

EMPLOYABILITY IN PRACTICE

A report on an investigation of the meanings
and contents of the concept of employability

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Executive Summary

1. The study looked at what definitions of employability were available in the UK literature. It then compared these to the actual meanings used by people who work in the field of employability for jobseekers, in Edinburgh and Glasgow. It also looked at the content of the term by asking respondents about the main employability issues which they found in their work. In addition it asked about problems encountered in delivering employability services. Significant findings included:
2. There is no consensus or clarity about what is meant by employability. The meanings used covered a wide spectrum of the issues affecting entry to work; the main tension is between a narrow meaning relating similar to 'job-ready' and a variety of broad ones, which include both supply and demand side issues. Some people expressed contradictory views.
3. The factors given as major employability problems, which can be taken as important elements of employability, covered the whole of this range but there were very few mentions of 'employer behaviour', which shows that in fact demand-side issues are not normally seen as components of employability.
4. Supply-side issues included skills and experience, but there was a much greater emphasis on core skills and 'personal effectiveness' than was expected from the literature review.
5. Predictably, the issues mentioned varied according to the groups of people with which the respondent was working. Some of the external barriers faced by such groups were mentioned (e.g. childcare for lone parents) but the preponderance of responses grouped under 'personal characteristics' and 'skills and experience' suggest that the core of the concept relates to characteristics of individuals.

6. However the character of employability also varied according to the occupational sector being considered (e.g. construction vs. retail). Furthermore there were variations in responses between Edinburgh and Glasgow and between different groups of respondent.
7. Employability is therefore not a uniform concept but a relative one.
8. Despite the confusion about its meaning, practitioners regularly use the term. The reasons they like it include its relationship to a goal (of employability; of employment); to the process of change; and because it allows an holistic view of the individual's needs.

Recommendations

- a) It would be useful to compare the survey results about what practitioners mean by employability and what the important factors are with the perceptions of a) employers and b) jobseekers.
- b) Employability should not be confused with the whole of 'getting people into work' – it is a specific part of that agenda. The author recommends a narrow definition, similar to job-ready. This allows a clear answer to the question of "what does this concept add to the discussion of getting people into work" and attention to the problems relating to this. It also encourages appropriate attention to other issues, like barriers and discrimination, which otherwise might be obscured by a wide definition.
- c) Employability varies according to industry and occupation and from one target group to another. Therefore policy on employability should be responsive to these variations – there should not be a blanket policy on employability which rests at a macro-level and with correlates like skill levels, but instead it should articulate the needs of specific groups.

- d) There is also an important local dimension to policy in this field. The problems about delivery of services are perceived differently in different labour markets.
- e) The implications of the emphasis given to core skills and personal effectiveness need further consideration. Are these problems causes or symptoms?
- f) Policy on employability, at EU, UK and Scottish level, should understand the degree of confusion surrounding the term and should clarify what it means by it.

Who knows what employability means?

What is employability? This question is of some importance, but turns out to be quite hard to answer. This report describes what practitioners in Edinburgh and Glasgow think, and sets this in the context of

Employability has a central place in government and European policy. It *“underpins much of the current government’s employment strategy ...”* (Tamkin P and Hillage J 1999) and forms one of the four pillars of the European Employment Strategy (.....). The government has stated in its Employment Action Plan (HM Treasury 1997) that it is a *‘key to a cohesive society’*.

It is implicit that if we know what makes someone employable and how to give them those characteristics, then we can resolve problems on both the supply side of the labour market (helping people into work) and the demand side (helping employers fill vacancies). Conversely if we find that jobseekers, employers and practitioners have mistaken views about employability, then we have probably identified a failure in the operation of the labour market which would cause unemployment to be higher than it need be. There would be a similar problem if people who need to work together to improve employability mean different things by the term. If it is so significant then it surely must be clear what it is?

Yet it is a remarkably unclear concept. A candid admission comes in the first paragraph of the document generally used as the key reference for the definition of employability: *“Employability is central to the strategic direction of the Department for Education and Employment. However the term is used in a variety of contexts with a range of meanings and it can lack clarity and precision as an operational concept. In early 1998 the DfEE commissioned a review of the relevant literature to come up with a definition and framework for employability”* (J Hillage and E Pollard, IES, *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis IES/DfEE 1998.*).

The definition arrived at by Hillage and Pollard is: *‘Employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they work’*. These factors are summarised as assets; deployment; presentation; and circumstances/context.

Unfortunately this does not actually clarify the concept. It amounts to all factors which might affect whether someone gets into work. In a field in which there has been a long history of discussion about the causes of unemployment, we should

expect that a concept which is credited with major new influence on policy and practice should do more than say 'all of those things'. This is so broad as to be of little or no use in practical terms. It is in fact an answer to the question "what are the factors which contribute to whether someone is in work?" The message for practice from this broad approach is to (continue to) attempt to influence all of these – which would mean to abandon the idea that employability brings something specific to the discussion.

However the literature shows that people actually have more focused, but differing understandings of the concept. At the narrow end of the spectrum there is a meaning which refers to individuals having a bundle of characteristics which are deemed to be those which employers, generically, desire in employees. For example: *"employers require not only specific vocational skills but also the softer and transferable employability skills"* (National Skills Task Force 2000).

Furthermore, on a day-to-day basis the term is used by many people working in the field of access to employment. It clearly has some value to them. In practice most commentators and practitioners use a more specific meaning covering a much narrower part of the spectrum encompassed by Hillage and Pollard, and when one reads references to 'employability skills' this is usually taken to cover some combination of core skills, basic skills and generic skills. (These are often confused but there are fairly clear definitions of these terms available).

In these circumstances it would be helpful to clarify how the term is used and what is commonly meant by this. Out of this it may be possible to pose a tighter and more consensual definition of employability which can then allow discussion of employability to take its appropriate place alongside other factors. That was the intention of a survey done in 2003 in Edinburgh and Glasgow into the use of the concept of employability in practice.

For the survey the range of meanings found in the literature was examined and summarised as follows:

Wide: having the core skills which all employers seek

Narrow: the likelihood that you will get and keep work

Match: your match with actual opportunities

Adaptability: the ability to adapt to change

Skills: having the skills needed

From an examination of these definitions and references, a list of 23 factors which might comprise the content of employability was drawn up:

Literacy, Numeracy, IT Skills, Communication skills, Team working, Customer relations, Reliability and time-keeping, Responsible and integrity, Flexible/adaptable and responsive, Problem solving, Business awareness, Desire to learn and improve performance, Organisational skills, Positive attitude, jobsearch

skills and motivation, interview skill and c.v. presentation, fit with labour market needs, up to date skills, qualifications, work record, career management skills, personal circumstances – e.g. caring, disability/ill health, barriers – e.g. discrimination, lack of facilities or childcare, employer attitudes.

