Research Article

Introducing Students to Employability, Skills and Reflection: A Case Study from History

Chris Corker¹ and Sarah Holland (Sheffield Hallam University)

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Abstract

We present an approach to introducing students to employability, skills and reflection from our experiences of working with history students during their first year of study. The approach is embedded into the delivery of a module which incorporates an independent research project. As part of this delivery, we undertake two lectures, a single workshop and an assessment task related to employability. The approach to each of these is outlined in the core of the article. In addition, we present survey results and evaluation related to first year students’ perceptions of skills and employers needs, and their own perceptions of the skills they have developed during the module. Finally we present an overview of the approach and the prospects for its transfer to other subjects and disciplines.

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Introduction

Employability, an important aspect of any undergraduate level study, has the potential to be overlooked with first year delivery in favour of introducing the concept in the second and third years. In this regard, we believe such an approach has a detrimental effect on the student experience and the level of understanding students have when developing their employability profiles, and the potential to achieve their dream jobs. From the development of the Making History module at Sheffield Hallam University, we present one approach to introducing students to employability in their first year of study. We take a skills based approach, embed delivery into the schedule of lectures and workshops for the module, and include a reflective element with assessment. Students were also surveyed at two points in the module delivery to ascertain their perception of the skills they currently have and are developing from the module, the results of which are presented below. Ethical approval was sought and achieved for students to be surveyed. The data was collected via two questionnaires given to students at the start and end of the module, and completed on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Students were also aware that by returning the questionnaires they were granting permission for the results to be utilised by the authors for research purposes. This case study starts with an overview of the module, followed by an exploration of students’ perceptions of skills at the start of the module. Our approach to integrating employability is then presented, along with students responses to their skills development and reflection. The article concludes with an evaluation of the approach and its transferability.

Overview of the Module and Approach

Making History was delivered in the second semester of Level 4 to all history students, with a typical cohort of around 100 students. At the core of the module is an enquiry based, group research project on any aspect of Sheffield’s history that students want to explore in groups of two or three. Emphasis is placed on under-researched or new areas of investigation, and the projects must utilise primary source material. The output of the research is a formative group poster to be presented to the public at an exhibition, and an individual research essay based on each student’s contribution to the research. Giving students creative control over a project, as seen with another history module at Level 6 involving public history, can have a positive affect on the student learning experience (Robertson, 2010: 219). Using MS Publisher to produce the posters, the module is an exemplar of technology enhanced learning, and from its use of a public exhibition, visits to libraries, archives, museums and a public history walk, we have demonstrated the positive impact on student engagement and the student experience of public engagement initiatives (Corker and Holland, 2014; Corker and Holland, forthcoming 2015). In addition to using the module to begin to explore employability alongside their research projects, it also aims to help develop students as autonomous learners, capable of taking responsibility for their own research and learning outside of the classroom. (Moore et al. 2010). Within the module, the use of active learning through research projects, formative assessment within the module via posters and project proposal presentations, and integrated student support and prompt feedback
through workshop sessions, are all known to improve student retention, a key consideration for any module delivered at Level 4. (Bramhall and Corker, 2012:4).

Our approach to employability encompasses reflection on skills development and learning, a key aspect of employability pedagogy (Pegg et.al. 2012). We also accept, as a recent HEA publication has suggested, that ‘Graduates need the skills, capabilities and attributes to enable them to be successful in an ever changing global economic environment’ (Owens and Tibby, 2014:3). By exploring skills development, we provide a broad, motivating and generic view of the world of work, and give students the opportunity to explore and develop their own employability profiles and plans beyond graduation. This is embedded into the delivery of the module, in two lectures, one workshop, and one aspect of the assessment, all explored below.

**Identifying Student Perspectives of Skills (Questionnaire)**

Throughout the module we utilised a standard set of ten skills in questionnaires, relating to both students’ perspectives of skills, and of the skills they believed they needed to further develop. These are as follows:

- Verbal Communication
- Teamwork
- Commercial Awareness
- Analysis and Investigation
- Initiative/Self-Motivation
- Information Technology/Computer Skills
- Written Communication
- Planning and Organisation
- Independence
- Time Management

The reasons for using this list were twofold. Firstly, these are the skills which are generally found on lists of graduate employers most desirable skills; as such developing a Level 4 student’s familiarity with them can be seen as one facet of their understanding of employability. Secondly, the module aims to give students the opportunity to develop each of these skills, albeit to varying degrees. The exception to this is commercial awareness, which students are signposted towards during the employability sessions as part of the Making History module, but is not explicitly part of the delivered content. This is discussed in more detail below.

