

Surprised by success: An interim evaluation of an international career development programme

Kathleen Houston

Career guidance professionals and employability teachers aim to develop graduate employability characteristics in response to employer and CBI demands for 'future fit' graduate entrants to the labour market (CBI 2009). Part of this 'future fitness' relies on a global outlook and 'cultural agility' (AGR, CIHE, CFR 2011). The 'Start your International Career' programme at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) aims to promote and develop global career awareness and graduate capacities. A case study approach was used to examine the experience from the first cohort to seek out indications of potential effective practice to benefit teachers and careers professionals working in this subject area. Positive outcomes suggest that an incentivised and diverse programme can build international career awareness and global work competencies.



Introduction

As a career guidance professional and employability lecturer, I believe I can support students and graduates in 'being and becoming' (Barnett 2012: 76). I want them to be confident and competent career starters. Recently at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), we have been 'surprised' by the success of a particular employability programme, designed to encourage graduates to be more globally aware. This article will explore and discuss the ingredients of this programme and its outcomes, in order to understand why and whether it was successful and how this can be developed and shared. I will be sharing insights on behalf of the team who organised this programme.

Employability and career management courses and workshops within higher education are part of the landscape of the student experience and their learning. Most universities offer embedded employability learning within courses as well as *ad hoc* optional provision through careers services and other career enhancement schemes. Lack of student engagement with these initiatives is the constant lament from many of those with an interest in employability and career development for students and graduates. Graduates are accused of lacking 'future fitness' (CBI 2009) and it is argued that UK graduates are geographically narrow in their career aspirations, with regard to the global labour market (Guardian 2011; AGR, CIHE, CFE 2011).

Employability itself, as a concept and as a measure of graduate success, is a slippery, misleading and often misunderstood term. However for the purposes of this review, I have chosen the following definition, as it encompasses the broad understanding of employability most often agreed upon as:

a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

(Jones cited in Future Fit CBI 2009)

The programme at the University of Central Lancashire, entitled 'Start your International Career' was prompted by an awareness of the employability needs of both home and international students. The programme team wanted to offer a globally relevant employability learning experience through a series of interactive workshops, led by different teachers and speakers. While some sessions were led by university staff from the careers and employability service,

other invited, external speakers were chosen for their expertise in certain international careers topics. The overall aim of the programme was to support the development of global career awareness and the skills and attributes demanded by the global job marketplace. Trialled throughout February and March 2013, there were fourteen, hour-long workshops offered on the following topics.

The International Career programme – workshops

- Global graduate employability
- Developing entrepreneurial skills for an international career
- Teaching abroad – talking TEFL
- Working in the US and Canadian summer camps
- Emotional intelligence and graduate employability
- Boost your job prospects with work experience in China
- Commercial awareness for international careers
- Business culture and etiquette in the Arab world
- Gaining international experience whilst in Preston
- Getting an international internship in the UK
- Getting a job abroad
- Career start China
- Creating CVs and covering letters for global careers
- Erasmus work placements

Motivating students to attend

A major concern at the outset was whether we could entice students to attend a programme of workshops additional to their main area of study. As an incentive and added benefit for those who attended, there was the opportunity to apply for a range of overseas work placements organised through UCLAN and partners to supplement and complement the aims of the programme. This incentivisation aspect was explicitly indicated in promotional material. Only students who attended three workshops or more were

entitled to apply for specific funded work placements abroad. These had been sourced through the UCLan International Office and by staff involved in organising the programme. These funded placements, thirteen in total, were located in Cyprus (at the UCLAN Cyprus campus), in China at UCLan China (Shanghai) and SIFT (Shanghai International Foreign Trade), in China and in Thailand (Teaching English through English Teaching Abroad) and in France (at the Nimes Chamber of Commerce). There were an additional four internships in the UK for international students, who wanted a UK specific placement.

