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# **ENHANCING STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY: Higher Education and Workforce Development**

Ninth Quality in Higher Education International Seminar in collaboration with ESECT and *The Independent*. Birmingham 27th-28th January 2005

## **Enhancing Graduate Employability in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism**

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This paper is work-in-progress. The purpose of the paper is to describe the aims, context and methodology of a recently approved Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) Phase 5 project. The aim of the project is to develop, implement and evaluate a range of curriculum interventions to enhance the employability of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (HLST) students. In delivering this aim, the project's objectives are to:

1. Identify and evaluate the skills and attributes required for successful graduate employment in HLST.
2. Audit curricula in 10 partner HLST departments and develop clear strategies for embedding employability into their courses.
3. Develop and implement a range of innovative learning and teaching interventions that deliver the strategies to enhance students' employability.
4. Deliver excellent value for money by encouraging take-up of project outcomes across the HLST subject communities and beyond.

The project is essentially an investigation of how the employability skills<sup>1</sup> of hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism (HLST) students can be enhanced via curriculum interventions.

### **Context/Rationale**

This project is particularly timely as in an increasingly competitive and volatile graduate employment market it is vital that students are equipped with skills that enable them to maximise their potential for a successful career. The Government's aim to increase HE participation amongst 18-30 year olds to 50% by 2010 and changes in the industrial structure of the country will have profound effects on the type of work graduates will engage in. As the number of graduates entering the workforce increases, so competition for jobs intensifies. Further, the decline in the proportion of graduates following traditional career paths in large national/global organisations and the emerging trends of service sector employment, in small/medium sized firms (or self-employment) has implications for the types of skills needed by graduates. The speed of industrial change and fluctuations in the economic cycle mean that graduates are likely to move jobs more often and will seek work in different industrial sectors. According to McNair (2003), successful graduates will need to have greater ownership of their

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'employability skills' is used here to refer to 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the community and the economy' (Knight and Yorke, 2003:7).

employability skills and the confidence to cope with economic upheavals in order to identify and capitalise on career opportunities over a lifetime.

The project is also consistent with government policy that insists that Higher Education (HE) should enhance student employability, thereby increasing the value of graduates' contribution to national economic growth.

In addition to the national priorities regarding employability, the project fits closely to subject-based priorities. This project has particular relevance for HLST because the diversity of industries and the volatility of employment within the sector mean that students face particular challenges in gaining graduate jobs. The vast majority of HLST businesses are small and, whilst this may offer opportunities to gain early responsibility in a less structured and hierarchical work environment, graduates need to have ownership of employability skills that enable them to create a rewarding graduate role in what Purcell and Elias refer to as 'niche graduate occupations'. Niche graduate occupations are those 'where the majority of incumbents are not graduates, but within which there are stable or growing specialist niches that require higher education skills and knowledge' (2003:p5). Occupations such as entertainment/sports managers and hotel/accommodation managers are included within this category. Recent re-assessment of HESA First Destination Statistics on 'graduate' employment suggests that fewer HLST students than previously thought (64.7% as opposed to 94.2%) are entering graduate-level employment (Kingston, 2003). Graduates need to maximise their opportunities for graduate-level employment in jobs that utilise their skills. Also, employment within HLST is particularly sensitive to fluctuations in the economic cycle and students need to see the value of their abilities beyond narrow vocational boundaries. A recent HEFCE research report (01/30) provides clear evidence that demand for graduates from hospitality and related courses is very strong, and recommends '*that students are encouraged to develop realistic expectations of and recognise the opportunities for employment in the industry.*' (p7). This project will enable students to do this more effectively.

HLST received considerable praise in QAA reports in a number of areas associated with student employment. For example, strengths in provision included; work placement opportunities, careers support and guidance, close involvement of industry in curriculum development, delivery and assessment, and the availability of accredited short courses (Subject Overview Report, 2001). Oxford Brookes and Sheffield Hallam courses were particularly praised by the QAA (2001) for the management of supervised work experience, close industry contacts and the organisation of careers events. However, a national student satisfaction survey carried out annually by the Higher Education Academy Network for HLST indicates that graduating students are sometimes dissatisfied with the careers advice they are given. The project partners feel there is a need to take a more holistic view of employability and to adopt a coherent approach to developing curricula that ensure students maximise their capabilities for employment and life-long learning.

### **Meeting the needs of students and employers**

A key feature of this project is that it is aimed at meeting the needs of both students and the employers. It is envisaged that both parties have an important part to play in the research and its outcomes.

