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Enterprise and employability: to conflate or not to conflate?

Laura Dean

Back in 1992, Watts and Hawthorn provided definitions of 'enterprise' that could subsume the concept of employability. They argued that enterprise may be about: helping students set up a business; working within an enterprise (organisation); or being enterprising, innovating and creative. Their comments were made in the context of the Enterprise in Higher Education programme, which ran for eight years until 1996. This predated the nomenclature 'employability', but ran alongside traditional employability elements such as career development learning. More recent enterprise initiatives (for example the National Centre for Graduate Entrepreneurship) have focused more specifically on entrepreneurship, innovation and knowledge transfer, not on employability.

Alongside this, employability as a separate and distinct concept has grown in strength, incorporating concepts such as key skills and career development learning, meaning that employability and enterprise have come to be seen as distinct, if not mutually exclusive concepts.

Public images of enterprise are influenced by the popular media. Programmes such as *Dragons' Den* epitomise enterprise as activities that are competitive, and primarily about wealth creation. The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Enterprise based at Leeds Metropolitan University takes a more open approach to what enterprise can be. They cite Paul Kearney's definition as a useful starting point:

"Enterprise is purposeful active behaviour, which can take place in any number of contexts, business being only one. Enterprise is making things happen, having ideas, and doing something about them, taking advantage of opportunities to bring about change." (Kearney, 1994)

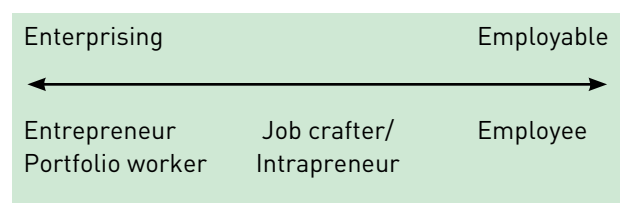
This definition fits well with how students and graduates access employment in the information age. While some vacancies are still advertised in traditional ways, employers also engage in viral advertising, computer games and other innovative methods to access specific graduates. As there is no legal requirement to advertise vacancies, and doing so is expensive, many vacancies are not advertised at all, with opportunities taken by those most effective at networking or creating opportunities. Even when in work, significant minorities of graduates and other employees (BIS, 2009b) have portfolio careers, i.e. they incorporate a range of part-time positions, or spend part of their time in self-employment or a co-operative or volunteering while in paid employment for other blocks of time. Even employability skills as basic as career management require creativity and

enterprise. Enterprise can be as much about parents finding innovative solutions to their childcare issues so that they can work as about money-making activities. For example, a group of parents opting to establish co-operative working arrangements which incorporate reciprocal childcare demonstrates innovation and creative approaches to problem-solving: enterprise in its widest sense.

For those graduates who opt for traditional full-time employment, enterprise skills still come into play. For example, graduate trainees generally spend time in each department of an organisation, establishing their strengths and preferences before opting for one area. However, many other employees act either as intrapreneurs or 'job crafters', employing enterprise skills in the workplace, in the former by innovating for the organisation's benefit and in the latter by developing a role subtly over time so that it better meets their needs and interests.

The UK, along with other first world countries, relies decreasingly on industry and goods manufacture as sources of employment. The knowledge economy is one in which rapid change, diversification and evolution are the norm. 59% of people work for small- and medium-sized companies which undergo rapid change in processes, approach and even output type over short periods of time (BIS, 2009a). In short, these are organisations for which the ability to see opportunities, respond to change, be flexible and other enterprise skills are vital; ergo enterprise skills are employability skills, on a continuum, as illustrated in Figure 1.

