Why kick the “L” out of “LEarning”? The development of students’ employability skills through part-time working

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Introduction

One of the most noticeable emerging trends in employment over the last decade or so has been the rising expectations among employers of newly recruited graduates. Not only should graduates begin to make a significant contribution to their organisations from almost their first day of employment, but they should take responsibility for many other aspects of their careers.

This trend has been widely recognised. The Dearing Report (1997) observed that while the single most important capacity employers seek in their graduate recruits is intellectual capacity of a high order, other capabilities are also important:

Apart from the key skills of communication, numeracy and capability in information technology, those in work increasingly need to be flexible and adaptable, to work in teams, and to manage their own career development.

From the employers’ perspective, Hawkins and Winter’s (1995) report for the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) on “Skills for graduates in the twenty-first century”, which was based on research into the stated needs of a range of large, small and medium (SME) employers, concluded that:

In the twenty-first century the most significant challenge for graduates will be to manage their relationship with work and with learning. This requires skills such as negotiating, action planning and networking, added to qualities like self-awareness and confidence. These are the skills required to be “self-reliant” in career and personal development; skills to manage processes rather than functional skills (p. 5).

A report prepared by Coopers and Lybrand (1997) for the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) offered a:

First taxonomy of employability skills comprising: traditional intellectual skills; the “new” core or key skills; personal attributes deemed to have market value; and knowledge about how organisations work and how people in them do their jobs.

It quotes Dearing’s identification of four key skills: communication skills; numeracy; the use of IT; and learning how to learn.

This trend is summed up by Harvey et al. (1997, p. 5) when they observe that:

Employers and their representatives consistently say that to succeed at work, most people in future must develop a range of personal and intellectual attributes beyond those traditionally made explicit in programmes of study in higher education.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not necessarily representative of the Project Team, Leeds Metropolitan University, or the DfEE.
education institutions. The need for developing a range of personal and intellectual attributes beyond specific expertise in a disciplinary field is becoming increasingly important and is likely to be more pressing in the working world of the twenty-first century.

This paper describes a project which has started to address some of these stated needs by harnessing the experiences which students encounter when engaged in paid work before graduation. The type of work which students encounter on "thick sandwich" placements generally offers the best opportunities for the development of employment skills, but for the majority of students this is not an option, whereas the taking of part-time work in order to pay their way is frequently a necessity. The project therefore concentrated primarily on the latter, seeking strategies for making the best use of whatever opportunities it provides.

The paper summarises the background of the project, and then addresses the three basic issues with which the writer was concerned, namely:

1. What skills and attributes should students be aware of?
2. How can students be helped to learn from experience? (including a section on problems associated with the processes of reflection).
3. How can the material on these two aspects be best presented for students to use?

There is an account of the pilot studies and trials in which the prepared material was tested with students, and a short section on the place of accreditation in the project. Finally, some conclusions arising from the project are discussed.

**Project: Working for Skills**

In 1998 Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU) was awarded a contract by the DiEE to run a two-year project:

...to develop and deliver a transferable model of work experience which will be capable of providing large scale workplace learning opportunities to higher education students. The model will use paid part-time and vacation employment to develop student skills and employability. The project will also establish learning processes that will lead to the recognition of skills developed by student participants and by their workplace supervisors (DiEE, 1998, p. 12).

This project is one of nine which come under the general heading of "Work experience". Others, which are running in parallel, are in clearly overlapping fields, such as "Learning through work" and "Learning through earning", and the overall strategy of the DiEE is to draw on the experiences of different approaches at the end of the two-year period through the newly created National Centre for Work Experience.

The LMU work has been split into three separate task areas as follows, each of which requires phases of development, piloting and evaluation:

1. the preparation of a resource designed to help prepare students for a part-time, or temporary, work-based learning experience;
2. the preparation of a resource designed to help student part-time employees to recognise and develop their transferable skills; and
3. the preparation of a resource designed to support employer supervisory staff to recognise and develop mentoring skills.