A survey of the use and meaning of employability

The survey had two purposes. Firstly to help understand the concept and its significance better. Desk research has revealed that there is substantial uncertainty about what is meant by employability (see above). There are ambiguities in current definitions and contradictions between some of them. At the same time it is clearly a concept that is now in frequent use. Asking practitioners and policy-makers what they mean by it and why they use it can illuminate these questions and help refine practicable concepts and definitions.

The second purpose was to examine the practical issues relating to employability of jobseekers, and within provision and policy to promote that. Within a specific strategic context, the survey sought to find out what were thought to be the main problems relating to employability and the issues in implementing policy to enhance it. These findings can then be related to the definitional issues.

In addition to the survey results this section also presents and draws on the results of an invitation from Working Capital magazine to its readers to give their own views of the meaning of employability.

Local Policy Context

At the national level, in the year of the survey the policy context included the UK government's raft of welfare-to-work, which had a strong supply-side emphasis; and the Scottish Executive's policies on social inclusion and regeneration. At the local level in Edinburgh the context was provided by 'Joined Up For Jobs', which had been launched in 2002 by the City of Edinburgh Council, Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian, Jobcentre Plus (then the Employment Service) and the Capital City Partnership. It was co-ordinated by the latter organisation, which is the city's social justice partnership, comprising, on its Board, the main statutory agencies and community representation from the city's Social Inclusion Partnerships in Craigmillar, North Edinburgh, South Edinburgh and Wester Hailes.

The economic context of this strategy was that of a tight labour market, leading to concerns from some employers about the difficulties of recruiting to even low-skilled jobs. Unemployment, measured by the claimant count was at %; the ILO estimate was %. At the same time it was recognised that there were large pools of social exclusion and economic inactivity: while approximately 7,000 were claiming JSA at any one time, approximately 35,000 were on so-called 'inactive benefits'.

It sets out a strategic view of access-to-work services in the city with a view to 'maximising the benefits of; the intention is that they should be 'demand-led' and 'client-focused'; and that provision should be 'joined-up'. On the demand side the strategy stimulated a series of employer-led 'sectoral employment academies'; and on the supply side, it emphasised a focus on specific hard-to-reach target groups like homeless people and ex-addicts. This implied engagement with the front-line organisations which work with those groups at the point of crisis, and construction of pathways from exclusion to work.

In Glasgow the situation was different. Unemployment was higher and the pools of economic inactivity were larger both numerically and proportionately (?). There was no city-wide strategy in this field. (Macgegor) The Glasgow Alliance, Glasgow's social inclusion partnership, did not play the same pro-active role as the Capital City Partnership. Some efforts at co-ordination were underway through the Employers' Coalition, in fact an organisation funded to promote employer involvement in the New Deals. Jobcentre Plus was seeking to convene a welfare-to-work forum, but this was at an early stage. Later in the year Glasgow City Council launched its EQUAL Access strategy, initially focused on health issues and employment in the care sectors.

Methodology

The survey was conducted by circulating a questionnaire amongst the existing networks of practitioners, service managers and policy-makers in the two cities. It asked respondents whether they used the term employability; and about

1. what they thought it meant
2. what they liked about the concept;
3. what were the main employability problems which they encountered,
4. what were the main problems affecting delivery of employability-related services
5. what are the roles of employers

In addition it asked about methods used for assessing employability; and training and information needs.

There were therefore a combination of practical and academic purposes. As regards the latter, the main hypothesis being tested was:

Some working hypotheses to be tested are:

- 1. Definitions of employability vary substantially along a broad-narrow spectrum.**
- 2. Measures to improve employability in fact focus on a narrow definition.**
- 3. Perceptions of the role of these measures vary substantially in a pattern which is influenced by the respondent's role in the labour market.**
- 4. The actual common use of the term varies between industrial or occupational sectors – in particular the extent of the inclusion of vocational skills in the package.**

5. A focus on employability alone is sufficient to help some groups of people into work.
6. However it is inadequate for other groups which confront specific barriers in the labour market – only a part of the package.
7. Employability implies different content (and extent) of individuals' action plans according to their needs (it is holistic and concerns fit with the local labour market).
8. 'Pure' employability programmes do not help fill hard-to-fill vacancies.

Rather than ask each respondent to present their own understanding of the meaning of employability, five strands of thought and five corresponding definitions of employability were extracted from a reading of the literature and presented in the questionnaire. These were presented in the questionnaire with an explanatory question:

| | 'Employability' refers to: | Explanatory Question: | Best | Dis-agree | Agree |
|---|--|--|------|-----------|-------|
| 1 | having the core skills which all employers seek | Are you job-ready – that is, having the <u>minimum</u> characteristics needed to get any work, probably at 'entry level' (<i>e.g. literacy, numeracy, team working communication</i>)? (NARROW) | | | |
| 2 | the likelihood that you will get and keep work | Are you going to get work, taking in <u>all relevant factors</u> (<i>e.g. core and vocational skills, attitudes, jobsearch, personal circumstance, barriers and demand in the labour market</i>)? (WIDE - JOB OUTCOMES) | | | |
| 3 | your match with actual opportunities | Do your characteristics <u>match</u> what is needed in the labour market now? (MATCH) | | | |
| 4 | the ability to adapt to change | Do you <u>adapt</u> and learn as the skills and qualities which employers want change? (ADAPTABILITY) | | | |
| 5 | having the skills needed | Have you the <u>skills and experience</u> necessary to get work in your occupation or sector? (SKILLS) | | | |

Distribution and response rate

The survey was distributed by e-mail to people concerned with employability of jobseekers, which included workers in policy and service delivery – managers, personal advisers and policy workers. This coincides with those charged with delivering the welfare-to-work agenda. This included Jobcentre Plus, the City Council and Scottish Enterprise in both cities; and mailing lists covering all or at least the majority of providers/intermediaries, as well as a number of organisations which work with specific client groups and have an interest in enhancing their employability and referring them on towards work.

Although initially intended also to include employers, this part of the survey was not implemented, primarily for practical reasons relating to the difficulty in compiling a suitable distribution list. However the response rate achieved suggests that a different and more focused approach to employers would be needed

70 responses were received. It is estimated that this was a response rate is 12.8% and the sample of the population was 3.2%. These figures mean that it is difficult to draw conclusions with any certainty from the answers of the different groups of respondents about the larger populations from which they are drawn; but the results are pertinent to the general questions posed.

From anecdotal evidence, the reason for the low response rate is almost certainly the difficulty which respondents found in answering, or at least the amount of time it required. However this is an almost inevitable consequence of the character of the issue being probed.

