Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc

Learning for Life and Work in a Complex World

Volume 38

Refereed papers from the
38th HERDSA Annual International Conference

6 - 9 July 2015
Melbourne Convention and Exhibition
Centre (MCEC), Melbourne, Australia

Bennett, D., Richardson, S., Mahat, M., Coates, H., MacKinnon, P. & Schmidt, L. (2015) Navigating uncertainty and complexity: Higher education and the dilemma of employability. In T. Thomas, E. Levin, P. Dawson, K. Fraser & R. Hadgraft (Eds.), Research and Development in Higher Education: Learning for Life and Work in a Complex World, 38 (pp 1-10). Melbourne, Australia. 6 - 9 July 2015.

Published 2015 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, MILPERRA NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN 1441 001X
ISBN 978-0-908557-96-7

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DIISR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence and they reviewed the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Papers were reviewed according to specified criteria, including relevance to the conference theme and sub-themes, originality, quality and presentation. Following review and acceptance, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

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Navigating uncertainty and complexity: Higher education and the dilemma of employability

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This paper reinforces growing social and economic demands for graduates who can navigate the uncertainty and complexity of rapidly transforming employment contexts. This aim is first addressed with an overview of the research on employability and the changing nature of work and employment. This is followed with a discussion of employability and career development within higher education. The article concludes by considering the implications for higher education institutions. Recommendations include the development of graduate employability measures that record multiple employments and the refinement of employability models. The authors challenge higher education institutions to place the development of self and career at the core of every program.

Keywords: graduate employability; transition; higher education; graduate outcomes

Introduction

Amongst other responsibilities, higher education institutions (HEIs) are responsible for helping students to gain the skills, knowledge and personal attributes required of them in the

initial stages of their careers. There is, however, a perception that HEIs are not doing this task effectively. This is notwithstanding substantial evidence on what is required by employers, alongside the existence of multiple graduate attributes statements and a large body of scholarly literature. Of particular concern is the difference in perception between HEIs and employers, with international surveys indicating that HEIs rank their performance far more highly than do employers (McKinsey & Company, 2013).

Evidence also reveals disparity between what working graduates consider to be important skills for employment and what was addressed in their degrees. For example, Australian computer science graduates report that both generic skills and discipline-specific skills could have been better addressed in their degree programs (Koppi & Naghdy, 2009). Similarly, graduates in the performing arts bemoan the lack of small business skills that would enable them to function as portfolio careerists (Bennett & Bridgstock, 2014; Harvey & Shahjahan, 2014). More broadly, research from the UK indicates that students perceive their degrees as having declining value in the congested employment market and feel the need for broader skillsets than those offered within their courses (Tomlinson, 2009).

The challenges of achieving higher education excellence and quality are many and difficult, particularly in light of the substantially more complex operating space that has emerged over recent years. Mahat and Millot (2014) list a number of forces that have had a substantial effect on graduate employability. These include:

- An emerging concern with the quality of education in the wake of massification, diversification and increasing demands for institutional accountability;
- The shift of the financial burden for tertiary education onto students (and their families) with subsequent expectations of a monetary return in the form of improved employment opportunities;
- Governments' efforts to achieve national priorities by steering progress in certain economic sectors, and a parallel shift towards the predominance of private employers;
- A need for students to be prepared for an ever-changing economy and labour market, leading to a focus which transends immediate disciplinary technical skills; and
- Rapid technological developments, which require that employability is not only the capacity to find work, but also the capacity to engage in ongoing skills development.

What do we mean by employability?

One of the challenges in efforts to enhance the employability of graduates is disagreement about the meaning of graduate employability, partly because it is viewed from the perspectives of many different stakeholders (Hugh Jones et al., 2006). Indeed, different conceptualisations reflect disparities in the underpinning beliefs about what is important, why, and for whom. It is important to articulate these because the way in which graduate employability is framed will impact how—or even whether—it is approached at the level of the university, faculty, discipline, academic and student.

Boden and Nedeva (2010, p. 46) note a shift over time from a definitional emphasis on graduates securing "a job" to a definition "that places at its core the individual acquisition of a set of attributes that makes one appealing to a heterogeneous range of employers". To illustrate different perceptions of what is required to gain and retain work, we turn to four commonly used definitions of employability. We note also the distinction between employment and employability and the rider that work should be meaningful and satisfying.

