

# **What is Employability?**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Employability is commonly seen as one of the manifestations of the rapid changes associated with the globalisation era of the past two decades (cf. Field 2000). It is essentially a three-act story. First, the decline of industrial production and the rise of a services- (even knowledge-) based economy in the OECD countries necessitate a new form of preparation for the world-of-work. Second, the dominance of Neo-Liberal ideology makes even parties formerly of the left embrace education and work as the ways to end poverty and social exclusion, and abandon the welfare state. Third, the related notions of lifelong learning and boundaryless careers portray this new world as one of exciting opportunities for those that embrace it. All of these factors are held to make a focus on an individual's ability to gain initial employment, maintain employment, move between roles within the same organisation, obtain new employment if required and (ideally) secure suitable and sufficiently fulfilling work, in other words- their employability, more important than the simple state of being employed (Hillage and Pollard 1998).

Educational providers across all levels are expected to respond to this new employability imperative. Public further and higher education institutions, in particular, have been encouraged to transform their curricula and pedagogies in its service. For FE(T) colleges, the challenge has been especially stark as the rise of employability has been closely intertwined with the demise of apprenticeship and a related collapse of old business partnerships. Instead, the recent past has seen the rise of new, larger and more diverse clienteles whom colleges are now expected to make employable, and an imperative to include business interests in governance structures, programme planning and joint ventures.

The purpose of this paper, and of the project as a whole, is to improve our understandings of employability in a threefold manner: practically through the experiences and challenges of FE(T) colleges; theoretically within the discipline of education; and comparatively by looking at contexts and experiences in England and South Africa. This paper seeks to provide a provisional account of employability theory in order to allow a research team, drawn from three universities, three FE(T) colleges and one sector education and training authority to begin to plan their methodological approach to working together on the question of how FE(T) colleges in England and South Africa can promote employability for their students. Crucially, it starts from the assumption that employability is not as simple as it appears in either theory or practice.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF EMPLOYABILITY**

In spite of widespread assumptions that employability is a concept of the current period, scholars of employability note that the notion did not simply emerge as a way of explaining necessary responses to a radically changed economic and public policy environment since 1990. Instead, somewhat ironically at first sight,

it is conventionally dated back to 1909 and the early work of one of the architects of the British welfare state, William Beveridge in his book: *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry* (1909).

Gazier (1998), one of the leading theorists of employability, argues that the concept has gone through seven stages over the past century:

#### 1. *Dichotomic employability*

This approach emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in Britain and America. It made a distinction between those that are/can be employed and those that cannot be. In important regards it is a reformulation of the long-standing Anglo-Saxon dichotomy between the "deserving poor" (hard working and morally upright individuals who have fallen on hard time due to misfortune – e.g., illness or widowhood) and the "undeserving" poor (those who are lazy and morally degenerate). The former deserve charity; the latter must be reformed.

#### 2. *Socio-medical employability*

This theme emerged around the time of World War Two in the USA, Britain and Germany in particular. It focused particularly on the social, physical or mental deficits of individuals that made them unfit for employment.

#### 3. *Manpower policy employability*

This account developed mainly in the USA in the 1960s, and extended the deficit approach of the socio-medical model to other societal groups.<sup>1</sup> Again, the focus was on the gap between their knowledge, skills and attitudes and those required by the labour market.

#### 4. *Flow employability*

This is a primarily French account, which emerged in the 1960s. It was radically different from the earlier approaches in focusing primarily on the demand side and the accessibility of employment within local and national economies, with employability defined as "the objective expectation, or more or less high probability, that a person looking for a job can have of finding one" (Ledrut 1966, quoted in Gazier 1998: 44).

#### 5. *Labour market performance employability*

This emerged internationally towards the end of the 1970s. This concept focuses on the measurable labour market outcomes that result from specific policy interventions. These measures typically include period employed, hours worked and wage rates.