Analysis of respondents

The breakdown of respondents is presented in Table 1. There is an equal number of people working directly with clients (Personal Adviser/Service Delivery) and managers; and of both of these categories, somewhat fewer work for Jobcentre Plus than for other providers (mostly intermediaries). It can be seen that there is a difference in the composition of the Edinburgh and Glasgow respondents which needs to be borne in mind in analysing geographical differentiations in the responses

| Type of respondent – working as: | Total responses | No. from Edinburgh | No. from Glasgow |
|---|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Personal Advisers in Jobcentre Plus | 15 | 4 | 11 |
| Managers in Jobcentre Plus | 6 | 5 | 1 |
| Personal Advisers or service delivery in providers (intermediaries etc.) | 10 | 7 | 3 |
| Managers in providers (intermediaries etc.) | 19 | 11 | 8 |
| Managers in Policy/Funding bodies; or professional workers in any organisations | 8 | 6 | 2 |
| TOTAL | 64 | 36 | 28 |

Results of the Survey

The structure of this report of the survey is in three sections. Firstly, the bulk is made up of an examination of all the responses taken together, in the following order:

1. Use of the term employability
2. The usages of the term employability
3. The content of employability in practice
4. Issues about employability services

Use of the term 'employability'

The large majority (89%) of respondents did use the term. Of the five purposes suggested the most common were 'for working with people seeking work' (61%) and 'for explaining what you do' (59%). It was used 'for thinking or analysing issues' by 50% and 'for working with employers' by 42%.

59% said that their organisation has a policy which deals with employability with 23% saying no and 8% not knowing. This showed primarily that the survey has selected a set of respondents who mostly do use or think about the term, but given the response rate it does not show anything definitive about the pattern of use across the population – people who do not use the term would be much less likely to complete the questionnaire. It demonstrates that it is used both for analytical purposes and in working directly with clients and employers.

The usages of the term employability – What they think employability means.

This question posed five definitions of employability derived from desk research (see table __ below) and asked respondents to say which they thought to be best. Respondents were also asked to say whether they agreed or disagreed with them, the assumptions being that only one 'best' would be chosen but that others might also be considered compatible or satisfactory. The first assumption was unfounded – 5 respondents gave more than one 'best' definition; 10 gave no 'Best', of whom 6 agreed with all the definitions.

The responses reported below eliminate from the 'Best' scores the five who gave more than one 'Best'. The table shows the largest number preferring 'Wide' (40%), with 'Narrow' at 26%. However when the numbers who agree with each are calculated (summing all who give either a Best or an Agree response to a definition) this pattern is reversed with 89% being able to agree with Narrow compared to 81% agreeing with Wide. Majorities of approximately two thirds or more were happy with each definition and few respondents disagreed with any of the definitions.

| <i>Definition Label:</i> | 'Employability' refers to: | Best | | Agree | | Disagree | |
|--------------------------|--|------|-----|-------|-----|----------|----|
| | | | | | | | |
| <i>Narrow</i> | having the core skills which all employers | 15 | 26% | 57 | 89% | 2 | 3% |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|--|----|-----|----|-----|---|-----|
| | seek | | | | | | |
| <i>Wide – Job Outcomes</i> | the likelihood that you will get and keep work | 23 | 40% | 52 | 81% | 5 | 8% |
| <i>%Match</i> | your match with actual opportunities | 5 | 9% | 43 | 67% | 7 | 11% |
| <i>Adaptability</i> | the ability to adapt to change | 6 | 11% | 42 | 66% | 8 | 13% |
| <i>Skills</i> | having the skills needed | 8 | 14% | 40 | 63% | 6 | 9% |

There are several interesting conclusions to be drawn from this, not least that the assumptions and methodology used were inadequate for probing the current awareness of the content of the employability concept. Equally it can be concluded that the respondents as a whole did not see many contradictions between the definitions and, instead, most saw many of them as compatible.

Not all the definitions are mutually incompatible. Those relating to Match and Adaptability can certainly be seen as a different casting of the Wide definition, since they are not specific about content but do embrace a specific way of viewing the wide range of factors affecting whether someone is in work. However there is an important incompatibility between Narrow and Wide, summarised by the contention that a person can be employable (in the narrow sense) but not employed – on account of a number of factors like deficient demand, practical problems (e.g. absence of childcare) and barriers (e.g. discrimination) which are included in the Wide definition. Furthermore the Skills definition was included to test responses to a view which emphasised personal vocational choice, occupational specificity and technical skills, all of which are counterposed by many of the applications of the term in the literature.

It is concluded that the responses demonstrate that there is substantial vagueness and confusion pertaining to the term as used in practice. It is suggested that this reflects a low level of debate about employability and the related policies for helping people into work; which in turn has meant that respondents have probably not thought a lot about these questions before being asked in the survey – as was confirmed in writing and personal communication by a number of respondents.

The wide spread of meanings commonly applied to 'employability' was confirmed through a related exercise conducted through the magazine Working Capital (which is produced to promote awareness of the Joined Up For Jobs Strategy). A number of readers were asked to submit their definitions. A selection is given below.

At the Narrow end of the spectrum, referring only to core skills or personal attributes, are:

Possessing or having the ability to develop the key skills and personal attributes required to secure and sustain employment. These may vary across occupational sectors, but some will span all career areas, for example communication, problem-solving, basic IT, and literacy/numeracy.

Women Onto Work, which works with disadvantaged women returners

“Employability refers to having the core technical and presentational skills, attitudes and qualities required to access and sustain employment”.

ECSH Partners In Education, an organisation working with homeless people

Some add occupational skills to this (ie Narrow plus Skills):

“An individual mix of occupational and interpersonal skills, allied to attitude, commitment and confidence which makes a person attractive to an employer, and in equal measure make that person willing and confident to compete and participate in an open labour market.”

Into Work, which works with disabled people

Others add industry-specific elements:

“Employability means enthusiasm, willingness to come to work every day and the right attitude. We can teach everything else, but we can’t teach people to be nice to our customers – you have to have the right attitude for that. If you don’t actually like people you’re not employable at Schuh. Liking people, wanting to help our customers and enthusiasm are all we need – we’ll teach all of the others skills”.

Personnel Director, Schuh Ltd

Someone with an ability to be friendly and welcoming, a pleasant personality, to be able to communicate effectively with good language skills and the ability to use a common sense approach to working as a team and also on their own, without having to be prompted all the time. We like our employees to Smile, Serve, Surprise and Surpass our customers’ expectations.

Aitken & Niven Ltd (clothing retailer)

At the Wide end of the spectrum, an employee of the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) has a broad approach which is of special interest because, from a specific industry, it demonstrates that the concept depends on the kind of work being considered.

“CITB, as the managing agency for the construction industry, expect our apprentices to be well motivated, have a good understanding of the trade they are following and able to demonstrate the skills required in that discipline, meet our selection criteria, have a good school report, be willing to travel, work in adverse weather conditions and have a willingness to progress academically and develop as an individual to achieve their potential to ensure that employment is maintained.”