Employers have sometimes been critical about graduates and their preparedness for work. A recent study carried out by the Chartered Management Institute discovered that 49% of HR managers surveyed believed graduates are

increasingly less well prepared for the workplace and 33% of managers reported that graduates lacked interpersonal skills (diplomacy 64% and team-working 39% were key areas of concern). Less well researched, but also important is the extent to which graduates themselves feel prepared for work. Leon (2002), surveying new graduates, found they reported difficulty with verbal communication, time management and 'task juggling'. Although 'transferable' and 'critical reasoning' skills are often taught, practised and assessed in HE, students seem to be unable to transfer these skills from one context (HE) to another (employment). From this a clear need is identified. This need requires the development of curriculum interventions that enable students to make clear connections between their education and work, and help them recognise the relevance/value of their studies in enhancing their employability. Students must also learn how to present their achievements and skills to employers. Personal and Professional Development (PDP) will play a central role in facilitating this.

### **Addressing employability in the HE curriculum**

Despite clear consensus in government and HE about the importance of graduate employability, there remain considerable differences in both opinion and approach to developing students' skills. Most HE institutions provide careers services to support graduates in gaining employment, but such services in isolation may not address the more complex issue of enhancing employability (Harris, 2001). Employability is about much more than the acquisition of a first job and relates to a broader set of achievements that enhance students' capability to operate self sufficiently within the labour market (Hillage and Pollard, 1998:2). Harvey, Locke and Morey (2002) propose a broad 'attribute development' approach to employability on the basis of evidence for an embedded approach that brings academics and central services together. Yorke and Knight (2003:7) define employability as 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the community and the economy'. There are clear connections here to lifelong learning. As a result of this project students will be able to; capitalise on learning opportunities during their studies, engage with effective methods of recording and articulating their skills and achievements to employers, and demonstrate these skills at work. The USEM 'employability model' developed by Yorke and Knight (2002) underpins this proposal and will be central in the evaluation of graduate skills, curriculum audit and implementation of curriculum interventions.

The project will build on, and add to, the work undertaken under the broad remit of 'employability' (much of which has been brought together by the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team - ESECT). ESECT works closely with the Higher Education Academy to collate/disseminate information about how employability can be enhanced via the curriculum. Employability is strongly aligned with 'good learning', and commitment to enhancing student employability rests upon the embedding of effective teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) methods in the curriculum. This project aims to ensure constructive alignment of TLA for enhancing employability related to students' particular course of study and the institutional context in which the changes are being implemented. ESECT and the HE Academy and its subject network will provide key dissemination channels for the project.

### **Project Deliverables**

The Project Deliverables will include:

1. Graduate Employability Inventory (GEI) - a listing of the skills and attributes required for successful employment in HLST. Derived from review and evaluation of current literature on graduate attributes and direct input from key HLST stakeholders (i.e. academics, employers, graduates and students). The GEI will be used to construct the Curriculum Audit Instrument and will inform the development of TLA interventions and evaluation tools (e.g. student/staff feedback methods).
2. Curriculum Audit Instrument (CAI) - the CAI will be used to audit the curricula of the 10 partner institutions and will underpin the development of their strategies/action plans for embedding employability into the curriculum. Feedback from partners and other HLST providers will ensure the CAI is relevant and usable beyond the project partner network.
3. Employability Case Studies - it is envisaged that each partner institution will provide at least one case study. This will result in a minimum of 10 case studies offering a rich source of practical advice on embedding employability into curricula. Based on actual experiences of partner institutions these will reflect on the use of specific TLA interventions across a broad spectrum of HLST courses within different institutions. TLA resources will be available online for use/adaptation by others within and outside of the subject community and will build on innovations such as curriculum audit, employability card sorts, work-based learning portfolios, workplace mentoring, recording achievement through Personal Development Planning (PDP), and career management skills modules.
4. A Good Practice Guide - will offer guidance on generic aspects of curriculum audit, employability strategy development, and different TLA techniques for embedding employability into the curriculum. It will include examples of good practice from the partner institutions, and directories of specialist contacts on employability and useful resources for curriculum development. An evaluation of overcoming the challenges of embedding employability into the curriculum will form a core aspect of the Guide.

All of above will be available on the project website. Involving 10 partner institutions will ensure that project outputs are relevant, workable and effective for the diverse range of courses covered within HLST. This, in turn, should ensure maximum impact and continuation beyond the three years of project funding.

## **Methodology**

The project will be completed in four key phases.

Phase 1 (Nov 2004 – Aug 2005) is primarily concerned with producing the Graduate employability inventory (GEI) and the Curriculum Audit Instrument (CAI); conducting the curriculum audit within the partner institutions and developing strategies and action plans for TLA interventions for each partner.

Phase 2 (Sept 2005-Aug 2006) is concerned with implementing and evaluating first-stage TLA interventions in the 10 partner institutions and formalising the dissemination plans.