Methodology for evaluation

The organising team wanted to assess the available attendance and review data from the programme to evaluate whether we could count this as a 'success'. A key limitation was the absence of formal student evaluation form evidence. This was an error in the planning stage and while all speakers commented on the enthusiasm and engagement of the students in workshops (informal evaluation evidence), we failed to organise end of workshop evaluations. Nonetheless it was decided that available data and opportunistic sampling was still worthwhile for this review process.

Four key areas were the focus:

1. Content of workshops
2. Attendance at workshops
3. The student perspective
4. The staff perspective

At one level, these questions are problematic to answer in any definitive way. However the purpose of the case study approach was to explore areas of the programme experience to seek out hints of potential effective practice to benefit teachers and careers professionals working in this subject area. This initial review does not claim to arrive at definitive judgments, due to limitations in terms of evaluation data. Nonetheless it was considered worthwhile to assess the programme effectiveness in an interim way and a decision was taken to pursue unavailable data for a future evaluation at a later date. For this article we focused on the existing, preliminary data.

I was keen to interpret what I could from available

data, because I simply wanted to understand whether it was possible to 'teach' or prompt global employability development in students. The motive for considering attendance figures was not to prove or even suggest any kind of quantitative validity but rather to track initial interest and continued attendance as a qualitative indicator of engagement. As a broadly qualitative review, I decided to give weight to 'soft' indicators (Mazey 2004, Dewson, Eccles, Tackey and Jackson 2000) which suggested effectiveness of the programme as a whole. Initially I chose to weigh up programme content against the competencies recommended by the AGR Global Graduates study (AGR *et al* 2011). As formal student evaluation data for each workshop was not available, attendance and ongoing willingness to attend more than one workshop were rated as indicators of satisfaction. Student perspectives were considered from the viewpoint of continued and persistent attendance and success in the competition for overseas placements. It was hoped that attendance at workshops would make them perform better in the interview process for the limited number of placements. Finally staff perspectives on the experience of the programme were assessed and reflected upon.

Evaluation of evidence

1. Content of workshops

The graduate global outlook or mindset championed by many employers and by AGR *et al* (2011) goes beyond multilingual ability and cultural awareness. Increasingly, global mindedness is being classified as a rich patchwork of characteristics, encompassing the usual graduate career skills (teamwork, problem solving, communication, time management, IT skills, numeracy, customer awareness - Prospects online) as well as additional 'global competences'. The authors argue that universities should be encouraging additional international awareness, and supporting the development of more globally relevant employability attributes. AGR *et al* (2011) set out to explore global graduate employability and it seemed worthwhile to use the global competencies identified as a measure of the appropriateness of the content of the programme workshops.

Figure 1 provides an initial assessment of workshop content mapped against the required global competencies. The sequence of workshop titles came about through team discussions. The competencies did not form the basis for the choice of workshops selected for the programme. Only after the programme, did it occur to us to assess how and whether we had offered learning that might develop graduates, according to these required competencies. In fact as we recalled our initial planning meetings, we realised that the selection of workshop titles was somewhat random and principally based on expertise and interest within the team. Nonetheless, in our review it seemed useful to compare workshop titles and broad content against the competencies to determine whether there was alignment.

Below is the basic comparison review, which is subject to assumptions I have made on session/workshop plan content rather than observations of the actual sessions. In considering the fourteen session plans, it was clear that the most common theme lay in encouraging a more global mindset and the development of globally required employability skills. This was indicated in the aims and objectives for each session, activities and summaries.

Broadly, it appears that most competencies were matched by workshop content in a reasonably aligned way. It appeared that the full programme acted as a regular and persistent encouragement to more globally minded thinking. For example, in the workshop 'Global graduate employability', students were prompted to reflect on employability in a global context and to consider whether they were suited to 'going global'. In 'Developing entrepreneurial skills for an international career' the focus was on expectations of global employers and self-employment with an international perspective. The 'Emotional Intelligence (EI) and global graduate employability' workshop centred on developing students' awareness of EI and how it is a key aspect of global graduate employability. Cultural awareness and 'cultural agility' (AGR *et al* 2011) within the workshop 'Boost your job prospects with work experience in China' developed students' awareness of working life in Asia. Similarly, the workshop 'Business culture and etiquette in the Arab world' aimed to strengthen understanding of the Arab business environment. The 'Getting a job abroad'

Surprised by success: An interim evaluation...