Immediately prior to the first lecture of the module, students were asked to voluntarily complete a questionnaire which asked questions related to employability, their use of libraries and archives, and public history. The first question asked which skills students believed were most important to employers, highlighting the three they believed were most important. Those skills that were identified as being most important in students’ minds are identified in Table 1.
Table 1: Which of the following skills do you think are most important to employers? (Tick Three Only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>2013 (n=66)</th>
<th>2014 (n=58)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Communication</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Awareness</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Investigation</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative/Self-Motivation</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology/Computer Skills</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Communication</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Organisation</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these results we can identify the students’ perspective of what skills are important to employers. Firstly, there is a general consensus that verbal communication, teamwork, initiative and self-motivation, planning and organisation, and time management are the most important. That this highlights that a large proportion of students believe employers are looking for graduate employees who can work in teams, get their ideas across, plan their own time, and work with a level of self-direction. In contrast to this, independence gained a lower response rate from students, a skill which could easily be used to corroborate their suggested most important skills. Information technology, written communication and commercial awareness also ranked low among students’ perceived required skills. In an age of digital communications, and a heavy emphasis on emails for correspondence, this was surprising. These three, information technology, written communication, and commercial awareness were used as the basis of discussion later in the module. We accept that students are restricted in their choice of skills, being limited to highlighting three only, which requires them to make a deductive decision on which to choose. This was also done to avoid students ticking all the boxes if they were given an opportunity to mark as many as they wanted.

The second question asked students to highlight all of the skills they believed they needed to develop. This provides some further insights into student’s perceptions of skills, principally which of those listed they see as potentially being fully developed. These results are presented in Table 2.
Table 2: Which of the following skills do you believe you need to develop? (Tick all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>2013 (n=74)</th>
<th>2014 (n=65)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Communication</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Awareness</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Investigation</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative/Self-Motivation</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology/Computer Skills</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Communication</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Organisation</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show that when commencing the module, many students did not see some skills as needing further development. Time management is clearly an area of issue for both cohorts, and one traditionally bemoaned by students, some even commenting on having started and completed an assignment in a limited number of days before a deadline. Verbal communication, analysis and investigation, initiative/self-motivation and planning and organisation are the only other areas in which over a third of the students viewed as areas for potential development. On the whole, these results show a fascinating insight into which skills students believed required no further development.

Students were also asked if they had any idea of what career they wanted to follow after graduating, presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Do you have an idea of what career you want to follow after graduating?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2013 (n=74)</th>
<th>2014 (n=65)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students typically suggested teaching as the most favoured career after completing their studies, with over half of those stating they had an idea of a future career highlighting
this option. Journalism and working in museums were also common responses, with some interesting single responses including British Army officers, insurance brokers, working in law, police force, politics and film industry also included in students’ responses. Overall, the responses provided in these questionnaires provided guidance on which aspects of employability and skills development required further discussion in lectures and workshops.

Introducing Students to Employability: A Brief Description of Lectures, Workshops and Assessment

As part of the module delivery, employability is introduced to students in two lectures each of one hour duration, and a follow-up workshop of one and a half hours duration. The assessment of the module also requires students to write 500 words reflecting on one or two skills they believed they had developed as part of the module.

Lectures

To introduce students to employability in lecture one we give them two definitions of the concept as found on the Sheffield Hallam University Employability website (e3i, 2010). These are as follows:

- “To be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure” - Peter Hawkins, The Art of Building Windmills
- "Enabling students to acquire the knowledge, personal and professional skills and encourage the attitudes that will support their future development and employment" - Shefield Hallam University

In presenting these to students, we acknowledge their basis in learning and teaching research, wider literature, and the pedagogical implications and approaches involved, before also highlighting that they are relatively meaningless to students. In order to present employability to students for the first time, the concept needs to be evocative, active, and relevant to each of them and their diverse range of background and potential futures.

