



# Participation, reflection and integration for business and lifelong learning

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## Pedagogical challenges of the integrative studies programme at the University of Strathclyde Business School

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**Abstract** This paper gives a succinct account of current debates in the literature on graduate attributes as they are related to employment and lifelong learning, and argues the limitations of a “key skills” agenda as a guide to curriculum practice. Development of a curricular innovation that addresses key skills, “integrative studies” at the Strathclyde University Business School, is described and located in a wider framework of work-related facets that extend thinking beyond key skills. Those facets include the idea of a learning organisation and the concept of student identity formation. A research-based approach to further development of the curriculum is outlined, which takes the experiences of students and the perceptions and practices of specific employers to be key influences.

### Introduction: the knowledge economy and lifelong learning

Academic and policy debate on the future of work and learning has come to be constellated around the concepts of a knowledge intensive, post-industrial economic order (Castells, 1996; Thompson and Warhurst, 1998) and the associated realignment of educational systems constituted as lifelong learning (Holford *et al.*, 1998). In this short paper we focus on the specific issue of change in graduate employment and undergraduate education, as expressed in terms of the generic skills and personal dispositions required for effective learning at work, and lifelong learning. In the UK this change agenda has been driven by state and employer demands, and is currently described in terms of “key skills”. Key skills typically encompass graduate attributes that have been expressed as “generic”, “personal”, “core” or “transferable”. They include hard areas such as “numeracy” and “information technology”, and soft areas such as “communication” and “teamworking”, and are proposed as essential attributes for employment.

This framing is linked to a broader concept of “personal development planning and profiling” which entails the notion that students will take a greater role in self-assessing their development needs and stages of progress. In



effect beginning to develop “reflective practice” (Schon, 1987). Allied to this is the idea that universities will legitimise such objectives as part of the degree programme, and support students with relevant teaching. In addition universities are being required to support students by making provision for detailed records of progress in these areas. This policy area is currently referred to as key skills and progress files (KSPF), and all universities are required to evidence commitment and provision ([www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)). This has proved to be an influential combination of forces in renovating curriculum and the interface between educators, students and graduate employers.

This development represents a shift in the balance from an academic-led “supply” model, to an employer-led “demand” model of higher education. This in turn associates with a paradigm shift in teaching practice from a lecturer/subject emphasis, to a student learning/skill development emphasis. Drawing on experience gained from implementing a major KSPF innovation in undergraduate business education, we argue that whilst the KSPF agenda is a valid force for change it has a number of limitations. We will argue that the “key skills” rhetoric and practice, whilst significant, is an insufficient framework being too simplistic in relation to the complexity of change in organisations employing graduates. Similarly ideas of personal development planning and personal progress files (PDP/PPF) whilst potentially useful, require to be developed appropriately, to avoid mechanistic implementation. They should aid reflection and develop process and analytical skills rather simply recording events and achievements.

### **Key skills: supporters and critics**

The “key skills” movement in the UK has developed through a sequence of initiatives driven by employers, employer organisations and government agencies, and has taken a variety of forms in universities. Typically, the rhetoric of key skills is adopted by senior university managers as a requirement of employer-friendly degree programmes, and harnessed to the remits of careers advisors, educational developers, and lecturers to generate some form of teaching innovation at course and class level (Hockley and Moore, 2001). Whilst this process has brought about significant change, it has been criticised on grounds of: relative superficiality and limited basis in research (Hyland and Johnson, 1998; Bennet *et al.*, 2000); lack of engagement with employers desire for higher order skills (Harvey *et al.*, 1997); dissonance with the critical purposes of universities and too close an ideological link to free-market thinking (Barnett, 1997).

The challenge to educators is therefore twofold, how to respond to the substantial pressures to demonstrate provision of KSPF, and how to ensure that such provision displays pedagogical coherence and academic validity. We will consider pedagogy by presenting an analytical case study of a particular innovation, the integrative core at Strathclyde University Business School, but

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first we will outline some of the main themes in the relevant human resource management (HRM) literature.