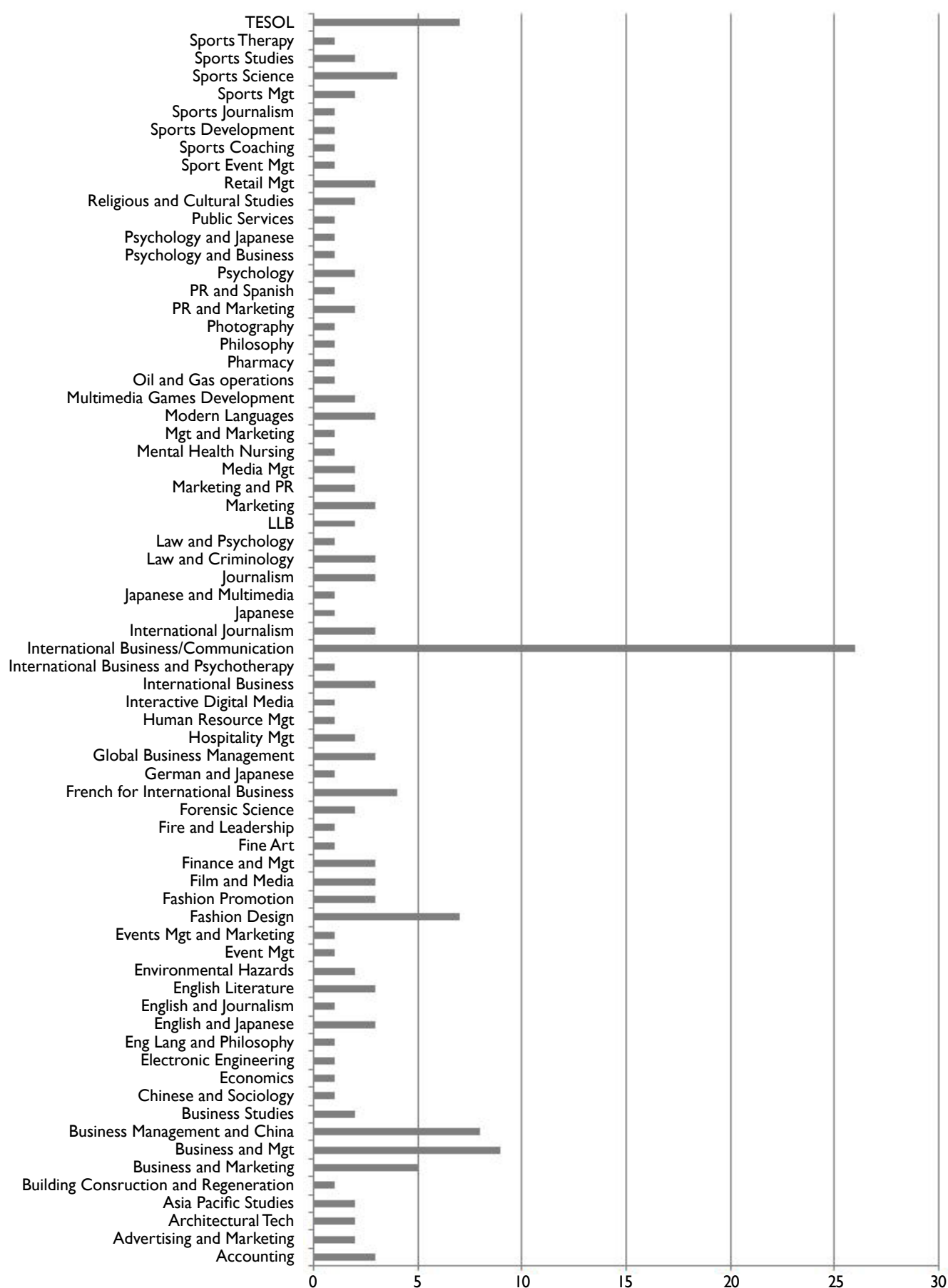
Global competency	Workshop/title	Alignment/Match
1 A global mindset – the ability to see the world from a ‘cosmopolitan viewpoint’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global Graduate Employability Emotional Intelligence and Graduate Global Employability 	Good
2 Global knowledge – knowledge of global business activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global Graduate Employability Emotional Intelligence and Graduate Global Employability Commercial awareness Developing Entrepreneurial Skills for an International Career 	Good
3 Cultural agility – the ability to understand the perspectives of individuals from different cultures... the ability to cope with and adapt to living in different environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business Culture and Etiquette in the Arab World Emotional Intelligence and Graduate Global Employability 	Good
4 Advanced communication skills – the ability to communicate effectively (speaking, listening and presenting) with others from around the world, and where required, communicate in a native language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working in US and Canadian Summer Camps Emotional Intelligence and Graduate Global Employability 	Partial
5 Management of complex interpersonal relationships – the ability to manage relationships with diverse teams and clients from across the globe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boost your Job Prospects with Work Experience in China Emotional Intelligence and Graduate Global Employability 	Partial
6 Team working and collaboration – the ability to work collaboratively and empathically with diverse teams across the globe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional Intelligence and Graduate Global Employability 	Not covered explicitly
7 Learning Agility – the ability to rapidly assimilate knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting a Job Abroad Creating Effective CVs and Cover Letters for the Global Labour Market ERASMUS work placements Getting an International Internship in the UK Getting International Experience whilst in Preston Boost your Job Prospects with Work Experience in China 	Good
8 Adaptability, flexibility, resilience, drive and self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional Intelligence for Graduate Global Employability 	Good

