**Employability programmes: getting the best outcomes for learners**

Who needs employability programmes?

There are a range of people for whom employability is seen as a key learning need. Whilst employability courses are often thought of as being for young people disengaged from regular routes to employment, this is not always the case. There are also young people who are motivated, and on track, but simply lack some simple skills or knowledge relating to the world of work. An employability group may contain a variety of people. Programmes may thus need to be flexible enough to be able to meet a range of needs.

Similarly, although the target group is often low-skill/low-qualified young people, there are many employers who see university graduates as being unprepared for the realities of the world of work and in need of employability awareness before they can be recruited as effective workers.

Employability training is also increasingly being built into secondary school programmes of study and, in more general ways, into work with primary-age children. At the other end of the age-scale, there are adults being displaced, after years in one job, and who find themselves needing some employability updating in a rapidly changing job market.

The bulk of employability support is – however - still done with 16-25 year olds, with few/no qualifications, who may have disengaged from study/work, and who may have a range of social/emotional/behavioural/core skills issues.

In designing any programme it is important to consider a number of drivers:

* The nature of the participants
* The purposes of the learning programme
* The extent to which there is set content to be taught or changes in attitude to be supported
* The nature/timing of any accreditation; how success gets recorded
* The extent to which the provider organisation has the capacity to be flexible
* Any staffing/funding implications

What are such programmes for?

Employability programmes are seen as being to improve those basic generic skills that employers are looking for, and which are likely to help the person secure initial employment and maintain ongoing employment. Sometimes employability programmes supplement these generic skills with access to more vocationally-specific training and awareness. Sometimes there is heavier emphasis on the practicalities of sorting out a way forward for each participant, or dealing more substantially with underlying issues of attitudes and motivations.

Employability programmes can include components such as the ones below, with the content being built up from different components and combining them with things to suit the local context.  Most of the courses we have been associated with, in one way or another, have included some aspects of:

* understanding what the local labour market looks like in terms of job opportunities and what things are needed to do different jobs (in terms of specific permits/ qualifications etc)
* understanding how the world of work operates; what is expected of workers in terms of timekeeping, reliability etc
* getting direct information from speakers representing relevant industries
* meeting employers; understanding employer needs
* knowing about employment laws, regulations, rights and responsibilities
* developing practical skills in given work areas
* building familiarity with work-specific vocabulary
* strengthening ICT skills for work
* taking part in work placements, or site visits; work tasters
* having experience of working in teams/groups as well as working alone on tasks; improving interpersonal skills
* brushing up conversational skills; ability to answer questions; ability to make demands appropriately
* developing skills of letter writing as well as emailing; formal and informal styles of writing; writing for different purposes - notes, reports etc
* practising presentational skills; following instructions; giving clear information
* bringing together information from various sources; skimming/ scanning documents for relevant facts  and for overall meaning
* doing calculations common to that area of work - wages/hours/deductions; ratios, scales, conversions; fractions, percentages; charts, graphs
* solving practical problems (usually as group exercise); prioritisation and decision-making
* having contact with someone (mentor? supporter? counsellor?) who helps sort out the life issues the young person is having to deal with
* being involved in specific work on motivation, self-management, time-management where these are barriers to employability
* developing assertiveness; confidence; self-esteem
* undertaking self-assessment and changing self-presentation
* doing practice exercises/real exercises on budgeting, money management
* building a strong realistic CV and letter of application
* setting up a 'work' email account - for formal communications/academic communication
* understanding the mechanics of job-search online (and help completing online forms) where this is needed
* taking part in practice interviews

Structures of employability programmes

Historically the majority of vocational training courses had fixed entry dates, fixed end dates, fixed lengths, and relatively-fixed content. Alongside this was a reluctant acceptance of the ‘inevitability’ of a drop-off in student numbers as the course progresses.