Broadly speaking, there have been three challenges in this work:

1. the identification of the "skills and attributes" which were referred to in the introduction and which underlie the overall purpose of the project;
2. the selection of a model of experiential learning which helps students to relate their work experiences to the desired skills and attributes; and
3. the presentation of the above material in a manner which is accessible to the great majority of students, and which can be used by them to develop and enhance their employability skills.

During the course of the project three drafts of a workfile were prepared and used on a trial basis. The workfile, in its final form, consists essentially of the materials specified in (1) and (2) above, although the "heart" of the file is the content on skills and attributes and the use of work-based experiences to develop them.

In addition to piloting with students, the workfile has also been reviewed by a number of employers who are an integral part of the project. A number of locally-based, national employers formed an Employers Consultative Committee (ECC), a sub-group of the project steering committee, which consists of representatives from Allied Domecq Retail, ASDA Stores, Bass Leisure Retail, GE Capital, Halifax Direct, Marks & Spencer (Pudsey), and Ventura. These employers are committed to providing opportunities for part-time employment in the fields of retailing, licensed premises, and call centres.

The ECC is significant in the work of the project insofar as its members, viewing student part-time working from an employer perspective, are able to advise on a wide range of practical and conceptual issues. In particular, in addition to offering comments on the workfile, they are able to offer "inside" views on the mentoring processes.
What skills and attributes should students be aware of?

Several authorities have highlighted the need for graduates to offer more skills and abilities than those solely associated with their academic disciplines, but few have sought to produce comprehensive or definitive descriptions of those skills. Indeed, Dearing explicitly refrained from doing so, saying:

We resist the temptation to offer a list of the other types of skills which higher education should seek to develop. Much will depend upon the nature of the programme and the aspirations of the students. It must be for each institution and each department, taking account of the starting points and learning objectives of their students, to consider how far programmes should include the development of particular skills.

Clearly the same constraints existed for this project. While the part-time job opportunities of the employers in the ECC were limited to those in the fields of retail, pubs, and call centres, the scope of potential users of the workfile is unlimited in terms of job opportunities, and the range of “starting points” of students in their quest for employability skills is obviously extensive.

Nevertheless, the objective of the project was to provide practical and useable information and advice which any student, regardless of his/her previous experience, could consider and use as an aid to personal development, and to this end it was necessary to be specific and comprehensive in terms of the skills and attributes which employers typically are seeking in their graduate recruits. Two sources of researched material were primarily used in order to compile a list of skills and attributes for students to work with; these were Hawkins and Winter’s (1995) Skills for the Twenty-first Century, which provided an overall span of skills, and Harvey et al.’s (1997, p. 66) Graduates’ work: Organisational Change and Students’ Attributes, which developed in more detail some of the “self skills”. In the following list of 20 skills and attributes, all were derived from one (or both) of these sources, except for “delivery” which was included on the basis of the writer’s own experience and after discussion with others.

In an attempt to make this list more comprehensible and differentiable the 20 skills and attributes were placed on an axis which related to the student’s internal and external worlds. The “inner you”, or internal world, was concerned with what was processed in his/her head, without active relation to others.

Thus, knowledge (of the job, the organisation, of IT etc.), intellect (the propensity for, and facility with, analysis, critique, and synthesis), delivery (perseverance, sense of obligation), self-awareness, and self-confidence were all viewed as being essentially at the “inner you” end of the axis, while polarised at the “outer world” end were communication (written, and oral), relate to people, and work effectively in teams – in all of which the focus was primarily on other people, such as colleagues, customers, and bosses.

This led to a taxonomy of skills and attributes as follows:

**Inner you**

1. knowledge
2. intellect
3. delivery
4. self-confidence
5. self-awareness

**Inner you, aware of outer world**

6. transfer skills
7. decision taking
8. action planning
9. explore opportunities
10. cope with uncertainties
11. development focus

**Inner and outer worlds in balance**

12. flexibility and adaptability
13. political awareness
14. networking
15. negotiation
16. self-promotion

**Outer world drawing on inner you**

17. communication – oral
18. communication – written
19. team-working
20. relate to others

Most of these 20 skills or attributes are commonly understood. “Transfer skills” is the ability to use skills learned in one situation when working in another. Thus some teamwork/working skills developed in a sports team context could be applied in a work team.

