



Expert guide: Embedding and sustaining employABILITY through whole-of-program change

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Much of the activity within a university is concerned with cyclic course (unit) design and curriculum review. New and revised courses and whole-of-program changes are launched with fanfare. There is typically a shared optimism that the proposed changes will benefit everyone but, also typically, fingers are crossed that fidelity with the intentions of the new curriculum will be maintained.

Before too long it is time to return to the design and review process, and heads are shaken as to why the previous optimism has dissipated or plans have not been realised. Perhaps through active resistance, passive unawareness or silence, what tends to be lost is course cohesion — an elusive element that rests between precise and locked prescription and idiosyncrasy and *laissez-faire* in how we direct the teaching of our disciplines.

Where we began is rarely where we end. There is a wearying sense of *dejà vu* as teams are (re)formed and the process starts again.

How does this relate to employability?

Investigations into course cohesion have been concerned with identifying possible internal levers such as time, procedure, communication and sequence. It is now time to look for an external lever: a rallying cry about which all else is directed.

The employABILITY Initiative describes employability as employability thinking: “students’ cognitive and social development as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens” (Bennett, 2017).

Thus defined, employability might, as either context or mechanism rather than simply an outcome, become the commonly agreed lever that halts the rollercoaster ride of institutional design and review. Context (the what) and Mechanism (the how) are the integral components in realist evaluation represented as Context (C) + Mechanism (M) = Outcome (O). This can be seen in an evaluation of how Engineers without Borders programs have been adopted as a cohesive device within the engineering curriculum in 13 Australian and New Zealand universities (Jolly & Jolly, 2014).

If employability were to be adopted as a key institutional strategy extending into curriculum design and review, it would form a natural link to cohere the components of a course. This being the case, it is likely to be accepted as such by academics and students alike. Three reasons follow:

1. To leverage employability as the lever for creating course cohesion reduces the intransigent, discipline-based defences of what Dawn Bennett notes as “the pursuit of truth and beauty” into a common space;
2. Employability provides a lens through which to examine the structures and intersections of theory and practice; and
3. Students emerging from a course perceived as cohesive might bring added confidence to their sense of employability.

Top tips

To position employability as a lever for course cohesion, it is first necessary to cast it as either Context or Mechanism. The ensuing questions, in the context of your programs and institution, are:

1. Is developing employability a context and/or a mechanism? Is it a relatively abstract goal/construct or a formal and labelled standalone suite of activities?
2. Is Employability a mechanism to assist in course cohesion, or is cohesion an outcome of the mechanism of employability?
3. Is WiL (Work Integrated Learning) a mechanism within the context of Employability?

While employable graduates and cohesive courses are desirable, there is little consensus as to where they fit and how they might be achieved, sustained and sensibly measured. The critical turning point in our thinking about employability and course cohesion is to establish the context or mechanism that comes from a realist evaluation. No one argues about the outcome.

Things to avoid

- Do not regard employability as a consequence (or happenstance) outside of the institution or as the sole responsibility of the student.
- Do not position employability outside the interest of course (program) designers and reviewers.
- Do not limit curricular thinking and design to the present, particularly in regard to students’ future careers

Further reading and resources

- Bahr, N., & Lloyd, M. (2011). Course cohesion: An elusive goal for tertiary education. *Journal of Learning Design*, 4(4), 21-30. doi: 10.5204/jld.v4i4.86.
- Bennett, D. (2017). What is employABILITY thinking? <https://developingemployability.edu.au/about/>
- Jolly, H., & Jolly, L. (2014). Telling context from mechanism in realist evaluation: The role for theory. *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, 14, 28-45. doi: 10.18793/LCJ2014.14.03.
- Sharp, S., O'Rourke, J., Lane, J., & Hays, A-M. (2014). *Cohesion, coherence and connectedness: A 3c model for enabling-course design to support student transition to university*. Paper presented at the 2014 AARE Conference. Retrieved from https://www.aare.edu.au/data/2014_Conference/Full_papers/



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