Construction Industry Training Board

In another industrial sector, there were supporters of both Wide and Narrow definitions:

Members of the Edinburgh Tourism Action Group define employability in a number of ways. To some it means the basic skills that someone brings to a job and whether they are relevant or suitable. Others feel that it involves wider issues including employment and social trends. Yet more people believe that employability is related to the whole spectrum of recruitment so that it includes the selection process (skills) through to induction and retention of staff.

Edinburgh Tourism Action Group

Other combinations are also given, e.g. Wide and Match:

The Edinburgh Cyrenians define employability as the development and acquisition of skills, knowledge and experience, all of which help people progress towards employment or enable them to move into and sustain employment. These attributes are ones that are essential for employers in the workplace, but at the same time, help and support individuals in their everyday lives.

Edinburgh Cyrenians

Two versions of Wide give explicit emphasis to outcomes, with the latter referring to Addaptability:

Employability is having the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that significantly impact on the ability of an individual to access, obtain and sustain employment.

Scottish Prison Service

Employability for individuals is to enable them to enter and re-enter employment, to stay in work and to have secured better quality jobs. Help for individuals to sustain themselves in work through a capacity to upgrade their skills continuously.

JobCentre Plus

The conclusions which may be drawn from this exercise are that it reveals a wide spread of meanings; and that the strands of thought identified for the survey (Narrow, Broad etc) have been applicable in practice in differentiating them; and that there is an important sectoral aspect to the meaning of employability.

The content of employability in practice –

The most significant employability problems – contradictory positions – why they like the term

Respondents were asked what problems most often restrict the employability of jobseekers. This was the means used to look at the content of the term

employability.

This question could have been taken to refer to either the problems of which the respondent most often has experience; or their view on the main problems across the entire labour market. It was decided to emphasise that the response would be from their own experience, which does mean that each respondent was not asked to comment on quite the same thing but it has the merit of allowing expression of the diversity which is one of the subjects of the survey.

Most respondents did answer this open question (%). They were given no limit on the number of problems to be reported and after similar responses were grouped together, a total of 22 problems were recorded.

Question 4 responses (in order of prevalence)

| | No. of mentions | % of respondents |
|---|-----------------|------------------|
| Self confidence – self esteem | 22 | 34 |
| Motivation/attitude – fear – | 19 | 30 |
| Lack of skills and qualifications | 19 | 30 |
| Lack of work experience | 19 | 28 |
| Costs working/leaving benefit/hsing | 14 | 20 |
| Core skills – communication, wkg with others | 12 | 19 |
| Drug/alcohol misuse | 12 | 19 |
| Basic skills – Literacy and Numeracy, | 12 | 19 |
| Aims and aspirations | 10 | 16 |
| Criminal record | 9 | 14 |
| Employer behaviour* | 9 | 14 |
| Peer pressure/lack of role models | 8 | 13 |
| Appearance | 7 | 11 |
| Inability to grow/adapt, inflexibility | 7 | 11 |
| Childcare – care issues – lone parents | 7 | 11 |
| Housing problems | 7 | 11 |
| Financial difficulties/debt | 7 | 9 |
| Chaotic lifestyles/multiple disadvantage | 5 | 8 |
| Dependency from being LTU | 5 | 8 |
| Punctuality ETC | 4 | 6 |
| disability & mental ill–health | 4 | 6 |
| Travelling/transport | 4 | 5 |

* Employer behaviour includes: racial discrimination, employer stigma of mental illness, lack of flexibility or supportive opportunities or adaptations for disabled, low salaries, perception of jobseekers

The number of factors listed in the table gave rise to the need to group them

together. The problems cited were grouped together, initially into four categories: Personal Characteristics; Skills and Experience; Circumstances and Barriers; and Employer Behaviour. These groupings refer to their relation to the labour market. The simplest to grasp refers to 'employer behaviour and attitudes' – this includes the state of labor demand. Another fairly simple category is 'skills and experience' which describes what technical abilities can be supplied to an employer. Basic skills – primarily literacy and numeracy – were included because they can be learnt and taught although they may seem a long way from technical vocational qualifications.

'Circumstances and Barriers' refers to those factors which may stop someone getting work even if they are 'job-ready' – like absence of suitable work; or of affordable childcare; or of facilities for disabled; and a number of issues around debt and the benefit system. There was some difficulty in considering whether drug and alcohol abuse and a record of offending should be included here because these certainly are barriers. However it was decided that they had more in common with the fourth category, 'Personal Characteristics'. This is the largest and perhaps least tightly defined category. What is being described by each of the factors included here is something dysfunctional about the individual's relationship to self or to society or social norms. For example, Self-confidence and Motivation. Punctuality, attitude, appearance and inflexibility describe problems of the relation with others. There is perhaps less clarity about the inclusion of 'being long-term/third generation unemployed' or chaotic lifestyles but they are, it is contended, within the same broad category of 'Personal Characteristics'.

These categories are related to the five definitions used in Question 3. Circumstances and Barriers and Employer Behaviour would be included in WIDE but not other definitions. Personal Characteristics are in the same territory as NARROW. The link between skills and experience and SKILLS is clear as well.

Table __ presents the composition of these categories and the responses split between Edinburgh and Glasgow

| Problem described and code | | No. of responses | | | % of respondents | | |
|----------------------------|--|------------------|----|----|------------------|----|----|
| | | G | E | T | G | E | T |
| PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Self confidence – self esteem | 7 | 15 | 22 | 25 | 42 | 34 |
| 2 | Motivation/attitude – fear – | 4 | 15 | 19 | 14 | 42 | 30 |
| 3 | Core skills – communication, interpersonal, wkg with others | 3 | 9 | 12 | 11 | 25 | 19 |
| 4 | Punctuality, work ethics, attendance, reliability, timekeeping | 1 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 8 | 6 |
| 5 | Appearance | 1 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 17 | 11 |

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|--|----|----|-----|----|----|----|
| 6 | inability to grow/adapt – inflexibility – poor at change | 1 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 17 | 11 |
| 7 | Aims and aspirations/lack of LM awareness and info /unrealistic expectations | 2 | 8 | 10 | 7 | 22 | 16 |
| 8 | Chaotic lifestyles/multiple disadvantage | 1 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 11 | 8 |
| 9 | Dependency from being LTU – 3 rd generation | 3 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 8 |
| 13 | Criminal record | 2 | 7 | 9 | 7 | 19 | 14 |
| 14 | Drug/alcohol misuse | 6 | 6 | 12 | 21 | 17 | 19 |
| | | 30 | 82 | 112 | | | |
| SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE | | | | | | | |
| 10 | Basic skills – Literacy and Numeracy, | 4 | 8 | 12 | 14 | 22 | 19 |
| 11 | Lack of work experience | 10 | 9 | 19 | 36 | 22 | 28 |
| 12 | Lack of skills and qualifications | 8 | 11 | 19 | 29 | 31 | 30 |
| | | 22 | 28 | 50 | 54 | 58 | 56 |
| PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES | | | | | | | |
| 15 | Childcare – care issues – lone parenthood | 2 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 14 | 11 |
| 16 | Housing problems | 2 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 14 | 11 |
| 17 | Travelling/transport | 1 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 5 |
| 18 | Financial difficulties/debt | 3 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 8 | 9 |
| 19 | Costs of working/leaving benefit/housing – benefit trap | 11 | 3 | 14 | 39 | 6 | 20 |
| | | | | | | | |
| 20 | disability & mental ill–health | 2 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| 21 | peer pressure/lack of role models | 4 | 4 | 8 | 14 | 11 | 13 |
| | | 25 | 26 | 51 | | | |
| | EMPLOYER BEHAVIOUR, inc. racial discrimination, employer stigma of mental illness, lack of flexibility or supportive opportunities or adaptations for disabled, low salaries, perception of jobseekers | 1 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 22 | 14 |