“Development focus” is the realisation that many things – operations, people’s performance (including one’s own) – can be improved, and the willingness to act on this understanding.

It had to be recognised that not only did the 20 skills and attributes comprise a “wish list” which employers, in the aggregate, seek from graduate recruits, but the chances of a student having the opportunity to develop himself/herself in all 20, while engaged in part-time work, would generally not be high. Nevertheless, there was good reason to address all 20 in the workfile. To do so would advance the knowledge of employer requirements of any student who even so much as glanced at the list; and over a period of two or more spells of part-time work in different jobs a student would have the opportunity to build up a wider repertoire. In
any case, once a student is alerted to what employers are looking for, he/she can use their time to observe those skills and attributes in others, which is more helpful to the student than being totally unaware of them.

**How can students be helped to "learn from experience"?**

If the first challenge was the construction of a number of employability skills which could be, at the least, drawn to the attention of students engaged on part-time work, the second was that of providing a tool, model or approach which could help them review their working experience and harness it to develop one or more of these skills. University undergraduate students who have followed a traditional route of 12 or 13 years at school and up to three years at university, very possibly in an unbroken sequence and with no significant experience of working life outside academia, are likely to view the acquisition of knowledge as a largely externally driven process. Teachers, lecturers or coaches are expert in knowing what should be learned and, in general, how it should be learned.

Experiential learning therefore presents two problems: of legitimacy; and of practicality. A student might reasonably ask himself/herself "is it right to rely on my experience?", especially if the lessons learnt from that experience appear to conflict with what authority, whether a person or a book, appears to be telling them. Second, there is the matter of technique; learning from experience is a gift we are born with – and we use little else up to the age of, say, five – but a student might reasonably ask: How do I go about it? Is it hardly more sophisticated than learning by reacting to sensations, such as recoiling from heat? How far can I trust my judgements? – and to what extent are they transferable?

A main aim of the workbook has therefore been to raise these issues and address them. The question of legitimacy was addressed by reference to the views of mature adults who perform responsible jobs; while it is impossible to trace the totality of one’s knowledge back to its original source, the writer’s experience when working with directors and senior managers is that they typically believe that 80 per cent or more of the knowledge they use to undertake their normal work is derived from their own experience following their completion of formal education. Not only do young children use experience to develop their understanding of their world, therefore, but adults rely on it to a very large extent. The legitimacy of experiential learning is also helped by the realisation that much learning from experience is to do with developing an understanding of people, a subject which is generally approached from the academic standpoint only by those who have studied psychology or organisational behaviour.

After establishing experiential learning’s legitimacy, the next question arose of which of the several models of experiential learning to use. Starting with Dewey (1938), Lewin (1951), Piaget (Flavell, 1963), Kolb and Fry (1975), the British Further Education Curriculum and Development Unit (1981), Boud et al. (1985), and Jarvis (1994) all offer models of experiential learning. Each has strengths and limitations but it was considered that a generalised model, after the style of Lewin and Kolb, would be most helpful, and the following familiar cycle was presented: experiencing – reflecting – generalising – testing, *et seq.*

Having given a simple example of using this sequence of actions the student reader is then invited to think for himself/herself of similar instances where an experience has been processed in such a way that it has led to growth in understanding.

This cyclical approach to experiential learning, and more specifically that of Kolb (1984) as one of its best known proponents and developers, is not without its problems. Holman et al. (1997) observe that, coming from the cognitive psychological tradition, Kolb overlooks or mechanically explains the social, historical and cultural aspects of self, thinking and action. Moreover, the absence of any reference to the importance and significance of memory in the learning cycle (why are some experiences forgotten or mis-remembered?) is also a limitation.

Despite this criticism the learning cycle model is helpful in providing an analytical tool which enables students to recognise that experience can be “unpacked”; and that spending time and effort on the various phases can enhance the learning to be derived from the experience – which in turn helps them to develop their employability skills and attributes.

