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1. Executive Summary

Introduction

1. Employability skills combine positive attitudes, the ability *to use numbers, language and IT effectively*, and skills in *self-management, thinking and problem solving, teamwork, and communications*, and in *understanding the needs of the employing business or organisation*. Employers prize these skills, often above more technical or directly job-related ones.

2. WESB's key concerns are that *educational institutions* – schools, colleges, and Universities – whilst all giving some attention to employability, do not give it the level or quality of attention which it needs; and consequently, many people seek to find work without a sound basis for sustainable employment.

Graduate employability

3. The huge expansion of Higher Education (HE) has lessened the elite status conferred by a degree. It is important for HE institutions to define more clearly what it is that being or recruiting a graduate means or should mean for *employers and in relation to the economy* – and to ensure that many more of their graduates back up that definition. In our view, a key element in 'graduateness' is a *clear minimum standard of employability*.

4. The development of employability skills by Universities cannot be a haphazard or optional part of University experience. It needs to be a natural part of every student's University experience.

5. At present in Wales, HEFCW (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales) has a range of funds which, from a variety of angles, support the development of employability skills by students. Each HE institution in Wales has a variety of initiatives and programmes which promote employability to its students. Our overall impression, however, is that this forms a patchwork of initiatives and approaches which is very uneven in its take-up and quality.

6. WESB poses an **Employer Challenge** to higher education institutions. **That challenge is to ask these institutions whether they have a long-term and coherent system in place which ensures that all their students have the basic employability skills which employers expect** and our recommendation is:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW require all Universities in Wales to take up and respond formally to our 'Employer Challenge'

7. WESB also has concerns in respect of the *employer contribution* to employability skills development in Universities. Firstly, we believe that many private sector employers wish to contribute to this process but are put off by lack of knowledge, complexity of funding, and of a single clear route for engaging with Universities.

We recommend:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW require all Universities in Wales to review their current mechanisms for engaging with employers, to eliminate identified inefficiencies in these, and to establish and market single, clear points of employer contact

8. Secondly, the Welsh Assembly Government is a major employer in its own right and indirectly funds much other employment. A further aspect of our ‘challenge’ is that the Welsh Assembly Government itself should thoroughly review what it currently contributes to graduate employability and identify what further systematic contribution it could make to support the expansion we advocate.

We recommend:

- at the Welsh Assembly Government, as employer and purchaser, review its current and potential contribution to the development of graduate employability and act in accordance with that review; with the target that graduate work experience placement numbers in the Welsh Assembly Government, its agencies, and its supply chain should increase substantially

9. WESB is also concerned that sandwich degrees and other flexible and part-time provision in Welsh Higher Education Institutions is in decline; and that partnership between Further Education (FE) and HE needs to be improved. Our overall point is that work based learning at higher levels makes a particular and strong contribution to graduate employability. It is a contribution which employers value highly and should be strengthened.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW identify the reasons for the decline in sandwich degree and other flexible and part-time Higher Education courses; and find and apply the means to substantially increase their numbers
- That the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW adopt a learning priority to better align FE and HE provision and, thereby, to strengthen high-level Work Based Learning

Schools and employability

10. We believe a range of measures are needed to dramatically improve the employability of young people leaving school or college at ages 16-18.

11. Firstly, we believe that there should be better strategic planning of 14-19 vocational options by schools and local learning partnerships. Vocational options and experiences must be authentic in the sense that they have a real potential to lead to rewarding careers; and young people need better guidance as to the vocational choices they make.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government require that Estyn inspections of vocational provision delivered as part of 14-19 Learning Pathways should closely monitor not only the quality of that provision per se, but its relevance to the local economy and to its students' aspirations

12. More structured engagement between schools and employers is needed to raise, very significantly, the coherence, status, and value of work experience and of other employer inputs to young people's learning.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government should:
- Develop a concerted national campaign to encourage employers to offer work experience to school pupils and to engage more widely with schools
- Require all secondary schools and colleges to publish an 'Employability Skills Plan' which sets out in detail their arrangements for building employability; these plans to be reviewed against a minimum acceptable standard
- Encourage schools to organise their calendars and timetables so that more work experience time is provided and that time is distributed across the school year

13. Beacons of excellence in developing the employability skills of young people, particularly those with disadvantaged backgrounds, need to be identified and promoted to all schools. Schools need to be inspired and to be able to inspire *all* their pupils that worthwhile careers are a realistic option.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government should undertake a review of innovative and ‘best practice’ examples of employability skills development (particularly for disadvantaged pupils) and explore ways of assisting schools to adopt this best practice

14. Certificated graduation which formally and ceremonially recognises a minimum set of properly accredited achievements, could become a powerful motivation for pupils and students in Wales’ schools and colleges, one which unites young people pursuing both ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ strands, and could become a guarantee of the minimum employability skills which employers would warmly welcome.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government should review the validity of graduation as a guarantee of minimum employability (including acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy) and, assuming a positive validation, take the necessary steps to introduce graduation at an agreed age as a universal goal of secondary education in Wales



2. Context

Introduction

15. WESB first annual report¹ identified shortfalls in employability skills as a key challenge facing learners, providers, and employers in the world of 21st century work. The report committed the Board, during 2009/10, to develop a better understanding of ‘what employability means to employers and how the education and employment system in Wales can respond’. A task and finish group, comprised of a sub-set of Board members and of co-opted expert advisers, was established to take this investigation forward.

16. A range of documentary intelligence on the issue was considered, a number of experts were invited to present to the group (including representations of GO Wales, the Higher Education Academy, HEFCW, and others) and members of the group consulted externally with a number of organisations and individuals on behalf of the group as a whole. Consultees included leading representatives in Wales of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Federation of Small Businesses, and the National Union of Students Wales. Two Universities in England (John Moores University in Liverpool and Birmingham City University) which were identified by the Higher Education Academy as being in a group of ‘leading edge’ institutions in respect of their approaches to developing graduate employability, were visited. Furthermore, the HEFCW Student Experience Teaching and Quality Committee ran a workshop session on Employability Skills, using WESB’s Employer Challenge as the catalyst for discussion.