In order to achieve this, we discuss employability profiles and how they can be enhanced by every aspect of a person’s life, including undertaking degree level study. We also highlight how a profile can encompass skills, attributes, competencies, experiences, knowledge, interests, values, personality and ability. Building from a discussion of employability profiles, the following points are covered in the lecture:

- The reality of the graduate job market and the limited number of history graduates who go into jobs directly related to their degree.
- Where students are at – a firm idea of a future career, some idea or no idea – and how to plan ahead, even when your own plans change.
• Understanding your own skills and attributes and how to apply them to any situation. The key here is accepting that skills development is never finished, and that skills developed in one part of your life can be transferred to another – for instance across life, work, social and academic situations. Also highlighted is that skills development can be as simple as applying a skill to a new situation.
• The skills developed from undertaking a history degree, on this module, and how they link to the skills desired by graduate employers.
• Understanding your skills gaps, and how to identity and work on them.
• Job options with history, options for further study, the benefits and pitfalls of undertaking post-graduate qualifications, and what to do if you have no idea about a future career.
• How to demonstrate capabilities and interests beyond being solely identified by a degree title, how to enhance your CV and profile, and get the experience you need.

Principally we explore the versatility of a history degree, including the following quote from the Prospects website:

“A history degree provides openings to a wide range of other careers but it is also important, in order to boost prospects, to gain as many of the relevant skills and as much relevant work experience as possible prior to embarking on a particular career.” (Prospects, 2014)

We also emphasise to students that “employers widely respect history graduates as having a valuable combination of skills” (Prospects, 2014). When exploring the skills that a history degree provides, students are given a short amount of time to name as many as they can before feeding back to the whole lecture. We link this to the QAA history subject benchmark statement document, and the skills listed under “the historian’s skills and qualities of mind” (QAA, 2007. The Subject benchmarks for History were updated and a new document issued in December 2014 following the module delivery). Students are encouraged to know and understand the statements so they have an awareness of, and the ability to apply, the skills they have developed over the course of their studies. While many could simply state that they had experience with primary sources, to state as the QAA benchmark reads, “the ability to read and analyse texts and other primary sources, both critically and empathetically, while addressing questions of genre, content, perspective and purpose,” (QAA, 2007:4) begins to show a deeper appreciation of the value of historical studies.

When discussing skills gaps, we return to the students results regarding commercial awareness from the opening survey. In particular, we emphasise the need to have direct experience of the job, sector, environment and so forth which they are interested in, along with an up to date knowledge of the specific industry. It is often found that students who are initially interested in teaching, for instance, can dislike working in schools so much they explore other career options after undertaking some work experience. We also discuss IT skills and written communication as professional
qualities which people use every day in the form of emails, and how IT confidence is more important than IT skills. IT confidence is essentially how quickly can you learn and be able to use new technology or piece of software.

Lecture two builds on the previous week, and explores the benefits of reflecting on your own skills and employability development. The concepts and approaches to reflection are developed further in a practical workshop delivered during the same week, explored below. Finally, there is a discussion of three popular job profiles for students undertaking a history degree: teaching, journalism, and the museums and heritage industry. A key point emphasised in this lecture is that no matter what the job, gaining experience of it and having up to date knowledge of the sector before opting for a career in that area is essential. This point is linked back to the previous lecture’s discussion of commercial awareness.

Workshops

Employability workshops, which are timetabled and compulsory for all students undertaking the Making History module, are attended by around 15-20 students per session. The employability workshop is one of eleven weekly sessions which students attend to support their work and learning on the Making History module, with five classes scheduled each week of the semester. The employability workshop, delivered following the two lectures related to employability, gives students an opportunity to consider their own skills development and what careers they might wish to go into, building on what has been previously discussed. This is followed by an overview of writing reflectively for their assessment. For this process, the workshop is delivered as phases I-IV, based on which aspect of employability is to be explored. For phases I-II, students work in groups, and individually for phases iii-iv. Groups are usually formed of around four to six students at a single table, and are provided with a large piece of paper and markers to write with.

