experiences, believe the integration of skills teaching in Business Schools has, to borrow an analogy from *marathon running*, hit the wall! They believe this is due to philosophical and pedagogical issues such as the legitimacy of teaching skills, the evaluation and assessment of skill, and the staffing of skill classes, which EHE must influence in order to effect change. The list of issues implies a major effort. The changes required to meet the aims of EHE will not come easily.

Boyatsis (1991) provides one solution. His study shows that staff intent is a major determinate of effective student skill learning. Therefore, a comprehensive staff development programme with the objective of increasing the motivation and ability to deliver skills, may provide the necessary impetus for change. An alternative to changing staff practice is the use of technology for high volume skills training. Initial studies in the University of Ulster (Thompson 1992) has shown that Interactive Video has learning and cost advantages over traditional teaching.

The results of the survey need to be continually updated to ensure that the skills menu is still current. For example, a survey of NHS graduate trainees (Szczepura 1990) provides a general confirmation of our results but raises important differences. One difference is a job specific skill, selection interviewing in the NHS, which does not easily fit into all undergraduate programmes. The other difference is that communication is split into three distinct elements, all of which are important. This would influence the relative proportion of the skills curriculum which is given to Communication.

It is important to be aware that the employer is not the sole customer for the enterprising student. The concerns raised by Law (1990) are reminders that the aim should not be the enterprising graduate free from constraint. The needs of society at large have to be considered.

This survey has identified a clear demand for enterprise skills. How to meet this demand is not so clear and will require major changes in curriculum design and delivery.

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