Considerable work has been done to make courses more learner-centred and one measure of this has been the retention rate across the length of the course. In attempts to increase the match with learner needs, programmes have increasingly been broken into shorter units, with more choice and flexibility of pathways, and the accumulation of small units of accreditation. Various terms are used (modular learning; bite-sized learning; credit-accumulation; roll-on roll-off ….sometimes with different meanings in different cases).

In terms of programme structure, a range of models can be set out. These are best thought of as ideal-types, whose elements can be combined in particular ways to get the best match with learner needs, organisation capabilities, desired outcomes etc..

1. Year-long courses

The aim, usually, is academic or professional certification; based on a fairly fixed syllabus of things to be learnt. Programme information sets out the details of the course but the advice about suitability is often left to the teacher (who may, in some cases, need to recruit a certain number of learners for the course to be viable and for their teaching employment to be secured).

Once on the course there may be little in the way of choice of learning modes, little flexibility in what is covered (and a student may therefore end up sitting through material that they already know), with little or no chance of changing courses after the first few weeks (so the advice becomes ‘I think you are on the wrong course, so come back next year and try this failing process all over again with another course – meanwhile you could fill your time doing X or Y’)

1. Modular long courses

These are similar in purpose and structure to the above except that a number of long courses, running in parallel, might be split into short blocks/modules, each a few weeks long. This gives the option for a ‘wrong course’ learner to change horses mid-stream, move onto another course yet still feel that the first few weeks of the old course were productive learning. For this to be effective, each module needs to be relatively free-standing rather than relying on cumulative learning from the module/s before.

In the better models, the front end of the programme is loaded with a process of information, guidance, screening, and initial assessment. This helps map out the most appropriate modules for each participant.

If external accreditation is involved then the learner may not have covered all the material (having spent some weeks doing other stuff) but that may not be a block to success if the exam/accreditations offer several entry opportunities across the year. This model is relatively common but may often still be based on a fixed entry date or a defined cohort of learners.

1. Mosaic–type course structures

Where the topics to be covered are short; and a number of sessions are given over to individual learning-planning; and there is an acceptance that not everyone needs to cover the same ground – then a course structure can look more like a mosaic of small learning opportunities. Participants can negotiate a pathway through that suits what they need to know/ practice, ‘stepping stone to stepping stone’, with each learner having a negotiated Individual Development/Learning Plan.

It is quite feasible to use a list of employability skills, such as the one outlined earlier, to work out which learners need to cover which skills and to then assemble a programme around that – as opposed to setting out, in advance, what will be covered week by week, session by session. This requires someone to take a strong learning-coordination role – looking at the next steps that best fit each individual and making sure that those are pulled in place to get the best match with the varying needs of the range of learners in the programme at any one time.

If there is this flexible set of stepping stones, these can all be offered as short recurring workshops for people to drop in to according to individual need. A learner can thus join the programme at any time and work their way through an individualised programme. When they have covered all that they need they can leave the programme: so they roll-on when ready; and roll-off when finished (rather than ‘time-serving’). The success measure for these programmes changes from ‘retention’ (ie covering all content, whether needed or not) to ‘fulfilment of the individual learning plan’.

The writer has had experience of programmes where these units were, for example, packaged as half-day or 2 hour workshops (some very practical, some with more input, some group, some 1:1) – so maybe 8-10 units offered across 5 days .. then some individual support tutorials; and some group exercise time; and some time for researching things on-line; time for participants to keep their own learning-record/portfolio up-to-date; some work visits/ work tasters sessions - forming a set of opportunities on offer across a 2-4 week period, with workshops then being repeated as needed, allowing newcomers to start at any time and people to leave at a stage where they have all they need to be employable.

This format is suitable for learners who are likely to come and go on very different timescales – so is often used, for example, with prison populations - but the principles can be applied within a standard training provider. Where a provider has tried this individualised approach but then reverted to the more ‘modular’/ set course structure, this was often because the organisation was not prepared/able to be flexible to the extent needed; or was unable to match the funding regime available to them with this model that might have group teaching + one-to-one + online/distance learning + work placements/tasters.

