Beyond employability
A more radical role for HE in developing workplace capabilities

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Applied Systems Thinking in Practice (ASTiP) Group
...expanding the narrative on employability

1. Background to narrative… x3 projects at OU

2. Expanding the narrative… using a political economy approach

3. Prevailing narrative: competency approach to employability

4. Beyond the narrative: capabilities approach to employability

5. Challenges for Higher education
Immediate backdrop

7-year action research programme on employability

_X3 projects funded by eSTEeM (The OU Centre for STEM pedagogy)_

1. Enhancing systems thinking in practice (STiP) at the workplace. (2013-2016) … transitioning from PG study to PG post-study (Universities with employers and alumni).

2. Framing professional competencies for STiP. (2017-2018)… transitioning towards workplace capabilities (Universities with professional bodies)

Projects 1 and 2 = ‘mind the gap’…. Core outcomes: (i) focus on capabilities for curriculum design; (ii) _L7 Apprenticeship_ STP (systems thinking practitioner) trailblazing group

3. Changing the way the game is played: Transforming PG Curriculum praxis and workplace capabilities. (2018-2020)
Backdrop to narrative
...on employability and Higher education

Immediate backdrop
7 year action research programme on employability
X3 projects funded by eSTeEM*

1. Enhancing systems thinking in practice (STiP) at the workplace. (2013-2016)
2. Framing professional competencies for STiP. (2017-2018)
3. Changing the way the game is played: Transforming PG Curriculum praxis and workplace capabilities. (2018-2020)

*The OU Centre for STEM pedagogy

Wider current backdrop

1. Augar review… tuition fees/ marketisation of HE
2. Levelling up…. apprenticeships/ quality control
3. ‘Truth’ or Trust …post-Brexit/ campus free speech
4. Disputes… HEI working conditions, student climate protests
• Systems thinking in practice (STiP) = creating space (narrative) for meaningful conversation
• ...Critical systems heuristics (CSH) = one of many STiP traditions*

• CSH = reference system: x4 questions associated with political economy
  1. Who gets what? (motivation and values)
  2. Who owns what? (control and power relations)
  3. Who does what? (knowledge and trust)
  4. Who suffers (with) what? (legitimacy and politics)

• Use of CSH to frame conversation on two contrasting models of a system to (re)align employability with higher education provision:
  a) Model 1: Competency approach (residual)
  b) Model 2: Capabilities approach (relational)

1. Motivation and ‘values’
   - (Student perspective): individual wellbeing
   - **Beneficiary** role: knowledge ‘consumers’ (customers)
   - **Measures**: instrumental value/ secure occupation (career)

2. Control and ‘power’
   - (employer perspective): secure labour resource
   - **Standards**: pre-set/ risk averse
   - **Accountability**: market-demand (marketisation)/ fail-safe impetus

3. Knowledge and ‘expertise’
   - (University perspective): secure support for employers and students
   - **Knowledge** ‘providers’/ task-orientated/ skills-driven/ trainer-oriented
   - **Pedagogy** – assessment-driven/ learning outcomes = competencies

4. Legitimacy and ‘politics’ (who suffers (with) what?)
   - (societal perspective): collective wellbeing
   - **Worldview**: survival of fittest/ competition/ marketisation/ utilitarian (functionalist)
   - **Learning**: ‘positivist’ assimilative process/ knowledge as ‘commodity’/ technocentric/ system=residual

A system to (re)align employability with Higher education provision for student/social wellbeing
Prevailing narrative
Model 1: competency approach

1. Motivation and ‘values’ (predetermined)
   - (Student perspective): individual wellbeing
   - Beneficiary role: knowledge ‘consumers’ (customers)
   - Measures: instrumental value/ secure occupation (career)

2. Control and ‘power’ (fixed standards)
   - (employer perspective): secure labour resource
   - Standards: pre-set/ risk averse
   - Accountability: market-demand (marketisation)/ fail-safe impetus

3. Knowledge and ‘expertise’ (predetermined ‘competencies’)
   - (University perspective): secure support for employers and students
   - Knowledge ‘providers’/ task-orientated/ skills-driven/ trainer-oriented
   - Pedagogy – assessment-driven/ learning outcomes = competencies

