



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING



# **INTEGRATING EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

An Introduction to the Commonwealth  
of Learning's Employability Model  
for Prospective Partners



# Understanding Employability

## What is Employability?

While there are many definitions of employability, most include these common aspects:

- Employability is linked to employment.
- Graduates' attributes, skills and knowledge facilitate employability.
- Individual characteristics, personal circumstances and other socio-economic factors also affect graduate employability.

For governments, employable graduates are key to driving economic growth, through the

For higher education institutions, employability spans the entire spectrum of education, from inculcating of values, to imparting knowledge and developing the skills and attributes that equip students for the world of work. While many universities still emphasise a graduate's ability to obtain employment that matches their area of study, there is increasing focus on developing the broader skills set that will allow graduates to adapt to a rapidly changing and diverse world of work.

## Why is Employability Important?

Many students choose to study at university to improve their career prospects. However, while most employers are looking for “work-ready” graduates, more than half of them believe that post-secondary has not adequately prepared graduates for the labour market (McKinsey, 2013).

## Employability

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

*Professor Mantz Yorke (2004), “Employability in Higher Education: What It Is – What It Is Not”.*



**58% of worldwide employers do not believe new graduates are adequately prepared for work**

development of enhanced products and services. Governments look to the education sector to produce graduates with the soft and technical skills to meet new economic imperatives. Employable graduates will result in a greater number of employed graduates, which positively affects national development and prosperity.

In an increasingly competitive market, higher education institutions must show that they can produce high-quality graduates for the labour market and offer a good return on investment for students. By improving and evidencing student employability as an outcome, universities can attract more learners,

which leads to increased revenue. Focusing on employability can also enhance student engagement and motivation, which can lead to better results and improved institutional rankings and reputation. Addressing employability in universities also supports various national and international agendas related to both education and sustainable development.

While the importance of graduate employability is increasingly accepted in higher education, there are a few systematic processes for how an institution can operationalise employability, particularly taking into account the principles and best practices of sustainable change management

