

# Academic and Employability Skills: Reflective report

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## **1.0.Introduction**

This reflection report is aimed at providing a structured account of the learning outcomes of this module over the past two terms. While I consider that numerous employability skills have been covered during this term, I identified four main categories in which I have made significant progress during the module in comparison to my previous knowledge. These categories are personal development and employability skills, CV writing, reflective writing, and critical thinking. In reflecting upon these skills, I will use the reflection model of Rolfe et al. (2001).

### **1.1.Rolfe's reflection model**

The reflection model was developed by Rolfe et al. (2001) to help healthcare and nursing professionals reflect upon their practice based learning. The model is simple, focusing on three main questions the professional needs to ask himself or herself in the process of learning. These questions are What?, So What?, Now What? and are meant to help the student identify the experience or situation, their role in it, what actions were taken, etc. (What?), how the situation or experience help their learning, how they understood and what broader issues arise from the experience (So What?) and what further actions need to be taken for improvement of skills and knowledge (Now What?). Even though the reflection model was developed for health care professionals, it is appropriate to be used in the current reflection, as it can help me structure my experience with each of the aforementioned skills and reflect upon how they will be further developed and what they mean for my professional life.

## **2.0.What?**

In this section I will explain each of the four skills I consider this module helped me develop and account for my experiences with learning each of them.

### **2.1.Personal development and employability skills**

Even from the beginning of the module, in the first term, I understood communication plays an important role not only in my academic life but also in my employment. According to Vasanthakumari (2019) communication can be considered as a soft skill which is essential in the workplace and improves the quality of work as well as the relationships between co-workers. In addition, communication can contribute to the creation and assimilation of the organisational culture (Dean and East, 2019), and it is considered essential, in addition to hard skills (i.e. technical skills) in determining employability. I consider I could not have learnt that without first developing a Personal Development Plan.

Another skill that I feel was further developed during the first term of this module is related to organisation and more specifically to time management. According to Branine (2008) organisational skills include a variety of attributes that recruiters seek in their employees. Moreover, the quantitative study showed that recruiters are less focused on hard skills when it comes to hiring graduate employees and are more focused on a more person related than job oriented approach. This means that employers are more interested in transferable attitudes

and open personalities, than the level of qualification. From this I conclude that for an employer hiring a university graduate it is more important that that person has skills that help him or her integrate in the organisation and become part of the culture, and skills that help them organise their work and manage their time, than the actual knowledge that person has. While that seemed odd in the beginning, this module helped me understand why this happens and why this model has become more and more applicable in the recruitment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Kelper et al. (2019) contributed to this understanding, as they argue that organisational skills are highly important and transferable and help the employee manage their time and plan, prioritise activities, which helps the company save time and money.

## **2.2. Self-reflection and reflective writing**

Another skill I consider I developed even when considering the Personal Development Plan and employability skills is self-reflection, which I consider to be highly connected to self-motivation and having initiative. In my work experience I sometimes considered that initiative, or innovation stems from a place of wanting to be noticed in the workplace and advance in your career. However, during this course and with some research of my own, I learnt about extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and their relationship with innovation and initiative. Valerio (2012, p.30, citing Barry and King, 2000) defines intrinsic motivation as “engaging in an activity for its own sake, for the enjoyment, challenge, interest or natural fulfilment of curiosity”, whereas extrinsic motivation is coming from outside the individual, from a place of incentives for high quality task performance.

Lai (2011) takes this theory one step further and argues that self-motivation does not determine only innovation but makes the person more engaged with the activities and tasks given. Whether this occurs in education or at work, during employment, the results seem to be the same, Lai (2011) argues. The connection with self-reflection comes from the fact that a student who can analyse all the information received and challenge himself or herself to further develop. I consider that cannot be achieved without self-reflection. Belobrov (2018) argued during The Asian Conference on Education that self-reflection is a process that allows students the opportunity to be actively engaged in the learning process by thinking about it and analysing it through the prism of their own perspective. For me, self-reflection also determined further research, from a desire to learn more about the concepts presented in this module. This, I believe, is another connection between self-reflection and intrinsic motivation, because reflecting upon what I have learnt triggered a sense of curiosity which pushed me towards further research.