For an assessment of the extent to which respondents favoured one or other, the total number of responses in each category is given below, alongside the percentage who gave at least one of the problems in each of the categories. The largest number of responses falls in Personal Characteristics and the smallest in Employer Behaviour.

| Problem described and code | No. of responses | | | % of respondents | | |
|--|------------------|----|-----|------------------|----|----|
| | G | E | T | G | E | T |
| PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS inc core skills | 30 | 82 | 112 | | | |
| SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE inc basic skills | 22 | 28 | 50 | 54 | 58 | 56 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------|----|----|----|---|----|----|
| PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES | 25 | 26 | 51 | | | |
| EMPLOYER BEHAVIOUR | 1 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 22 | 14 |

Assessment

There was a substantial overlap with the list prepared from examination of definitions in the literature (see above). However there is much more emphasis given to core personal characteristics and attitudes within the idea of assets (from Hillage and Pollard) than that concept might have been thought to contain. In fact a number of factors which feature strongly here are not found at all in the list derived from the literature review. (This may be a result, in part, of a focus on unemployed and excluded groups here). Furthermore the attention given to what Hillage and Pollard call 'deployment' and 'presentation' is slight relative to their posing them as two of the four elements of employability.

In terms of the content of the concept employability it can be concluded that for these respondents, employer behaviour and labour market conditions are given little attention even by those who believe these to be within the definition of the term. Personal circumstances and barriers also are cited infrequently except for those relating to the benefit system and whether work pays. Skills and experience feature in a majority of responses and all three factors in this category came in the top eight. Personal characteristics contributed the top two problems and were cited by 75% of respondents (% of those replying to this question).

Put another way this represents a strong preference for those factors which are characteristics of the individual, some consideration of factors external to the individual which can hinder access to work and only slight attention to the behaviour of employers. When the latter includes discriminatory attitudes which could be seen alternatively as barriers, the case that the demand side of the labour market has little place in respondents' view of employability, or at least the main problems concerning employability, is clear.

The most striking point in these data for the study of labour markets is the strong preponderance of personal characteristics. It could be argued that this is partly a result of the grouping of a large number of problems in this one category. However the number which could potentially be shifted out, to Circumstances and Barriers, is small. An alternative is another category, for example 'social problems', which was considered. When this was tried it foundered on the difficulty of reaching a suitable definition which was clearly differentiated from the others.

Another variation of these groupings recognises the debate about generic skills. This groups Basic skills and Core skills separately, rather than in Skills and Experience

and Personal Characteristics respectively, making 5 categories. Table _ presents the broad outcomes using this categorisation.

Using either of these approaches this would not blunt the significance of the main conclusion – that in the eyes of these respondents the largest set of problems concerning employability of jobseekers lies in their personal characteristics, larger even than their skills and work experience.

| Problem described and code | No. of responses | | | % of respondents | | |
|----------------------------|------------------|----|-----|------------------|----|----|
| | G | E | T | G | E | T |
| PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS | 27 | 73 | 100 | | | |
| CORE AND GENERIC SKILLS | 7 | 17 | 24 | | | |
| SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE | 18 | 20 | 38 | | | |
| PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES | 25 | 26 | 51 | | | |
| EMPLOYER BEHAVIOUR | 1 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 22 | 14 |

The relation of these responses to the actual array of employability problems in these two labour markets, if that could be described, is not clear. There are notable differences in the pattern of responses between different groups of respondents, which may simply be because they were asked to offer the issues which they themselves most frequently encounter. Furthermore there are a number of omissions which are quite surprising. For example few/no respondents mention health problems. However in Glasgow in particular it is known that there are a large number of people who are not working and claiming Incapacity Benefit because of health problems. With these reservations the implications for policy in the two cities are considered later.

why they like the term (or not)

Question 3 asked respondents “Is employability a useful concept?” The number replying yes to this question was 47 (85% of those who replied) while 8 said No. This result roughly corresponds, not surprisingly, with the response to the first question about whether they use the concept. The usefulness of the question however was that the reasons for this view were requested. The __ responses which gave a reason for a positive response have been examined for shared characteristics and grouped together as follows (some respondents are counted against more than one factor).

The categorisation used distinguished Process, Outcomes or Goals, Content, and Application to specific uses. It therefore distinguished between the usefulness of employability in defining goals – that is, as a worthwhile objective itself and as a means of getting and keeping work – and its usefulness as part of a process.

However these may not be particularly valid or useful distinctions and it is more important to see whether there is a common core shared by most of these responses.

“Employment may not be a goal for our clients, so employability is a soft outcome” (working with young homeless people)

“It focuses on getting and keeping a job, not the specific job” Scottish Enterprise

“I’ve never thought about this question before – which has highlighted the difficulties for (check text, no 66)

“Employability is useful in that it moves the focus away from vocational skill sets” (City of Edinburgh Council)

“Most of what is wrong with the supply side can be couched in terms of employability” (intermediary)

“Keeps issues which are relevant all in one category without diluting them” (drugs-related agency)

“employers point of view” (23 check)

“It indicates that the goal is employment which helps And that there are a range of factors – it’s not simple – continuum or pathway” (working with mental health” check, 42)

It is suggested here that there is a consistency in these responses which reflects different aspects of the same core meaning. Broadly speaking they all refer to factors relating to a process of change, moving towards either employability or, through that, to employment. Most demonstrate a holistic view of the individual in this process.

While they are generally compatible with each other at a general level, there are some sharp differences as regards specific content. One respondent likes the term because it allow a focus on a person’s characteristics to be considered separately from the barriers confronting them – another likes it for the opposite reason – because it incorporates those barriers. Similarly, one likes it because it separates employability from the question of skill; another because it includes it.

