

Enhancing employability through the undergraduate curriculum

Mantz Yorke

Liverpool John Moores University and ESECT

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Employability

ESECT interpretation

A set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes — that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy

Employability

- **Is not 'employment' (too vulnerable to labour market vicissitudes)**
- **Is probabilistic, helping the student to increase the chances of success**
- **Is made up of a number of characteristics and capabilities**

Employability is more than 'skills'

HE in the UK has been subject to a number of policy initiatives intended to promote the development of 'skills', partly in response to claims of a 'skills gap' at intermediate (i.e. sub-bachelor's) level

These initiatives have had no theoretical base, and hence have been found unattractive by academics

Terms in the policy literature include:

Basic, Core, Key, Transferable, and Generic skills

Dearing's 'key skills'

Communication

Numeracy

Use of information technology

Learning how to learn

plus

Cognitive skills

Subject specific skills

'Higher education in the learning society', para 9.17 and
Recommendation 21

USEM

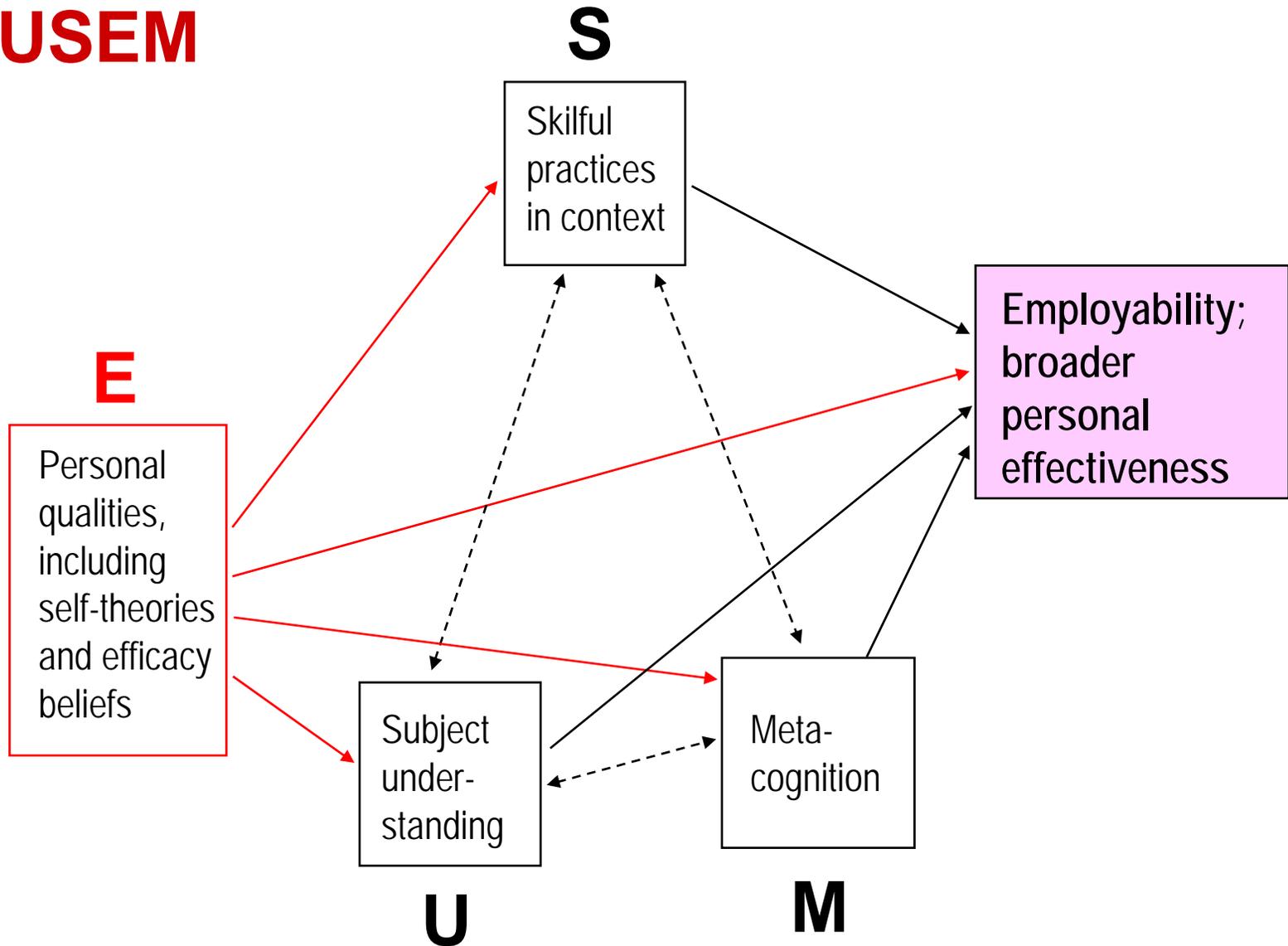
U Understanding of subject and broader situations

S Skilful practices in subject, employment and life

E Efficacy beliefs and personal qualities

M Metacognition

USEM



U Understanding

Understanding of subject matter is a normal expectation

Understanding of how individuals, organisations and 'the world' work may not be an expectation in some (especially non-vocational) curricula

S Skilful practices in context

In the context of the subject discipline, and also in workplaces and more general life-situations: e.g.