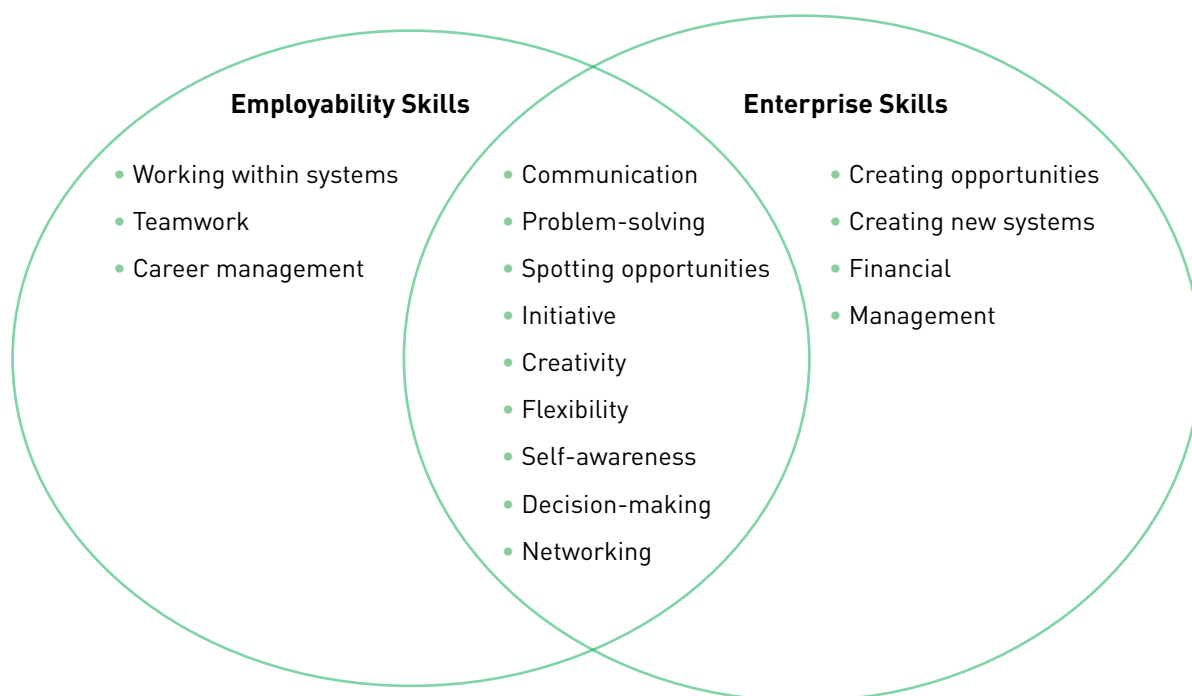
Figure 1: Continuum of enterprise and employability



For personal or personality reasons individuals may choose to aspire to a particular place on that continuum, for example because of their risk aversion level. However, the skills required at each point are for the most part transferable to all the other points.

When the then Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills commented that “We want to see all universities treating student employability as a core part of their mission” (DIUS, 2008, p. 6), we assume that self-employment can be subsumed into that ideal. The use of the term ‘employability’ and the growth from career development learning mean there is already a focus on skills, which is necessary in rapidly changing economic circumstances. But is it beneficial to differentiate between employability skills and enterprise skills? The following diagram illustrates some of the skills required from both agendas. While any of the employability skills could potentially be required of an enterprising graduate and vice versa, we have distributed them according to their primary importance to each concept.

Figure 2: Enterprise and employability skill sets



Sources: Lyons & Brown (2003); NESTA (2008); Boyatzis (2008)

Bearing in mind that 8% of the UK workforce is currently unemployed, attempting to develop the employability skills of some may appear to be a poor solution. If employability is perceived as a set of skills which allow someone to be employed, then developing them in one person simply means that one person gets an available job rather than another: it does not increase the total employment level. If employability and enterprise are seen as part of the same set of skills, the benefit to the economy as a whole can be seen. Schumpeter (1949) argued that wealth within a country can be created in one of four ways: through new products, new production methods, new markets or new forms of organisations. Employability skills such as problem-solving and flexibility can assist in all of these, but in that context they are likely to be labelled enterprise skills.

In conflating enterprise and employability and promoting these to students there are some important issues. First, the benefits of doing so presuppose that enterprise can be taught (Kuratko, 2005). I believe it can, but to do so staff have to be entrepreneurial first. Within universities we need to model enterprise, highlighting mavericks, intrapreneurs and entrepreneurs as role models: people who are not necessarily valued or rewarded within a university. For example this might be the member of staff who seizes an opportunity to learn from a real-life, immediate situation and so changes the module content to focus on a current event, or one who works with a student developing the commercial applications of an idea, outside the curriculum. Second, it may be beneficial

for institutions to keep enterprise and employability separate in order to attract particular funding or the interest of external bodies. Third, conflating them may deter particular groups of students. As some students look for more secure work, increasingly applying to 'safe' options such as the public sector, coupled with the popular definition of enterprise as entrepreneurial activity, using the enterprise terminology may alarm students and prevent them from engaging with employability activities. However, if institutions embed employability/enterprise activities into the curriculum they can appear seamless to students. Students may not be aware that the teamwork skills they are developing in a group-assessed module may benefit them in the workplace, or that the exercise they complete analysing the press cuttings of a particular organisation is anything more than a mechanism for analysing a particular theory. When employability and enterprise are central to courses they can be virtually invisible to students, and they can be central without losing any academic content if staff themselves are sufficiently enterprising.

As universities become more enterprising as institutions, and expect their students to be more enterprising, it is vital they value and reward enterprise and creativity in their staff and develop systems which allow for minor and major modifications of modules and courses rapidly to maximise the benefits of seizing opportunities.

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