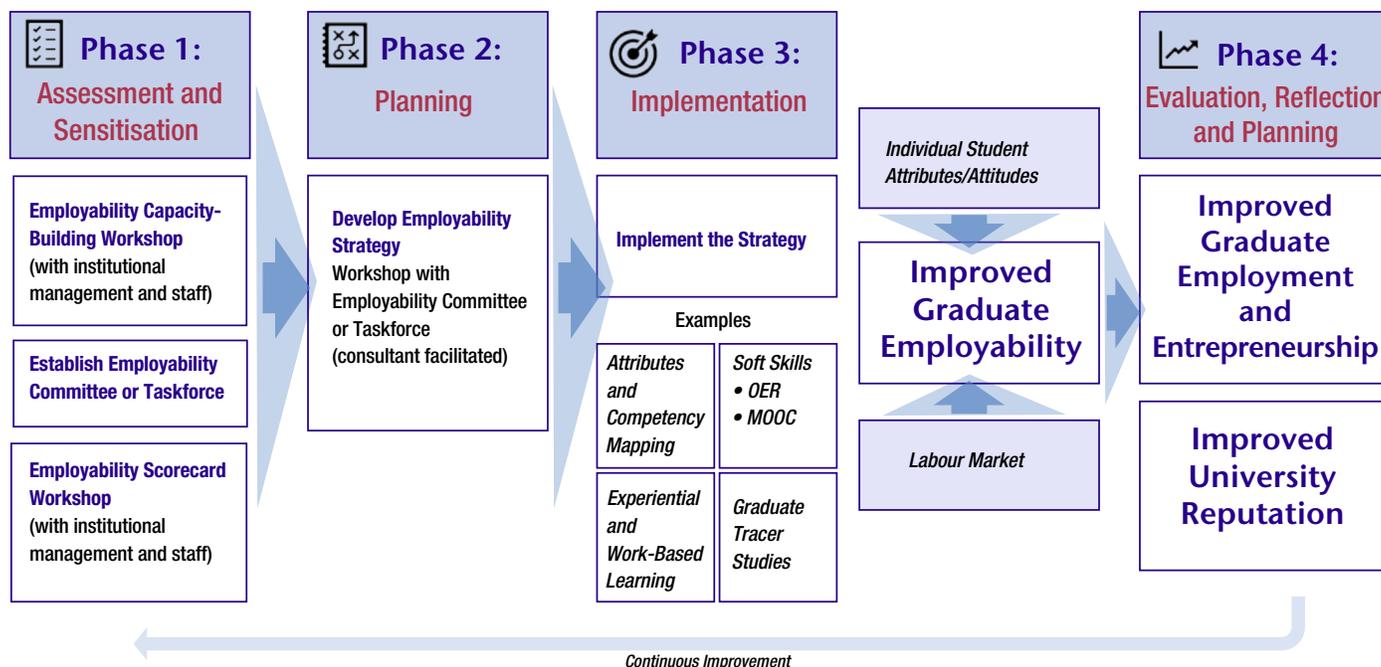


## The Commonwealth of Learning's Employability Model

The Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organisation that supports developing Commonwealth Member States to increase access to quality learning opportunities, leading to sustainable development. COL's Higher Education Initiative works with universities to improve access, quality, sustainability and employability. Within this framework COL is piloting an "Employability

Model," which utilises a systematic, phased approach to support universities in assessing readiness, planning, implementing and evaluating employability initiatives. This section presents COL's employability model and outlines the essential features of each phase.

Figure 1. The Commonwealth of Learning's Employability Model





## Phase 1: Sensitisation and Assessment

### ACTIVITY 1: Establish Employability Committee

An Employability Committee/Taskforce is established, comprised of key individuals who will lead the institutional change-management processes related to the employability model. COL supports this process with input to the terms of reference and guiding documents for the group.

### ACTIVITY 2: Capacity-Building and Employability Scorecard Exercise

In a three-day workshop, institutions will undergo sensitisation/capacity building in employability, supported by COL. This activity is intended to support change management by creating common understanding and buy-in from staff and faculty. It will outline why employability is an important concern,

present different approaches to employability, and introduce COL's model.

After the capacity-building session, COL's Employability Scorecard will be used to assess the university's current level of employability integration, with the aim

of identifying areas for improvement. The Scorecard is completed in a collaborative session, co-led by the Employability Taskforce and an external consultant. The results of the Scorecard will highlight the areas in which the institution needs to further integrate employability. It is the starting point for the Employability Strategy, which will be developed in Phase 2.



## Phase 2: Planning

### ACTIVITY 1: Institutional Employability Strategy

The Employability Committee will use to the results of the Employability Scorecard to develop an "Employability Strategy" for the institution. COL can support the development and/or review of the strategy by supporting collaborative development workshops, providing

input/feedback on draft documents, and/or assigning an external consultant to support the process. Once the Employability Strategy has been developed, interventions will be projectised and planned using a results-based management approach. COL can support the institution in this process, including training key staff in results-based management, and providing feedback on project documents.



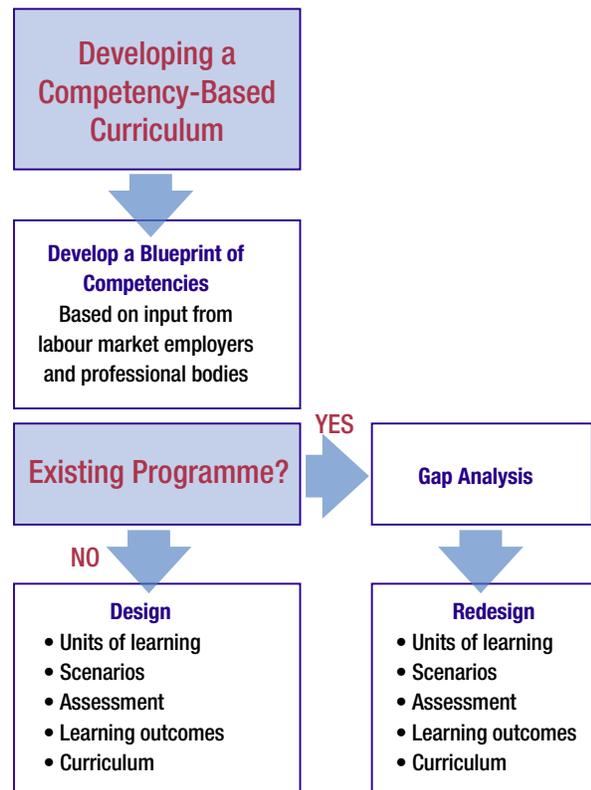
## Phase 3: Implementation

COL may enter into agreements with an institution to support the implementation of the projects proposed in the institutional Employability Strategy. This section outlines some of the general areas of project

implementation that COL can support; however, these areas will vary depending on the needs and priorities of the institution, as identified in the Employability Strategy.