... the ability to leave your office and go and face people in the community, not knowing how those people will be in terms of their social situation, their mental health and also how they're going to perceive you and deal with that social work jargon... [It] only comes with practical experience [...] you don't need a social work qualification ... to be able to think about how people function under stress, under difficult situations

Experienced social worker (Knight & Yorke 2004, p.61)

Applying U and S

Understanding

| | | Lower | Higher |
|------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|
| Skilful practices in context | Higher | + | + + |
| | Lower | - - | - |

Applying U and S

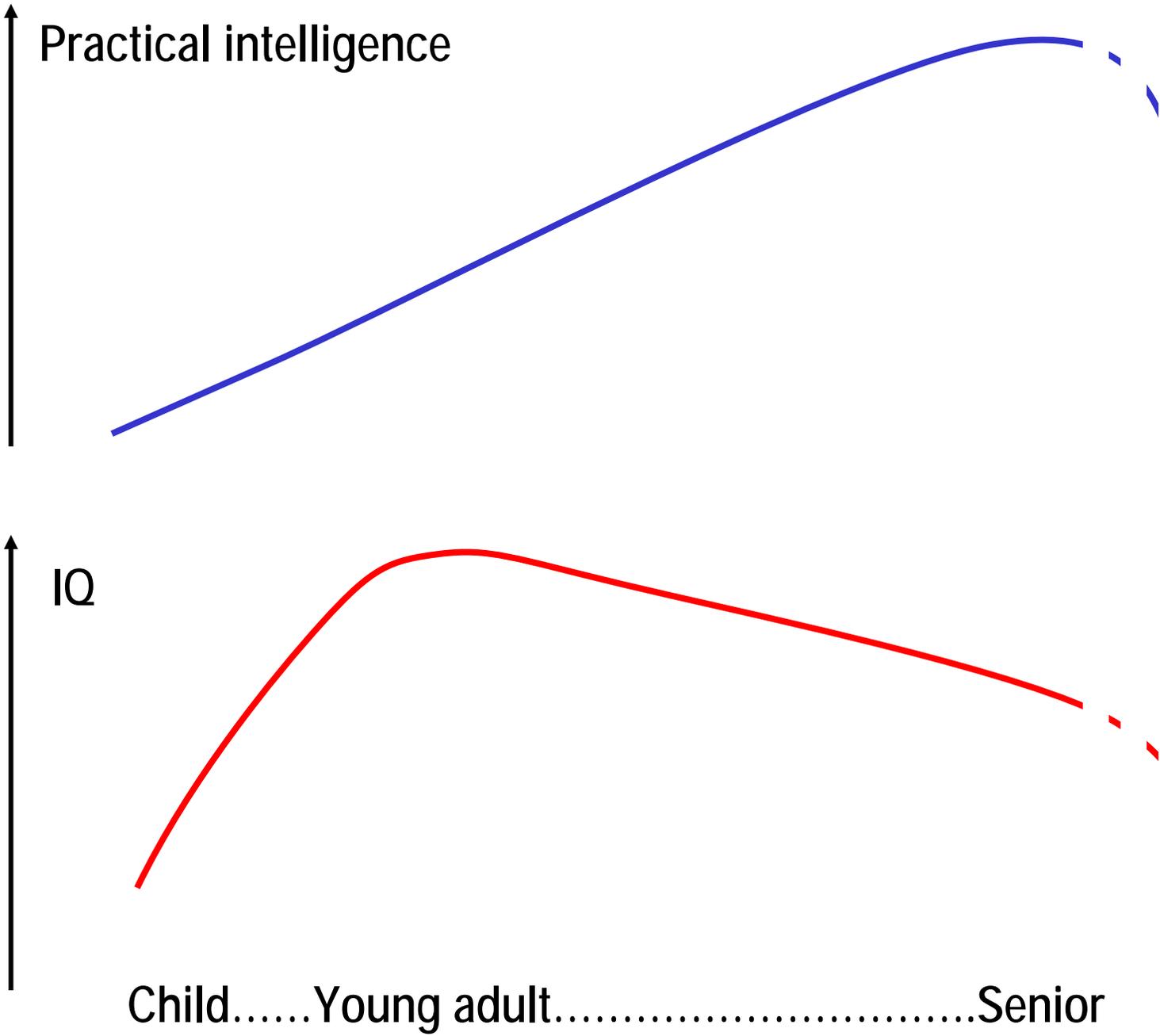
Very many successful lawyers ... are not all that bright. Some of our best judges do not shine intellectually. Becoming a good lawyer requires a mixture of talents, of which the intelligence revealed by the proposed [university entry] tests is only one. Equally, many bright people have proved to be rubbish lawyers.