Of the 8 respondents who said they did not find employability a useful term, most were working with people with learning difficulties and mental ill-health. Typical of the reasons given were “I try to consider everyone as employable as long as their support meets their needs”; “All my clients have the ability to work but many require support”; and “The concept is not necessarily useful since it has to be defined, and if you do not fit it you are labeled as unemployable and face discrimination and disadvantage” (check precise text 55)

Issues about employability services

Problems and Needs in Employability Services – Employers' Role in Improving Employability – Measuring employability

Problems and Needs in Employability Services

Respondents were asked two open questions about employability services. 69% replied to a request to describe "the main problems hindering efforts to help jobseekers get work". The 60 problems identified in the responses were divided into subdivisions based on knowledge of the issues which had already arisen in the implementation of Joined Up For Jobs in Edinburgh. These are listed below with the percentage of respondents who mentioned them:

- Problems in the pattern of provision of employability services, the policies of funders and the funding of providers ('Funders and patterns of provision')
- Problems to do with co-ordination, co-operation and information flow
- Problems related to the characteristics of the clients
- Problems arising from the benefit system
- Problems caused by employers

The largest number refer to 'funders and pattern of provision'. This groups together the comments that the provision available does not suit the needs of clients with those about the attitudes and policies of funders because, by and large, the former is determined by the latter. Half of these refer to the need for more support for people after starting work, to help them stay in work. Others refer to inappropriate types or inadequate resourcing of support for excluded or disadvantaged groups – for example, the need for longer timescales.

The next largest category is 'Benefit-related'. Here, one of the main issues identifies the benefit-work transition as inflexible and offering no security if a claimant leaves benefit but then finds he/she cannot sustain the job taken. The other is the difficulty of earning enough to make it worth some people's while to leave benefits.

In all categories, there is a distinct difference between Glasgow and Edinburgh. In terms of numbers of mentions, and implicitly of importance, they are ordered quite differently:

| Edinburgh | | Glasgow | |
|---------------------------|----|---------------------------|----|
| | | | |
| Pattern/Funding | 25 | Benefit-related | 12 |
| Co-ordination/information | 13 | Client-related | 9 |
| Employer-related | 11 | Pattern/funding | 6 |
| Benefit-related | 6 | Co-ordination/information | 2 |
| Perceptions of jobseekers | 3 | Employer-related | 2 |
| Client-related | 2 | Perceptions of jobseekers | 1 |

| | Glasg | Ed | Total |
|---|-------|----|-------|
| Need more support on moving into work | 2 | 9 | 11 |
| Need for long timescales for excluded groups (cf ORF) | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Not enough funds for 'core' employability services | | 1 | 1 |

| | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Funds too narrow | | 1 | 1 |
| 'One size fits all' – generic solutions to specific problems | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Unrealistic/unfair perceptions/ expectations of decision-makers about jobseekers | | 3 | 3 |
| Lack of resources | | 2 | 2 |
| Need for more targeted resources | | 1 | 1 |
| Insecurity of funding | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Long hours and low pay of staff | 1 | | 1 |
| Unreliable training and recruitment organisations | | 1 | 1 |
| FUNDER AND PATTERN OF PROVISION TOTAL | 6 | 25 | 31 |
| Not enough information sharing between intermediaries | | 1 | 1 |
| Piecemeal and unsystematic approach to non – JSA groups | | 1 | 1 |
| Coherence and co-ordination between agencies | | 5 | 5 |
| More joined-up | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Lack of trust between agencies | | 1 | 1 |
| Lack of effective 'real time' LMI/job vacancy info | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| CO-ORDINATION, CO-OPERATION, INFORMATION | 2 | 13 | 15 |
| Literacy and numeracy | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Skills for the jobs | | 1 | 1 |
| Mismatch in labour market | 1 | | 1 |
| Drink and drugs; Debt; Homelessness; Unfit | 1 | | 1 |
| Working and signing on | 1 | | 1 |
| Clients are demotivated; lack confidence | 3 | | 3 |
| Clients are unrealistic about job goals | 1 | | 1 |
| Low aspirations of clients | 1 | | 1 |
| CLIENT-RELATED TOTAL | 9 | 2 | 11 |
| Not enough sanctions | 1 | | 1 |
| Housing benefit pays the rent for you | 1 | | 1 |
| High rents | 1 | | 1 |
| Women can't earn enough to get children out of poverty | 1 | | 1 |
| Benefit trap; benefits inflexible | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Benefit to work transition, no safety net | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Lack of affordable childcare | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| BENEFIT-RELATED TOTAL | 12 | 6 | 18 |
| Lack of employer involvement | 1 | 5 | 6 |
| Lack of employer-led job-specific training | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Employer attitudes | | 1 | 1 |
| Programmes not relevant enough to employer needs | | 1 | 1 |
| Lack of on-the-job training/employers won't train | | 2 | 2 |
| Give more support to employers | | 1 | 1 |
| EMPLOYER-RELATED TOTAL | 2 | 11 | 13 |

| | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Attitudes of JCP staff (to young people) | 1 | | 1 |
| Perception of JCP among jobseekers | | 1 | 1 |
| Perception that low-paid work is exploitation | | 1 | 1 |
| Need for quality jobs for motivation | | 1 | 1 |
| PERCEPTION-RELATED | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| TOTALS | 31 | 60 | 91 |

It is not possible to relate these responses to the general questions about the 'meaning of employability. The term 'employability services' in the question is vague and begs the question of what employability means and anyway some respondents have interpreted the question more widely than it was meant – it is arguable that it is not appropriate to list the characteristics of clients as a problem hindering efforts to help them since those characteristics constitute the employability problems at which the efforts are directed.

Training and information needs

36% of respondents replied to the question "Are there information and training needs which hold back the quality of the service being supplied to jobseekers?" This was comprised of 50% of the Edinburgh respondents (18) and 30% (8) from Glasgow – this is the largest bias in the response rate between the cities and means that the replies on the whole refer to Edinburgh. The most remarkable of the replies was 'No'. The categories into which the others fell included improving the morale and skills of personal advisers; use and sharing of information; understanding of the policy context and the needs of employers; understanding of the needs of disadvantaged groups, including training relating to chaotic drug use, medical conditions, addiction and mental health; and techniques like in-work benefit calculations and solution-focused interview techniques. Again these do not have any direct bearing on the meaning of employability but they are of interest from a policy point of view.

Asked about the roles which employers might play in helping deal with employability problems over half (53%) said they would most like more employer effort at removing unnecessary recruitment barriers, and 36% would most like employers to do more in terms of recruiting people from excluded groups who need support into work. It is interesting and probably positive that 58% and 41% said that they had experience of these activities respectively – although there is also the implication that what is done is not sufficient.

It could be argued that these responses run counter to the conclusions drawn in the previous section – that employer behaviour has little place in respondents' view of employability. However, while inconsistency does seem to be a feature of some of the responses (see below) it is more the case that here respondents are commenting

on what employers can do to assist people who are perceived to need assistance because of their low employability – rather than employer attitudes being a contributory cause of low employability

Glasgow vs Edinburgh

There were some notable differences in what was said by respondents from Glasgow and Edinburgh on some topics. Glasgow respondents were more likely to refer to difficulties arising from the financial implications of leaving benefits and entering work, and difficulties within the benefit system. This probably is not surprising since attention has been drawn by Glasgow City Council to the implications of the high rent levels in social housing in that city, which impact on the level of wage income needed to make jobseekers better off in work than on benefit (through withdrawal rates of Housing Benefit).