#### 6. *Initiative employability*

This account coalesced in the late 1980s in the North American and European human resource development literature, which was starting to discuss the notion of the end of the "salaryman" who worked for the same large corporation (or state bureaucracy) from leaving school until retirement. With the purported end of "a job for life", this account argued that successful career development now required the development of skills and attitudes that could make workers both

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<sup>1</sup> There appear to be clear parallels to prevalent South African views of the time, possibly running through to the De Lange Commission (1981) but this is beyond Gazier's account and requires further exploration.

succeed in their current jobs and be able and motivated to get a better job in another organisation. The stress here is firmly on the individual's initiative and agency.

### *7. Interactive employability*

Following on swiftly from this account, emerged the notion of interactive employability. Whilst accepting the importance of individual agency, this account sought to balance this with a development of some of the insights of the French flow employability school regarding structural factors. Thus, it was argued that that the employability of the individual is partly relative to the employability of others in the labour market, both as competitors but also in the sense that high levels of dispersed employability might attract new employment opportunities to an area. The state of demand locally and nationally is also considered, as are the rules and institutions that govern the labour market, reflecting the rise of institutional economics at this period. Thus, this account implicates employers and policymakers in the employability challenge alongside individuals.

These accounts should not be seen simply as marking an evolution to a current orthodoxy, rather elements of all can be seen as present in popular, practical and policy debates.

## **TOWARDS A WORKING DEFINITION OF EMPLOYABILITY**

I have already stated Hillage and Pollard's (1998) widely-cited definition of employability as an individual's ability to gain initial employment, maintain employment, move between roles within the same organisation, obtain new employment if required and (ideally) secure suitable and sufficiently fulfilling work. McQuaid, Green and Danson (2005: 191), however, suggest that "employability remains a contested concept in terms of its use in both theory and policy, and throughout the past century has been used as both a predominantly labour supply and a labour demand concept." They go on to argue that, nonetheless, the concept is useful in both forms. They suggest that the narrower supply-side focus of the initiative approach is valuable in its generation of a set or sets of skills, and supporting national and institutional policies and practices, that can contribute to improving individual employability. However, they maintain that a broader, interactive approach permits

the additional consideration of vital demand, personal circumstances and other factors that influence the employability of people in a particular labour market, or at a particular time, and so are fundamental to those people gaining or changing employment. (McQuaid, Green and Danson 2005:194)

Over the past decade or so, a large number of authors have sought to develop typologies of employability from a wide range of disciplinary and ideological perspectives (e.g., Hillage and Pollard 1998; de Grip, van Loo and Sanders 2004; Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth 2004). Perhaps the most comprehensive model is provided by McQuaid and Lindsay (see table 1).

**Table 1: Employability Factors**

<i>INDIVIDUAL FACTORS</i>	<i>PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES</i>	<i>EXTERNAL FACTORS</i>
<p><b>Employability skills and attributes</b></p> <p><i>Essential attributes</i> Basic social skills; honesty and integrity; basic personal presentation; reliability; willingness to work; understanding of actions and consequences; positive attitude to work; responsibility; self-discipline</p> <p><i>Personal competencies</i> Proactivity; diligence; self-motivation; judgement; initiative; assertiveness; confidence; act autonomously</p> <p><i>Basic transferable skills</i> Prose and document literacy; writing; numeracy; verbal presentation</p> <p><i>Key transferable skills</i> Reasoning; problem solving; adaptability; work-process management; team working; personal task and time management; functional mobility; basic ICT skills; basic interpersonal and communication skills; emotional and aesthetic customer service skills</p> <p><i>High level transferable skills</i> Team working; business thinking; commercial awareness; continuous learning; vision; job-specific skills; enterprise skills</p>	<p><b>Household circumstances</b></p> <p><i>Direct caring responsibilities</i> Caring for children, elderly relatives, etc.</p> <p><i>Other family and caring responsibilities</i> Financial commitments to children or other family members outside the individual's household; emotional and/or time commitments to family members or others</p> <p><i>Other household circumstances</i> The ability to access safe, secure, affordable and appropriate housing</p>	<p><b>Demand factors</b></p> <p><i>Labour market factors</i> Level of local and regional or other demand; nature and changes of local and regional demand (required skill levels; occupational structure of vacancies; sectors where demand is concentrated); location, centrality / remoteness of local labour markets in relation to centres of industry / employment; level of competition for jobs; actions of employers' competitors; changing customer preferences, etc.</p> <p><i>Macroeconomic factors</i> Macroeconomic stability; medium- to long-term business confidence; level and nature of labour demand within the national economy</p> <p><i>Vacancy characteristics</i> Remuneration; conditions of work; working hours and prevalence of shift work; opportunities for progression; extent of part-time, temporary and casual work; availability of 'entry-level' positions</p> <p><i>Recruitment factors</i> Employers' formal recruitment and selection procedures; employers' general selection preferences (for example, for recent experience); employers' search channels (methods of searching for staff when recruiting); discrimination</p>

