



An overview of employABILITY thinking

Professor Dawn Bennett, July 2019

The *EmployABILITY Thinking Initiative* is led from Curtin University by Dawn Bennett. Over 40 institutions are involved and the resulting dataset promises to be the most comprehensive longitudinal dataset of students' career thinking in the world. This short paper presents an overview of the approach and its potential for program- and institution-wide adoption.

The ground-breaking approach to employability enables educators to embed employABILITY thinking within the existing curriculum, enables students to shape their future work and career, and creates the datasets which will drive global research into students' thinking about their studies and their future lives and careers.

Why is this important?

University educated workers are critical to every nation's economic health, international standing and social wellbeing. For graduates to meet their full potential, however, they need to have developed, as students, ***the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work and learning across the career lifespan***. This is how employability should be conceptualised in the higher education context.

The employability of 21st century workers is developed and sustained only through explicit career- and life-long identity and employability work. In higher education, employability is inadequately described by terms such as skill, job, employer and employment. Rather, employability is a metacognitive challenge. It underpins the developmental role of higher education, which is to develop employABILITY thinking: ***students' cognitive and social development as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens***.

What is employABILITY thinking?

EmployABILITY thinking is a strength-based, metacognitive approach to employability development delivered within the existing curriculum, without the need for additional time, expertise or resources. The approach prompts students to understand why they think the way they think, how to critique and learn the unfamiliar, and how their values, beliefs and assumptions can inform and be informed by their learning, lives and careers.

As suggested by its use of capitals, rather than focus on learners' potential to be "employed" and directed by others, the approach focusses on learners' ABILITY to create and sustain meaningful work. This is as relevant to workers in traditional, full time employment with a single employer as it is to workers who combine multiple roles to create portfolios of work.

Program- and institution-wide adoption is supported by student resources, educator guides, faculty and student workshops, and a social cognitive measure known as *Literacies for Life* (L4L), which is summarised on the following page. A dedicated [educator site](#) features dedicated and plain-language employABILITY thinking student resources, educator guides and expert guides. Educators can request aggregated cohort-wide data and engage with the research. Activities, research and writing from the Initiative are regularly updated in the [EmployABILITY research lab](#) and in the [Community of Practice](#).

Literacies for Life: elements of the student self-assessment tool

Scales	Sources
<i>Basic literacy</i>	
1.1 Self and program awareness	Bennett 'Self and program awareness'
1.2 Communication skills	Coetzee (2014) 'Interactive skills'
1.3 Technological and digital literacy	Bennett 'Technological and digital literacy'
<i>Rhetorical literacy</i>	
2.1 Problem solving and decision making	Coetzee (2014) 'Problem solving and decision-making'
2.2 Goal-directed behaviour	Coetzee (2014) 'Goal-directed behaviour'
<i>Critical literacy</i>	
3.1 Career identity and commitment	Mancini et al (2015) 'Career commitment'
3.1.1: Identification with commitment	
3.1.2: Reconsideration of commitment	
3.2 Belief in one's ability to succeed	Rosenberg (1965) 'Self-esteem' (positive version)
3.3 Belief in one's ability to succeed academically	Byrne et al (2014) 'Academic self-efficacy'
3.4 Willingness and ability to learn	Coetzee (2014) 'Continuous learning orientation'
3.5 Understand the relevance of learning	Smith et al (2014) 'Perceived relevance'
<i>Occupational literacy</i>	
4.1 Career exploration and awareness	Lent et al (2017) 'Decisional Self-Efficacy'
4.2 Occupational mobility (agility)	Lent et al (2017) 'Decisional Coping Efficacy'
<i>Emotional literacy</i>	
5.1 Emotional intelligence	Brackett et al (2006) 'Self rated emotional intelligence'
<i>Ethical literacy</i>	
6.1 Ethical and responsible behaviour	Coetzee (2014) 'Ethical resp. and behaviour', adapted

How does employABILITY thinking work?

EmployABILITY thinking is embedded into the curriculum through the use of touchpoints: explicit links between learning and students' futures. We embed one touchpoint into every unit. We then map existing career development activities and add these and the touchpoints to a visual map, creating a program-wide, integrated developmental program.

Data are generated through a formative, online self-assessment tool which encompasses the measure. Students use the online tool to create personalised employability profiles which they can review and revise at any time. The [29-page personalised profile report](#) is a prompt for analysis and action rather than as a score card; over 50 embedded resources enable students to be more agentic in their development (see Attachment A).

Most students engage with the tool as a required reading. Students are directed to employABILITY resources at touchpoints such as before and/or after an industry placement, during a reflective task, when working in teams, or when giving and receiving feedback. The self-reflection tool, profile and resources form part of a [Student Employability Starter Kit](#).