4. Legitimacy and ‘politics’ (free-market/ bureaucratic)
   - (societal perspective): collective wellbeing
   - Worldview: survival of fittest/ competition/ marketisation/ utilitarian (functionalist)
   - Learning: ‘positivist’ assimilative process/ knowledge as ‘commodity’/ technocentric/
   - system=residual

A system to (re)align employability with Higher education provision for student/social wellbeing
1. Motivation and ‘values’

Model 1 (competency approach)

- **(Student perspective):** individual wellbeing
- **Beneficiary** role: knowledge ‘consumers’ (customers)
- **Measures:** instrumental value/ secure occupation (career)

- **(Student perspective):** individual wellbeing… beyond the workplace
- **Beneficiary** role: knowledge ‘makers’ (active citizens)
- **Measures:** intrinsic value/ life-long learning

Augar Review implementation?
2. Control and ‘power’

Model 1 (competency approach)
- (employer perspective): secure labour resource
- **Standards**: pre-set/ risk averse
- **Accountability**: market-demand (marketisation)/ fail-safe impetus

Model 2: capabilities approach
- (employer perspective): secure resource-ful source of labour
- **Standards**: developmental ‘entitlements’/ experimental/ capacity to choose
- **Accountability**: market-forming (externally adaptive)/ safe-fail impetus/ risk-embracing

*Levelling up?*
Beyond the narrative
Model 2: capabilities approach

3. Knowledge and ‘expertise’

Model 1 (competency approach)

- (University perspective): secure support for employers and students

- Knowledge ‘providers’/ task-orientated/ skills-driven/ trainer-oriented

- Pedagogy – assessment-driven/ learning outcomes = competencies

‘Trust’ deficit?

- (University perspective): secure support for society, employers and students

- Know-how ‘providers’/ sustainability-aware/ contextualised-driven/ improvisation-oriented/ learn-ability

- Pedagogy – relevance-driven/ learning objectives = capabilities
Beyond the narrative
Model 2: capabilities approach

4. Legitimacy and ‘politics’

Model 1 (competency approach)

- (societal perspective): collective wellbeing
- **Worldview**: survival of fittest/competition/marketisation/utilitarian (functionalist)
- **Learning**: ‘positivist’ assimilative process/knowledge as ‘commodity’/technocentric
- **system = residual**

- (societal perspective): collective wellbeing with eye on most vulnerable
- **Worldview**: communitarian/cooperative/public work/social/emancipatory (constructivist)
- **Learning**: ‘transactional’/knowledge as ‘contractual’/provisional/democratic
- **system = relational**

Disputes/protests.. UCU, climate breakdown?
Challenges and opportunities…

Challenges (options…)

? Transform model 1 to model 2

? Integrate model 1 into model 2

? Retain both co-existing systems (allow students to choose)

? Enable (re)design (modelling) of curriculum praxis

Opportunities (The OU…)*

Curriculum ‘innovations’:

• OpenStudio/ OpenBox/ OpenLearn
• Microcredentials (FutureLearn)/ Peer assessment
• Portfolio design/ Apprenticeships
• Pro-active use of LOs
• eSTEeM/ PRAXIS/ SCiLAB/ FASSTEST/ LATIS scholarship/

“…greater flexibility in degree provision will help people access the life-changing opportunities that a university education can provide. …we will need greater dynamism in our higher education provision – including reforming traditional course delivery …recognising the need to provide more in-work options like part-time, distance learning, and apprenticeships….In developing the ideas in this section, I have benefited from The Open University being akin to a public policy lab on ‘what works’ in supporting learning and earning.”

Carolyn Fairbairn Director-General of the CBI. Forward in OU pamphlet ‘Fixing the broken market in part-time study” (November 2017 p.2… my emphases)


Reynolds, Martin; Shah, Rupesh and van Ameijde, Jitse (2018). Framing professional competencies for systems thinking in practice: final report of an action research eSTEeM inquiry. The OU Centre for STEM Pedagogy. The Open University, Milton Keynes.

Reynolds, Martin; Shah, Rupesh; Wedlock, Elaine; Ison, Ray and Blackmore, Christine (2016). Enhancing Systems Thinking in Practice at the Workplace: eSTEeM final report. The OU Centre for STEM Pedagogy. The Open University, Milton Keynes.