Figure 1: Alignment of workshop content to global competencies

workshop tested students’ existing knowledge of the global labour market through interactive exercises that challenged them to consider the major, well known global employers comparing and contrasting them with less recognisable international organisations and companies.

A common teaching strategy, employed within all these workshops, was to assess students’ initial awareness of global employability and the demands of an internationalised labour market. The focus then moved to extending and building knowledge and allowing students to assess their own capacity

and skills gaps. As the programme progressed, each workshop aimed to re-enforce previous learning and consolidate knowledge. There was evidence from session plans that learning activities were designed to allow peer to peer learning; for example, through mixing international, EU and UK students and allowing them to share knowledge through pair and group discussions. From a critical perspective, the absence of anything explicit within the programme design on team and collaborative working is notable. This seems on reflection to be the major gap or misalignment in terms of topics covered.

Figure 2: Range of subject disciplines studied by students attending the programme

2. Attendance at workshops

This programme was intensively marketed and promoted to students and resulted in a high level of bookings (761), 421 separate attendances at individual workshops and 202 individual students participating. While the majority did not gain a placement (there were only thirteen placement opportunities altogether) the attendance figures on their own suggest that the programme engaged the students in some way. It may be that they were attracted by the prospect of developing knowledge and awareness of the global attributes, required for an international career, but it could also be assumed that the opportunity to 'win' a placement abroad was more than likely a significant motivation. Students attending came from a wide range of subject disciplines (see Figure 2) with just over 50 per cent of students from the UK compared to EU and other international students.

The achievement of 700 plus bookings was due to immense effort from a large cross-university team but suggests that intensive marketing through myriad, standard channels and through vigorous and persistent social media bursts (Facebook, Twitter) was effective. Nonetheless, the conversion of bookings to turn-up rate at workshops was just over 50 per cent (421 separate attendances over 14 workshops) and suggests that sign-up enthusiasm waned. As it was, group sizes for workshops were ideal and manageable and sign-up wastage was possibly fortuitous.