Phase I of the workshop is as follows:

- Students are asked to write down as many skills and attributes they can which they have developed as part of undertaking their degree. Typically students exhaust this process after highlighting around 20 skills, understandable for Level 4 students. Each group feeds back in turn, and a list of skills is presented via the whiteboard.
- Once students have completed this, they are instructed to underline all the skills they have exclusively developed as part of the module.
- The overlaps are then discussed, followed by a discussion of any skills not developed as part of the module, and why this may be the case.
- This allows students to explore their skills development wider than just the module, and serves to highlight how they may be developing the same skills across multiple modules and in varying contexts.
Phase II of the workshop relates to students perceptions of careers. This proceeds as follows:

- Students are asked to write down as many careers they can think of which are directly related to their degree. Typically students highlight around 10 careers. Each group feeds back in turn, and the careers and presented via the whiteboard.
- Once completed, students are asked to write down any jobs related to any of the skills which they had highlighted from the first phase of the workshop.

This highlights to students the vast range of generic skills which historical studies develops, with many quickly realising that the skills they are developing as part of their degree can be reasonably applied to any job context. The point is made once again regarding commercial awareness of a specific job or sector to back up generic skills development and application.

For Phase III of the workshop students work on their own in order to explore potential future careers they are interested in. This proceeds as follows:

- Students are asked to list their passions, aiming for around ten specific examples. For instance, rather than just state ‘literature’, they are encouraged to suggest specific genres, authors, writing, reading and so forth. Some students do struggle with the idea of passions, and claim they do not have any, though often they have not considered their interests in this way before. Using the ideas of interests or hobbies can be clearer. Students are invited to share their passions if they are happy to.
- This is followed by asking students to write down their three most desirable jobs which they would like to do after graduating.
- The final part is to compare if anything on these two lists overlaps and corroborates.

We then seek to help students consider what they wish to do after completing their studies. Where desirable careers and interests do overlap, students often feel reassured that they are pursuing something they want to do in the future. When a students’ career and passion lists do not overlap, this raises two questions for them to consider. Firstly, are their desirable careers truly what they want to do? When this is explored, it is found that students may simply have an idea of something they might want to do, but simply are not sure yet. Secondly, are their passions the key to what they want to do in the future? It has been found that students’ do not always view their passions as ways into future careers, with some later exploring potential careers into areas they had simply not considered before. The conclusion of this exercise is linked back to commercial awareness and what had been previously discussed in the lectures; essentially that no matter what the job they are interested in, up to date information and experience of a role or career is essential to allow them to make an informed decision.

Phase IV of the workshop allows students to write reflectively on their skills development, using a series of questions as a framework from which to begin. One issue
which arises from asking students to write reflectively on their learning in assessment is that students are not provided any guidance or a framework from which to develop their ideas. This results in many viewing self-reflection as solely being critical of what has come before, with little emphasis on looking forward to the future. It has been observed by the authors that some students believe that the more critical they are of themselves or a certain skill, the higher a grade they may potentially achieve. In these cases, students have been seen to be somewhat compelled to exaggerate and misrepresent themselves when writing reflective pieces, and as a result fail to see the importance of being reflective as a part of their learning and personal development. Consequently, we view the framework demonstrated below as a means of overcoming this apparent negative approach to reflective writing among some students. In the workshop, this proceeds as follows:

- Returning to the list of skills they had developed as part of this module from earlier in the workshop, students are asked to pick one skill which they believed they had developed the most as part of the module.
- With a skill identified, the following questions are posed and students are given the chance to write some brief answers to each:
  - What is this skill?
  - How have you used it in the past?
  - How have you been developing it as part of your project?
  - How can you continue to develop it?
  - How useful is it to future studies?
  - Is it relevant to a future career I want?

The final three points here are opportunities for students to think forward as much as look back with their reflection.

- This was followed by giving students a guide to enhance their reflection with some context, utilising the STAR method of Situation, Task, Action and Result. Thinking specifically about which aspect of the module facilitated their development is key here.
- The final aspect of the reflective writing framework was to consider any career linkages which could be highlighted as part of each student’s skills development, thinking about how their selected skill could be useful to a specific career. For those unsure about their future after graduation, links were also provided to www.prospects.ac.uk to allow students to begin to explore future options.

