

**LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #13**

Meeting skills and  
employability demands  
Thematic Peer Group Report

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# Reaching a shared understanding: how do universities address employability?

This report is the result of the work carried out in the EUA Thematic Peer Group “Meeting skills and employability demands” (hereafter referred to as “the group”, see also Annex).<sup>1</sup> The overall aim of the group was to explore how universities can ensure that their study programmes reflect the dynamic demands of society and the labour market, and address skills demands throughout the student experience at university.

The group started its reflection on the topic by considering employability as part of universities’ mission to educate, and to contribute in general to future graduates’ personal and professional development. Discussions among the group, complemented by a review of the relevant literature, showed that although the term “employability” is generally understood to address the need to equip students for the world of work, it can have different, overlapping meanings and foci:

- The spectrum of definitions ranges from a vision of employability in absolute terms, without reference to a clear employer, to specific needs from particular professional sectors.
- The concept of employability can be development-focused, but can also be seen as geared towards the immediate needs of the labour market. The latter may lead to a narrow understanding of employability that profiles higher education as ancillary to market needs, thus undermining the intrinsic value of university education. A response to this would be to emphasise the role of higher education in educating the graduates of tomorrow and shaping citizenship. However, in the group’s view, there should be no contradiction between educating future professionals and future citizens. Moreover, employability does not necessarily mean being employed by a company or industry in a defined field of work: it is broader as a concept, and also covers social activities, such as engaging with local communities.

- National contexts may play a role in the way universities address employability. For instance, some countries have developed national schemes to support and boost universities’ interactions with employers.

The group found that universities may not have a clear definition of “employability” within the institution, but instead commonly use definitions of “graduate attributes” or “graduate identity”, with defined aims (such as students acquiring solid knowledge in their fields of study) and graduate outcomes. The attributes that graduates should ideally acquire typically include a mix of transversal and discipline-specific skills. Such definitions are closely connected to the student journey through higher education. Therefore, employability is not only defined from the perspective of the labour market or employers, but also from the perspective of who graduates will become in the future as a result of their learning journey in higher education, and how higher education provides for graduates over a career span.

Moreover, this learning journey would not end with a university degree, and employability is not attained once and for all upon students’ graduation. While a university degree is needed and appreciated by employers, that degree education may no longer be sufficient to ensure employability throughout one’s lifetime. In this regard, how universities engage with lifelong learning is crucial: skills development does not end upon graduating from formal education. Universities may offer lifelong learning in multiple ways (continuing professional development for graduates, non-degree credits, certificates or courses, initial education offers as part-time arrangements for adult learners, etc.). Therefore, institutional commitment to employability and skills demand should be seen as multifaceted – and not limited to curricular and extra-curricular activities for students during their first foray into higher education.

The group members agreed that the interplay between professional, technical and transversal skills is crucial. Employers have a demonstrated interest in transversal skills, even in jobs with a strong technical profile.

It is vital to address employability at the curriculum level, as this offers the possibility to work on learning outcomes, graduate attributes and pedagogy in an integrated or “connected”<sup>2</sup> approach. The role and goals of internships and work placements within the curriculum need to be considered. This raises the questions of how a continuum can be created between education and training, and how training can meet both employers’ demands and the academic requirements in terms of content and duration.

Beyond the curriculum, there are various ways in which students may acquire skills, especially transversal skills. In addition to the classroom, where a variety and combination of teaching methods could be used, skills acquisition and training also takes place through informal or non-formal learning, outside the classroom, or in a mixture of co-curricular and extra-curricular situations. This poses the question of recognition for learning that takes place outside the curriculum and is not credited as part of it.