So, it could be questioned whether claims of 'success' for this programme were demonstrated by the bookings and attendance figures (the marketing of the programme) or whether this was, to any degree, a pedagogic success. We would argue that in the context of other career related workshops across UCLan, this was a triumph in terms of marketing *and* engagement of students. Although students were required to come to at least three to be eligible to apply for placements, the consistent, repeat attendance hints at satisfaction. It was made clear to all who attended that there were only a small number of placement opportunities and it seems likely that this minor incentive could not be sufficient reason for the sustained attendance figures. 72 students altogether attended over three workshops (the minimum required to apply for

the paid placements), 36 out of that 72 attended over four workshops, with some attending seven to nine workshops. This required them to have been tempted in the first place, attend a first workshop and, encouraged by the experience, to keep on attending. It seems reasonable to claim that, given the lack of engagement by students with other employability events and workshops, this sustained attendance indicated satisfaction with the programme.

3. Student perspectives

The staff team broadly agreed that student engagement in terms of continued attendance at workshops was the primary indication of student satisfaction. However, frequent and unsolicited commentary at the end of workshops and limited student interviews after the programme end, suggested that the content and the teaching approach of the programme was effective. The sample of student perspectives considered, based on convenience sampling due to the absence of formal evaluation evidence, offered consistent commentary from student sources that this programme had prompted new career thinking and a more global awareness.

The following commentary from a successful student is just one example of the positive experience offered by the placement and how it linked to the programme and the competences.

I was so pleased to gain an internship as a marketing assistant at UCLan Cyprus. This was an amazing experience. I attended a great many of the workshops on the International programme and believe this prepared me with the knowledge I needed to make the most of this experience. The placement experience itself opened my eyes to what is available in the wider international labour market and this has encouraged me to think bigger.

I asked this student to self-evaluate her own employability against the eight global competences after the programme and placement. The student stated that she had developed a more 'global mindset', that she could 'adapt and adjust' to another culture, had developed 'learning agility' and proved to herself that she could 'deal with quick changes'. Other post placement interviews indicated similar development

as a result of the programme and /or placement experience.

4. Staff perspectives

Teacher/guest speaker comments (contemporaneous and six months after the programme) were considered for this review. Principally, workshop teachers or experts commented on the fact that international, EU and UK students were keen to learn from one another and showed themselves to be globally curious. The evidence suggested strongly that workshops were the trigger for UK and international students to mix and learn from one another. It also indicated that participants were fascinated with the prospect of adding a global dimension to their career aspirations and were enthusiastic about developing these additional global competencies. For instance, Teacher A commented:

An example of peer to peer learning in the 'Get a Job Abroad' workshop was an icebreaker activity which required students to network to find a student from a country they would like to work in. Once they had paired or grouped up, they were asked to 'interrogate' each other about the job market in their contrasting countries. This worked well to set the workshop off with a buzz and feedback from groups or pairs to the whole group proved that it had tapped into existing group knowledge, allowing it to be cascaded to the others.

This is just one example of the unique advantage offered by the mix of UK and international students attending workshops. Most teachers or experts were able to capitalise on the knowledge of participants, allowing them to share experience and develop a global outlook through prompted conversations and paired exercises. This suggests to me that global employability skills were developed through the inter-cultural experience of the programme.

Those successful in gaining a work placement were regarded by the staff team as particular successes from the programme. The competitive selection process for the overseas placements was organised and delivered by staff who were predominantly not involved in the programme. They assessed student CVs and interview performance in terms of suitability for placement

selection. As a result of considering those selected against those who failed to gain a placement, it was evident from interviews with staff that the programme had successfully prepared these selected students. For those who failed in this competitive process, feedback on their performance added a useful extension to their learning on the programme.