On this model it may be difficult to match learner progress and success to the demands of external accreditation except where these are small-unit accreditations. Often learners keep an electronic ‘portfolio’ where they store their successes/records of achievements, and use these to build into a CV to show potential employers, or as evidence for certification.

In adopting this flexible approach there are a number of logistical issues to be managed:

* Keeping track of where individual is within the learning system
* Having suitable space.. maybe one or two rooms set aside to this type of programme, that can then have posters etc around
* Staffing – depending on the flow of numbers in and out of the programme: someone taking on-site workshops whilst someone else sets up employer visits. Staff qualities are more about being connected, supportive, mentoring, challenging etc rather than being a good class teacher
* Funding arrangements across all the variabilities of the programme

Links with employers is seen as important for real success within employability programmes – but needs to be thought through re style/purpose. As an example: a visit to a manufacturer or retailer will be less about the specific products and more about ‘How many staff are employed? What is the range of jobs? How often do jobs come up? What times are normal working days? What qualifications/experience/attitudes are needed? What are workers expected to do?’ ie generic employability questions that can be asked across a number of employment settings.

1. Other models

A variety of other programmes have been experienced, which all contain some insights that might be adapted for incorporation in an employability programme. Some examples:

In one programme the topics were the usual ‘employability’ ones listed above and the delivery was via short workshops but the main issue was the young people’s motivation in terms of their ability to get to a place on time, with the right equipment, and with a positive approach. A set of adult mentors were recruited with a wide remit including calling round at a young person’s house, making sure the person was out of bed; buying them an alarm clock if necessary; making sure they got to employer premises; and being available for the young person to talk to (as someone outside of their family/peer group). A major local employer had just closed and there were groups of fifty year old workers (often with their own grown-up children) - with many years’ experience of the world of work – who were keen to volunteer (for expenses) as a way of staying useful whilst they sorted their own future out and, in the process, gaining a mentoring qualification.

Another programme was focused specifically at employability in public service jobs (police/ fire/ health/ City Hall …) where small groups of young people worked with some appropriate combination of a local community public service worker, a youth worker, a teacher, a careers adviser. The process was structured around using ‘real-life’ type exercises, built around some very hands-on problem-solving, group work, decision-making, and self-management. Along the way there were conversations about what kinds of jobs were likely to become available; how a worker would be expected to act; the rules/laws around that job; the language of the job, and so on.

In a different case there was a recurring enrolment every month but this was into an assessment 'gateway' that helped determine people into various strands: (a) Those who were fairly confident what area of work they wanted to do and had few issues other than some basic confidence + lack of qualifications + some intermediate literacy/numeracy issues. These were able to be fed quickly into vocational programmes with support. (b) Those who had no idea of the kind of work they might do, often had more home/community/ personal issues going on in their life. These were cycled into a programme of tasters of different areas of work; had more 1:1 support sessions; often with some referrals to other agencies as part of the programme. (c) Those who were nowhere near ready for work - academically, personally, attitudes. These participants often went into more basic programmes dealing with functional communication skills, life skills etc. Participants were able to move from one strand to another according to need and progress. Different individuals therefore took different lengths of time to move from gateway assessments to a position of employability.

Assessments  
Many of the programmes had an appropriate balance of initial, formative and summative assessment processes – and the right mix of vocational/academic assessments and assessments of personal motivations, aspirations and attitudes.

Initial assessments were used to establish the skills and behaviours that needed to be practiced. Summative assessments were regularly made of the progress made towards employability, and the extent to which these might be certificated. The formative approaches were very much geared to self-awareness of progress made, next steps needed to be undertaken, scale and pace of direction of travel etc..

