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Developing employable Postgraduate Researchers: there is more to transferable skills development than delivering courses. (0179)

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The dramatic expansion of postgraduate numbers and diversity, especially of Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs), in Higher Education across the globe has raised the profile of the question of employability and the nature of the skills and knowledge that enable PGRs to secure positions and embark on viable career pathways. No longer can the doctorate be regarded as simply an apprenticeship for an academic role (Denicolo et al, 2013). Indeed, the majority of doctoral candidates are already seeking or will need to find employment in other sectors, if not immediately upon completion but certainly a few years afterwards (Royal Society 2010:14 and Vitae 2013), simply because the doctorate is now seen as the entry qualification for some other professional roles while there are insufficient academic posts available for the volume of PGRs graduating. This has propelled the question of PGR employability into a broader context while there has been an attending acknowledgement that doctoral researchers require a wider skill-set than those needed to complete the thesis, even for those who remain in academia (evidenced in the UK by the research councils' criteria for doctoral training centres and partnerships, etc).

Much effort and resource has been allocated globally to the transferable skills agenda for doctoral and post-doctoral researchers. For instance, in the UK between 2004 and 2010 the national government allocated £20 million specifically to fund the 'skills training and development' of PGRs and early career researchers i.e. postdoctoral researchers (otherwise known as 'Roberts funding') following recommendations in a report by Sir Gareth Roberts (Roberts 2002). A decade on, the time is ripe for exploring and reviewing the shape of transferable skills development within Higher Education Institutions to see what lessons might be obtained from the UK experience that developers of PGRs elsewhere might find informative.

Many transferable skills development programmes in the UK context depend on face-to-face courses and workshops, with a few online, self-study versions available, but the question that the authors explore is whether or not such courses, on their own, are the best way of achieving researcher development and the transferable skills required for employment. There is emerging evidence that the transition to other kinds of employment can be quite difficult as Michael Eraut's research, among others, has indicated (Eraut 2009). For one

thing, much workplace activity relies on tacit knowledge only available to a select few. Further, Eraut noted that: “performance in the workplace typically involves the integration of several different forms of knowledge and skill, under conditions that allow little time for the analytic/deliberative approach favoured in higher education.” (Eraut 2009:65). The authors own research and experience confirm Eraut’s observation that developing transferable skills is not a straightforward endeavour; indeed, in the words of Pam Denicolo (SRHE PIN workshop June, 2013), ‘the term transferability trips lightly off the tongue but weighs heavily on the shoulders’. This sentiment struck a chord with all the participants involved in supporting PGRs. If the transfer to employment is problematic then it is to the structure and content of the transferable skills development programmes themselves that we need to turn our attention. Research on exactly what generic skills are required by employers continues apace but in this paper we are concerned particularly with the ‘how’ of both learning and transferring those skills.

The existing research and the presenters’ recent work on transferable skills (Denicolo & Reeves 2013 – in press) indicate that there are many ‘taken-for granted’ assumptions which may inhibit the effectiveness of developers’ efforts in terms of PGR transferable skills development. These assumptions extend from the way programmes are designed, structured and promoted to researchers, to the way such activity is evaluated. Much of this activity may appear to reflect the assumptions of the developers more than the academic context in which they are located, or the employment context which they are intended to address.

Taken collectively, the above issues demand a more critical stance towards PGR transferable skills development than has previously been adopted and certainly more so than many policy directives (within the UK context at least) have indicated as necessary.

The authors will explore some of the assumptions informing the transferable skills development agenda; it is their thesis that *transferable* skills may not be so readily acquired by PGRs and that different cohorts of researchers may need different kinds of development. In particular but not exclusively, transitioning from academia to other kinds of working environments may not be easily achieved. Orthodox approaches to development have under-appreciated the contextual variables encountered in the workplaces to which PGRs aspire. Thus the authors suggest that a challenge has arisen to the rationale behind transferable skills development programmes dominated by courses. They will present some of the findings from their own practitioner-based research and will discuss some key issues arising from it including the questions: what makes transferable skills transferable; how can we design skills development programmes to reflect the research environment; what challenges do researchers face when moving to other environments; and how can we better support researchers in acquiring transferable skills and in transitioning to other roles?

The audience will be presented with some reflections on the kinds of issues that need to be taken into consideration when designing development programmes for PGRs and with some

thoughts on how to meet the challenges faced by different cohorts of researchers. In taking a critical but sympathetic approach to the transferable skills agenda both authors recognise the challenges developers and PGRs face but identify new tensions and challenges that have been under-researched yet exert considerable influence and will determine the impact and success of PGR skills development programmes.

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