The workshop on emotional intelligence and global employability (based on the work of Mayer and Salovey (1997)) was repeated twice due to demand and added a strong psychological dimension to the programme. The workshop teacher stated that students found interesting links between emotional intelligence and global graduate employability:

[Students] had no difficulties in making connections between the two concepts and were encouraged to share examples of experiences from their different cultural backgrounds.

This peer learning aspect of the teaching approach was reflected in other workshops and commented on by other teachers.

Tentative findings

It seems important to emphasise that the programme was well thought out in terms of planning and content and rather poorly planned in terms of evaluating effectiveness. We only decided to review this programme once it had ended and did not give sufficient forethought at the outset to setting up evaluation mechanisms to generate or collect data while the programme was running. Data available was very much a convenience or opportunistic sample based on interviews with a few students and staff.

There is, therefore, no claim to rigour in how we approached this, except that we were opportunistic about noticing small indicators of success that will inform future programmes. The 'success' that most surprised us initially centred around the unusually high sign up and actual attendance figures but further into the programme we began to notice that, rather by chance, we had managed to do something potentially valuable.

I would propose that from this initial review we seemed to have almost chanced upon a successful

Surprised by success: An interim evaluation...

model of delivery and employability content that served to attract students and engage them. It would seem that global competencies recommended by the AGR study were broadly covered and that this provided an interesting series of workshops that built learning about the requirements of the global workplace. It is reasonable to argue that the placement experience was the finishing touch to this programme; however, other participants without the placement experience still seem to have benefited from the learning opportunity. There is evidence from student commentary that more globally focused career aspirations were developed; however, it could be argued that the group of students attracted to this programme were already globally minded.

As a member of the programme team, this seemed to me to be a worthy and valuable endeavour and all team members enjoyed being part of an innovative project. It was to a degree, however, patched together in a haphazard way and any success was probably due to a sweetly naïve eagerness on the part of those who planned this. By chance it worked. We have all learnt something about the need for planning for evaluation, as well as delivery, in learning and development. The title for this article 'Surprised by success' occurred to me because I realised how lucky we were to achieve what we did given our lack of rigour regarding evaluation planning. We would hope that, notwithstanding these flaws, it can offer some insight and inspiration to others involved in employability education. We believe it is something that deserved an interim evaluation and this will inform future programmes.

Barnett R. (2012) Learning for an unknown future, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 31:1: 65-67.

CBI (2009) *Future Fit – preparing graduates for the world of work*, <http://www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/news-articles/2009/03/future-fit/> (accessed 21 November 2013).

Dewson, S., Eccles, J., Tackey N.D. and Jackson, A. (2000) *Guide to measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled*, <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/summary.php?id=rr219> (accessed 20 October 2013).

Docherty, D. (2011) *Universities need to work harder to turn UK students into global graduates*, <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2011/nov/29/universities-uk-students-global-graduates> (accessed 29 November 2013).

Jones, E. (2013) *Internationalization and employability: the role of intercultural experiences in the development of transferable skills*, http://www.academia.edu/2489954/Internationalization_and_employability_the_role_of_intercultural_experiences_in_the_development_of_transferable_skills (accessed 2 February 2014).

Mayer, J.D. and Salovey, P. (1997) Emotional intelligence, *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9: 185-211.

Mazey, R. (2004) Measuring soft outcomes: a review of the literature, *The Research and Development Bulletin*, 2, 3.

Prospects (2014) *Applying for jobs: what skills do employers want?* http://www.prospects.ac.uk/applying_for_jobs_what_skills_do_employers_want.htm (accessed 21 November 2013).

References

AGR, CIHE and CFR (2011) *Global graduates*, http://www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/401-Global-Graduates-into-Global-Leaders (accessed 31 January 2014).

Barnett, R. (2009) Knowing and becoming in the higher education curriculum, *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (4): 429-440.

For correspondence

Kathleen Houston,
Senior Lecturer in Employability
University of Central Lancashire, UK

KHouston@uclan.ac.uk