### **Beyond key skills: learning organisations and employment identities**

Within the UK, and globally, organisations are undergoing dramatic change and re-structuring. In contemporary organisations employees are encouraged to be enterprising subjects – more self-reliant, risk taking and responsible (du Gay, 1996). Lifelong Learning has been heralded as the survival tool for individuals, the economy and organisations. Within professional bodies, e.g. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development there is an emphasis on continuing professional development where employees are expected to reflect on their practice to enable them to become “reflective practitioners” and “thinking performers” ([www.cipd.co.uk](http://www.cipd.co.uk)). The Learning organisation (Senge, 1990) has been promoted as an ideal type for organisations where individuals are encouraged to learn and develop to their full potential, and the organisation is conceived as being in a continuous process of organisational transformation to enable it to be more competitive.

Within the organisational relationship the “psychological contract” (Makin *et al.*, 1996) has been highlighted. Typical of the rhetoric of this thinking is the proposition that the traditional “career for life” is being supplanted by the expectation of regular job and role change accompanied by continuing professional development and lifelong learning. Inherent in this model is the shift in conception from employment to employability where the education system and employers will provide you with relevant skills/knowledge for employability, but with little by way of the traditional notion of employment security (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995). The employability scenario has been accompanied by enabling concepts directed at the nature of self, and the personal attributes for success. Goleman (1998) has promoted emotional intelligence (EI), as a requisite for all future managers and purports to distinguish outstanding performers in organisations. The essential EI competencies relate to mastering the skills of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management and relationship management. The emphasis on this approach is the importance of these skills in an organisational context and translating intelligence into on-the-job capabilities for management and leadership.

Within this changing organisational context performance management is central to organisational effectiveness and the process involves reviewing and reflecting. A variety of tools/approaches may be significant in enabling a prospective employee to be successful in the workplace and critical reflection has been identified by several authors (van Woerkom *et al.*, 2002) as important in the current organisational climate. Closely linked with this definition is self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) which focuses on the belief in one’s capabilities and involves self-evaluation.

Relating these ideas to graduate recruiters, there is an expectation that graduates will obtain a 2:1 degree, and have obtained relevant work experience. In addition employers are interested in competence in communication, teamwork/collaboration, planning and organising, analytical thinking and problem solving, personal effectiveness, research, managing information, information technology, numerical interpretation ([www.careers.strath.ac.uk](http://www.careers.strath.ac.uk)). Researchers in this field have also shown that recruiters expect students to have developed their self-awareness and have an accurate sense of their own identity in terms of what they are seeking from employers (Stewart and Knowles, 2000).

The rise of the flexible learning organisation and the demise of the traditional career, together with the emergence of new employment identities exemplified as: the portfolio career, the intelligent career, the boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) highlight the significance for future employees of planning their own “self-managed careers” (Arnold, 1997). The challenge facing students, graduates and educators is therefore much more complex than simply obtaining a standard set of “key skills”. This suggests the arguably more difficult project of using research on changing career perspectives in organisations to help students form relevant employment identities which entail notions of self-awareness, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence.

From the foregoing discussion, we have selected four constructs that we regard as the most important nodes of the emerging network of relationships between work and learning. These nodes are displayed in Table I and a broad indication given of their impact on university thinking and practice in relation to graduate development.

These constructs draw on different stakeholder perspectives and whilst there is a discernible pattern of interactions between 1 and 2 which can be found enacted in courses and recruitment, 3 and 4 are more theoretical in nature and less evident as influences on practice. However we will argue that 3 and 4 require much greater involvement and that it is with these “higher order” concepts that the future lies. In the following case study we will present an expanded account of the four nodes as they might relate to aspects of a university course, specifically aimed at enhancing graduate employability.

Work and learning facets	Impact on university thinking and teaching practice
1 Key skills	Established and growing in importance
2 Personal development and progress files	Established and growing in importance
3 The learning organisation	Restricted to particular subject areas business education, and research agendas
4 Student identity formation	Restricted to particular subject areas business education, and research agendas

Table I.

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## **Integrative studies: a case study of key skills and and identity formation for employability**

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The University of Strathclyde Business Faculty offers undergraduate programmes through a modular course structure. In year 1, students are required to take modules in five subjects; in years 2 and 3, two principal subjects are studied; eligible students proceed to single or joint honours in year 4. This structure tended to militate against the development of interdisciplinary awareness and a coherent approach to transferable personal skills.