<p><i>Qualifications</i> Formal academic and vocational qualifications; job-specific qualifications</p> <p><i>Work knowledge base</i> Work experience; general work skills and personal aptitudes; commonly valued transferable skills (such as driving); occupational specific skills</p> <p><i>Labour market attachment</i> Current unemployment / employment duration; number and length of spells of unemployment / inactivity; 'balance' of work history</p>		<p>(for example, on the basis of age, gender, race, area of residence, disability, unemployment duration); form and extent of employers' use of informal networks; demanding only appropriate qualifications or credentials</p>
<p><b>Demographic characteristics</b> Age, gender, etc.</p>	<p><b>Work culture</b> The existence of a culture in which work is encouraged and supported within the family, among peers or other personal relationships and the wider community</p>	<p><b>Enabling support factors</b> <i>Employment policy factors</i> Accessibility of public services and job-matching technology (such as job search / counselling); penetration of public services (for example, use and credibility among employers / job seekers); incentives within tax benefits system; existence of 'welfare to work' / activation and pressure to accept jobs; accessibility and limitations on training; extent of local / regional development policies; measures to ease the school-work transition and address employability issues at school and university</p> <p><i>Other enabling policy factors</i> Accessibility and affordability of public transport, child care and other support services</p>

<p><b>Health and well-being</b></p> <p><i>Health</i> Current physical health; current mental health; medical history; psychological wellbeing</p> <p><i>Disability</i> Nature and extent of: physical disability; mental disability; learning disability</p>	<p><b>Access to resources</b></p> <p><i>Access to transport</i> Access to own or readily available private transport; ability to walk appropriate distances</p> <p><i>Access to financial capital</i> Level of household income; extent and duration of any financial hardship; access to formal and informal sources of financial support; management of income and debt</p> <p><i>Access to social capital</i> Access to personal and family support networks; access to formal and informal community support networks; number, range and status of informal social network contacts</p>	
<p><b>Job seeking</b></p> <p>Effective use of formal search services / information resources (including ICT); awareness and effective use of informal social networks; ability to complete CVs / application forms; interview skills / presentation; access to references; awareness of strengths and weaknesses; awareness of location and type of opportunities in the labour market; realistic approach to job targeting</p>		
<p><b>Adaptability and mobility</b></p> <p>Geographical mobility; wage flexibility and reservation wage; occupational flexibility (working hours, occupations, sectors)</p>		

Source: McQuaid and Lindsay (2005: 209-10)

It can be seen that the top left cell (employability skills and attributes) is where much of the education-for-employability debate has been located. Essentially, this debate has sought to identify such a list that should then be taught by educational institutions (e.g., Harvey and Green 1994; Coopers and Lybrand 1998; Lees 2002; Hartshorn and Sear 2005). Some authors, such as Hartshorn and Sear, have identified employability skills with enterprising skills, as defined by Gibb (1993).

I will return to a consideration of the detail of these skills and attributes and what we know about educational institutions' ability to implement employability skills programmes later in this paper. However, for now, I want to dwell further on the other aspects of employability as outlined by McQuaid and Lindsay.

Even in the column of individual factors, this model makes clear that this is not just a simple matter of building skills and attitudes within the educational system. As is typical in many policy responses to employability, such skills need to be supported by job seeking skills, often developed by careers and employment services. More broadly, there is a need to consider the impact of health factors (reflecting the socio-medical model of employability); by age and gender; and by mobility.