We begin with Hillage and Pollard (1998, p. 2), who define employability as

> 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 … within which they seek work.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia (ACCI/BCA) (2002, p. 3) define employability as "skills required not only to gain employment, but to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions".

Yorke (2006, p. 8), meanwhile, defines employability as "a set of achievements–skills, understandings and personal attributes–that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy".

Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007, p. 280) suggest that employability means having a set of "skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful". Notably, Pool (2012) later added the words "and retain" to this definition in recognition that employability incorporates the ability to maintain work over the career lifespan.

Hillage and Pollard (1998) and Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) focus entirely on the benefits to the individual. Yorke (2006), however, broadens the perspective considerably, seeing benefits for the individual, colleagues and society. Employers are not mentioned by Yorke, whereas, not surprisingly, ACCI/BCA's employer-driven definition highlights the benefits of employability skills for both individuals and employers. Boden and Nedeva (2010, p. 38) are highly critical of this approach, suggesting that it masks a drive for universities to produce "docile employees".

Yorke's much-cited definition refers to graduate "achievements", suggesting mastery prior to the entry into work. However, in discussion he stresses the context dependency of employability. Indeed, many scholars with an interest in employability recognise that the possession of appropriate skills and attributes does not necessarily equate to the ability to find work. As Wilton (2011, p. 87) suggests, "it is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed".

Equally, scholars recognise the limits of what HEIs can do. In part, these limitations acknowledge the importance of workplace-based learning (Knight & Yorke, 2004). This view is supported by Mason, Williams & Cranmer (2009), whose evaluation of the effectiveness of non-workplace employability interventions showed that any beneficial effect was lost within three years of graduation.

Employability and graduate outcomes

Despite the myriad definitions of employability, there is also a degree of common ground. Most scholars and practitioners use the term "employability" as shorthand for knowledge, skills, understandings and, possibly, attributes or attitudes - although the latter are contentious.

There is also a consistent focus on the benefits that may accrue to the individual within the labour market.

Inevitably, efforts to enhance employability reflect an increasing focus on graduate outcomes (Oliver, 2011; Coates & Mahat, 2013). A number of efforts have been made to create a common framework for graduate outcomes at the system level: for example, the Bologna Process in Europe was informed by a desire to "prepare students for their future careers and for life as active citizens in democratic societies, and support their personal development" (Bologna Secretariat, 2007, n. p). The subsequent European Qualifications Framework (EQF) provides a common framework for the promotion of lifelong and life-wide learning through study and work mobility (European Union, 1995-2014). Similarly, the "Tuning" suite of projects, along with the OECD's AHELO initiative, have shifted the focus from what a graduate has been taught to what the graduate has learned and is able to do (Richardson & Coates, 2014; Tuning Association, 2011). These international projects have also demonstrated the capacity to reach consensus regionally and internationally.

Recent developments in Australia stem from the Bradley review (Bradley et. al., 2008), which led to the Australian Government's commitment to produce

> graduates with the knowledge, skills and understandings for full participation in society and the economy … through building … the foundation for a new student centred higher education system, which will enable students to develop richer learning and employment pathways. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 7)

This focus has since been reinforced by other developments. Implicit in the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), for instance, is the recognition of qualifications, employability of graduates and mobility of students (TEQSA, 2013). Similarly, the Advancing Quality in Higher Education (AQHE) initiative has prompted the development of a suite of key performance measures in learning and teaching, including graduate outcomes (Radloff, Coates, James, & Krause, 2012). The Australian Higher Education Graduate Statement (AHEGS) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) encourages universities to list details of their courses, including workplace learning, professional placements and employability assessments. The Australian Qualifications Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013) maps the education levels of each industry sector in relation to required knowledge and skills, and it explicitly references generic learning outcomes. Finally, the Commonwealth Government's (2013) Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework describes performance in a set of indicators relating to the non-technical skills, knowledge and understandings that underpin successful participation in the labour market.

The combined message from these developments is that graduates' skills and knowledge, and their ability to find suitable work, is a core responsibilities of HEIs. As institutions face an increasingly demand-driven system (Kemp & Norton, 2014), excellence in graduate employability is one way to differentiate themselves and to attract students. This is particularly important for HEIs whose modest research output precludes them from elevation in international rankings (Thakur, 2007). And as the race for reputation becomes intense, graduate employability is increasingly finding a place within universities' missions and visions.