Following investigation of trends in business education and internal consultation the Faculty decided to modify the structure by introducing a new credit-bearing class, integrative studies, to form a spinal core of development in both transferable skills and interdisciplinary understanding over the first three years of the degree.

In year 1 (introduced in session 1999/2000), students are required to develop over both semesters the following five post-Dearing skill areas: communication, numeracy, use of specific computer technologies, problem solving and interpersonal skills.

Compulsory integrative studies classes in years 1, 2 and 3 enable students working in inter-disciplinary teams to share and integrate the knowledge and experience gained from their Principal Subjects into the broader business context. Year 2 focuses on decision making, negotiation, leadership and entrepreneurship where interpersonal skills development is further developed. Year 3 includes research methodology/project management, strategic management and ethics. This current year (2002/2003 at time of writing) we have 460 students in year 1, 490 in years 2 and 3. The first cohort graduated in 2003. The teaching teams include staff from all the Business School departments: Accountancy and Finance, Economics, Entrepreneurship, Human Resource Management, Law, Hotel School, Management Science, Marketing additionally Computer and Information Science, and Statistics and Modelling Science.

Reflective tools have been utilised, e.g. learning diaries in year 1; and reflective reports on negotiation and leadership practical exercises in year 2. By raising awareness of critical reflective working behaviour we are encouraging “reflective practitioners” who can manage their own careers. Three educational principles have been adopted for the class: active and problem-based learning, students taking responsibility for developing understanding and lecturer as facilitator of learning.

These principles guide: policy, practice and development of the programme; use of case studies, organisational projects, and other learning experiences; and inform dialogue with employers. This pedagogy is appropriate to fuller development of the class to better meet the conceptualisation of the new graduate workforce. Comprehensive evaluation of the class is an integral part of the development and draws on a range of staff/student views. Evaluation data is circulated within the teaching team and used to modify practice in all

areas of the course design. Further discussion of integrative studies is available (Belton *et al.*, 2001).

The class has been endorsed by all the employers involved as providing the key business skills that they are seeking. Employer representatives who have observed first-year student presentations have commented very favourably on the professionalism and effective team working displayed. Throughout the three years, business leaders and entrepreneurs have contributed a welcome insight from their professional practice and experience. Additionally we have consulted with human resource managers in developing our assessment criteria for reflection elements of decision making in teams, negotiation activities and leadership role plays.

### **Current status: coherence and academic validity**

There are challenges in motivating students where identification with principal subjects are paramount, and student “buy in” has not been totally achieved. Additionally, vertical and horizontal integration of the curriculum for integrative studies within the faculty has still to be achieved. The goal of alignment of objectives, learning design and assessment (Biggs, 1999) over the three years of the programme, is still being developed by the multi-disciplinary design and teaching team. Equally, integration across the Faculty with its traditional “silo” structure of academic disciplines related to business functions (Macfarlane and Ottewill, 2001) is still under way. It is intended that the conceptual framework and research approach outlined below will assist the teaching team in further developing the concept, design and practice of the class by providing an additional and wider frame of reference which can be translated into specific elements of learning outcome, teaching, and assessment.

The relationship of integrative studies to the forgoing discussion of KSPF, learning organisation and identity constructs can be illustrated by the matrix shown in Table II as an outline guide to the evolving direction of the programme. We portray the relationships between our four key nodes of education/employment relations, and four key elements of the class in terms of both design and experience of pedagogy, staff support, student response and employer perception.

### **Researching key skills: student and employer perceptions 2003**

The requirement on British universities to evidence provision of KSPF by 2004/2005 is a further spur to development. Integrative studies is well placed to meet that target date by continuing to develop its curriculum and enhancing reflective practice in ways which underpin personal development planning. We are treating this as an opportunity to research the work/learning interface by exploring questions such as:

- To what extent do students prepare throughout their University career for their futures?