17. The outcomes of this process are set out in this volume of our Second Annual Report. Our ambition is not to review the whole field of employability skills since a thorough review has recently been delivered at a UK-wide level². Rather, our intention is to emphasise some themes and to identify others which we believe are especially important to Wales at this time.

¹ *A Wales that Works*, Wales Employment and Skills Board, April 2009

² *The Employability Challenge: Full Report*, UK Commission for Employment and Skills, February 2009

WESB's focus on employability

18. We set out four initial points as an initial framework for our discussion of employability which follows. They do not need any great elaboration, and we believe they are broadly accepted by educators and trainers in Wales.

19. Firstly, a great deal of attention has been paid to defining employability skills. Reviewing the 'definitional' literature we reach the same conclusion as reached by UKCES, that no single list of skills or attributes can ever be wholly definitive – work situations and occupations are so various that what is essential or inessential in one situation or occupation is the reverse in others. We are content, therefore, to use UKCES's working definition which is that, for most purposes, employability depends on a base of personal characteristics and positive attitudes to employment which can be summed up as having a *positive approach*; then of having the ability *to use numbers, language and IT effectively* (that is, at the level needed to do a particular job); and, above these basic needs, then having appropriate skills in *self-management, thinking and problem solving, teamwork, and communications*, and in *understanding the needs of the employing business or organisation*. Whilst not in the exact words, this definition accords with definitions used by other organisations (such as the CBI and the Trades Union Congress) and many other authors and commentators.

20. As an adjunct to this point, we recognise that employability skills are fundamentally about being employed – both in the short term and across a whole working life – not about getting employed. Writing a good CV, having good interview skills, and looking the part at interview are important and may well be symptoms of having acquired fundamental employability skills. But the core function of developing employability skills is effectiveness in work, not just of making a good sales pitch to a prospective employer.

21. In a similar vein, we observe that activity to develop entrepreneurial attitudes and skills is sometimes bundled practically or conceptually with employability skills development. It is obvious that entrepreneurial skills may well contribute to the 'understanding the needs of the business' element contained in most definitions of employability skills. However, our view is that entrepreneurship development, laudable in itself, is distinctively aimed at growing the capacity of young people or adults to think about starting and to actually start and run businesses, not about the capacity of people to work effectively for someone else.

22. Our second point is that we recognise that the development of employability is a whole-life phenomenon. At a very young age, how an individual comes to view employment is conditioned by family, education and social background. The three or four year old child who sees his or her parents in stable, full-time employment will begin to observe and absorb some of the attributes contained within UKCES's 'self-management' functional skill – punctuality, time management, appropriate dress and behaviour – to a degree which is not

possible in families where employment is absent, infrequent or haphazard. At the other end of the scale, a finance director in his or her forties may still be acquiring the functional skills needed to move to an MD role, or a skilled engineering worker of the same age may need to develop IT skills to remain in the sector. Our view here is consistent with Welsh education and skills policy and with the positions of NIACE³ (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) and the Leitch review⁴ both of which also emphasise the need for skills development in an older and ageing workforce.

23. However, we further recognise that the years when young people are in full-time education are especially important ones – in developing effective numeracy, literacy, and IT skills as rapidly as possible, in developing appropriate personal skills and attitudes throughout the years of school, College and University, and in developing an ever-increasing appreciation of what working situations demand. What is not gained in these years when learning experiences are structured and intensive and when young people’s learning capacity is high, may be hard won subsequently. Particularly, for young people who fail to gain a good job at the end of their education and transfer into a world of unemployment or low quality employment, society’s subsequent ability to influence their employability will be low.

24. Thus, whilst later we will note individual and employer responsibilities in employability skills development, the key issue from our point of view is on what schools, Colleges, and Universities do and what government, in its broadest sense, does to influence that.

25. Within this view, of the importance of what happens to develop young people’s employability between, roughly, the ages of 5 and 21, we note, of course, that there is a very specific issue, that of the development of adequate – employable-level – literacy and numeracy skills by primary and secondary schools. Overall, the proportion of the Welsh adult population with entry-only level skills in literacy and numeracy is significantly higher than in England; and such low literacy and numeracy affects, respectively, around a quarter and a half of Welsh adults⁵. Although the proportion is falling, around 4 out of 10 school pupils in their GCSE year do not achieve the ‘Level 2 threshold’ of getting 5 or more good GCSEs including English or Welsh language and maths⁶. Many employers, including some major UK corporates⁷, continue to be frustrated by the difficulty of finding young recruits with the levels of literacy and numeracy they expect. Furthermore there is concern that even possession of GCSE in English and Mathematics does not guarantee the skills they need. Literacy and numeracy are also critical to effective participation in Higher Education which, hence, also has a

³ *Learning through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*, T. Schuller and D. Watson, NIACE, September 2009

⁴ *Leitch Review of Skills, Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills*, HM Treasury, 2006

⁵ *National Survey of Adult Basic Skills in Wales (2004)*; *Skills for Life Survey (2003)*

⁶ *First Release, Examination results in Wales, 2007/08*, Statistics for Wales

⁷ See for example, CBI UK Conference, 2009

substantial interest in their development (and frequently has concerns that literacy and numeracy skills on entry to University are too low).

26. The Webb Review⁸ explored this issue in depth and put forward the goal of ‘the virtual elimination of the Basic Skills gap’ over a ten year period. We are heartened that the ‘Skills that Work for Wales’ strategy accepted this goal amongst other ‘fundamental messages of the Review’.