In order to help students to engage with all the phases of the cycle some notes were prepared which can be summarised as follows:

1. *Surface questions* on what happened, noted as fully and objectively as possible, and if possible including data from other participants or observers;
(2) conjecture questions, using information from the surface questions plus other background knowledge, to come up with tentative conclusions;

(3) “unexpected” questions, probing what did not happen, where expectations were not met; and

(4) “what if . . . ?” questions, replaying the experience in a “virtual reality” to explore how the experience might have been different if some of the variables were changed.

Generalisation: warning of the risks of generalising on one experience, and the desirability of using several experiences, but advocating the use of “working generalisations” which can be used cautiously as a basis for testing.

Testing/experimentation: this can be “direct” in which the student manages the process herself/himself, using the working generalisation as a basis for modified behaviour, or it can be “indirect”, testing the student’s generalisations alongside those of others.

Finally, in the learning from experience section of the workfile, it has to be recognised that experiences in working life are rarely one-off, snapshot events; they are more likely to unfold over time as one incident/experience leads into another. Dewey (1938) recognised this when he displayed his model in the form of a helix, in which the first experience (and its subsequent processing) leads into a second (with further processing) and to a third, and so on. Gold (1996) developed the “learning and logging chart” to enable managers, students, and anyone seeking to learn from experience, to track their experiences, reflections, generalisations, and plans/tests over time, capturing the essences of the experiences, and noting any particular truths, puzzles, and issues, together with any emergent needs (for example, for greater skills or knowledge) along the way. This technique neatly encapsulates in a practical manner the phases of experiential learning in typical working situations, and was included in the Working for Skills Web site.

Problems with reflection

The foregoing summarises the approach adopted in the workfile for encouraging students to learn from experience, but the literature on experiential learning – and particularly reflection – carries some warnings about its likely success. One early lesson from the pilot trials was a perception that “reflection is a girly thing”, for example. Boud and Walker (1993, p. 80) identify barriers to reflection, which they define as “those factors which inhibit or block learners’ preparedness for the experience, their active engagement in it, and their ability to reflect rationally on it with a view to learning from it” (page 80). They list 18 barriers they encountered, ranging from lack of time and inadequate preparation to more profound problems such as obstructive feelings (lack of confidence or self-esteem) and presuppositions about what is/is not possible. They confess to being “somewhat overwhelmed by the number and diversity of blocks to learning” they had identified. When mature adults who have thought deeply about experiential learning report barriers to the process of this order it does not suggest that students approaching the process for the first time are likely to find it plain sailing.

A different type of warning emerges from the work of Kitchener and others who developed a model of reflective judgement when researching adult cognitive development. Kitchener and Bremner (1990) have developed a model of reflective judgement which, in the context of this article, embraces the phases of experiential reflection and generalisation.

Their model of reflective judgement posits seven stages of an individual’s “View of knowledge” and the related “Concept of justification”. In Stage 1, “Knowledge simply exists and, therefore, does not need justification. Knowledge is concrete, e.g. ‘I know what I see’”. This view is supported by the perspective that “Beliefs need no justification since there is an absolute correspondence between what is believed and what is true”. With increasing maturity, an individual passes through a further five stages in which knowledge and beliefs are seen as increasingly open to challenge. At Stage 7, “Knowledge is constructed via the process of reasonable enquiry into generalizable conjectures about the problem at hand, e.g. which interpretation seemed most probable based on the current evidence”, where “Beliefs are justified probabilistically via evidence and argument using generalisable criteria, e.g. which argument offers the most complete or compelling understanding of an issue”.

Kitchener and King (1990) offer evidence that reflective judgement increases both with age and education. Samples of students selected for high scholastic aptitude were found to be functioning in the range of Stages 2 to 3.5 in high school (“3.5” is transitional between Stage 3 and Stage 4), the 3 to 4.5 range in college, and 4.5 to 6.5 range in graduate school. Kitchener (1986) observes:

The sequence described in the reflective judgement model implies that before an individual reaches the point at which his or her thinking can be called “reflective” in the
Deweyan sense, he or she must have passed through six prior steps or stages in which he or she holds assumptions about reality and knowledge which are not compatible with reflective thinking.