Marcel Berlins, on the proposal by 8 top universities to devise an entry examination to complement A-level

The Guardian G2, 10 February 2004, p.17

E Efficacy beliefs and personal qualities

- **Importance of motivation to learn and achieve (but the desire to ‘perform’ may militate against successful learning)**
- **Capacity to learn from misfortune, error, criticism**
- **Belief in the ‘developability’ of intelligence, etc**
- **Belief that one can ‘make a difference’**
- **Importance of emotions in learning...**
- **... and in working with others**
- **Academic and practical intelligence → success**



M Metacognition

- **Possession of general strategies for learning, thinking and problem-solving**
- **Capacity to differentiate between tasks, recognising that variation in difficulty is likely to require different cognitive strategies**
- **Awareness of how one tackles tasks and learns**
- **Self-regulation**

Understanding and Skilful practices are important; so are Efficacy beliefs and Metacognition

Foci

- **Working on the student's 'self-system' [E]**
- **Supporting the development of metacognition [M]**

Approach

- **Emphasising formative assessment**

Meta-analyses: effect sizes on learning

| | Effect size |
|---|-------------|
| Self-system (Marzano 1998) | 0.74 |
| Metacognition (Marzano 1998) | 0.72 |
| Formative assessment (Black & Wiliam 1998) | 0.70 |

'The gains in achievement [are] among the largest ever reported for educational interventions.'

Black and Wiliam (1998, p.61)

Weaknesses in formative assessment

In 49 per cent of cases, marking systems could be improved particularly in respect of feedback to students. This sometimes lacked a critical edge, gave few helpful comments and failed to indicate to students ways in which improvement could be made.

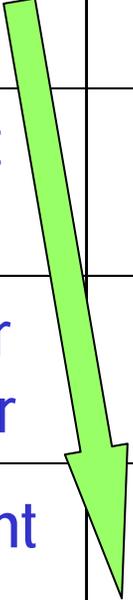
QAA (2001, para 28: Subject overview report, Education)

See also QAA (2004)

- *Learning from Subject Review*
- *Learning from higher education in further education colleges in England*

Encouraging M via formative assessment

| <i>From</i> | Formal | Informal |
|---------------|--|---|
| ↓ Teachers | Probably the main approach in HE | Where circumstances permit |
| Peers | Via peer assessment activities | Over coffee or in the bar |
| Others | Problems if assessor is mentor, supervisor | In work-based situations |
| Self | Only if an assessment requirement | Where student is acting self-critically |



What can be done?

(Whether or not the development of employability is a policy objective for the HE system as a whole)

- **Institutional strategy, involving academics, careers services and others**
- **Departmental/programme initiatives**
- **Actions by individuals**

drawing on

- **Resources currently available (it is not sensible to develop resources from a zero base)**

Institutional strategy

- **Declare a commitment to employability (and mean it)**
- **Make the academic case for employability, not just assert the necessity**
- **Make clear what the commitment means for teaching, learning, assessment, career development**
- **Operate the EU principle of subsidiarity: 'one size' does not fit all academic departments**
- **Someone senior needs to act enthusiastically as a champion ...**
- **... and work constructively with others, such as educational development units, careers services**

Departmental/programme actions – 1

- **Emphasise a culture of (active) learning**
- **Engage colleagues in designing and providing appropriate learning opportunities for students ...**
- **... recognising that, especially in today's HE, there is a need for activities with a social dimension ...**
- **... and remembering that there are many resources 'out there' which might be useful**
- **Take formative assessment very seriously indeed**
- **Use the potential of personal development planning**

Departmental/programme actions – 2

- **Audit existing curricula in respect of employability**
- **‘Tune’ existing curricula by taking opportunities to incorporate activities likely to enhance employability (a ‘low pain, high gain’ approach)**
- **In the longer term, consider more radical curriculum development**

Individuals' actions

- **Be aware of the influences that may sustain/inhibit the development of employability in students**
- **Use, adapting where appropriate, available resources: avoid reinventing wheels**
- **Look for learning opportunities that offer possible synergy between subject studies and employability**
- **Stress the employability-relevance in learning tasks**
- **Make formative assessment effective (this means getting students to respond, which might need some imagination in approach)**

In summary ...

**There is an alignment between
the development of employability
and
the encouragement of good learning**

... and not an opposition

UK resources available via ...



www.itsn.ac.uk/ESECT