Abstract

This paper explores the role of extra-curricular activity in developing employability and graduate identity. Initially, it examines the concept of employability, contrasting two models of how employability is developed. The first being based around the acquisition of skills which, once acquired, can be transferred to the workplace. The second being based on the concept of graduate identity and emphasises the importance of employer culture and professional context, noting the requirement of graduates to stake a claim of belonging within this context during the recruitment process.

Next, the role of extra-curricular activity is examined through the perspectives of focus groups of undergraduate Business students. I examine whether the reported experiences of these students accords with either of the two models of employability. I find evidence that the reported behaviours are more consistent with the graduate identity model which appears to provide a more rounded explanation of students' behaviours and perspectives.

Exploring the Role of Extra-Curricular Activity in Developing Employability and Graduate Identity

Jones Rob, *Newcastle University, UK*

Introduction
There is a well-developed body of literature that examines the area of employability. Broadly, there is a consensus as to its definition with the main elements of Hillage and Pollard (1998)'s definition of employability as: "the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required" (p.1.), being largely endorsed by a number of other authors (Glazier, 2001; Harvey, 2001; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

However, while the definition of the concept may be generally accepted, there remain questions as to how an individual develops the capacity for employment. Accordingly, other researchers have explored how an individual might acquire and develop that capacity.

Acquisition of Transferable Skills
One of the main ways in which this capacity has been articulated is in terms of skills and skills development, which once acquired can be transferred to the workplace. This perspective is reflected in Government sponsored reports and policy such as the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), the Leitch Report (Leitch, 2006) and QAA subject benchmarks (QAA, 2007). It is also reflected in the academic literature (Hesketh, 2000; Knight and Yorke, 2003).

Concept of Graduate Identity
While there is a consensus that skills and skills development are important, there is also a growing body of work that suggests that a model based solely around skills development is not sufficient to explain the process by which an individual develops the capacity for employment. In order to address this gap, a number of studies have advanced a concept of graduate identity.

This perspective takes the view that graduates need to develop a professional identity, which accords with the cultural norms and expectations of their employer, if they are to effect a successful transition into the workplace (Colley, James, Diment, and Tedder, 2003; Gracia, 2010; Hamilton, 2012). Holmes (2013) notes the requirement for applicants for graduate positions to "stake a claim" to graduate identity by marshalling a fluent case for employment based on their ability to match employer expectations. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) also argue for a model of employability based around graduate identity and capability, rather than transferable skills. In their view the skills development model is not sufficiently well developed to meet the needs of either graduates or graduate employers.

Extra-Curricular Participation
One way in which students can contribute to their own personal development is through participation in extra-curricular activity (Atkins, 1999; Jones and Hill, 2003; Kuh, 1995). There is also evidence of a link between work experience and higher graduate employment rates (Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh and Knight, 2001) while a similar study by Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) suggested that there were significant early career advantages for undergraduates with internship experience.

However, while these papers discuss a link between extra-curricular participation and employment, they do not explore the nature of that link and, in particular, whether there is evidence to support the model of employability based around skills development or that consistent with establishing a graduate identity.

Research Question and Methods

The principal research question addressed in this study is the exploration of the role of extra-curricular activity in developing employability. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the emphasis is more on developing understanding and a theoretical approach than theory testing. Data was gathered by conducting focus groups with 56 undergraduate Business students at a research intensive university in the North of England. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed, then analysed for themes relevant to the research question. Relevant quotes are shown in italics in the section below.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Overall, there was definite agreement with the proposition that coming to university is an investment, where learning and personal development at university contributed to making the individual more rounded and employable.

> *Part of me came to university just really to get away, experience - a new city, different cultures from around the world, social life and rather that than academic.*

A majority of focus group participants (33 of 56) stated that they were actively involved in extra-curricular activity, with agreement that this activity had contributed to a greater sense of purpose and to personal development.

> *I thought I knew myself before I came here (university) but now I actually know what makes me happy, what makes me feel … fulfilled.*

> *I think when doing your CV you notice how extra-curricular activities are the things you actually write about. It's everything that you're doing outside of university that shows more about who you are.*

These perspectives underline the view that personal development can take place as readily outside the classroom as in it (Cranmer, 2006; Kuh, 1995). There was recognition of how extra-curricular participation could contribute to a wider student project of securing graduate level employment (Jary and Lebeau, 2009; Tomlinson, 2007, 2008).

> *A lot of people, and myself included, are coming because they want to get a good job.*

Participants were acutely aware that there were rules to the game of securing graduate level employment, just as there had been in gaining entry to university. Accordingly, in order to stake a claim to the graduate identity (or persona) sought by employers, participants needed to prepare a case to present at interview (Glover, Law and Youngman, 2002; Holmes, 2013).

