Developing your employability:
Learning from Lancaster graduates

It can be hard to know how to develop your employability and improve your prospects for getting a good job after university, but tapping in to the experiences of recent graduates can really help.

In 2012-13, twenty-three final year undergraduate students at Lancaster took part in a Higher Education Academy (HEA) project on employability. Their collective experience (both before and after graduation) revealed several learning points that you can use to develop your own employability:

- There is much more to ‘employability’ than simply ‘getting a job’. Applicants always outnumber jobs, so assessing and understanding your own employability can help you to get through assessment centres and interviews, and improve your chances of eventually getting a job you really want.

- Developing your employability is actually two processes – thinking about the kinds of work you enjoy (i.e. the ‘ends’) and developing skills, experience and knowledge needed for the job you want (i.e. the ‘means’).

- You can use the framework shown below to assess your current employability situation, identify things to think about and work at, and monitor the development of your employability. Place an ‘X’ at a point on the diagram that best describes how sure or unsure you are about your employability and career intentions. Doing this will help clarify what you need to think about and work at.

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**DO I KNOW THE KIND OF CAREER I WANT?**

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**DO I HAVE THE SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE THAT GRADUATE EMPLOYERS WANT?**

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- The Careers Service isn't just for those who already know what kind or job or career they want. Careers Advisors can help with both the 'ends' and the 'means' parts of your employability.

- Holding office (for example, president of a society) is impressive, but employers are likely to be more interested in your actual skills and experiences. Keep detailed records of all the things you have done at university (academic and extracurricular), as this can be used as valuable evidence when making applications, attending interviews or taking part in assessment centres.

- Work placements and internships can certainly develop your employability. However, your academic studies, contributions to your college, paid or voluntary work, and your social life can be used to demonstrate your skills and other qualities.

- You can use the 'STAR' framework to reflect on, and record, your experiences and development of skills throughout your time at university. Here is an example:

  **SITUATION** – what did you do? (e.g. I was captain of the team).
  **TASK** – to raise enough money so the team could travel to the competition.
  **ACTION** – I found two willing sponsors, and raised £500.
  **RESULTS** – we came second in the championship, our best-ever performance.

- Use your social networks and contacts through friends and family to uncover opportunities in addition to more 'formal' routes such as company graduate schemes and recruitment agencies.

- Register for the Lancaster Award. This is a valuable way of enhancing your employability, gaining formal recognition for things you are probably doing already, and standing out from other students who will be competing for the same jobs.

  www.lancaster.ac.uk/careers/students-graduates/lancaster-award/

- Don't expect the transition from being a student to a full-time employed person to be entirely smooth or straightforward. It is normal to experience 'rejection' at some stage and you may not get your 'ideal job' for some time. Following an unsuccessful job application or interview, always ask for feedback and advice so you can improve for the next time.

- Think long term – it can be a wise move to accept a job that doesn't fit exactly with your skills and ambitions. A 'less-than-ideal' job can provide valuable experience and may even allow you to apply later as an 'internal candidate' for jobs that you do really want.

- After your graduation, stay in touch with the Careers Service and friends from your degree course and college. Careers Advisors and friends from university can be valuable sources of information regarding job opportunities, and can provide emotional as well as practical support as you search for your first graduate-level job.

- Start early – it is much easier to develop your employability over 2-3 years compared to a few months or weeks in your final year when you will most likely be very busy with academic work and exam preparation. Employers will be impressed if you can show evidence of sustained effort and personal development throughout your university career.

This guide is based on findings from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) project 'Student Self-awareness of Employability Skills in the Environment Disciplines' (HEA Teaching Development Grant 701). The project was conducted in the Lancaster Environment Centre (LEC) by Dr. Nigel Watson (Lead), Dr. Viv Cuthill and Dr. Gordon Clark. David Evans and Chris Little (Lancaster University Careers Service) also provided valuable input and advice for the project.