Reporting of employability in a changing labour market: What do we (not) know?

In the absence of rigorous measures for learning outcomes, graduate full-time employment rates are easily measurable proxies for graduate employability. In Australia the first-destination survey, implemented four months after degree completion, has become entrenched as the measure of graduate employability performance. The data from this survey present worrying trends, with the 2013 Australian Graduate Survey (Graduate Careers Australia, 2014) showing the proportion of graduates in full-time employment to have fallen to 71.3%, the lowest in 20 years.

Most noteworthy in these data is the high—and worsening—level of graduates still seeking full-time employment four months after graduating from the visual and performing arts, the life sciences, and the humanities. Also noteworthy are the high levels—just under 50%—of life science graduates who continue in full-time study upon completion of their bachelor degrees; only graduates of the physical sciences exceed this number. It is, however, an oversimplification to claim that the seemingly poor employment performance of some disciplines reflects poor preparation of graduates or, indeed, the extent to which graduates have secured work. A number of other factors contribute to the postgraduation employment rates, not least of which is the size and structure of the labour market for these graduates. Concern should also be tempered by the expectations of graduates: our own research suggests that first degree graduates of the life sciences, for example, expect to undertake further study in a professional area before entering the workforce (private communication, 2015).

In reality, many graduates join labour markets that feature multiple employments. These markets demand workers who have the capacity and confidence to move across the boundaries of separate employers, clients and task orientations, to manoeuvre traditional and digital environments, to locate external sources of validation, mentorship and information, and to engage in networked forms of finding work. Viewed from this perspective, the current measurement (under review) is insufficiently nuanced to provide the required level of specificity.

Higher education needs to recognise and respond to these more complex and precarious working lives with interventions that help students enhance their employability in ways which are suitable for the context. This means that impediments to the optimal development of employability skills must be overcome. Whilst this is a common concern across disciplines, the need for change—and for sufficiently nuanced reporting—is most acute amongst many of the disciplines covered by general degrees.

Employability and career development within higher education

The role universities could, should, and do play in the development of employability skills has been discussed over many years. Prominent in this discussion is the relative importance of discipline-specific and generic skills relating to graduates' potential to gain and retain work. The significant gaps between employer expectations and graduate competence relate largely to graduates' "work-ready" (Oliver et. al., 2014) or "work-ready plus" (Scott, 2014) graduate attributes. We accept that some skills can only be learned in the workplace (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009) and agree that there will always be gaps between the qualities of graduates and the expectations of employers; however, we argue that it is not only the duty of the employer and graduate employee to ensure this gap is quickly narrowed. The

disparities are even more pronounced among the growing number of graduates who need to create their own work and self-manage their career in order to make it sustainable.

One of the difficulties noted by UK researchers Boden and Neveda (2010) is that higher education institutions have diminishing discretion in shaping what employability means and that they tend to be guided by external forces, particularly employers. In sectors where employment *per se* is more tenuous, as a result of which the characteristics and economic circumstances of these graduates are poorly understood, this is particularly difficult (Bennett, 2013). Graduates in these areas work the hardest to define and create their career paths. Moreover, educators and graduates rarely receive guidance from professional groups simply because such groups rarely exist in any discrete form.

Many HEIs have responded to concerns surrounding graduate employability with new policies and strategies. These include curricular reform to include generic attributes and professional competencies; course-wide levels of achievement in key capabilities; and reforms in moderation and assessments (see for example Chalmers & Partridge, 2012; Jones, 2012). But whether these university initiatives develop the graduate outcomes being sought is still very unclear. The persistence of employer complaints suggests that new policies and strategies may not be fully translated into teaching practice, or at least not in a way that ensures students gain (or recognise) the necessary competencies. While nearly all students will participate in teamwork activities during their degrees, for example, it is likely that the way in which these are positioned and assessed does not translate into the ability to function successfully within a team in the workplace.

Developing employability skills requires more than just classroom-based activities (Billett, 2009; Cranmer, 2006). This means that an effective employability framework must include strategies for integrating multiple resources and pedagogical approaches, including work-integrated learning and the development of career preview. A growing number of Australian programs now offer explicit courses in career development, including various forms of work integrated learning and community service opportunities. Many of these courses were prompted not so much by employers, but by students, who were found to be placing great importance on vocational outcomes (Macleod & Chamberlain, 2012). Gannaway and Sheppard (2012) acknowledge the increase (since 2008) in the number of institutions requiring workplace practice as a core unit; however they have also found that few programs specify a goal of creating work-ready graduates. They are critical (p. 9) that despite the absence of career development courses, "future employability and the attainment of skills required for future employment are still listed in promotional materials as key outcomes of the degree, in particular, skills like critical thinking, research skills and problem solving".