> *What does matter is that you learn or gain the experience and confidence*

I think university should probably be about coming to learn something specific. But the way the system is, isn't like that. If you want to get a decent job, then you've got to have yourself a degree.

Conclusions
This paper explored the role of extra-curricular activity in developing employability and graduate identity, drawing from the perspectives of a group of undergraduate Business students. It finds evidence that students consciously engage in extra-curricular activity to warrant their claims to graduate identity and employment, while the acquisition of skills is seen as important, but subsidiary, to a wider project of establishing both student and graduate identity.

References

Atkins, M. J. (1999) Oven-ready and Self-basting: taking stock of employability skills, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Volume 4 Number 2, pp. 267–280.

Blackwell, A., Bowes, L., Harvey, L., Hesketh, A. J. and Knight, P. T. (2001) Transforming Work Experience in Higher Education, *British Educational Research Journal*, Volume 27 Number 3, pp. 269–285.

Colley, H., James, D., Diment, K., and Tedder, M. (2003) Learning as becoming in vocational education and training: class, gender and the role of vocational habitus, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Volume 55 Number 4, pp. 471-498.

Cranmer, S. (2006) Enhancing graduate employability: best intentions and mixed outcomes, *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 31 Number 2, pp. 169–184.

Gault, J., Redington, J. and Schlager, T. (2000) Undergraduate Business Internships and Career Success: Are They Related, *Journal of Marketing Education*, Volume 22 Number 1, pp. 45-53.

Glazier, B. (2001) Employability: the complexity of a policy notion, in: Weinert, P., Baukens, P., Bollerot, P. et al (Eds) Employability: From Theory to Practice, pp. 3–23, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Glover, D., Law, S. and Youngman, A (2002) Graduateness and Employability: student perceptions of the personal outcomes of university education, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, Volume 7 Number 3, pp. 293-306.

Gracia, L. (2010) Accounting Students' Expectations and Transition Experiences of Supervised Work Experience, *Accounting Education: An International Journal*, Volume 19 Issue 1-2, pp. 51-64.

Hamilton, S. E. (2012) Exploring professional identity: The perceptions of chartered accountant students, *The British Accounting Review*, Volume 45 Number 1, pp. 37-49.

Harvey, L. (2001) Defining and Measuring Employability, *Quality in Higher Education*, Volume 7 Number 2, pp. 97–109.

Hesketh, A. J. (2000) Recruiting an Elite? Employers' perceptions of graduate education and training, *Journal of Education and Work*, Volume 13 Number 3, pp. 245–271.

Hillage, J. and Polland, E. (1998) Employability: Developing a Framework for Analysis, Department for Education and Employment Research Brief No.85, ISBN 085522889X.

Hinchliffe, G.W. and Jolly, A. (2011) Graduate identity and employability, *British Educational Research Journal*, Volume 37 Number 4, pp. 563-584.

Holmes, L. (2013) Competing perspectives on graduate employability: possession, position or process? *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 38 Number 4, pp. 538–554.

Jary, D. and Lebeau, Y. (2009) The Student Experience and Subject Engagement in UK Sociology: a Proposed Typology, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Volume 30 Number 6, pp. 697-712.

Jones, S.R. and Hill, K.E. (2003) Understanding Patterns of Commitment: Student Motivation for Community Service Involvement, *The Journal of Higher Education*, Volume 74 Number 5, pp. 516-539.

Knight, P. T. and Yorke, M. (2003) Employability and Good Learning in Higher Education, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Volume 8 Number 1, pp. 3-16

Kuh, G. D. (1995) The Other Curriculum: Out-of-Class Experiences Associated with Student Learning and Personal Development, *Journal of Higher Education*, Volume 66 Number 2, pp. 123-155.

Leitch S (2006) "Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills" Final Report HMSO.

McQuaid, R.W. and Lindsay, C. (2005) The Concept of Employability, *Urban Studies*, Volume 42 Number 2, pp. 197–219.

NCIHE (1997) Higher Education in the Learning Society (Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education: 'The Dearing Report') HMSO.

QAA (2007) Honours degree benchmark statement: General business and management, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Gloucester. Retrieved 14 August 2013 from:
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/GeneralBusinessManagement.pdf.

Tomlinson, M. (2007) Graduate employability and student attitudes and orientations to the labour market, *Journal of Education and Work*, Volume 20 Number 4, pp. 285-304.

Tomlinson, M. (2008) "The degree is not enough": students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Volume 29 Number 1, pp. 49-61.