

Helena Mitchell

became increasingly interested in issues of student employability as part of her work and with the help of an ESCalate grant has been able to conduct further research into this crucial area. ►

Student Employability - what are the issues?

My introduction to ESCalate was in the spring of 2003. I was invited to be part of a discussion with a number of colleagues from other universities who were already involved in subject centre working, and was fascinated by the different projects being undertaken. The opportunity to work with ESCalate came shortly after that. The HEA was funding a number of projects on developing employability for undergraduate students, and ESCalate was to run one of these. I had become increasingly interested in student employability since becoming course leader for a new Early Childhood Studies Degree. Most programmes in a school of Education lead to Qualified Teacher Status, so have a vocational outcome. With an Early Childhood Studies degree students wanted to know what

their career options were on graduating; a question that is even more pertinent now. Through my involvement in the project with ESCalate, and ESECT (Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team) I discovered, of course, that employability is far more than a focus on career options, or indeed on transferable skills, but involves a far deeper interrogation of knowledge, understanding and values.

Working with Dr Julie Anderson, who was leading the project for ESCalate, was a great opportunity. We set up a small research project, trawled a range of sources to gather literature about approaches to employability, then gathered data about student views on employability and career options. We collected data from colleagues at other institutions. What did employability mean to them? How should HEIs engage with



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employability? The range of answers were on a continuum from very positive to very negative! Analysis of the data threw up varied and interesting results which we presented in different contexts. One of the benefits was attending employability-focused conferences and discovering many new contacts in the field. Some of the work undertaken by colleagues in other subject associations was revealing and helped the development of our project, deepening our understanding of how the curriculum needs to foster student self knowledge, reflection, and a confident engagement with life long learning.



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For our project, Julie assembled the data into two ESCalate publications on employability, one for students¹ and one for staff². We also presented papers at a number of conferences including UCET and BERA.

Involvement with ESCalate was a clear benefit. But it was also the opportunity that ESCalate offered to go beyond subject boundaries, and to work with academics in different disciplines which provided a valuable resource. Because education is often practice based it feels as though it is in a half way position between practice and academic theory. Working with academics from

different disciplines dispelled that view, both providing access to networks and resources from other subject areas, and deeper perspectives on approaches to employability and the content and structure of degree programmes.

Since its completion, the employability project has continued to inform our planning for student programmes. It has enabled engagement in relevant research and fostered new networks. Not only are the published resources very useful, but the positive and energetic support of the ESCalate team at Bristol has been invaluable.

¹ <http://escalate.ac.uk/7197>

² <http://escalate.ac.uk/2988>