Employability: a capability approach

Employability is often driven by the following question: 'what is the best way of developing employment skills compatible with academic requirements?' However, there is a range of research suggesting that this approach is too narrow (see for example, Hinchliffe (2002), Knights and Yorke (2004), Hinchliffe and Jolly (2010) and Holmes (2011). Employability is rather linked to graduate identity which has a certain complexity. For example, Holmes (2012) suggests that identity approximates to an agreed zone which is claimed by graduates and affirmed by employers. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) further suggest that the dimensions of identity are complex and include four dimensions of values, engagement, cognitive ability and performance, in which the development and emphasis of these dimensions varies according to employment sector requirements. If we accept, therefore, that a different perspective to employability from the skills and audit-driven approach is needed, we could ask instead the following: 'what kind of capabilities should be developed to enable graduates realise their potential?'. This question then enables us to focus on the capabilities a graduate needs to develop if he/she is to engage with the world, the public domain. What, however, is a capability? Is it not just another term for skills and competencies? I wish to show that there is much more to it than that by drawing on the work of the economist, Amartya Sen.

When he first theorised the concept of capability Sen suggested (in the context of asking questions about social re-distribution) that we should focus not so much on goods and resources as what people could actually *do*.[1] This idea was further theorised by Sen in terms of 'functionings' or modes of being and doing. The idea is that a capability can enable a range of possible functionings interpreted as 'beings and doings' that there is reason to value (see Sen, 1993). A 'capability set' is therefore, according to Sen, a combination of functionings. The key point here is that there is no one-to-one correlation between capability and functions – capabilities enable a range of functionings. It follows that the development of capabilities has an empowering dimension: capabilities enable persons to do more with their lives in terms of potential functionings. For Sen, the concept of capability therefore includes a normative dimension that goes beyond standard human capital theories: a capability set becomes an index of freedom and well-being.

For graduates, then, there is a complex capability-set that encompasses values, social engagement, intellect and performance. It enables, potentially, a range of functionings. This suggests that underpinning the employability specifics – writing CVs, undergoing recruitment assessment, interview performance – is the need to forge a capability set.

It might be useful at this point to think about the capabilities students and graduates need to develop their employability. But rather than suggest a long list I am inclined to identify two capabilities in particular:

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[1] See Sen's article *Equality of What ?,* originally delivered as a Tanner Lecture on Human Values in 1979, to be found in Sen (1982), P 353-369, particularly pages 365-7. See also Sen (1999, passim)

Capability for Voice

We might think of the capability for voice as being the ability to express one's opinions and thoughts and to make them count in the course of a public discussion (Bonvin and Thelen, 2003, p.3). This is more than the skill of self-assertion which is primarily directed to ensuring recognition of the self by others. Capability for voice implies an ability to make effective interventions both at the valuational and strategic level. It is more than the ability for getting oneself heard, it implies also a capability for dialogue as well. This capability therefore includes the capacity for self-disclosure through speech. Moreover since self-disclosure need not be confined to speech, the capability for voice may also be a surrogate for self-expression through visual and auditory signs. It should be noted that the capability for voice is not simply a self-regarding capability: for it suggests that the ability to make one's voice count depends in part on the recognition of the voice of others. Crucially, therefore, the capability for voice implies that other voices are heard and understood; it is a capability that is exercised in the context of recognition of others.

Capability for Deliberation

It is being suggested that deliberation is of ends and not only means and that persons may be considered, in the words of Charles Taylor, as 'strong evaluators' (Taylor, 1985, especially Chapter 1). This implies that at least sometimes we deliberate over values. For example, a graduate may deliberate over the kind of occupation she wishes to pursue. What is being suggested is that the framework provided by graduate identity enables such a person to reflect on their values and intellect in the light of what a particular occupation requires. It may be that some kind of revision as to one's values may be necessary and that this revision is best conducted through experiential engagement. So someone considering entering the teaching profession, for example, may be uncertain as to whether they could fully care for children and young adults and whether 'care' is a motivating factor in their value set. Engagement with young people (e.g. on a voluntary basis) could help settle this question. Deliberation could therefore be conducted over an extended period in which values are reflected on in the light of experience.

A final word regarding deliberation in the context of employability may be in order. It is important to differentiate occupation from a job. An occupation implies a whole practice incorporating a set of skills, theoretical knowledge, technical know-how and an appropriate value set. This is explored by Chris Winch in his analysis of occupational practice in Germany (see Winch, 2011). The difficulty in the UK (in England, certainly) is that universities are pressurised to publish graduate destination of employment figures within 6 months of graduation. In addition, graduates themselves are under personal economic pressure to find employment as soon as possible after graduation. In other words, all the motivation is to find a *job*, not an occupation. The long term process of investigation, engagement and reflection is simply not encouraged to anything like the degree that is needed if graduates are to seek a suitable occupation. By focussing on the graduate 'job', we neglect the development of occupational capability.

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