The group mapped the main areas for possible improvements in Figure 1:

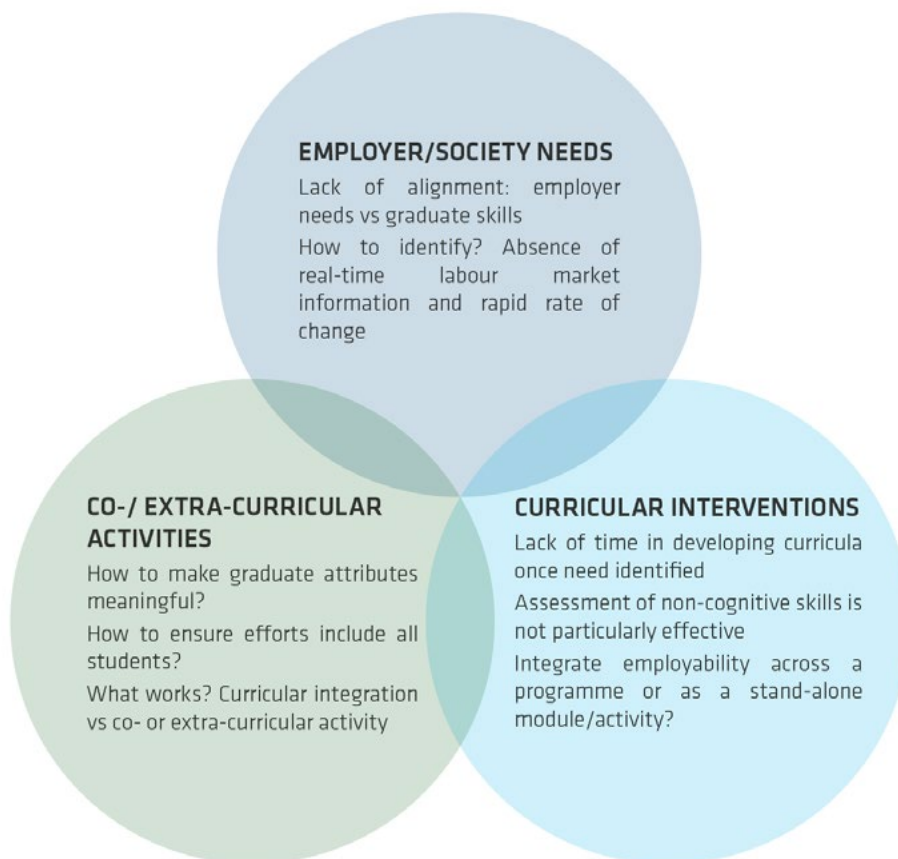


Figure 1: Main areas for possible improvements. Co-curricular activities denominate structured learning activities that complement the formal curriculum, e.g., skills labs. Extra-curricular activities denominate activities separate from the curriculum.

# Challenges identified

The group identified three main challenges that universities face when addressing skills and employability demands.

## CHALLENGE #1

**There is an inherent tension between what employers may want, what students may want and what the university may actually deliver through a study programme.**

Designing and delivering a study programme often involves engaging not only with the university community (including academic staff and students), but also with industry, the third (service) sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the local community. Some group members, for instance, pointed to their institution's strong presence as an actor in the economic and societal development of their city or region. At the same time, academic staff and students may be concerned not to dilute the sense of academic activities connected to their subject fields.

Importantly, group members also pointed to the difficulty of communicating with stakeholders outside academia, such as employers, using a common language. For instance, how the curriculum manages to develop students' skills does not matter to employers in the same way as it does to university representatives. This relates to the overall difficulty, for universities, of engaging with employers in meaningful ways.

Moreover, employers are not a homogeneous group. In some disciplines, it is difficult to define who the potential employers actually are. It is also commonly assumed

that engaging with employers will provide a clearer view of what is needed, whereas employers at times cannot themselves explicitly state what they need.

As a final point, there is an inherent tension between the immediate needs of the labour markets (which however may not be immediately identified) and the perspective of educating for long- or longer-term skills. Universities point to the fluid and sometimes changing requests from companies and employers.