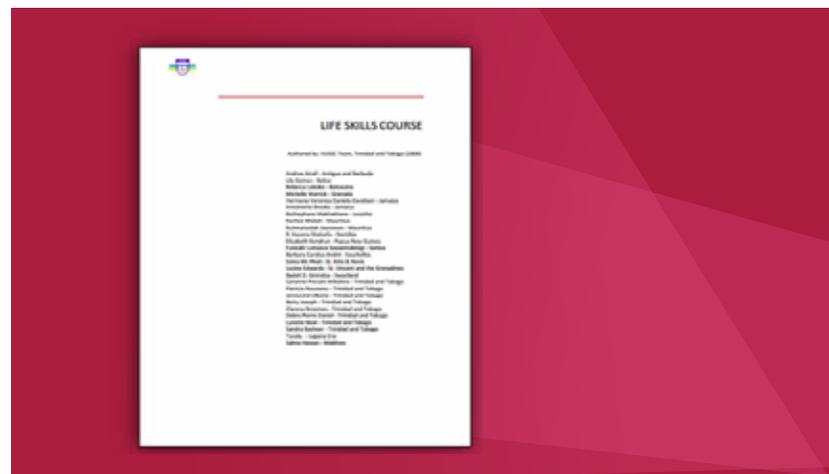
### PROJECT 1: Competency-Based Programmes: Linking to Labour Market Needs

Competency-based learning moves beyond traditional assessment of knowledge and ties education to the achievement of career-related aptitudes, aligning learning outcomes to the needs and expectations of the labour market and professional bodies. With the Open University of Mauritius, COL has piloted a toolkit, outlining a six-stage process to assess the relevance of current programmes vis-à-vis labour market needs, and transition to a competency-based approach.



### PROJECT 2: Soft Skills

COL can support institutions with integrating soft skills and entrepreneurship components (modules/courses/programmes) into their offerings. This includes supporting institutions to find relevant existing open educational resources (OER), and to adapt and re-use the materials for their context. COL has already developed several life-skills courses that can be easily integrated into existing formal programmes or offered as standalone MOOCs. COL also has extensive experience in training academic and technical staff in the use, re-use and adaptation of OER.



### **PROJECT 3: Experiential Learning**

A key approach to developing graduate employability is providing opportunities for students to engage in job-focused, project-based learning opportunities and events. Based on the Scorecard results, institutions may find develop specific projects related to the integration of experiential learning. COL can support with policy and systems development and/or specific events or programmes related to experiential learning.



### **PROJECT 4: Career Guidance and Counselling**

Career guidance and counselling is an important step on the road to employability. While students may have the adequate skills and competencies for the labour market, they may not be aware of the career paths available to them and may not be familiar with the job-search and interviewing processes. To equip career counsellors and students on the path to employability, COL can support training for counsellors and the development/adaptation of OER for use in counselling sessions or independently by the student. COL has successfully piloted a career counselling

toolkit in India that uses interactive games and activities to sensitise learners about their career options.

### **PROJECT 5: Evaluation of Employability Outcomes**

More and more, both internal and external quality assurance agents are requesting evidence of employability. In order to provide such evidence, institutions must have the internal capacity to conduct rigorous assessments of student outcomes, which go beyond graduation. These results can be used for evaluation, course

correction and marketing purposes. COL has supported numerous institutions to develop their capacity in conducting tracer studies, so they can assess how their graduates are faring in the labour market. COL can also support evaluation studies, such as return-on-investment analysis, for specific programmes.





## Phase 4: Evaluation, Reflection and Planning

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The results-based management approach utilised by COL facilitates evaluation, reflection and continuous improvement. Throughout each project's life cycle, continuous monitoring will take place, will be used to inform decision making and will guide any course correction or improvement. At the end of each project, the achievement of planned outputs and outcomes

will be evaluated. Based on this assessment, additional activities may be planned, such as disseminating results, expanding activities or updating guiding documents, such as the Employability Strategy. COL may provide support with external consultants and/or workshops in this phase of the model.



## Potential Partners: Next Steps

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COL is looking to partner with higher education institutions in Commonwealth countries to pilot the "Employability Model."

For further information, please contact Dr Romeela Mohee, Education Specialist: Higher Education, at [rmohee@col.org](mailto:rmohee@col.org).



## LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

**VISION:** To be the foremost global agency that promotes learning for sustainable development

**MISSION:** To help governments and institutions to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning by using open, distance and technology-based approaches

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