27. A third point concerns graduate level employability skills. We assume that the old debate about the purpose of higher education – whether it is about training the mind through the medium of a subject of passionate interest to the student or whether it is about feeding the economy with the skills it needs – is largely redundant. Our starting point is that for all practical purposes, it is, or should be, about both. We recognise that some students (perhaps those who enter HE after a significant break from school or college, or those with more comfortable financial circumstances) take undergraduate courses out of sheer enthusiasm for the subject. For this minority, their learning is not connected to employment ambitions or prospects. Others may be so talented in their subject that they will find related employment whatever their level of personal or communication skills. However, we believe that for most students and for all institutions, the two ‘sides’ of the higher education process are complementary – with study of subject developing the critical faculties which employers value whilst more directly workplace-oriented elements in the curriculum develop other skills alongside which those faculties can be exercised⁹.

28. In support of this view, we believe that, with an increasing number of graduates, a currently weak economy, and with undergraduates obliged to self-fund a significant part of their higher education costs, students are becoming increasingly realistic about the need to have a broad portfolio of knowledge, skills, and experience in order to be competitive in the labour market and to get value-for-money from their undergraduate studies. We observe that all institutions – schools, FE Colleges and Universities – now place employability skills development somewhere in their offer to students. The real question is whether this offer is of sufficient quality.

29. Our fourth and final contextual point is that the detailed design of employability skills development programmes has to involve flexibility. There is a plethora of different ways in which employability skills can be developed (some of these, at undergraduate level, are exemplified in an *appendix* to this volume). We recognise that employability skills development includes:

- Some things which can be taught (such as advanced literacy and numeracy, how to write structured reports);

⁸ *Promise and Performance*, the Webb Review team, December 2007

⁹ See, for example, *New realities: the relationship between Higher Education and Employment*, L. Harvey, Tertiary Education and Management 6, 2000, for a discussion of employer perspectives on needs for generic and job-specific skill in graduate recruits

- Some things which can only be developed by experience in work situations (such as live project work), and
- Some things concerned with personal attitudes, social skills, and self-presentation (such as communication and giving presentations) which can be strengthened in both of these learning environments – and from general social interaction

30. Our key point is that developing better employability skills in Wales must follow not from adoption of a particular programme but from deeper cultural and structural change in the way that the curriculum is designed and the way that a school, college or university supports its pupils and students.

3. Graduate employability

The impact of wider access to HE

31. Our discussion of graduate employability starts from a simple observation regarding Higher Education: that the huge expansion in the number of young people has fundamentally changed the character of the undergraduate population – and the way in which employers view graduates. In moving from a position in which only 10 or 15 per cent of young people went to University to a position in which over 40 per cent do so, the distinctiveness of graduate status has clearly lessened. Hitherto, graduates were a clear elite, in academic terms and often social ones. The question of whether there were enough ‘graduate’ jobs for this elite group seldom arose. A question now arises for employers, to which we do not believe they get a clear answer: ‘what can we expect when we seek to recruit a graduate?’ And for would-be undergraduates and graduates themselves, the question is ‘what will or does graduate status convey to an employer?’ – alongside the even sharper question of ‘is it worth undertaking a degree?’ Of course, in the latter case, the answer has historically been that graduation carried a substantial lifetime earnings premium, but with ever more graduates, that premium will surely begin to decay.

32. Moreover, the hitherto significant premium in lifetime status and earnings for almost all graduates may now be much more unevenly spread across the graduate population. There is a lower stratum of students with only threshold entry profiles (in terms either or both of academic ability and motivation). They may lack the confidence to continue studying, especially when there appears to be no end-point advantage for their qualification. The consequence can be drop-out, and this is most pronounced for those universities and colleges which specialise in widening access. Withdrawal from some courses, based on wrong-choices and competing interests, can in a small number of cases be beneficial for some students. However, the vast majority of student withdrawals are likely to be destructive to the economy and damaging for individuals. It is our view that motivation and persistence with studies can be enhanced significantly through early and ongoing clarification of employability objectives.

Employability as a key outcome of participation in HE

33. Following from this analysis, we believe that it is now important to begin to define much more clearly what modern graduate status comprises and guarantees. A quality of 'graduateness' needs to be made explicit by Higher Education Institutions to students and would-be students and to the employers who represent Higher Education's principal markets.

34. In this sense, the development of graduate employability skills cannot be a somewhat haphazard or optional part of, or adjunct to, some courses or in some faculties. These skills must be developed systematically and comprehensively so that, when an employer seeks to recruit a graduate, he or she can have reasonable certainty that applicants will have a minimum standard across a repertoire of aptitudes, attitudes, and skills. We are not saying here that it is the duty of Universities to produce young people who are wholly work-ready at the end of their degree courses. Employers recognise that a degree of adaptation to the work environment is virtually always necessary, but graduates must have the skills in place to make that adaptation with reasonable speed. Employers seek 'fitness for progression to work' rather than the finished article. Employers have no objection to introducing young graduate recruits to their specific workplace procedures. They do object to having to develop skills and attitudes which they expect 11 years of compulsory education to have generated.

35. The key point is that we believe that development of graduate employability should be a natural part of every student's University experience and should ensure a minimum standard of employability skills for all graduates. This requires institutions to take a long-term perspective on their approach to employability skills. We believe, in line with our argument above, that the development of graduate employability needs to become a core function of Universities, as much a part of the corporate DNA as the development of excellence in subject knowledge. This raises a major challenge. Firstly, given the likelihood of reduced rather than increased resources for the public sector, HEFCW and HEIs have to reorganise their available funding so that funding is directed to priority areas. Secondly, they need good information on which to model future demand, identifying where demand for skills will grow and thus identifying those priority areas. And thirdly, they have to deliver employability alongside their refined or adjusted subject and course offer to students and employers.