Edinburgh respondents were more likely to mention problems relating to the patterns of funding and provision; and, in describing employability problems, to mention Personal Characteristics and Generic Skills, as opposed to a greater emphasis on Skills and Experience and Personal Circumstances from Glasgow. It is possible that these differences arise from the differences in the jobseeker populations. Edinburgh has low unemployment and so the attention of services has been more focused on the needs of more disadvantaged groups. With higher unemployment, Glasgow has more ‘traditional’ unemployed, claimants of Jobseekers Allowance not IB or IS. This might also explain the larger emphasis from Edinburgh on the response from employers (for whom it might be expected that JSA claimants in Glasgow present few fundamental problems).

These are perhaps only plausible suggestions as to the reasons for the differences in responses from the two cities, which reflect known differences. They are also a reflection of the differences in the composition in respondents – the Glasgow respondents include more JCP Personal Advisers; the Edinburgh respondents include proportionately more JCP Managers, Personal Advisers in intermediaries/service providers, and people in policy/funding organisations.

There is more difficulty in explaining the high proportion of respondents from Edinburgh who cited problems relating to co-ordination and co-operation. There is no reason to believe that services are less well co-ordinated in Edinburgh or that organisations co-operate better in Glasgow. In fact it is likely that the opposite is the case. Joined Up For Jobs had been operating as a city-wide strategy in Edinburgh for some years before moves in a similar direction were established in Glasgow. Anecdotally it can be reported that a number of people who work across a number of geographical areas have commented on the advantages for Edinburgh of a clear strategic framework within which individual organisations can position themselves; and that this promotes joined-up working. The results reported here may perhaps be a perverse consequence of the awareness of Joined up For Jobs, which is widely

recognised, and dissemination by Working Capital magazine.

Responses to Questions Analysed by Groups of Respondents

As would be expected, there are variations in the data between different categories of respondent. Some of the differences between Glasgow and Edinburgh have been reported above. In addition to location, three categorisations of respondents were used to examine difference in the pattern of responses: Jobs; Organisation and Type of Respondent – this is a combination of the above two categories:

- JCP Personal Advisers;
- JCP Managers;
- Provider Personal Advisers/Service Delivery workers;
- Provider Managers; and
- Policy development and Funding.

This latter includes managers working in Policy and Funding organisations plus anyone else who describes their role as policy development. There was a small residual category of 'Other'.

While there was a sufficient spread among the respondents to generate groupings in each category, any such subdivision of 64 respondents will produce fairly small sub-samples so the differences between them have to be large to be even potentially significant statistically, as explained above. For this reason, and because of the large volume of data generated by even simple cross-tabulations, the method used here is to highlight only the most notable differences in replies to each question generated by any of the categorisations.

This section picks out any notable differences in the pattern of responses of these groups. The most noticeable distinctions arise between Edinburgh and Glasgow, between Managers and Personal Advisers, and between JCP and other intermediaries.

PAs in Jobcentre Plus were unlikely to mention Self-confidence, Motivation and Cores Skills, while 33% of JCP Managers mentioned self-confidence; and Service Delivery PAs were the most likely group to mention these factors. The other main difference within JCP was that the 47% of the JCP PAs mention Lack of Work Experience but none of the Managers do.

As reported above there are also noticeable differences between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Respondents in Edinburgh are more likely to mention the three main Personal Characteristics problems (Self confidence, Motivation and Core Skills): 42%, 42% and 25% compared with 25%, 14% and 11%. This is probably partly a result of the higher proportion of JCP PAs in the Glasgow sample.

The differences described above are less noticeable when the scores for all problems in each of the categories are summed; and when respondents giving at least one problem in each category are counted. The main feature here is the difference

between JCP PAs and SD PAs. The former score low on Personal Characteristics and Employer Behaviour and high on Lack of Skills and Experience and Circumstances and Barriers; while this pattern is reversed for the latter.

The section above has highlighted the largest variations from the overall average responses. Their significance should not be exaggerated, even when shown to be statistically significant, since most of the variation in describing key factors within employability may be explained as resulting from the expected differences arising from the different jobs of the respondents, which the survey wanted to reveal. However it is fairly certain that some interesting differences are revealed, in particular between JCP PAs and JCP Managers; between PAs in JCP and other organisations; and between Edinburgh and Glasgow. These could be subject of further study.

Assessment of Results of the Survey

The findings of this survey provide interesting evidence relating to the meaning and useage of the term employability.

Firstly, the results have demonstrated fairly conclusively that among people who use the employability concept every day there is no agreement on what it means or its content. There is ambiguity, contradiction and unclarity; albeit within a broad consensus about the territory within which its meaning can be located. For example, for some skills are an important component of employability, for others it is important that they are not included. Similarly for barriers in the labour market for specific groups.

The responses about definitions present this most starkly. The large majority agree with a narrow 'supply-side' definition, describing the minimum characteristics needed to get work; and also a wide 'labour market' definition which encompasses the demand side and everything else in between.

The responses about the most important employability problems give an insight into what respondents regard as pressing practical issues, rather than an abstract concept. While they present much diversity they do offer a qualification to the degree of confusion presented as regards definition. Here there is a strong preference for supply-side characteristics, ranging from self-confidence to vocational skills. There is some attention paid to the circumstances and barriers faced by different groups of people, many of which are also supply-side problems although they do not reside in the characteristics of the individual. The number of responses referring to employers and the demand side is small – so small that this imbalance cannot be coincidental.

There is an expected variation in the employability problems presented. There is interest in these variations but the most remarkable aspect is probably the strong preponderance of very basic personality characteristics like self-confidence and self-

esteem. This was not anticipated from examination of the previous literature on employability.

These perceptions by practitioners, some dealing with jobseekers on a daily basis, surely tell us something quite startling about a society and its culture which generates a layer of its population who are held back not (just) by lack of skills but about how they feel about themselves and society. Furthermore when taken together with the substantial concern about poor literacy and numeracy, and with reports of employers complaining about the basic skills of people they interview from school etc (FSS Skills Survey), they point to a severe social problem – i.e. with the meaning of a problem of the functioning of society.