Using the brief questions and statements they have written as a guide, students are then given the opportunity to begin to write up their reflective writing for their assignments. Students are also reminded that writing reflectively is about looking forward as much as looking back, and to view skills development as a continuous process. Students enjoy the chance to write reflectively in the workshop, as some can feel apprehensive about it having never done it before. Their assessment with regards writing reflectively is as follows.
Assessment

Each student provides a portfolio of four pieces of work totalling 3,500 words, including a critical reflection on their skills development; an essay on public history; a research essay; and a review of a primary source. For the critical evaluation of their skills development, they are provided with the following brief:

A critical evaluation of your skills development. You should focus on one or two skills which you have developed as part of this module, outlining why you might not have used these skills before, what aspect of the module allowed you to develop these skills, how you can use these skills in future work and study, and how you think you need to develop these skills in the future. If appropriate, link your skills developed to a possible career you have considered for the future.

Guidance notes were also provided via the virtual learning environment based on those discussed in the workshops. On the whole, the reflective writing submitted is interesting to read and shows some students are beginning to develop a deeper understanding of employability and what they wish to do after graduating, seeing themselves as part of a vast and competitive graduate job market. However, there are some students who do not view reflective writing as valuable and present something rushed and unreflective. Typically these students fail to attend one or more of the three sessions related to employability, and provide us with an imperative to explore why some students do not see the value of employability at this stage of their academic career.

Students Perspectives and Reflection on their Employability Development

As part of students’ feedback to the module, they were provided with a survey which asked three questions, among others, related to employability and their skills development. For 2013, these were distributed in a lecture following the public history exhibition, whereas for 2014 students were asked to fill them in immediately prior to the exhibition taking place. This explains the discrepancy in the number of students completing the questionnaire. Data collection was once again on a voluntary and anonymous basis. The first question asked students if they had an idea of what career they wanted to follow after graduation, as shown in Table 4.

| Table 4: Do you have an idea of what career you want to follow after graduating? |
|----------------------------------------|--------|
| 2013 (n=43)                          | 2014 (n=79) |
| Yes                                   | 53%    | 43%    |
| No                                    | 47%    | 57%    |

Once again, teaching made up the majority of responses to the careers students wanted to follow after their graduation, with journalism also a popular choice. These results show that for 2013, the proportion of students knowing what they wished to do following graduation decreased over the course of the module, whereas for 2014 the
opposite is apparent (See Table 3 for the start of the module). What this demonstrates is that, in our experience, no two cohorts of students are alike in having a consensus as to what they want to do beyond their university career. Nevertheless, such results show that introducing students to employability during their first year, and providing them with the knowledge and resources to explore a future career, is a positive part of the student experience and allows students to plan ahead early in their time at university.

The next question invited students to highlight all of the skills they believed they had developed as part of the module, as shown in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>2013 (n=43)</th>
<th>2014 (n=80)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Communication</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Awareness</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Investigation</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative/Self-Motivation</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology/Computer Skills</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Communication</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Organisation</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen, in six out of the ten skills listed, over half of students believed they had developed in that specific area, with teamwork, analysis and investigation, and planning and organisation the key areas of development. However, we believe that the module provides students with the opportunity to develop in all ten skills listed. It may be that such developments are either not explicit to students, or that given the wide range of previous experiences among the cohort such opportunities to develop are more beneficial to some students than others. All the same, these results are promising and show that on the whole students have developed as a result of completing the module.

The final question related to students perceptions of what skills they believed they still needed to develop, shown in Table 6.
Table 6: Which of the following skills do you believe you still need to develop?
(Tick all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>2013 (n=43)</th>
<th>2014 (n=80)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Communication</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Awareness</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Investigation</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative/Self-Motivation</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology/Computer Skills</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Communication</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Organisation</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once again we see a wide range of results, with many students highlighting four key skills they believed they still needed to develop: commercial awareness, initiative/self-motivation, planning and organisation and time management. We can account for this from two aspects of the module. Firstly, the emphasis placed on commercial awareness during the employability sessions highlighted the need for such knowledge to each student, with many seeing it as an area they are lacking. Given that this has been highlighted to them in the first year of their studies, rather than later in their University career, they have the opportunity to develop and reflect on such experiences and knowledge over a greater period of time. The other three skills which students highlighted as areas to develop were all related to the project-based nature of the module, and are potentially areas which students felt required further development after applying them to a new situation.