Kitchener and Brenner (1990) say that in their studies:

\[ \ldots \text{no individuals younger than age 22 had a mean reflective judgement score of Stage 7. In fact, prior to age 24, Stage 6 reasoning is almost equally as rare.} \]

In terms of the cyclical model of learning from experience, “reflective judgement” appears to characterise the phases of reflection and generalisation. These phases may be seen as iterative in the sense that, having gleaned some data as a result of asking questions in the reflective phase the student attempts to draw generalisation(s), but to the extent that credible generalisations are difficult to achieve he/she reverts back to reflection, asks more questions, produces more data (or finds alternative ways of looking at the existing data), and seeks a more credible generalisation. In experiences which provide messy or complex problems, this process could be extensive before a satisfactory generalisation can be derived.

The implications of Kitchener and her colleagues’ thinking for the present work are that, having made allowance for the differences between the UK and US university systems, some users of the workfile may be intellectually ready to use it effectively – but others may not. The ability to reflect and generalise is closely related to intellectual maturity, and in a university population which is typically on the cusp between relative immaturity and maturity it is to be expected that some students will be better able to use complex experiences where judgements are required than others. There is already some evidence that this is so, as described below.

This is not say, however, that all students may not find the workfile of some value. Even those students who are nearer Stages 1 to 3 in the reflective judgement model will, hopefully, accept as a “fact” that employers are seeking more than simply high-level intellectual capabilities in their graduate recruits, and a reading of the 20 skills and attributes will provide useful guidance in that field. They may also accept as factual that people learn from other ways in addition to those of reading or listening to experts, namely by processing their own experiences – which at a more mechanistic level they have already been doing – and the very process of attempting to analyse and learn from experience, especially when doing so with colleagues who are perhaps more mature than they are, may in itself add to the process of maturing.

**How can the material be best presented?**

As noted earlier, one of the challenges in the project has been to prepare material for students which is readily accessible for them and which they will feel able to use constructively for their own development. The process is essentially voluntary, each participating student choosing for himself/herself to use the workfile, and, having chosen to do so, the extent and manner of their usage is for them to decide. The reader is conceived as the student who picks up the workfile “cold”, satisfies himself/herself that it is in his/her interests to read and use it, and then does so without any external support – other than from fellow workers who can be persuaded to co-operate, as the workfile advocates.

(A probable consequence of the voluntary nature of student participation was a tendency for the more mature students to “self-select” themselves as guinea-pigs, thus depriving us of the reactions of younger, less mature students. However, this possibility did not emerge until well into the life of the project, and, in any case, short of compulsory participation, it had to be accepted as an in-built limitation.)

The physical shape of the workfile presented some problems. Initially it was seen as a single, bound volume, but this was changed to a loose-leaf file format in response to student comment. The latter was then viewed as too bulky, so in its final shape it comprises five, slimmer A4 booklets, presented in a sturdy plastic “box”. The five booklets are:

2. *An Introduction to Working for Skills* (Book 1).
3. *Learning and Reflection at Work* (Book 2).

Given the target readership, the content and literary style needs to be light, direct and engaging. The reader is addressed throughout as “you”, sentence lengths are varied but generally kept on the short side, and examples or stories used whenever possible to illustrate points. As far as possible illustrations and working examples have been selected from the part-time job markets in which students are most likely to find employment, namely retail, pubs, and call centres. The aim has been to avoid slabs of text by the use of
models or diagrams where appropriate, and by cartoons where particular points can be illustrated by humour.

An important feature of the workfile is that it should provide opportunities for students to note down their experiences and to review them in some depth. Thus, immediately following the explanation of the experiential learning cycle, there is an activity in which the student reader is asked to “think of a simple experience from which you learned something, and separate out the various phases”, noting them down in the spaces provided alongside each of the four phases.