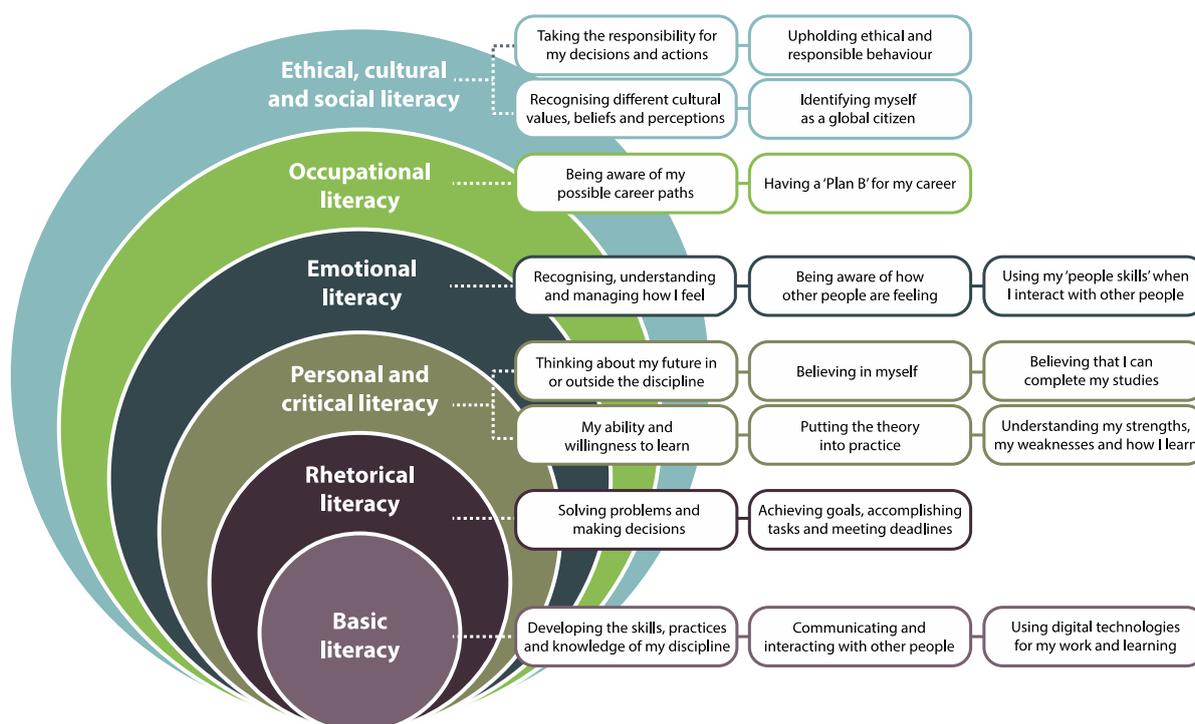
Why is employABILITY thinking a logical solution?

There is a critical need for a systematic and inter-institutional approach to employability development. It is my hope that our work will shift the landscape of higher education policy and practice so that employability development — *employABILITY thinking* — is established as the vital link between the purpose of higher education, graduate outcomes and the future of work.

Higher education employability frameworks, policies and initiatives have little impact unless they connect with students, yet most employability development activities are co-curricular and attract the students who need them least. Initiatives within the curriculum tend to be program-wide streams or distinct modules which are separated from the discipline studies in which students want to engage. Only when employability development and career guidance is aligned with disciplinary knowledge, skills and practices will it become core business.

Employability development is not yet at the core of the higher education curriculum because it has been poorly defined as the acquisition of generic skills which are developed separately from the core business of learning a discipline. Employability development includes but extends beyond discipline skills, knowledge and practices: the technical aspects of *doing* a discipline. Employability is enabled both for graduates and in the longer term by the ability to conceptualise future life and work through broader employABILITY thinking.

Properly defined, students are motivated to develop their employability because they are interested in developing their futures. Student engagement in explicit employability development creates cognitive links; it also increases the chance that graduates will secure work and that they will recognise their development when responding to graduate surveys! In practical terms this can be achieved within the curriculum by helping students to find the relevance between the learning we assign them and their expectations for their future lives and work.



Where can I find more information?

For more information, visit the websites, the research lab or the LinkedIn community; or email us at contact@developingemployability.edu.au.

Educator site: <https://developingemployability.edu.au>

Student site: <https://student.developingemployability.edu.au/>

EmployABILITY research lab: <http://bit.do/https-www-researchgate-net-lab-EmployABILITY>

Community of Practice on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13553226/>