Students Views on Employability

As part of the end of module questionnaire students were also asked to provide feedback on the aspects of the module they liked the most, those they liked the least, and given an option to provide any further comments. Responses related to the employability aspects of the module and skills development were on the whole limited. Typically students commented on enjoying the ability to choose their own topics and undertaking independent research. However, one student suggested that the module ‘teaches skills necessary in the second and especially third year’ while another disliked
the focus ‘on employability with no relevance to any job I want to go into’, clearly
demonstrating that students develop at different speeds, and showing that not every
student will know what they want to do for a career during their Level 4 studies. One
student who provided more in-depth feedback highlighted the following aspects:

   Making History has allowed me to develop my research and analytical skills. It
   offers the opportunity to expand thinking, time management, presentation and
   leadership skills. Therefore no matter what the strengths of the individual, they are
   able to gain something from Making History as a result of its broad nature. This
   module has enabled me to progress from somebody who studies history to a
   historian and has given me a solid foundation for further study. Through this
   module, I have also been encouraged to consider possible career paths as I have
   been able to recognise where my strengths lie due to the range of tasks that were
   set, including group work and presentations. I believe that Making History 2 has
   been a personal venture whereby I have developed skills I perhaps lacked and built
   upon existing skills for example, personally, time management was an aspect I have
   been able to improve due to Making History 2.
   
   (2014 Student)

We also found that, given the wide range of students, abilities and aspirations among
those taking the module, some were more engaged than others with the ideas and
processes involved with employability. There was a general recognition that much of
what was delivered via lectures and the workshop would be useful to every student
when they were ready to begin to explore their plans beyond graduation.

**Evaluation and Transferability**

Overall, we believe this is an active and relevant approach to introducing students to
employability during their first year at University. By taking a skills based view of
employability, it is possible for the content delivered to be relevant to all students, not
just those most pro-active in developing an idea about future careers or already certain
of their future career. This allows students to find their own way into employability,
giving them a range of thought-provoking questions to consider, a range of resources to
utilise to their benefit, and an opportunity to experience reflective writing and the
approaches demonstrated in a supported environment. By exploring dream jobs and
passions, students are given the chance to explore and consider what they really want to
do in the future, and as such incorporating elements of commercial awareness are a
must. The embedded nature of employability with this approach allows students to see it
as part of their learning experience, rather than something bolted on in an ad-hoc
fashion and delivered by someone who is a relative stranger to them. We believe
employability is an important aspect of the student experience which can be quickly
overlooked by students when it is perceived by them as an added afterthought,
potentially packaged as a sales pitch for other university departments and provisions.
Therefore, by having an embedded employability element students see it as something
of value and relevant to their learning experience. Incorporating a reflective element to
the assessment around skills development also allows students to gain experience of writing in such a way for when they require it with job applications, CV writing or other assignments and can provide a base from which to build further employability aspects into the delivery of a course.

By exploring students' perceptions of both their own skills needs, and what they believe employers require, it is possible to use the information gathered with the delivery of the employability aspects of the module. Furthermore, it provides a fascinating insight into which areas students see as potentially the most important. The results gathered at the end of the module show that students see that they have developed over the course of their research projects, yet also understand the areas which they still need to develop.

The approach, taken as a whole or just one aspect of it, is easily transferred to other disciplines with little modification aside from subject specific references. Presenting students with a survey similar at the start of a module can provide a rich set of data from which to build some aspects of employability delivery and can quickly provide a sense of what the needs of a cohort of students is. Following the basic structure of the lectures, tailored to the idiosyncrasies of a different discipline or potential career path, an effective means of introducing students to employability can be developed. The generic nature of the workshop, as outlined above, also provides students in any subject a chance to consider the wider benefits and implications of their studies to their employability profile and what jobs they truly want to go into. Finally, we believe that any approach to introducing students to employability should be backed up with an opportunity for students to begin to reflect on their skills development, either in a formative or summative way. The framework for reflection developed here is an effective way of breaking down the issues students have with reflection and to develop a deeper understanding of their skills and the links to their future employability profile. By embedding such an approach, in contrast to a bolted-on afterthought, students see the process as part of their wider degree experience and consequently recognize the value of it.

References


QAA (2001), *The Historian’s Skills and Quality of Mind*, QAA Subject Benchmark Statement. Gloucester: QAA.