Indeed, with McQuaid and Lindsay's personal factors, these latter elements are important aspects of a sociological literature that identifies a series of employability traps.

From a youth transitions / lifecourse perspective, Côté and Bynner argue that there is a

hiatus in the life-course, which is increasingly referred to as emerging adulthood, can be better explained in terms of changing economic conditions leading to a lowering of the social status of the young that is contributing to increasingly precarious trajectories, and in terms of the decline in the social markers of adulthood associated with the individualisation process. (Côté and Bynner 2008: 251)

Thus, more precarious transitions to work interact with challenges in the transitions to adulthood. Drawing on Côté's work on identity capital, defined as comprising educational, social, and psychological resources, Bynner and Parsons (2002) argue that this is at a premium in entering and maintaining employment. They suggest that certain groups of youth have weak identity capital. For instance, they highlight the persistence of disadvantage for those who are neither in employment nor education and training in their late teens. They highlight the particular disadvantage experienced by young women within this category, often linked to early motherhood. As other authors (e.g., Baker 1998; Neysmith and Reitsma-Street 2005; Gazso 2007) note, across Anglophone developed countries, young women with children face particular challenges in getting (back) into the labour market. Family background also appears as a factor (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Weller 2007; Glayniann and Grima 2008), particularly where this is characterised by abusive or disinterested behaviour and attitudes from parents / carers. More generally, Cieslik and Simpson (2006) suggest that low levels of employability tend to mutually reinforce with poor attitudes to education to prevent successful remediation of early failure. Clearly such accounts resonate with older accounts of class- and race-based disadvantage and discrimination (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976; Kallaway 1984) and more recent accounts based in social and cultural capital (e.g., Bourdieu 1986, Coleman 1988).

Across Europe, a literature has emerged that notes that young people are particularly prone to finding temporary and precarious employment that often does not lead inevitably to more permanent and decent forms of work over time (Groot and van den Brink 2000; Montchatre 2007; Glayniann and Grima 2008). Rather, Forrier and Sels (2003) find empirically that temporary workers with lower levels of skills and qualifications are less likely to invest in their own training or have employers invest in them either. Globally, such concerns are seen in the ILO's work on youth employability (e.g., ILO 2005) and the World Bank's *World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation* (World Bank 2006).

As the McQuaid and Lindsay framework also notes, issues of geographic location can be of great importance. This problem is seen as particularly prevalent in old industrial regions (including in coalfields such as those of Nottinghamshire and KwaZulu-Natal) (Peck and Theodore 2000; Danson 2005). As Danson notes, such areas have undergone painful economic change and many would-be workers remain trapped in these areas with the wrong skills and too little spatial mobility, leading to a spatial-skills mismatch problem (McQuaid 2006). Whilst this is often seen as particularly a problem of older men, formally employed in heavy industry / extraction, the above point about young women with children should alert us to a more complex gender picture.

Urban / regional geographers also highlight the importance of young people's mental maps of jobs and mobility in contributing to an employability trap. Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery (2005) point to the need to understand social space as perceived by young adults and suggest that young people have very restricted mental maps of where they can look for work (or attend further education and training). Whilst their account is specifically on the highly segregated city of Belfast, it appears to have wider salience. Indeed, it may be particularly adaptable to the South African urban landscape and young people's perceptions thereof. It is argued further that segmented housing markets, poor public transport links and lack of access to private transport exacerbate unwillingness or inability to travel to employment (Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery 2005; McQuaid, Green and Danson 2005). Thus, spatial mismatch may compound skills mismatch, as a decline of local low-skill jobs leads to greater spatial and skills mismatches for residents with limited education, generating greater competition for low skilled jobs remaining (Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery 2005). This leads Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery to conclude that "Spatial behaviour and local social capital shape life-chances and involvement in employment" (2005: 302).

