Finding the employability edge in your studies

S. Ian Robertson, Isabella McMurray and Pat Roberts on how graduate skills can be embedded within the psychology curriculum

In the era of credit crunches and high unemployment, any career skills that provide an edge for graduates seeking employment are to be welcomed. Therefore, the issue of what is being taught, why it is being taught and how it can be applied in the future, in whatever career the student embarks on, has become of prime importance.

There are some fantastically rewarding destinations on your road into psychology, and you can read about them in an article from The Psychologist archive at tinyurl.com/psychjobs. But we need to be realistic about the fact that in the UK, only about 20 per cent of psychology graduates go on to become psychologists (Lantz, 2011). The good news is that some 50 per cent of employers do not specify a particular degree – they are seeking good degrees and certain skills, so it makes sense to find out what those skills are.

Despite various definitions of what is meant by employability (CBI, 2011; Lowden et al., 2011), there appears to be some general agreement around the specific skills, competences and attributes expected of graduates that should stand the psychology student in good stead beyond their degree. There are many sources of such information, summarising the main skills looked for (see, for example, CBI, 2011; McMurray et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2011). The QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology (2007) emphasises the importance of generic employability skills and lists 11 psychology-specific skills and 10 generic skills that an honours graduate should have. The new Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), to be published by all HE institutions for each student, will include statements about employability anxiety.

The Psychology Student Employability Guide from the Higher Education Academy (Lantz, 2011; see tinyurl.com/lantz2011) is another excellent resource.

But how can we ensure such skills are embedded within the psychology curriculum? This question has been underpin it emerge as important topics in the teaching of psychology (see, for example, Pegg et al., 2012).

Fortunately for us, psychology is almost uniquely placed to embed employability skills within the curriculum. There are many topics in a psychology degree, such as counselling, personality and individual differences, occupational psychology, metacognition, problem solving and thinking, to name but a few, that can be directly related to the student’s personal experience. Others have noted this: in 2009 New Scientist magazine published a short article on how interview skills and strategies can be based on psychological evidence (Bond, 2009).

The integration of skills within the normal curriculum is, to us, key. From past experience, stand-alone Personal Development Planning (PDP) modules do not work well as they are seen as divorced from the rest of the course. Similarly, ad-hoc sessions by a careers adviser or guest speaker do not often attract students to the sessions. Neither of these methods really ‘embeds’ employability – they bolt it on where it can be largely ignored (Akhurst, 2005).

We have written elsewhere about how employability was built into the curriculum at our institution, the University of Bedfordshire, and how Research Informed Teaching and Learning is being supported with its own concomitant skill set (McMurray et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2011). The university’s careers department contributes to the curriculum at each level in a structured way by linking career development to psychology subject matter. Built into the department philosophy is the idea that we are fostering skills to support students’ transitions to employment. Students are therefore aware from early in their first year of study that they will be developing skills relevant to future employment and lifelong learning. We have formalised this by listing the skills to be developed in the module information forms much more
explicitly and clearly than previously, and these are accessible to students.

The adjacent table presents information of this type: a list of desired graduate skills culled from various sources (left column) with suggested areas of the psychology curriculum where these skills might normally be practised or experienced. We have found that employability skills can readily be linked to psychological theory and hence to a variety of tutorial activities, and we will turn to some examples now.

In the field of the psychology of individual differences, there are several scales and psychometric tests that can help students reflect on and gain a realistic understanding of their own abilities and aptitudes. These, along with a well-developed grasp of their career goals, have been found to correlate with higher levels of employability (Eby et al., 2003). Students in our focus groups had felt that there was a link between personality and career choices, and personality traits have been shown to correlate with such outcomes as job satisfaction, job success, salary and self-efficacy (Rode et al., 2008).

Studying research methods is an obvious area where students can develop useful skills in data analysis and interpretation. Businesses rely greatly on generating and analysing data, and research skills are useful to them (Akhurst, 2005). A background in statistics should therefore help make a graduate more employable than someone without those skills.

Methods are of course a central part of the research project, the culmination of a student’s studies. Yet undergraduates are often unaware that the project constitutes an excellent example of project management. Apart from research, data gathering and analysis, students have to liaise with others to organise and manage their project, produce an ethically sound proposal, organise a participant pool, book equipment and labs, manage their time, meet tight deadlines, and so on.

Action planning and goal setting can be incorporated into topics in social psychology or other cognate areas such as counselling psychology. For example, traditional theories such as social cognitive theory can be expanded upon to include examples of how self-efficacy,
goals and clear outcomes can impact on an individual’s career development. Research methods and social psychology modules are areas where one typically finds assignments built around teamwork, and students can be asked to reflect on that experience and relate it to psychological explanations of group processes, such as social loafing. Indeed, we have found that some students gain insight into their own role in teams and how their behaviour impacts on others both positively and negatively.

Under the topic of language, one can look at speech acts and how people convey information in conversation (e.g. Grice’s (1975) maxims). Pitch, pace, tone of voice and the words used in conversation along with body language, posture and appearance all have an impact on others. This can lead to an exercise such as ‘The Elevator Pitch’ where students have to convey their CV and (hopefully positive) aspects of their personality in 30 seconds to a potential employer in an elevator.

Cognitive psychology also includes employment-relevant topics such as reasoning and argument, the impact of heuristics on decision making, techniques of persuasion, creativity and insight, and so on. These need to be anchored to real-world examples and real-world experience so that students are aware of their applicability outside the lecture room.

Last, but very far from least, ethical considerations, including avoiding academic offences and acting within one’s level of competence are naturally embedded in any psychology degree and inculcated in many modules. How to treat others, how to treat sources of information and how to behave professionally with respect, responsibility and integrity ought to be second nature by the time students complete a psychology degree.

A time to reflect
These are just a few examples of how employability skills can be embedded into a psychology curriculum, and we are in the process of evaluating how successful we have been so far. Students are not always aware of the skills they are learning unless it is pointed out to them, hence the need for students to reflect on what it is they are doing at university so that they become more confident, knowledgeable and in control of their own learning.

It is, of course, not unusual for some students to feel undecided about their career choices. Even this can be linked back to the psychology curriculum: in a course on lifespan development, theoretical frameworks that underpin career theories such as Super’s self-concept development theory (Super, 1990) can be included exploring the vocational tasks and stages of career development; or Erikson’s (1968) characterisation of the adolescent years as a period of ‘identity versus role confusion’ where it is necessary for young people to experiment with different roles, personalities and behaviours in order to discover what gives them essentially a fixed, unique sense of being.

Our main message must be that maps are available to plot your journey in psychology, and manuals to ensure you

To check the latest jobs please go to www.psychapp.co.uk
are roadworthy. It is never too early to
give this some thought, and psychology
itself can be of assistance. Building
employability into the curriculum involves knowing what to do to enhance
career prospects and how to go about
doing that. However, psychological
theories and practice allow us to add
a further dimension in our view – why
we are doing it.

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