Perhaps the most direct use of the workfile as a working document, however, lies in the format of each of the 20 skills and attributes which employers typically seek in their graduate recruits. In Book 1 each skill or aptitude is presented initially and described, and the student is invited to consider what experience he/she has already gained from experiences at school, university, or earlier paid work. In Book 3, each skill or aptitude is repeated, including the description of what the skill or aptitude entails (for example, there are four lines of text on what “action planning” means), and the student is invited to work on that in the context of his/her present life. In action planning, for example, there are two thought starters, as follows:

1. Consider your current set of personal and work goals. Choose one that would benefit from action planning. Write down here the outline set of steps necessary to reach your goal satisfactorily.
2. Take a recent work experience, your own or somebody else’s, which would have benefited from action planning. What difference to the outcome would a good action plan have made?

Finally, the student is provided with some opportunity for self-assessment for each of the 20 skills and attributes into four levels of attainment, ranging from very little/none through to considerable, where that skill or aptitude is one of the student’s strengths in terms of what he/she has to offer employers.

In all the foregoing, the aim has been to provide the student with plenty of space for writing, jotting down notes, thoughts, feelings, ideas, suggestions for the future, and whatever he or she thinks will contribute to their development.

A student who builds up a workfile over a period could both use it to provide information when applying for post-graduation jobs, and could take it with him/her when going to “permanent” job interviews, where it would be likely to create a good impression with interviewers.

**Pilot studies and trials**

As mentioned earlier, the preparation process over the two years of the project included several phases of pilot testing of the material in its most recent form. The first was in November 1998, and the last in February 2000, when the five-booklet format was tested. Student feedback was sought from those who had used the material, which was freely available, primarily in two forms – questionnaires and focus groups.

There were two major problems with the use of questionnaires. First, it was very difficult to interest enough students to use the materials. The original target figure of 250 students using the workfile over a three-month period of part-time employment proved to be completely unattainable, despite extensive publicity. The probable reason for this was the pressure on students who are balancing academic needs with the requirements of paid work; the assumption of an additional load imposed by using, assessing and writing up the WFS material, was almost certainly seen by many as too great a burden.

This position would have been eased somewhat if the work contained in the booklets had been available for accreditation. During the first half of the WFS project this was not possible, and as noted below it entails a substantial amount of work.

The better alternative for obtaining feedback was through the use of focus groups. The first of these was held in November 1998, and the last in February 2000, when the five-booklet format was assessed. Although the numbers of students contributing to focus group discussions were necessarily much smaller than had been hoped for via the questionnaires, the quality of response was greater, and they proved a valuable source of student views. Six focus group discussions were held, each comprising six to eight students drawn from the widest possible range of faculties; typically, students were in their second or third years, although some were mature students in their mid-20s, who had had significant experience of working before attending LMU. There was a balance between male and female students.

The material was generally well received at all stages. After the group discussion on version, one those involved declined to return their copies because “the contents will be useful in the future”. The following are the general comments from a report on the last focus group, derived from taped conversation: “The booklets were thought to be ‘clearly written’ and ‘easy to follow’”. The general tone was said to be “fine” although one person thought the language “too simple” and
warned us that it bordered on “patronising”. The booklets were found to be “quite encouraging!” in that students’ eyes are open to the value of their existing skills. All the students believed the workbooks to be of intrinsic value.

A text size of “12-point would have been preferred” and some students did not like the illustrations. The diagrams were liked and we were asked if we could replace more text with similar, simple, diagrammatic explanations of concepts.

The books are “more manageable”, “much more readable” and the “flow between sections is better” than in version one and “it seems like less to be done” than in version two. One student told us, “At first glance, it seemed a lot to have to read. However, due to the layout being clear and easy to follow, it became an easy read”. The recapping and signposting elements were “appreciated”.

Clearly, paying attention to the views of students in the focus groups, which were held after the first and second versions, has led to a more accessible, user-friendly set of documents, and to this extent the aims of the Working for Skills project, described earlier in the article, have been met. However, there are two unresolved issues.