## CHALLENGE #2

**Meeting skills demands requires differentiated approaches.**

A commonly shared concern is that, in some disciplines, it may be more difficult to address employability and to have it reflected in learning outcomes. Other aspects to consider are inherent academic conservatism within certain disciplines, or, depending on national contexts, a lack of flexibility for degree programmes which means that some of them cannot easily accommodate the further development of generic skills and interdisciplinary collaboration. Beyond disciplinary boundaries, differentiated approaches may also be required if universities think about employability not only in terms of educating their students to become higher achievers or the "best" students, but to embrace a breadth of experiences that different students, with their own different profiles, may bring into their jobs in the future.

Moreover, different study levels may require different approaches to employability. Bachelor's and Master's degree students may not necessarily have the same priorities, and the range of possibilities can be large, from broadening horizons by experimenting with different workplaces to focusing on more targeted work placements or internships. PhD candidates are in a more specific situation: while encouraged to look beyond academic careers, they may not all benefit from skills training or links with industry through their doctoral programmes.

Finally, the way universities approach employability may also heavily depend on their national operational and policy frameworks. For example, what universities offer beyond initial education is closely connected with how higher education is situated within the broader lifelong learning ecosystem in their country, where different policies may shape universities' approaches (labour policies, actions from other education sectors, regulations on recognition for prior learning, etc.). This interconnection with other lifelong learning actors plays a role in the institution's life beyond learning and teaching as such: it also has consequences on strategies for student recruitment, funding, engaging with alumni, etc.

## **CHALLENGE #3**

### **There is a real issue of equity and equality.**

While universities commonly situate skills development and employability in an interplay between curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular interventions, group members acknowledged that extra-curricular activities, in particular, cannot reach all students, or be proposed to every student, in the same way. The curriculum does offer a chance of fairness in terms of establishing a learning experience that is offered to all. But work associated with extra-curricular activities typically does not fit the reality of students with caring responsibilities or who are subject to strict stipend rules (which may forbid them to work). In addition, international students' employability poses even more specific challenges (such as meeting conditions for obtaining a work or residence permit upon graduation) that go beyond their academic or professional profile.

# Recommendations

The group proposes the following recommendations to further and better address skills and employability challenges at higher education institutions.

## RECOMMENDATION #1:

### Recognise and give value to employability as an institutional endeavour

Examples of practice provided by group members tended to demonstrate that barriers to promoting employability are not inherent to certain types of curriculum. Rather, such barriers often result from a lack of clear commitment at the institutional level to establishing employability as a distinct component of the institution's educational offerings.

In order to embed employability in the curriculum and the overall student experience, institutions need to recognise and give value to it as a central agenda item. This necessitates overarching institutional commitment and vision.

Several of the following approaches may support this.

- **Making graduate attributes meaningful.** What is specific to one institution's educational offering, and should it be highlighted as such?
- **A flexible and nuanced approach at the institutional level** is necessary. While a university-level definition of "employability" is needed, faculties or departments may find it useful to also develop their own, complementary, **field-specific definition**. This definition could be jointly elaborated with relevant stakeholders in their field (employers, representatives from professional

organisations, etc.). Such a collaborative approach would also help to identify field-specific skills required for the curriculum. Appropriate participatory and co-creation processes, involving stakeholders both from the university community (staff, students) and from outside it, should be set up in order to address this task. The specificities of each study programme also need to be emphasised. Not every study programme can relate to a specific occupation on the labour market, but each programme has specificities that can enhance employability. Attention to employability may be reflected in the design of learning and assessment activities addressing transversal skills such as teamwork, public speaking, etc.

- Addressing employability requires teamwork across the institution. To make employability a horizontal matter across the institution, **a fine-tuned coordination and continuum is needed between and within study programmes, academic faculties and departments, and different support units** (the university's career development office, units in charge of work placements, quality assurance units, etc.). Likewise, the institutional endeavour towards employability should clearly relate to the different responsibilities exercised by different groups. For instance, academics may not instinctively embrace employability perspectives as something they should address through learning outcomes or in their classroom but may rather refer to their career development office for employability-related conversations.
- The institutional commitment towards employability requires **structures, support and evaluation** at the institutional level.