Work and learning		Integrative studies (2002/2003)		
Learning facets related to work: policy, education and HRM literature	Pedagogy: as the aims, design of teaching; the learning process	Staff support: degree of buy-in and involvement	Student response: degree of buy-in and involvement	Employer perception: rhetoric and reality
1. Key Skills concept	Present and developing	Present and developing	Present and needs motivating. Influenced by silo thinking/task orientation	Present and explicit
2. PDP/PDF	Implementing 2003/2004	Partial and needs discussion	Under investigation	Aspect of recruitment and HRM
3. Learning org. context	Latent	Latent, may reside more in HRM silo	Unknown	Present in literature but variable in practice
4. Identity formation concept: EI; self-awareness	Not present but with potential	Potential and needs theorising and development of reflection	Under investigation	Unknown but may be expressed as "higher order skills"

Table II.



- What are students' perceptions of what employers want?
- To what extent do we provide students with the relevant experiences and tools?
- To what extent do we challenge and encourage critical thinking and reflection?

Our approach is twofold, focus groups with honours students from the cohort which has experienced all three years of integrative studies, and interviews with a number of local graduate employers.

### **Focus groups with final year students (2003)**

The objectives were to identify students perceptions of what skills graduate employers were seeking, to evaluate students understanding of which skills they had acquired throughout their period of four years of study at university and, specifically, to seek to evaluate the role of integrative studies in the development of skills, behaviours and reflection tools which could assist in self-assessment and self-efficacy. Additionally, we sought to identify whether there was evidence of a planned approach to career decision making. The majority of students had a clear understanding of what employers were looking for, i.e. team working skills, leadership, drive, enthusiasm, self-reliance, motivation and analytical skills. It was also recognised that a range of behavioural and experiential examples were required within a competency framework when completing application forms and that this was a complex and time consuming activity. Whilst this is consistent with the key skills language it was apparent that the whole activity was challenging and leading to reappraisal of their skills and competencies.

However, a theme which emerges across several focus groups can be expressed by a strong sense that employers demands were unrealistically high, they were seeking "superhumans" which tended to be related to attributes such as leadership, creativity, vision, personal drive and relevant work experience. There was a tendency to respond to these demands by exaggerating their abilities and experiences. Others felt a sense of powerless and inability to provide suitable evidence to meet these high levels of employer expectations, in some cases they withdrew from the exercise until they could acquire relevant experience unable to compete at this stage. Whilst this is understandable given the pressures of final year none the less it suggests that there was a lack of engagement with self-assessment and deeper reflection of self-awareness throughout degree studies.

### **Working with employers (2003/2004)**

We are working with major graduate recruiters, e.g. IBM, Scottish Power, Standard Life, Royal Bank of Scotland and conducting interviews with graduate selectors. At this early stage our research has involved analysis of recruitment and selection policies and practices and performance management



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systems as provided in company documentation. In the next semester we will extend our contacts to include small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are a significant contributor to the Scottish economy and recruiter of graduates. Our aim is to develop this research to provide a finer grain of understanding, and to further involve colleagues in the business community in the integrative studies curriculum. Ideally, we will be able to align key skills and personal development work more closely and critically with employer perceptions and practices, and also to involve business people more directly in the teaching practice of the classes.

## Conclusions

We have attempted to give a succinct account of current debates in the literature on graduate attributes as they are related to employment and lifelong learning, and to express our sense of the limitations of a “key skills” agenda as a guide to curriculum practice. We have described in some detail the development of a particular curricular innovation, “integrative studies” at the Strathclyde University Business School, which addresses key skills, and we have attempted to locate the current state of its development in a wider framework of work related facets. Those facets including the idea of a learning organisation and the concept of student identity formation as extensions of the debate on the relationship between undergraduate learning, career planning, graduate employment and lifelong learning. We have also outlined a research-based approach to further development of the curriculum which takes the experiences of students and the perceptions and practices of particular employers to be key influences, and actively solicits and analyses that material.

As we have indicated above there are still pedagogical challenges to be overcome in developing integrative studies, and this is the ongoing task of the multidisciplinary team within the Business School. Perhaps the key challenge lies in permeating the course with a more complex set of learning outcomes than that outlined by the KSPF agenda. The major task will be to engage staff and students in that project and enhancing our links with employers. By these means we hope to implement the thinking behind our argument for a more complex experience than that offered by KSPF.

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