

DEVELOPING EMPLOYABILITY: A BEYOND-DISCIPLINARY TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO HIGHER AND POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

AN INTERACTIVE PRESENTATION

Melanie Booth, The Quality Assurance Commons for Higher & Postsecondary Education
Jeff King, University of Central Oklahoma
Niesha Ziehmke, Stella and Charles Guttman Community College

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Preparing graduates for employment is quickly becoming an expected outcome of higher educational programs, regardless of discipline or degree level. At the same time, the 21st century workplace is increasingly complex, interdependent, and dynamic, and workforce participants must be able to continually learn, reflect, adapt, change, and grow. Instead of focusing on graduates' employment—with metrics such as job placement and starting salaries that are frequently called upon as measures of quality—we suggest focusing on developing learners' *employability*. Employability is “the ability to find, create and sustain work and learning across lengthening working lives and multiple work settings” (developing Employability, 2018), and thus involves people skills, problem-solving abilities, and professional strengths that graduates will need to thrive in the changing world of work across their lifespans.

As Vaill (1996) suggested more than two decades ago, modern life is like “permanent white water,” full of novel situations and messy problems that require people to be able to make changes in themselves to address not only the know-what and know-how, but also the know-why of a given subject. The metaphor of permanent white water holds particularly true for 21st century work. Employees must be able to think critically, identify and solve problems creatively, engage with others collaboratively, communicate effectively, approach new situations differently, and learn continuously. These are *Essential Employability Qualities*, and they are not specific to any discipline, field, or industry, but are applicable to most work-based, professional environments. They represent the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences that help ensure that graduates are not only ready for their first job, but also support learners' foundation for a lifetime of engaging participation in the rapidly changing workplace of the 21st century and their social and economic mobility.

The Essential Employability Qualities Certification: The EEQ CERT

In this session, facilitators highlighted a new approach to quality assurance that is being co-designed with 27 higher educational programs from 14 institutions. This learning-based approach—the EEQ CERT—focuses on certifying programs that develop learners' Essential Employability Qualities. Many of the EEQs build upon existing learning frameworks and outcomes embedded in many academic programs, and the qualities can be appropriately adapted to degree and certificate programs of different levels, timeframes, and modalities. There are several existing academic frameworks that generally reflect aspects of the EEQs, and while many of the EEQs are included in existing aspects of some programs, by necessity they have applied, work-based components, and should be addressed and developed in all students equitably. Students need multiple opportunities to develop these competencies in work-relevant contexts and settings so they are “job ready” upon graduation, so experiential learning is a key component of any EEQ CERT program.

STLR at the University of Central Oklahoma

One of the 27 partner programs in the co-design of the EEQ CERT is the Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) at the University of Central Oklahoma. STLR is how UCO implements transformative learning, focusing on developing students' beyond-disciplinary skills and expanding students' perspectives of their relationships to self, others, community, and environment. As a partner in the EEQ CERT design process, STLR has emphasized that the dual focus of preparing students for employability as well as addressing the social good of higher education is a “win-win” for students and institutions. The visible institutional record of students' transformative learning—the actual Student Transformative Learning Record—also supports students for employability as it can make visible to potential employers what students have experienced and learned beyond a traditional transcript with courses and grades. In addition, STLR has an active employer advisory board that informs its practices and supports a deep connection to graduate employability.

Stella and Howard Guttman Community College

Guttman Community College in New York City, another of the EEQ CERT design partners, provides all of its students with multiple high impact practices, learning communities, intrusive advisement, guided pathways, experiential learning, and keeps both occupational and academic learning at the center of the curriculum. Two particular features—the Ethnographies of Work (EOW) course and the Experiential Learning Pathways—have deeply informed the development of the EEQ CERT. EOW is a 2-sequence course (EOW I in the Fall; and EOW II in the Spring) in which students master ethnographic methods and use workplaces as research sites to practice and refine their ethnographic skills. Students then focus on a critical analysis of the workplace, using a social science lens (including historical, anthropological, and sociological approaches), and use their ethnographic skills to conduct original research to better understand the worlds of work. Additionally, through Guttman's Experiential Learning Pathway, students have multiple opportunities to apply their learning in work-relevant contexts such as through optional and required internships, community engagement and service learning projects, and campus-based work.

As both STLR and Guttman's programs have illuminated, traditional forms of education and training – the simple transmission of knowledge, skills, and processes – are no longer sufficient as global and local conditions continually change, technology automates, and people must work differently. Transformative learning approaches that focus on beyond-disciplinary skills and developing people's capacities to see and think differently are more critical than ever, and represent Essential Employability Qualities people will need for the dynamic world of work in the 21st century.

SELECT REFERENCES

Developing Employability. About. <https://developingemployability.edu.au/about/>.

Vaill, P. (1996). *Learning as a way of being: Strategies for survival in a world of permanent white water*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

For further information, contact the lead presenter:

Melanie Booth

Executive Director

The Quality Assurance Commons for Higher & Postsecondary Education

Phone: (503) 327-1351

E-Mail: melanie@theqacommons.org