- Identifying and connecting with relevant employers or stakeholders outside the university is not easy. Examples of practice from group members use a mixture of resources, for which different university functions are responsible: these include alumni surveys and contributions, career development offices, local networks (chambers of commerce, etc.), and connections with individual teachers and programme directors. This is another reason why coordination and cooperation between various units and people within the university are necessary for success.

#### ◉ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

##### *University of Sheffield (UK)*

The University of Sheffield has an Employability Action Plan that is designed to take ownership of employability and provide institutional leadership on the matter. The action plan, devised by the careers service<sup>3</sup> and championed by the vice-president for education, provides the necessary scaffolding to support activity within and beyond academic departments. It ensures a focus on employability across the whole institution, rather than simply placing the responsibility on individual departments and expecting them to produce the required results alone. The starting point of the approach is to define the attributes that a graduate of a programme should embody, which clearly speaks to the employability agenda.

## RECOMMENDATION #2:

### Articulate curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular interventions in a meaningful way

Group members agreed that the articulation of **co-curricular and extra-curricular learning, as well as learning within the curriculum**, is key to an integrated approach to employability. Students can be engaged outside of their courses, and such engagements also need to become meaningful parts of the student learning path. From this perspective, the **flexibility** of the curriculum, as well as the institution's autonomy to use this flexibility, are crucial.

More precisely:

- **Internships and work placements**, as places for creating professional experience, should be carefully designed **within the curriculum**, to meet both employers' demands and academic requirements in terms of content and duration. Importantly, institutions should also prepare and offer support to students before and after the actual work placement period, as well as providing them with opportunities within the curriculum to reflect on their experience and the learning gain acquired through it.
- Internships, which are one of the most frequently used means of boosting students' employability, are not always easy to assess. Clear requirement frameworks should be available to students, staff and supervisors in the workplace.
- Employability within the curriculum should not only be about internships or work placements. Student feedback collected by the group showed that students appreciate **a mixture of curricular interventions**, e.g. combinations of internship modules, practical courses and different teaching methods (project-based learning, community-based learning, research-based learning, etc., possibly including real-life based, authentic assessment).
- Examples of practice from group members indicate that, in order to ensure that curricular interventions on employability are **sustainable**, developing a pilot (across a few programmes or involving several groups) may be fruitful for assessing and demonstrating impact and value. Institutional interventions are then needed to make this impact and value last and grow across the institution.
- Institutions should **approach co-curricular and extra-curricular activities related to employability in a centrally coordinated way**. It may be hard for each faculty or department to carry out such activities alone, and not all can reach out to employers or the local community in the same way.



- Institutions could devise a **fair system for recognising extra-curricular activities that are not credit-bearing**, for instance with digital badges in collaboration with external stakeholders (employers, the local community, other higher education institutions and possibly authorities). More generally, the question of recognition and validation for non-formal and informal learning at universities is high on European policy agendas, and universities would benefit from contributing to this reflection, based on their students' experiences of extra-curricular activities.

#### ◉ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

##### *University of Jyväskylä (Finland) and Tbilisi State University (Georgia)*

Attention to employability may be **integrated into the institutional curriculum policy**, as is the case at the University of Jyväskylä.<sup>4</sup> Their policy includes the development of transversal skills (problem-solving, creativity, self-directedness, entrepreneurial mindset, critical thinking, communication and collaboration) needed for contemporary working life across all study programmes. Curriculum design needs to ensure that teaching and active collaboration with the world of work systematically support the development of such skills.

Students and stakeholders (partner organisations, employers, etc.), as well as professors of practice, are typically part of the curriculum development process. This participatory approach to curriculum development is also to be found at Tbilisi State University, where students, graduates and employers directly participate through programme committees, surveys or various needs/satisfaction assessments. Study-programme coordinators, quality assurance office representatives and the career development office foster identification, connection and collaboration in the curriculum development process. Faculty-based quality assurance offices and programme coordinators also conduct studies on job markets and surveys of graduate employers to identify skill gaps. Curriculum development and ensuring that study programmes meet the market's and society's demands are shared responsibilities between the study-programme coordinators, central and faculty quality assurance offices, and the career development office.