Finally, challenges in the transition from student to professional are known to include insufficient connection between university learning and employment tasks; inadequate training about relevant job markets and employment opportunities; and students' under-preparedness to seek employment, to deal with colleagues and managers, and to communicate on different levels (Wood and Reid, 2005). Not surprisingly, graduates suggest that the transition (or transitions) to the workforce might be eased through clearer connections and links between subjects and areas of knowledge; by curriculum that incorporates group tasks and interaction; and with the inclusion of real-world situations as part of learning and training (Kift, 2009). Real world examples and experience, coupled with broader systematic evidence from empirical research, are arguably the best way to impart improved practice.

Implications for practice

Against this background there is now an urgent need to develop interventions informed by research, but which move beyond it to transform graduate outcomes for the benefit of students, employers, clients and institutions. We first advocate the need for an overall framework for employability skills development. There is already sufficient research and knowledge to enable this. Whilst it is a practical suggestion we argue that despite existing research and knowledge on employability, there exists nothing in which to synthesise what we know, what we have yet to discover, and what might be enacted as a result.

Given the extensive research already conducted on issues related to graduate employability, there is an associated need to make progress towards embedding sustainable solutions that have reciprocal benefit for all stakeholders. This requires change that enables action within higher education learning and teaching. Many higher education teaching staff recognise the importance of graduate attributes and their contribution to employability, and yet they are not willing, able or sufficiently confident to teach or assess these within already crowded curricula.

In addition to institutional support and practical resources, the extent to which staff address graduate attributes is influenced by prior industry experience, years spent in teaching, and gender (de la Harpe & David, 2012). Discussions of employment are also rare, with the 2009 Australian Universities Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) finding that less than half of 35,000 undergraduate respondents had talked about their career plans with teaching staff during that current academic year (Radloff & Coates, 2009; ACER, 2010). We assert that strategies to engage academic staff might include:

- Mechanisms for integrating an employability framework into disciplines;
- Identifying resources both within and external to institution that can be brought to bear on employability skills development;
- In-class modelling of best practice with students so that educators can learn during class time;
- Capacity development training for academic staff, including academics employed on a casual basis;
- Dissemination of exemplar case studies in multiple media; and
- Direct engagement with students via student organisations or social media.

More broadly, an effective framework might focus on building capacity rather than professing to be the solution. It should recognise best practice in employability skills education. Moreover, it would need to identify strategies to overcome the obstacles to its implementation. This would require a review of the manifold prior work on employability, generic skills and the labour market.

In turn, diminishing the employability gap will require further empirical research focusing on students in transition from study into work, and on graduates who have been in the workforce sufficiently long to meaningfully reflect on their transition experiences. It will also require consultation with academic leaders, employers and teaching staff, to develop insights into what is actually being done to address employability as opposed to what is stated in institutional policy documents.

Conclusion

Employability is important for graduates, society and the government, and HEIs have both a real and perceived role to play in this space. As such, this is an important discussion for all higher education institutions and educators. It is particularly important because of the growing evidence that decades of scholarship on employability and generic skills have made little difference to either educational practice in general or to employability outcomes. Furthermore, the challenges are increasing as the world of work becomes more complex and the expectations of graduates expands to include qualities such being responsive to change, entrepreneurial in outlook, being able to self-manage their careers, and being informed, lifelong learners. On this basis the conclusions for this paper take the form of four recommendations:

1. Develop the metrics used to assess employability such that they move beyond employment and capture richer data about graduates' ability to navigate the increasingly complex world of work and employment;
2. Expand the view of graduate outcomes to include the skills and traits required for employability into the future;
3. Develop a framework for employability that provides guidance to HEIs for the implementation of employability development within programs; and
4. Provide resources that will support academic staff and HEI leaders in the framework's implementation.

The immediate imperative is to leverage what we already know to engage employers and HEIs in innovative and sustainable approaches to evidence-based change. In this way we might frame the potential to deliver feasible solutions that progress practice and policy for employability.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the critical friends and participants who enabled this project. Support for this research was provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

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