Current practice in developing employability in HE

36. As our Appendix illustrates, there is widespread interest across all types of Higher Education Institutions. However, visits made to two Universities which are taking a lead on employability skills development (referenced earlier) provided a number of more detailed insights into the practicalities and concepts involved. These included, amongst others:

- An example of employability skills development as a compulsory and certificated module for every student.
- Employability skills developed throughout three year courses, not just towards the end of the course.
- Specialist and senior employability skills champions in every faculty operating with the confidence and backing of the University's senior management team.
- Programmes run with the underlying principle of 'future proofing' students – giving students the resilience and skills to adjust to future economic and career change.
- Development of extensive networks involving staff and external employers (SMEs as well as corporates) as the basis for student/employer linkages.
- Clear marketing, publicity and communications in order to declare employability objectives to internal and external stakeholders and customers.

37. However, the exact nature of the different institutions' development models (which were in some respects quite different) was not the central point for us. Rather, it was that both institutions had a clear vision, led by their senior managements and distributed throughout the institutions, of the importance of employability to the Universities' roles and remits. The key concepts are those of:

- *'Embeddedness'*: Within modules and programmes of study.
- *Universality*: All students received opportunities to improve their employability.
- *Organisation*: There were clear structures to deliver this universal participation

38. The employability approaches in these Universities have only been fully developed within the last two to three years. It is not yet clear what impact they have on long term employability (and recession, of course, makes measurement of this more difficult). However, both institutions note tentatively that two important measures – student satisfaction and 'drop-out' rates – have shown significant improvement in the period in which the new approaches have been in place.

39. So now we turn to the present position in Wales.

40. Firstly, we note that HEFCW has a range of funds which, from a variety of angles, seek to promote employability. They include:

- A credit-based teaching funding method
- Learning and Teaching Fund
- Third Mission Fund
- Postgraduate research funding
- GO Wales
- Reconfiguration and Collaboration Fund
- Strategic Development Fund
- Additional Support for Part-Time Students (Graham Funding)
- Economic Support Initiative

41. Graduate Opportunities Wales (GO Wales) is, perhaps, the most prominent initiative. Operating across all Welsh Universities, this publicly-funded project incorporates work experience, funding for training, and promotion of graduate jobs in Wales. Work experience opportunities are advertised, with applicants undergoing a formal recruitment process. Those who are successful receive a formal induction, with progress monitored and feedback received at the end.

42. Secondly, each HE institution in Wales has a variety of initiatives and programmes which recognise the importance of employability to its students. Just as one example, Cardiff University's Director of Careers and Employer Services has recently observed¹⁰ that 'Employability is such a powerful agenda that universities can't really hide from it.' Typical activities for universities include:

- Employer visits in order to run sessions on recruitment processes, communication skills, and the abilities that employers look for.
- Career management skills: a series of tailored workshops run by faculties or departments in conjunction with a central careers service including interview skills, CV writing, and work experiences.

43. However, our impression is of a patchwork of initiatives and approaches, some supported by national funding, others by the institutions themselves. This picture is reinforced by our consultations. The National Union of Students in Wales noted a frequent lack of communication (from Universities to students) as to the career paths which follow from traditional academic subjects. Furthermore, work experience opportunities were very uneven in their availability and quality. The CBI in Wales took the view that Universities should make clear declarations about employer engagement and training excellence. Funding models and the abundance of initiatives concerned with employer engagement confuse companies. There appears to be no consistency of approach by academic institutions to business (which, the CBI believes, is widely keen to help the graduate employability agenda). The Federation of Small Businesses also shared this perspective, noting that there were particular barriers between smaller companies and the HE sector, with HE tending to undervalue small businesses by frequently assuming that they had low skill levels. And on the other side of the fence, many SMEs lack the confidence or knowledge to approach the HE sector.

44. This impression is further reinforced by the recent review of Higher Education in Wales¹¹ which states:

'Economic success is enhanced by high skills, through programmes designed and delivered in collaboration with employers, and targeting areas of agreed strategic need'

¹⁰ CBI website, October 2009

¹¹ *Review of Higher Education in Wales*, M. Jones for the Welsh Assembly Government, 2009

45. But, whilst recognising this, the review is also obliged to make recommendations, implying current limitations, for improved approaches to the development of employability:

- Action to improve graduate employability, through stronger demonstration of essential generic skills.
- Encouraging universities to define graduate attributes in partnership with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS).
- Promoting work placements throughout undergraduate programmes more actively.
- Building on the success of GO Wales.

46. Whilst we fully endorse these recommendations, one of the main aims of this report is to go one step further.

47. Our summary view, reflecting the previous discussion, is that the scale of economic and social change and the dramatic change in the nature of University entrance in recent years, demands a ‘seismic’ shift in practice when it comes to developing employability within mainstream undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. There is an urgent need to go beyond short-term initiatives, academic debates about work-based learning, token employability modules, and the production of graduate attribute lists. The post-Leitch era, involving improved economic productivity through a dramatic expansion of level 4+ skills, creates huge ambition in Wales – for an entitlement to sustained employability experiences for all learners pursuing Higher Education qualifications.

WESB’s Employer Challenge

48. WESB therefore poses **an Employer Challenge to Higher Education Institutions. That challenge is to ask these institutions whether they have a long-term and coherent system in place which ensures that all their students have the basic employability skills which employers expect.** Some benchmark questions which begin the dialogue are:

- Does organisational management, at the highest level within the institution, support employability skills development?
- Are there embedded/effective means of developing these skills at the heart of the curriculum?
- Do courses – vocational and purely educational alike – genuinely deliver and measure the thinking and analytical skills that employers value and that are the core raison d’être of HE?
- Are employers supporting learning pathways wherever this is meaningful?
- Is mentoring and coaching available to all students and coherently organised?
- Are workplace projects extensive and accessible?

- Does part-time employment and volunteering make a coherent contribution to the development of graduate employability?

49. These questions have been honed through discussion of the Challenge with the HEFCW Student Experience Teaching and Quality committee. The discussion was both constructive and critical. We recognise institutions' concerns that excessive bureaucracy through imposing employability audits should not be generated and that employability development needs to prepare for the skills of the future not just those of the present.