There are a whole range of commercially-available tests around people's attitudes/motivations but these are derived from particular population studies (so will have less value with other groups of people); are set in particular cultural assumptions (so, again, 'travel' badly into other cultures); and can be over-commercialised (in that often you can't see what it really is without buying into an expensive package).   
   
In the range of employability work we have had involvement with, providers have made other assumptions (which may be equally valid or equally invalid):

* Some form of quick and easy screening, that can be done on-site by non-experts, is a necessary part of laying out some of the possible ways forward for an individual
* The more the person is engaged in the doing/deciding/planning around this, the more likely they will follow through with productive learning etc
* There are different things to be assessed: motivation to work/have a job; motivation to learn and put in the time/effort to get qualified; interest/motivations around different kinds of work; motivation to sort out some of the interfering issues in their life ....
* Assessment is more effective when it contains formative elements (ie determines possibilities for the next steps), rather than being merely summative (ie gives a static positioning of the person)

Participants’ literacy/numeracy levels, and needs, have been easy to assess. The early assessment (at the beginning of the programme) can determine whether the learner believes they have difficulties remembering how to spell certain words; whether they have had special support in the past; whether they find taking notes difficult - and so on. In addition, The UK national Skills for Life strategy developed a set of quick and easy on-line screenings and assessments which showed people their indicative literacy/numeracy levels. Specialist teachers could then use the more detailed skills needed to take the learner from their current level to the next one up, to construct a functional skills programme for that person.

Some of this learning programme might be delivered as understanding and rehearsing discrete literacy/ language/ numeracy skills but within employability programmes it is more a matter of practising these skills embedded in the day-to-day activities and tasks of the vocational area.

In parallel to staff training on employability issues, work has been done with a wider range of vocational teachers to make their inputs much more learner-friendly for those with literacy difficulties:

* using shorter, simpler sentences
* using active tenses not passive tenses
* using everyday language (not 'lecturer' language) except for necessary technical/industry-related terms
* where technical terms were going to be used in a module or workshop - listing these for the students before that module started - (and again at the start of particular lessons) with meanings/ pronunciations etc - so that learners didn't get thrown by new words halfway through something they were trying to follow.
* knowing a bit about first-language interference: Where the learners were eg Polish or Filipino - how their own language’s structure influenced their use of English.

The 'work- readiness' of participants was occasionally directly assessed by someone (with guidance/mentoring/personal skills) sitting with the person and going gently through a set of topics:

* 'Looking back in ten years’ time what work tasks do you think you will realistically have been mostly doing? Which will you be good at? If you had the choice, which work-tasks would really interest you to be doing?' .... against a list of things like communication with customers by phone; communicating with customers face-to-face; resolving complaints and enquiries; taking food orders; preparing food; filling out forms; helping a person with the daily living tasks in their life; educating children etc - the list drawn from work that is likely to be available locally.
* 'What kinds of work interest you?' from a list of things like working alone, working outdoors with tools/equipment; working with ideas, working with numbers, using computers .....
* 'What career might interest you?' from a list of things like construction, nursing, social services, landscaping, security work, hospitality/hotel work, retail, transport/driving, tourism .... etc

The advantage of this is that the person sees it as helping plan their future (not testing them for faults); the lists can be customised for the area or for that particular time, the language is everyday and can be 'localised'. The answers aren't right/wrong and can always be changed ... The total set of answers allow for a discussion about work-preparedness, things to be done to set off towards preferred jobs, and so on.

Using a combination of assessments it is thus feasible to establish participants’ starting points on a range of aspects (core skills, employability skills, motivations, attitudes to work) and thus design the individual’s best route to success.

Summary  
A variety of people need support in becoming more employable. This may involve participants understanding themselves better and becoming more motivated to improve a range of skills, attitudes and knowledge.

Any employability programme is likely to need to address a well-known set of core content topics and will need to address the same kinds of organisational issues. A range of factors will affect the ways that individual needs are able to be met through effective programme design.

It is hoped that this article helps readers think through some of the common issues associated with developing employability.

 