As Belobrov (2018) also indicates, self-reflection is often better developed through writing. As a consequence, the author speaks about the benefits students can draw from keeping journals, narrating their experiences and analysing what was learnt from them. During this module I also learnt there are several models developed by researchers which can help guide the reflective process and provide structure to the reflective writing, such as the model used for this reflection (Rolfe et al., 2001). The essentials of reflective thinking that I picked up from this module are thinking about an event or experience, analysing that (usually in a critical manner), and drawing meaning from the experience or event. But it is not enough to

simply think of an event and how it made you feel in order to truly reflect on it. Additional research is needed in order to find out what other people with more experience of the topic know, and incorporate those ideas for effective learning. From reflective writing, I have learnt that simple knowledge of definitions and concepts is not enough, and reflection, especially structured reflective writing, can help a student better understand the concepts and their application in practice.

### **2.3.Critical thinking**

I consider critical thinking to be strongly correlated with the reflective process and with personal development. In order to develop the employability skills discussed during the module and in the first section of this reflection, it is essential to analyse them from a critical perspective. Bahr (2010) argues that a common theme encountered in the literature on critical thinking in a higher education setting is that although there is consensus about it being essential, the concept remain unclear or poorly understood. The main presumption on why this occurs is because the literature argues that students and faculty staff perceive critical thinking in different ways, however Bahr (2010) manages to find that the concept is clear to students and matches the definition the staff members have. I believe that the literature may be correct and that on occasion students may have a different understanding of critical thinking, but Bahr (2010) is also correct in claiming students and staff have a similar level of understanding. The key, in my opinion is exercise, because from my experience developing critical thinking only occurs with continuous exercise. This is confirmed to me by Changwong et al. (2017) made an experiment and found that students focused on learning critical thinking through practice had a better grasp of the concept in comparison to students who did not practice critical thinking.

Another important aspect I learnt in this module in relation to critical thinking is the conceptual similarities and differences between critical thinking and analytical thinking. While critical thinking implies a process of conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising, and evaluating information, analytical thinking is highly focused on analysing and problem solving (Byrnes, and Dunbar, 2014). I see analytical thinking as an important part of critical thinking, but for me critical thinking is a more complex concept.

### **2.4.CV writing**

Perhaps one of the most important and interesting subjects approached in this Module, CV writing has helped me understand how to write my CV in a manner that appeals to employers. The CV was presented to us as a brief document that presents enough information to an employer about qualifications and skills that would determine the employer to offer work experience or meet you as part of a selection process. A lot of information is available online about how one should write a CV, and I also learnt that CVs should be written differently for different professional areas. For example for pharmacy students or pharmacists, the training and knowledge is very important to be shown first, if there is no experience, because there is a strict set of hard skills and knowledge the student must possess (Gallagher and Jackson, 2010), but in other domains, such as business, it may be important to

emphasise on soft skills as much as on the gained knowledge, if not even more, especially if experience is lacking. There is a lot of research on resume or CV writing (Risavy, 2017), which shows that a CV should include skills, attributes, knowledge and other information that may make a candidate appealing to an employer. CVs can also include a brief personal statement which should be tailored to the job for which the person is applying, to increase chances of being selected for an interview (Risavy, 2017).

### **3.0. So What?**

In this section I will indicate how this learning experience improved my overall employability and what new issues could have arise from my understanding of the four aforementioned skills. At the end of my first term I considered time management to be one of my strengths, but I since realised, with further research, that this is a matter for continuous development. I also realised that it is important for my development to engage in periodic self-reflection, and build achievable and progressive Personal Development Plans. Critical thinking can help me a lot in analysing where on my PDP I am and what else I need to improve. I feel that being allowed the opportunity to engage in critical thinking, self-reflection and individual study have helped me develop a set of soft skills which can be of help for my professional development, but also in a personal manner. Finally, one of the most important lessons of this module for me was CV writing, because it showed practical examples on how to write a successful CV.

### **4.0. Now What?**

As a conclusion, looking at the past terms, I consider I have gained skills that help me be more prepared for the work environment, such as research skills, self-reflection and CV writing skills. For future development, I would like to further work on my technology skills and research skills, in order to be better prepared for problem solving in the work place. I think that I am now able to successfully be an active member when working in a team and I understood that the quality of work, innovative thinking and initiative come from the passion one has for work and from doing work for the sake of work, rather than doing something for extrinsic motivations. Also, while I am aware of the importance of extrinsic factors which must continue to exist among motivational factors in the work place, I understand the value of a passionate employee and what type of value added they can bring to the company. As a student, I consider the soft skills developed during this module, which I achieved through self-reflection, critical thinking and personal development, have helped me understand the importance of presenting certain attributes employers want. As far as the CV is concerned, it is important to know how to present these skills in a succinct and relevant manner.

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