50. Of course, in posing this challenge, our intent is not just that we, and Welsh society, should receive an answer of 'yes' or 'no'. It is that...

- If HE institutions in Wales are not meeting the challenge and/or do not believe it necessary or possible to meet it, they should explain why this is so.
- If HE institutions believe they already meet the challenge, their approach should be better promoted so that their student and employer markets are more content than at present that they have a coherent and overarching employability skills strategy and development process in place.
- Or, if HE institutions share our analysis and concerns, and believe that major change is necessary, they should rapidly begin to plan, in conjunction with the Welsh Government and HEFCW, how they can get from where they are to where they need to be.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW require all Universities in Wales to take up and respond formally to our 'Employer Challenge'.

Employability and vocational courses in HE

51. Whilst a major point of this report is to set the challenge we have just described, we have further concerns.

52. Firstly, we recognise that there is another type of employability skill which is developed in Higher Education – that is, the directly vocational content of academic study. This is often not considered in discussions of employability skills but, clearly, different courses (irrespective of whether graduates from them possess employability skills of the type so far discussed) have different degrees of direct relevance to specific occupations built into them. Humanities courses, for example, may be relevant to employment generally, more because they develop thinking skills than for their content, whilst graduates in technological subjects or medicine or accountancy bring a more obvious body of relevant knowledge to corresponding occupations¹².

¹² Op cit, L. Harvey, 2000

53. The issue is of the relevance of employability skills to this other vocational dimension of employability. A simple framework allows us to make a simple point:

	Low direct vocational content	High direct vocational content
Low employability skills	A	B
High employability skills	C	D

54. This point is, our desired outcome for Wales is that all graduates should be in groups C and D. However, we believe that if resource constraints demand an emphasis on where growth in employability skills is first focussed, students who might otherwise be in group A should be the priority – particularly if they are the ‘marginal’ students whom we discussed earlier. We believe that no student of moderate ability who has undertaken a course which has low currency value in the labour market should also be left without the fundamental graduate employability skills on which the career value of their University experience might substantially depend.

55. We are also concerned that some courses, which are marketed to students as ‘vocational’, may, in fact, have limited value to employers and to their students’ employment prospects. Some ‘vocational’ courses are not a very good fit with what employers actually need. They may simply be badly conceived, relating more to what the institution is able to teach than to what businesses need; or they may not keep up with industrial or commercial practice. An additional comment concerns the number of students emerging from some vocational courses. Although the courses are well-designed and relevant, there may simply be too many graduates for the economy to absorb. There are several implications – concerning, for example, how courses are marketed to students and the management of the relationship between HE provision and the structure of the economy. For our purposes, the point is that some, perhaps many, students who are ostensibly in group B above, are effectively in group A – a point which emphasises again the significance of the wider graduate employability skills we have described.

56. Secondly, on a quite specific point, we note that the number of *sandwich degree courses*, a type of course which has a high reputation for developing both vocational *and* employability skills to high levels and which is well-regarded by employers, has declined consistently in recent years (from over 5,000 student enrolments in 2003/04 to fewer than 3,000 student enrolments in 2007/08¹³). We understand that the causes of this *may* relate to shifts in the structure of the Welsh economy and latterly to the influence of student tuition fees. We believe, however, that the causes should be investigated and means should be found to reverse the recent trend.

¹³ HESA student record

57. Thirdly, there are a number of other routes into HE and variant modes of developing Level 4 skills which have, as with sandwich courses, a strong vocational element and, typically, include the ‘experiential’ element on which the development of employability skills depends. These include progression from Level 3 Apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees, HNC/HND, and Applied Diploma courses. Part-time degrees, which students often pursue whilst in employment, also bring together the desirable confluence of academic study and workplace experience. However, whilst the level of part-time degree study was no lower in 2007/08 than it was in 2003/04, it is not at the peaks reached in 2004/05 and 2005/06. We urge that all these arrangements should be the subject of stronger and strategic government support – with the establishment of clear progression routes, promotion in their market places (students, parents, and employers) and funding to enable more students to take these routes. A fundamental and urgent priority involves developing very close FE/HE partnerships through a coherent and supportive policy for Foundation Degree and work-based learning provision¹⁴.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW identify the reasons for the decline in sandwich degree and other flexible and part-time Higher Education courses; and find and apply the means to substantially increase their numbers
- That the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW adopt a learning priority to better align FE and HE provision and thereby to strengthen high-level worked-based learning

The student contribution to employability

58. Our discussion thus far has largely centred on universities and colleges as having a major responsibility for the development of graduate employability skills. But, of course, we recognise that development is, in fact, a tripartite matter also involving students and employers.

59. In respect of students, we concur with the view taken in Scotland¹⁵ by the Scottish Funding Council when they say ‘*underpinning all of the above (a range of other points concerning employability) is the principle that it is ultimately up to individuals to take responsibility for their own learning and career development. Others can only support that process*’. We are confident that students in Wales, encouraged by the fact that they now have to contribute financially to their courses and by ever-strengthening competition in the graduate labour market, are much readier to accept that responsibility. We suspect they will enthusiastically endorse

¹⁴ *For Our Future*, Welsh Assembly Government, November 2009

¹⁵ *Learning to Work Two Consultation: developing the Council's employability strategy*, Scottish Funding Council, May 2009

whatever steps our HE institutions take to improve graduate employability in Wales. The National Union of Students in Wales confirmed our view on this.

The employer contribution to employability

60. The question of employer engagement in activities which develop graduate employability is more complex. However, a number of points are relevant.