The typology also heightens the importance of broader economic and policy factors (Berntson, Sverke and Marklund 2006). Indeed, it is argued that there is a need also to consider sectoral dynamics (de Grip, van Loo and Sanders 2004; Gore 2005). Thus, Marock argues in the South African context that

the willingness and capacity to participate and invest time, money and energy in training to support the development of their human capital will depend on the expected return on this investment. This return relates to both a direct increase in earnings and to an improved labour market position. (Marock 2008: 8)

Therefore, the overall stance of the economy and sector towards high or low skills are crucially relevant. As the sociology of education and work literature on Britain and South Africa of the past decade has argued, neither country is particularly strong at promoting individual returns on education and training investment, despite the considerable policy rhetoric in both (e.g., Keep 1999; Brown, Green and Lauder 2001; Wolf 2002; McGrath et al. 2004). Moreover, it is

clear that both countries see huge variances both within and between sectors regarding approaches to skills development and utilisation (e.g. Mason 2001; Paterson and du Toit 2005).

## **THE ROLE OF PUBLIC FURTHER EDUCATION (AND TRAINING) COLLEGES IN SUPPORTING EMPLOYABILITY**

In spite of the theoretical nuancing provided by interactive employability accounts, policy pronouncements still are largely stuck in initiative understandings or, as Peck and Theodore (2000) put it more strongly: “supply-side fundamentalism”. This narrower approach makes it clear that the individual has the primary duty and responsibility to improve their own employability. However, from an educationalist’s point of view, it is apparent that the sins of the “unemployable” are very quickly visited on the public education and training provider.

There are long-standing accounts of the failings of the public schooling, vocational education and training and higher education systems both North and South. As far as the vocational system is concerned, this centres on a lack of relevance in terms of skills developed; a divorce of providers and their staff from industrial realities and interactions; and high costs of provision, all of which are exacerbated by rapid changes in industrial structure. In Africa this became increasingly the orthodox view after the World Bank report on vocational and technical education and training of 1991 (World Bank 1991) and remains largely in place (cf. Johanson and Adams 2004; Akoojee, Gewer and McGrath 2005). In South Africa, this account has clearly influenced the post-Apartheid emergence of the public FET college, although the power of equity and redress are also clearly apparent in policy developments. In England, this reading of the failures of technical colleges was enshrined in the *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992.

In both countries, there has been a drive to improve colleges’ responsiveness to the needs of industry through reformed governance, business linkages and improved work placement possibilities for staff and students although these are currently far better developed in England (e.g., Ainley and Bailey 1997; Gleeson 1999; Gleeson and Keep 2004) than in South Africa (e.g., Cosser et al. 2003; Adams, Mabunda and McGrath 2006; McGrath and Akoojee 2007). It is clearly assumed by most policymakers that better working relationships between colleges and employers will inevitably improve learner employability. In this vein, it is argued that “every opportunity to get employer contact needs to be exploited.” (Lanning, Martin and Villeneuve-Smith 2008: 6).

These new relationships are supposed to be centred on a new approach to teaching and learning that moves away from old views of vocational education content, as a combination of trade theory and practical skills development, towards one that highlights core skills and attitudes, job seeking skills and a repackaged set of vocational skills and occupational / sectoral knowledge (cf. Table 1).

There are sound reasons for taking such an argument seriously but it is necessary at the very least to follow Lanning, Martin and Villeneuve-Smith’s (2008: 2) cautionary message that:

we have come to question whether the term Employability Skills is now unhelpful. While it has been a useful shorthand term, we suggest that it has come to imply that there is a discrete standard set of skills and

behaviours, often packaged into a qualification that can be taught and assessed.

We don't think that this is the case. Such an approach constrains and formalises something that needs to be flexible and responsive to employer and learner needs and their context. Rather, we would advocate a conceptual shift towards developing skills, knowledge and attitudes that enhance employability.

On the same page of their report for the Learning and Skills Network<sup>2</sup>, it emerges that the skills actually most valued by English employers are good literacy and numeracy skills, enthusiasm, commitment and timekeeping. This is a far cry from Reich's (1991) knowledge workers.