#### ◉ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

##### *University College Cork (Ireland)*

How can equal opportunities be ensured for students when it is neither appropriate nor possible to offer high-quality placements in every year of every study programme? University College Cork has articulated a self-evaluation tool for employability<sup>5</sup> in support of its Academic Strategy. This tool suggests different curricular approaches with increasing levels of integration of employability, from including it as an introductory element to making it the focus of a learning activity or assessment, or the central design focus of a whole programme.

#### ◉ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

##### *Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania)*

The "Product Development Project" (PDP) is a module offered in Bachelor's degree programmes at Kaunas University of Technology, amounting to at least 12 ECTS units. The PDP brings together students from different fields of study into interdisciplinary teams that work with researchers and social partners to create a product or develop a service that addresses the real-life challenges or needs of defined users. Such products or services could be artworks, apps, food products, new materials, marketing strategies, building design or any other innovative solutions initiating a welcome change and added value in society. Students get to know professional realities through developing their projects from concept to implementation. "Social partners" involved in the PDP include a broad range of Lithuanian and international education institutions, public sector organisations, business companies and NGOs.

## RECOMMENDATION #3:

### Make learning visible, self-reflective and part of a lifelong perspective

Addressing employability skills does not only mean enabling graduates to find a job or create one. It also means making students aware of, and agile about, their own employability – capitalising on what and how they have learnt. It is about empowering students as self-reflective, lifelong learners, and ultimately developing their personal responsibility for their learning.

The following recommendations for institutions encompass this goal.

- Create space in the curriculum and support measures for enabling students to **integrate and explicitly identify skill development**, for both transversal and professional skills developed within the curriculum or at the margins of it.<sup>6</sup>
- Promote project-based and real-life-based teaching approaches that can also be useful for **interdisciplinary collaboration**, and for **involving partners** outside the academic community (local community representatives, industry and companies, etc.).
- Seek how to connect with other actors playing a role in lifelong learning in the institution's learning ecosystem or immediate local/national environment, in ways that would demonstrate the added value for learning and teaching. These actors include the informal and non-formal education sectors.

- Take every opportunity to make students more aware of their own learning, and include reflection on their learning, so that they are able to situate themselves on their learning path and to communicate their skills to future employers.
- Finally, in line with this commitment towards lifelong learning for graduates, institutions should aim to **build a lifelong relationship with their graduates**. Developing alumni networks and career offices may contribute to this.

#### EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

##### *Politehnica University of Bucharest (Romania)*

To assist PhD graduates who could gain from preparing to enter the labour market outside academia, the Politehnica University of Bucharest has developed three projects<sup>7</sup> **on the development of entrepreneurial skills for PhD and postdoctoral students**, supported by EU Structural Funds. Each of these projects offers training in entrepreneurship, followed by individual work on business project proposals, training in different companies, modules on the valorisation of scientific results and reflection on the curriculum of doctoral programmes. The latter involves representatives from companies and employers, and could also serve as a pilot for enhancing curriculum development with an entrepreneurial outlook in other study programmes.

# Conclusions

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Addressing employability and skills demands at universities should be understood in the broadest sense of relating higher education to society, through educating and training future graduates as professionals and citizens. In this context, taking action to enhance the employability of students goes beyond meeting labour-market needs, or helping graduates to enter a defined field of work, to also cover who they will become in the future as a result of their learning journey at university. It is clearly a challenge to find the right balance between what society (including employers) may need, what students may want and what universities may actually deliver.

The group proposes a set of recommendations that emphasise the importance of making employability a central agenda item at institutions, with all due

coordination and articulated responsibilities between different faculties and departments, support services and administrative units. It is also suggested that the interplay between curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular interventions should be clearly identified and worked on. Finally, because students are at the centre of all learning, the group believes that it is crucial to empower them by making learning visible, self-reflective and part of a lifelong perspective – thus contributing to educating students who are aware of, and agile about, their own skills and employability.