- We recognise from our consultations with the CBI and the FSB and from the many good practice case studies which are available via the Higher Education Academy, that many businesses have a significant and overt willingness and enthusiasm for engagement with the HE sector in order to assist graduate employability. There is a much larger population of businesses which would become involved if it were simpler for them to do so. Numerous complexities exist. In some cases, it appears that the knowledge transfer or business support offer of institutions to businesses is sometimes entangled with the contribution which businesses make to institutions' graduate employability programmes. Different institutions offering differing programmes may fish in the same employer pool. Different tutors within the same institution rather than a single point of contact may seek to engage with a single employer.
- There is a substantial number of funding streams which support the relationship of the HE sector with Wales' employer base; and within the 'headline' funds there is a much larger array of local or specialist funds, each with their own title or acronym. We were assured by HEFCW that, for the employer, this 'wiring' is 'hidden'. However, our consultees from the business sector did not confirm this. Rather, they saw complex funding as one element in a wider picture of off-putting complexity.

61. Broadly, our view is that, not only do we believe that graduate employability needs to be undertaken much more systematically and coherently within institutions but that there needs to be a parallel drive to generate greater coherence and simplicity in the relationship between institutions' graduate employability activities and business, and greater co-ordination between institutions to avoid competitive and confusing overlaps.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW require all Universities in Wales to review their current mechanisms for engaging with employers, to eliminate identified inefficiencies in these, and to establish and market single, clear points of employer contact

62. A final point on employer engagement with HE (for employability skills development purposes) is that a large proportion of employment in Wales

is within the public sector¹⁶ and is directly supplied or funded by the Welsh Assembly Government. A further substantial part is supplied by businesses contracted by the Welsh Assembly Government or its outposts. We recognise that these segments of the economy already support graduate employability skills development in numerous ways. However, if HE institutions are challenged to raise their game very substantially in respect of employability skills, it is legitimate for them to demand that others, including the Welsh Assembly Government, and the part of the economy which the Welsh Assembly Government drives, should also make a full contribution. A further aspect of our 'challenge' is that the Welsh Assembly Government itself should thoroughly review what it currently contributes to graduate employability (through, for example, work experience opportunities in its departments, agencies and contractors) and identify what further systematic contribution it could make to support the expansion we advocate.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government, as employer and purchaser, review its current and potential contribution to the development of graduate employability and act in accordance with that review; with the target that graduate work experience placement numbers in the Welsh Assembly Government, its agencies, and its supply chain should increase substantially

Employability and labour market information

63. Finally, on the theme of graduate employability, we observe that labour market information that is Wales-specific and which would assist the government and HE institutions to plan and monitor employability, is either out of date or absent. For example, there is little recent data on where graduates are employed in the economy and on what roles they are performing. There are no data which track graduates beyond their first post-University employment destinations and allow us to see what possession of degrees of various types and from different institutions delivers for students in terms of employment and earnings. Without this type of information, it is difficult to contemplate shaping provision in relation to employer demand or to monitor the contribution which graduation subsequently makes to graduates' careers

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government require HEFCW to urgently develop mechanisms to generate much better information flows on the operations of the graduate labour market in Wales

¹⁶ *The Welsh Economy: the state of the nation*, J. Bryan and N. Roche, Contemporary Wales 21, 218-248, 2007

4. Schools and employability

Introduction: the importance of employability development in schools

- 64.** When we turn to consider the relationship between education in schools in Wales and the employability of young people, the basic theme of our previous discussion of higher education and employability is, again, central to our analysis. Thus, our concern is that the balance between the academic and the personal development and ‘employability’ components of school education has been wrong.
- 65.** In this respect, we do not want to take the ‘parity of esteem’ route and enter a debate on how vocational subjects, and, implicitly, the careers which result from pursuit of those subjects, can achieve equal status with academic options which lead onwards to University and, in many cases, to higher level jobs.
- 66.** What we do argue is that the school system as a whole has not taken sufficient account of the needs of the economy and of employers for ‘rounded’ young people with a range of basic attributes and skills in place – essentially those skills which we itemised in paragraph 19 earlier (albeit that, for school leavers, we would expect these to be less developed than for graduates).
- 67.** For young people who do take the academic route and proceed to University, the issue is less immediately acute. These people are likely to have a good level of motivation and though, as we have argued strongly above, deficiencies in employability skills are a matter of great concern, those deficiencies are in relation to the demands of higher level jobs, not absolute deficiencies in themselves. And, particularly if our recommendations are followed, there is this second opportunity (in Higher Education) for remedy.
- 68.** Our concern regarding the young people who do *not* go into Higher Education and who leave school or college mainly between the ages of 16 and 18 is different. It is that, for too many, the experience is one of perceived failure rather than one of pride and achievement. In not getting to the standard of five ‘good’ GCSEs, in some cases falling far short, we believe that too many young people believe, even at that young age, that they are in an inferior class, not just academically but socially – a belief which leads to resentful or indifferent attitudes to employment and, in some cases, to ‘NEET’ (those young people not engaged in employment, education or training) status.
- 69.** Our further belief is that this occurs for more young people than it should for three reasons. Firstly, because, as noted earlier, their levels of literacy and numeracy, the basic building blocks of progression and employability, are too low. Secondly, because other employability skills based in personal

presentation and development, oral communications, working with others, and, generally, understanding and responding to the needs of the workplace, are underdeveloped. Thirdly, because what is or can be achieved by this group of young people is not sufficiently recognised, celebrated, and signalled to employers.

70. We do not want to over-state the argument.

71. We recognise that schools are seeking to compensate in many cases for poor or disruptive family situations, to combat negative peer pressures, and to build on low innate ability.

72. We also recognise that most schools are doing a good job and some are doing an excellent one. We are not suggesting that schools or colleges are ignorant of the challenges they quite clearly face on a daily basis or that they are not responding to them with a range of impressive programmes to instil self-discipline, to build confidence, to allow pupils to gain work experience, and so on. All schools are very aware that personal and social development is as basic a function of education as the transmission of knowledge.

73. We also strongly support both the widening of pupils' ranges of options to include vocational choices which is the main thrust of the 14-19 Learning Pathways programme and the further spread of the Welsh Baccalaureate as a further route to a more broadly based curriculum and, perhaps, to a fundamentally broader educational experience as a whole.