It is important not to conclude that these are the root causes. The descriptions of the perceptions of these respondents cannot be assumed to describe reality. They are clearly symptoms – but of what? These are characteristics which are culturally relative – our communication skills can be perceived (and be) quite differently in different milieus. They may be generated either by the individual's perception of his/her place in society; and in response to a specific situation (e.g. the employment relationship; or the job interview. Furthermore it is not clear that they can be tackled head-on. For some people in some circumstances, a feeling of despair and worthlessness may be quite realistic. Encouraging them not to feel like that may be less effective than finding them a job. (insert further discussion)

(There is a further way in which the descriptions of the perceptions of these respondents cannot be assumed to describe reality. There is rarely any mention in the literature, or in the responses, of ability or productivity. This is despite the predominant theoretical model being one which explains that people who are least able to work productively are the most likely to be workless. Even the contesting paradigms do not deny that employers seek to select on this basis).

The variations to be detected between and within categories of respondent also add to the understanding of the content of this concept. It is also clear that the content of employability can vary between industrial sectors. Furthermore they demonstrate that this is a term which can be given different meanings according to one's place in the pattern of provision. The differences between Personal Advisers and Managers (particularly within JCP) about what are seen as the main problems are sufficient to prompt the question of whether the use of the term employability is a tool to enhance confusion or understanding.

There are significant differences between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Whereas these do reflect particular problems identified elsewhere, care should be taken in assuming that a reported difference does reflect a real difference in the labour market. A case in point is the response to the question about problems within employability services. Many more respondents in Edinburgh referred to problems relating to co-ordination, co-operation, funding and the pattern of provision. Anecdotally, few

people would report that these were less problematic in Glasgow. The interpretation might be that more awareness of these issues has been generated in Edinburgh by the existence of a policy framework in which they can be aired.

Discussion and Proposal

In making sense of the confusion revealed by the survey, some help can be found in the responses of those who said why they found the term useful. They mostly referred to Process – towards employability, as a staging post; or towards employment. Abstracting from this, it is feasible to suggest some of the elements which make employability a popular term.:

1. It is about work as the objective and constructing the pathway to it.
2. It is holistic, taking into account the needs of the individual in constructing that pathway.
3. It is relative – to the chosen industry, to labour market conditions and, in a competitive market, to other people.

These are all very useful things to understand in the process of getting into work. Although these are rarely found stated in the definitions it may be that they explain why it is used so much.

Is employability a contested term or just a confused one? A contested concept is one which, within an overall territory of meaning, different interests or schools of thought argue for interpretations or specific meanings which carry implications in theoretical or policy terms. The contests over employability might be traced through looking at its use in debate about what to do about unemployment over the last two decades. These have been characterised by both very high and low levels of unemployment, and also rapid changes in industrial and occupational composition of the workforce.

The dominant theme seen in the critical literature is the use of employability as a vehicle for a supply-side view of labour market problems which blames the victims – low employability as the cause of high unemployment. This is set against the view of unemployment prevailing at the start of the 1990s as being caused by macroeconomic factors and therefore experienced by the unemployed as a crisis of which they are victims. This was complemented by a literature which analysed the barriers to work experienced by different groups affected by unemployment.

A further facet of this debate is seen in the discussion about what to do for the unemployed. From the 1970s onwards government programmes had emphasised either skills training (TOPS, Employment Training) or work experience (Community Programme). The concern with skills corresponded to a number of strand of thought including the wish to invest in the unemployed, but primarily that the main factor which would help unemployed workers compete in the labour market was skill. This could and did complement an awareness of the changing skill needs of industry. The theme of employability accompanied a move away from skills training to enhancing

employability, often crudely through measures to improve jobsearch and cv writing. The New Deal introduced by the Labour Government embodied much of this approach, with little emphasis on training in any of the four options.

Although often viewed negatively by practitioners and commentators, it was underpinned by a valid critique of many training-based programmes – essentially that the training was of poor quality and did little good for the trainees, of whom many had a range of needs in addition to lack of relevant skills (although this was not the case for some of the smaller-scale programmes run independently of central government). In this regard it can be seen that the holistic quality of employability can underpin a sensitive response to the specific barriers faced by disadvantaged groups; and the need to adapt to change. However even in this context there are many who regard the key issue as not the employability of the group but the socially constructed barriers which they face.

These are perhaps the key debates in which employability has figured, and it is not clear that they involve a contest about the meaning of employability rather than about its importance. It might be argued that the existence of conceptions of employability which either emphasise skills or exclude them demonstrates a contest but it is just as likely that this is better described as careless thought or confusion. Confusion can also be seen deriving from a noble but misguided attempt to recognise the importance of demand-side factors in labour market outcomes, and so to incorporate far too much within the concept of employability itself – as in the Hillage and Pollard definition. This is compounded by the diversity of issues pertinent to different groups and different industrial sectors.

For the concept of employability to be useful, invoking it in discussions about access to work must add something specific. Statements such as “This person has the skills needed but he will need to improve his employability if he is going to get work” or “as well as the availability of childcare, employability problems are a factor which hinder many lone parents getting into work” should be clearly understandable and lead to particular policy conclusions.

The dangers in the broad approach are threefold: firstly to obscure the understanding needed of all the relevant factors by clumping them together under one title, which despite its supposed breadth, has a clear supply-side emphasis on the characteristics of jobseekers. Secondly, therefore to marginalise explanations of labour market disadvantage which emphasise factors like discrimination and structural barriers; and thirdly to confuse the insights which may be gained from appropriate attention to the narrower focus on jobseekers needs and characteristics.

On the basis of insights available from this study, a specification of employability can be suggested:

- It relates to the characteristics of individuals
- It is distinct from other identifiable characteristics like skills and experience;

and from labour market structures like discrimination

- Its content is determined relative to the needs of employers – the demand side of the labour market – and to others
- Its content can be sector specific – what makes one employable for a retailer would not do so for a building company
- Specific disadvantaged groups may face particular challenges in relation to employability (consider for example people with learning difficulties or alcohol addictions).

The meaning which best fits these requirements is the narrow one which can be summarised as job-ready – are you able to work – very similar to the marxist idea of simple labour.

To adopt this would allow a sophisticated debate about differential access to employment opportunities which will permit employability to take its proper place alongside skills, barriers, employer attitudes and the character and quantity of labour demand. It avoids confusing employability with actual outcomes as regard employment – yes, one can be employable but not employed. It allows examination of the specific issues about those people for the capacity to sustain any job is in question, and also the relative importance of these to different disadvantaged groups. A potentially negative consequence of this clearer definition of employability is the loss of its capacity to sum up the combination of factors which contribute to employment outcomes, which might be thought to be a useful aspect of its holistic quality. However, since these vary so much between groups and individuals, and it is precisely the specific combination of these which is of interest analytically, if this is a price it should be paid for the benefit of enhancing the valuable aspects of the employability and losing the confusion which it has brought to the discussion of unemployment and labour market disadvantage.

Further comments can include;

is the narrow meaning any different from 'job-ready'?

How this plays into the debates

If employability is a view of workers from employers' point of view

what is the reverse – view of labour market from workers' point of view

– fillability of vacancies; accessibility of labour market?

Appendix: Questionnaire