# Annex

## EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

As part of its work on learning and teaching, EUA carries out activities with the aim of engaging with university communities in charge of learning and teaching. One of these activities is coordinating the work of a set of Thematic Peer Groups. The groups consist of universities selected through a call for participation to:

- discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European universities, and to
- contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key recommendations on the selected theme.

The 2020 Thematic Peer Groups, active from March 2020 to February 2021, invited universities to participate in peer learning and exchange of experience, while at the same time contributing to EUA's policy work as the voice of European universities in policy debates, such as the Bologna Process.

Each group was chaired by one university and supported by a coordinator from the EUA secretariat. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the groups met in multiple online meetings organised throughout 2020 instead of gathering in person at group members' institutions, as was common practice in previous years. This setting entailed many challenges, but it also provided an occasion to address the respective group themes in the context of the pandemic, which threw a spotlight on issues related to all three themes – environmental sustainability, employability and the skills challenge, and equity and inclusion.

During their online meetings, the group members discussed key challenges related to the theme, how to address the challenges through innovative practices and

approaches, and what institutional policies and processes support the enhancement in learning and teaching. In addition, the groups were welcome to discuss any other issue that was relevant to the theme. Members of the groups also contributed to the 2021 European Learning & Teaching Forum from 18 to 19 February, where focus groups based on the work of the Thematic Peer Groups were organised to obtain feedback on their results.

### **Composition of the Thematic Peer Group “Meeting skills and employability demands”**

(starting with the group chair and by alphabetical order of the country name)

- University College Cork, Ireland: Paul McSweeney (chair), Catherine O'Mahony
- University of Jyväskylä, Finland: Marja-Leena Laakso and Anna Grönlund
- Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia: Irma Grzelidze and Tinatin Gabrichidze
- Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania: Lina Gaižiūnienė
- University Politehnica of Bucharest, Romania: Horia Iovu, Iuliana Biru (student)
- ITMO University, Russia: Maria Ososkova
- University of Sheffield, United Kingdom: Wyn Morgan
- Group coordinator: Thérèse Zhang, Deputy Director for Higher Education Policy, EUA

# Endnotes

1 \_\_\_\_\_ The contents of this report were first presented during a focus group that took place as part of the 2021 European Learning & Teaching Forum. The group would like to thank the participants of the focus group for their feedback and further input.

2 \_\_\_\_\_ Dilly Fung's work on the connected curriculum (<http://bit.ly/3cfk1xw>, accessed 02/03/2021) could be one reference in addressing this - including, among others, tailor-made approaches by institutions.

3 \_\_\_\_\_ See <http://bit.ly/3qt53cx> (accessed 02/03/2021).

4 \_\_\_\_\_ See <https://bit.ly/3rrgCT1> (accessed 22/03/2021).

5 \_\_\_\_\_ See <http://bit.ly/30fAGfa> (accessed 02/03/2021).

6 \_\_\_\_\_ A similar recommendation was also proposed by the EUA Thematic Peer Group "Empower students for their future professional life and civic engagement" in 2017.

Examples of ways to apply this included adapting learning and teaching methods to put greater emphasis on transversal skill development combined with discipline-specific knowledge acquisition and application (e.g., service learning, research-based learning, problem-based learning and work-based learning), and taking a cross-disciplinary approach as a key way to add value by maximising synergies between different disciplines and exposing students to a wider range of issues. See Loukkola, T., and Dakovic, G. (eds.), 2017, *EUA's Learning and Teaching Initiative. Report from the 2017 Thematic Peer Groups. Learning & Teaching Paper #1* (Brussels, EUA), pp. 8-11. <http://bit.ly/2MUpMZa> (accessed 02/03/2021).

7 \_\_\_\_\_ See <http://bit.ly/3evVRSz> (accessed 02/03/2021).

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.

This paper is one of a series of reports specifically focused on learning and teaching. It is designed to gather the knowledge and experiences of experts on the topic from across Europe. EUA's activities in learning and teaching aim at enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education provision, underline the importance of learning and teaching as a core mission and advocate for learning and teaching activities to be geared towards student learning and success.