74. However, we do wish to put forward a range of points and proposals which we believe would accelerate this direction of travel. Without this acceleration, we believe that schools will continue to add to the stock of poorly educated and poorly motivated adults who generate considerable long-term costs for society and the economy.

Positive experiences in vocational learning

75. Firstly, we believe that the expansion of vocational options for 14 to 19 year old students needs to be the subject of stronger strategic planning by schools and local learning partnerships. Whilst any vocational experience is likely to add to young people's employability skills to some degree, we believe that this effect is most likely when the vocational experience is authentic in the sense that it has the potential to lead to a rewarding career for the student in relevant occupations and sectors. We are concerned that vocational courses taken by students who are not positively motivated towards them, which result in a low-level qualification, or which have little relationship to job opportunities in the local area, are 'pseudo-vocational' and, as such, unlikely to add greatly to resolving the issues we raised above. We wish to see more careful planning of vocational opportunities and better guidance in fitting young people into them.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government require that Estyn inspections of vocational provision delivered as part of 14-19 Learning Pathways should closely monitor not only the quality of that provision per se, but its relevance to the local economy and to its students' aspirations

Strengthening work experience

76. Secondly, in support of this, and for the more general development of employability, we wish to see wider and more structured engagement between schools and employers. We believe this would occur if: (1) there was a concerted national campaign to encourage employers, especially smaller ones, to offer their advice and to supply work experience to schools and students; (2) schools put more emphasis on generating, managing, and designing quality work experience opportunities and wider employer engagement so that (as in the undergraduate case) work experience and other beneficial contacts with employers are a strategic and central part of the learning experience for all pupils; and (3) in support of this, the school calendar is organised so that work experience does not all occur at the more or less the same point for all pupils (a circumstance which currently places high demands on the local employer base for sufficient placements which are both of high quality and are matched to pupils' interests and subject choices). We believe that there is a positive, if sometimes latent, level of support for such further development from all parties concerned – employers, schools, and pupils – which provides a sound basis for progress.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government should:
- Develop a concerted national campaign to encourage employers to offer work experience to school pupils and to engage more widely with schools
- Require all secondary schools and colleges to publish an 'Employability Skills Plan' which sets out in detail their arrangements of building employability; these plans to be reviewed against a minimum acceptable standard
- Encourage schools to organise their calendars and timetables so that more work experience time is provided and that time is distributed across the school year

Inspiring young people to achieve

77. Thirdly, we are concerned that, whilst all schools work doggedly in pursuit, on a day-to-day basis, of whatever degree of excellence they can achieve in terms of academic results and of pupils' personal development, they too infrequently have the time or energy or resources to adopt innovative forms of delivery or to generate that elusive quality of inspiration – the ability to inspire all or most young people with a desire for achievement and the sense that they can achieve.

78. In this respect, we are impressed by the educational philosophies which led to the development of the Children's University and which underpin the approaches of such educational foundations as the United World Colleges.

79. In the first case, the *Children's University* (CU) is a growing movement currently with 50 active centres in England and further 25 in development. Wales has 20 CU delivery points which, in 2007/08, provided 17,000 children aged 7-14 with 230,000 hours of learning activities aimed at bridging the gap between the highest and lowest achieving schools and pupils by giving the latter creative and mind-stretching educational experiences. Funded by government, the Sutton Trust and other partners, the CU seeks to raise the aspirations and boost the achievement of children who would otherwise be unlikely to envisage education as a major creative force in their lives and careers. It is intentionally something other than school – with a different feel, different activities, and often a different location, staff, and peer group.

80. An evaluation of the Children's University¹⁷ reports that its achievements can be summarised as:

- The ability to engage and sustain young people's interest in voluntary learning activities out of school hours.
- The breadth of learning encompassed, complementing and enhancing the mainstream curricular provision.
- The responsiveness of centre managers and tutors to children and young people's needs and their creativity in devising imaginative ways of meeting those needs.
- The imagination and industry in exploiting potential sites for learning in the local community, nationally and even internationally.
- The collaboration with partners in the community, with statutory agencies, with business partners and with higher education.
- The value of the university partnership in celebrating achievement and raising aspirations of children for whom 'university' was never within their conceptual compass.
- The enthusiasm reported by children for activities which led to new interests and new friends.

¹⁷ *Evaluation of the Children's University, First Report*, University of Cambridge, 2008

81. The *United World Colleges* comprise a network of schools across the world (including UWC Atlantic in South Wales). They are residential and have a broad curriculum which combines a rigorous academic programme (mainly to the International Baccalaureate), a locally-based social responsibility programme (for example, operating lifeboat and cliff rescue services in the UWC Atlantic case) and are multi-cultural (typically with around 70 different nationalities in each academic year).

82. Essentially, both these organisations are concerned with the breadth of educational experience offered to young people and with the opening of young minds to new possibilities. As above, we believe the Welsh Baccalaureate has these qualities and we warmly welcome plans to promote its wider use across Wales. What we add, however, is that we believe that there are other innovative ways of generating breadth outside of qualification frameworks, illustrated by the examples we present here, and that the Welsh Assembly Government should formally investigate these with a view to their wider adoption in Wales.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government should undertake a review of innovative and ‘best practice’ examples of employability skills development (particularly for disadvantaged pupils) and explore ways of assisting schools to adopt this best practice

Graduation as a motivator of employability

83. Finally, we believe that there is another tool which can and should be deployed to set a target for all young people in Wales and to deliver a sense of achievement to many more of them. That is, that we believe that the concept of *graduation* should be extended down the age range of students into schools and colleges.

84. In the United States and Canada, for example, a high school diploma is awarded for the completion of high school, usually at age 17 or **18**. The diploma is considered the minimum qualification for government jobs and higher education. General education students who pass the 12th grade by obtaining enough credits or by completing all core courses but do not meet the standard requirements of the high school diploma instead receive a certificate of attendance.