They also claim that delivering employability skills is just about good teaching (cf. Lees 2002); which for them comprises largely of experiential learning, personalisation and embedding skills across curriculum. However, it is clear that this is but one very particular vision of good teaching that is located in an implicit (and questionable) set of assumptions about knowledge, skills, learning and teaching, education-economy linkages and economic structure.

As employability skills are often actually attitudes and attributes, there is also some connections made between employability and emotional intelligence / labour (Lees 2002). These remain highly controversial issues, not least when it comes to questions of how learners can be prepared for emotional labour and at what cost (e.g., Unwin 2004; Ecclestone 2007). Lanning, Martin and Villeneuve-Smith (2008) suggest that there needs to be more consideration of the relative importance of personal tutors in building learner employability, whilst Robson and Bailey (2004 and 2009) explore more critically the emergence of learning support workers in English FE colleges.

In considering responses to the employability imperative, it is also important that the distinction between short-term and long-term employability approaches is considered. I noted earlier some of the concerns that are common amongst continental European authors regarding the dangers of young workers getting trapped in temporary and precarious employment. Whilst generic skills may be vital for accessing the labour market in most cases, they may not be of much use in accessing and maintaining decent work (Currie, Tempest and Starkey 2006) – part of the broad definition of individual employability that I adopted from Hillage and Pollard.

According to Winch and Clarke (2003) the problem with short-termist views of employability lies in the failure to make a distinction between the task, firm and occupational understandings of skill.

Skill at a task is the ability to carry out that particular task. Skill in the context of a firm is the ability to do a particular job as specified by the employer or by a contract to carry out a commission. Skill at the level of an occupation, on the other hand, concerns that ability or potential ability to fulfil all the tasks associated with or negotiated for an occupation. ... skill in an occupational sense entails significant transferability between different jobs. It is also generally skill in this sense that is propagated by employees, it being in their interest to acquire skills of a more long-term nature, to equip them over a working life, Employers on the other hand, are more interested in skills

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<sup>2</sup> The quasi-independent English research agency for the college sector.

in the task sense, for the immediate job in hand. (Winch and Clarke 2003: 240)

Finally, it is important that the drive to employability does not lead to a naïve view that employers necessarily know best. There is considerable literature about employers' narrow interests and understandings as being part of the problem. Rather, what is needed is a dialogue based on a thoughtful reading of the challenges of employability, as Kruss (2004) has argued for the South African higher education sector or, as McQuaid, Green and Danson (2005: 192-3) put it:

There is a need for improved communication between training providers and employers to ensure that the training being provided is relevant to both employers and employees, but also to challenge some of the attitudes and practices of employers.

If learners, providers and employers all believe in a high skills solution, and government facilitates this, then there is real potential for fruitful partnerships on employability. However, if this is not the case, then there are very real limitations to what providers can do to make a real difference here.

## **WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR PROJECT?**

The point of this attempt to synthesise a very wide-ranging academic literature is to begin a process of thinking together critically about what we mean about employability. What employability means for each of the three partner colleges and how this is responded to must necessarily be different. There is no single list of employability skills that can unproblematically be grabbed hold of and applied to all learning situations. Multiple contextual factors are likely to matter, such as the programme being delivered; the history and local environment of the college; its staff and student profiles; and its strategic vision; as well as multi-faceted national differences between England and South Africa. Equally, my reading of these literatures reinforces my view that employability is not simply something to be done to learners in response to what employers and governments say they want. Rather, employability needs to be located in a dialogue between multiple stakeholders- including providers, learners and communities as well as business and government. Moreover, each of these other sets of stakeholders also has responsibilities in making employability work. What this means in settings where jobs are scarce or poor quality needs careful consideration and such settings abound in the catchment areas of the partners in this project. Finally, employability is but one policy objective for colleges, not the only one, and any drive towards employability needs to take account of other strategic imperatives.

This paper does not set out to say how we should look at employability in practice across the three college settings. That is a matter for the team to discuss and one in which the college staff will have to take a leading role. However, it hopefully gives some pointers regarding where our discussions might begin.

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