First, the focus groups were very probably, as noted earlier, a self-selected body of students who were already somewhat aware of employers’ wider needs. They were also probably more academically inclined – witness the warning above against using too simple language and being patronising. One could speculate that a majority of students would prefer simple text, especially when learning about employability skills constitutes a third load on student life, following on normal academic work and part-time employment.

Second, whether an awareness of these employability skills and attributes leads to students developing them in practice remains to be seen. The ultimate test of the intent behind the project will be given in the answer to the question: have students’ skills and attributes been developed as a result of their use of the project material? It is too soon to have an answer to this question, but it seems a reasonable act of faith to believe that if a student learns what employers typically want from him/her, as permanent employees, he/she will take action to provide it, especially if some help is given to assist in its acquisition.

**Accreditation**

One of the aims of the project was to explore the ways in which students’ use of the material could be accredited. For those students whose degree courses incorporate a substantial placement period the booklets provide useful guidance and support in the assimilation of work experience and its conversion into the various “life skills” which employers seek. In this case it would be a matter for the relevant course tutor to take the booklets and either pass them on unchanged for students to use, or customise them in whatever manner is needed to relate them more closely to the course objectives.

At the time of writing, before the completion of the project, there are two awards for students to consider if placements are unaccredited: the Vocational Certificate in Work Experience and Professional Skills, run by the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, and a City and Guilds Licenciateship. Both these involve substantial pieces of work, and students who are considering them are advised to contact the Working for Skills Project Office before embarking on them. It is also hoped to offer the City and Guilds Personal Development Award – at the start of the 2001/2 academic year; again students are advised to contact the office.

For students who are doing part-time work which is unrelated to their studies – arguably the largest category to whom this project is addressed – LMU, in conjunction with major employers and the Leeds TEC, offers a Certificate of Completion for completion of a “work-based independent programme to develop 20 key transferable skills for graduate employability”. This award is available on completion of the Workfile activities and on undertaking a brief job application-type procedure – essentially the completion of a typical employer application form and “interview”. It is recognised that part-time work may not contribute to the development of each and every of the 20 skills and attributes.

Details of all the above possibilities are set out in Book 1 of the set.

**Conclusions**

Overall, the project appears to have been successful in preparing, presenting, and piloting material which students doing part-time work can use to develop their graduate employability skills. The aims of preparing and testing material designed to inform students of the skills and aptitudes which employers typically seek in their graduate recruits, and providing a model which can be used to analyse experience and relate it to those skills and aptitudes, have been attained, and the Working for Skills books are now in the public domain. In the two-year life of the project this could be seen as a reasonable
achievement, although further modifications as more students use and comment on the books will no doubt be desirable.

Whether the take-up over the next few years is as great as the DfEE was seeking when it launched the project remains to be seen. It has been disappointing that the actual numbers of students prepared to take part in trials has been quite low, despite encouragement and inducements, although reluctance to take on yet another pressure on top of academic and part-time paid work is an understandable reaction.

As a personal comment, perhaps the best option for the encouragement of students to apply themselves to the acquisition of skills and attributes required by employers lies in the development of accreditation within degree courses. It has been notable to the writer that in every forum where the project was discussed experienced university staff mentioned accreditation as the most likely incentive to persuade students to apply themselves in this direction. An accreditation process would be needed in which students could demonstrate competency in a proportion of the skills and attributes — competency in all of them, provided by experiential learning in part-time work, would be an unrealistic aim — and this could be complemented by the student showing a thorough, albeit theoretical, understanding of the others. Such a process would be demanding on the time of academic staff and/or co-operative employers, but if students are to develop the key skills listed by, for example, Dearing, accreditation seems the best strategy for persuading them of the advantages of learning whilst earning.

Having said this, the findings of Kitchener and others quoted earlier sound a warning against expecting total success. Learning from relatively complex experiences in the unfamiliar world of work, requiring as it does a substantial measure of reflective judgement, demands a level of maturity which students in the 18 to 22 years age group may not yet possess.

Further information

Copies of the Working for Skills books and the Working for Skills Project Report can be obtained from the project manager:
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