85. In most cases, high schools offer more advanced diplomas for academically gifted students. In some instances where a school also has a vocational education branch, the high school diploma and certificate of completion (Voc-Tech program) are presented together.

86. The high school diploma is the symbol of having successfully completed the basic education required by law for young people. Because of this, the presentation of the high-school diploma has become an important ‘adulthood’ rite with diplomas given to students at a locally high-profile and formal graduation ceremony.

87. We are not advocating that Wales should follow the US or any other particular model. We do believe, however, that certificated graduation which formally and ceremonially recognises a minimum set of properly accredited achievements, could become a powerful motivation for pupils and students in Wales’ schools and colleges, one which unites young people pursuing both ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ strands, and could become a guarantee of the minimum employability skills which employers want.

WESB recommends:

- That the Welsh Assembly Government should review the validity of graduation as a guarantee of minimum employability (including acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy) and, assuming a positive validation, take the necessary steps to introduce graduation at an agreed age as a universal goal of secondary education in Wales

Appendix: Mechanisms for the development of graduate employability

Employer support to learning pathways

(Pioneered by, for example, professional associations, armed services, Scottish Programme for Entrepreneurship)

1. Links with widening access initiatives in order to increase participation by under-represented groups (eg Communities First residents, BME, disabled, Welsh as first language) with specific employment sectors
2. Employer compacts where graduation leads to guaranteed employment
3. Golden hellos advertising the possibility of student loans being paid off through later salary schemes
4. Employer assistance with market research when new programmes are being planned and established programmes require overhaul
5. Vacation and/or part-time employment which complements programmes of study
6. Student participation or observation within in-house company training schemes
7. Employer advisers for specific degree and diploma programmes
8. On-going employer support for students who enter higher education through apprenticeship schemes within further education
9. Course prizes and awards
10. Employer-led lectures and seminars as a formally defined part of the teaching schedule
11. Sponsored chairs and fellowships for employers, and/or academics visiting workplaces
12. Sponsored buildings, lecture theatres, laboratories
13. Employer contributions to 'Dragons Den' sessions
14. Sponsoring of field visits and trips

Availability of mentoring and coaching

(Pioneered, for example, by Monmouth, Miami and Harrisburg Universities in the USA; and by MMU, UCLAN and Oxford Brookes Universities in the UK. Note also business mentoring in non-HE sectors for example by Business in the Community, Careers Wales, EBPs, and Big Brothers Big Sisters (USA)).

1. Designated leaders and resources for organising mentoring and coaching support
2. Sustained mentoring and coaching schemes involving employers from priority sectors working with students
3. Designated mentoring and coaching campus spaces for meetings and workshops
4. Entitlement to support from employers
5. Timetabled sessions
6. Accredited outcomes
7. Work shadowing schemes
8. Sustained relationships with employers throughout the programme of study
9. Mentor and Coach training programmes
10. Employer support for CV writing and mock interviews
11. Use of alumni as mentors or coaches

Supportiveness of HE institutional management

(Pioneered, for example, by Surrey, Manchester, Middlesex, Kings College London, and Liverpool John Moores Universities)

1. Clearly defined employability and work-related learning strategy at individual course, faculty and institutional levels
2. Employability skills curriculum profiles for all schemes and awards at all levels, including where appropriate skills modules.
3. Articulated hub-and-spokes model so that central experts (eg careers services) work effectively and continuously with faculties and course teams
4. Accountable employability drivers for every programme
5. Governance profile for employers from priority sectors
6. SSC and sector fora engagement framework
7. Employability targets linked to appraisal of staff
8. HEFCW funding models promoting work related learning
9. Declared policies and systems which promote flexibility in study – eg switching from full – to part-time study mid-session
10. Employer involvement in course validation panels and scheme boards

11. Dedicated campus space for visiting employers
12. Prominent marketing and publicity operations advertising employer engagement
13. Prominent knowledge transfer mission and strategy linked to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes
14. Key skills strategy extending from level 4 – 7 for all subjects
15. Widespread use of “sandwich” degree schemes including a qualification for the year out
16. Short-term work experience schemes
17. Detailed staff development programme for the promotion of work related learning
18. Appointment of employability champions within faculties
19. Systems that promote fast and responsive validation of work-based learning courses in accordance with employer needs (Middlesex University model)
20. Tracking graduates through to second and third destination employment
21. Substantial Alumni operation

Scale and accessibility of workplace projects

(Pioneered, for example, by Waterloo University in Ontario, and Limerick, Nottingham Trent, Edinburgh, and Leeds Universities)

1. Work Related Project and Independent Study modules in all years of schemes
2. Projects scattered throughout the programme of study (not just the final year)
3. Opportunities for engagement with large companies and businesses
4. Opportunities for engagement with public sector organisations
5. Opportunities for engagement with SMEs
6. Opportunities for engagement with voluntary organisations
7. Live Project databases and advisers
8. Community enterprise database and advisers
9. Project prize schemes
10. Action – and problem-based learning curriculum areas within schemes
11. Use of accredited learning contracts
12. Conventions, exhibitions and conferences which disseminate project outcomes and future project opportunities
13. Teaching companies schemes
14. 4 and 5 year part-time programmes linked to SMEs (HoneyBees/Network 75 in Engineering in Wales)

Cohesion and integration of part-time employment and volunteering

(Pioneered, for example, by GO Wales, NUS, Anglia Ruskin, Bangor, Glamorgan, and Birkbeck Universities)

1. Accredited work experience modules for paid part-time employment and volunteering
2. Employment opportunities database
3. Employment bureau on campus
4. Involvement of Alumni for creation of part-time employment opportunities
5. University-based employment schemes
6. Employment rescue schemes for students in debt
7. Linking student employment opportunities with University supply chains through procurement policies and systems
8. Third mission engagement strategy which recognises the voluntary sector as an important workplace