Phase 3 (Sept 2006-Aug 2007) is key to dissemination it will include 10 regional workshops, staff development workshops and conference presentations. It will also include finalising the production of the case studies and the good practice guide.

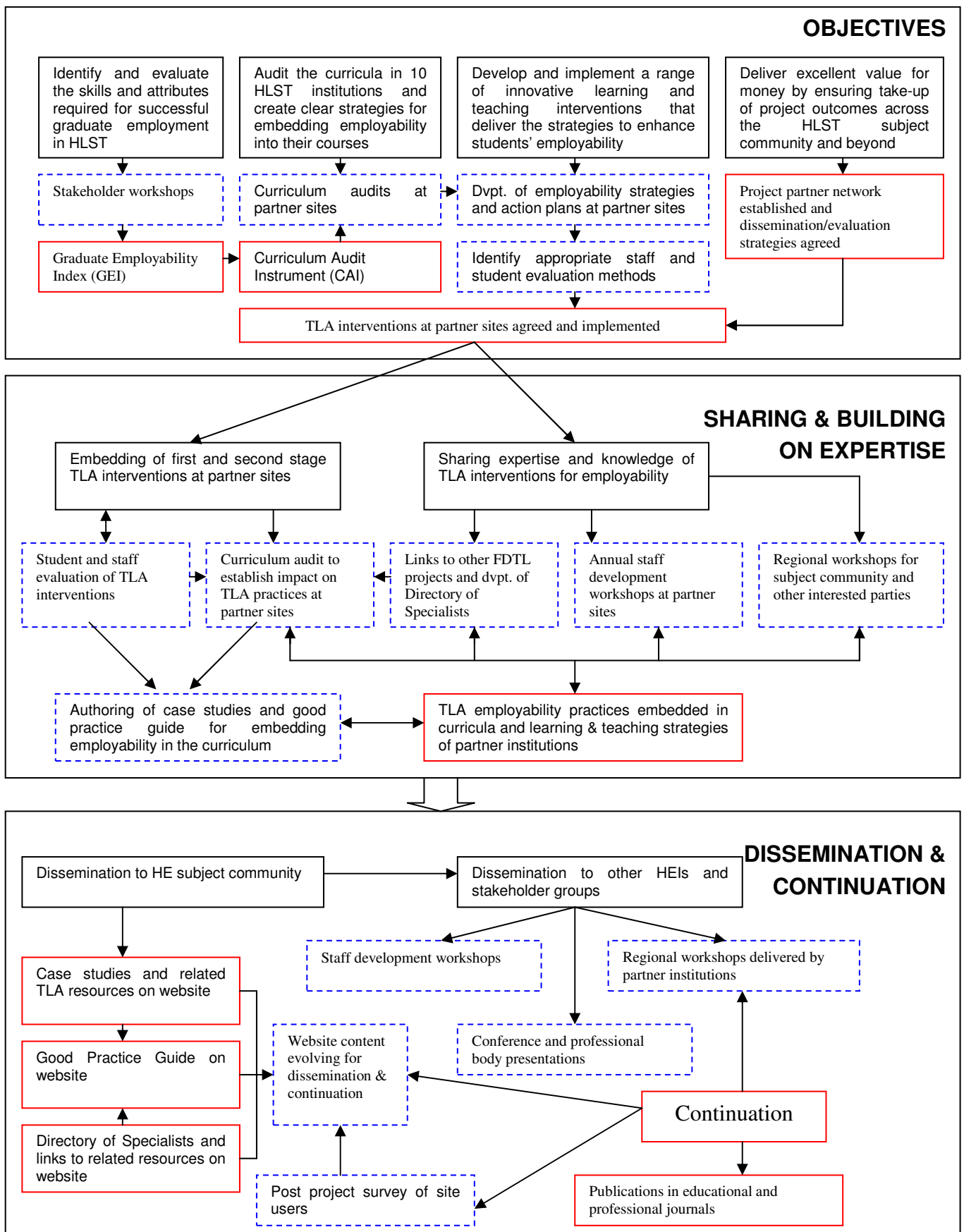
Figure 1 below gives a description of the overall methodology.

Figure 1: Methodology

Objectives

Activities of project team

Outcomes



Phase 4 (September 2007 onwards) is the continuation phase in which it is hoped that the case studies will be added to and further dissemination will take place.

## Conclusion

The project is only at its beginning. It is believed that the aims and objectives of the project can be met by the innovative methodology that is proposed. The dissemination plans for the project seek to ensure that there is the widest possible audience for its deliverables within the HLST academic community and the wider academic community.

The enthusiasm for the project that has been shown by the members of the project team should ensure successful achievement of outcomes and effective dissemination within higher education.

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