

Employability in Education Studies (0053)

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## **Background information and context**

This paper reports on the findings of research into employability and Education Studies which explored the trajectories of Education Studies students and considered the extent to which existing provision met their employability needs. Education Studies, as an undergraduate degree, evolved out of teacher education, however the subject area has wanted to distance itself from ‘teacher training’ and define itself as an academic subject – drawing on humanities and social science disciplines to cultivate transferable ‘academic’ skills. Many UK Education Studies courses have moved entirely away from a primary school focus – choosing to develop a curriculum based on critical engagement with informal education, sustainable development, global citizenship and digital communication.

In recent years, the number of Education Studies undergraduate courses have grown and student numbers have increased dramatically. Today, there are significantly more students studying Education Studies than there are places on teacher training courses. The ‘Employability in Education Studies’ project sought to understand employability in Education Studies in two ways: first, to consider how provision prepares students for specific employment opportunities, in line with recent recommendations to embed internship in HE provision (Wilson, 2012); second, to consider alternative conceptions of ‘employability’ that seek to widen student experience and expand their ‘horizons for action’ (Hodkinson et al, 1996). The research questions for the project focus on the perceptions of employability that students bring to participation in their programmes, the ways in which these impact on their engagement in their studies, and the scope for development – both in terms of expanding conceptions of employability and improving practice. This project is of prime importance given that large numbers of students are studying a course that no longer offers clear progression to a specific career. Questions relating to employability within the subject are also particularly acute in the context of the current drive towards employability in the sector as a whole.

## **Theoretical approach/methodology**

The research was conducted as a collaborative enquiry, directly engaging students and lecturers from the University of Warwick, De Montfort University, Manchester Metropolitan University, King’s College London and Liverpool John Moores University in research activity.

Small teams of staff and students are visiting 20 higher education institutions to carry out research conducted within an interpretivist paradigm. The research involved the use of qualitative methods including focus groups and individual, in-depth interviews with staff and students on Education Studies degree programmes. In addition, a qualitative survey was administered to students across the UK to gather their views.

## Results

Findings highlighted that the definition of employability in itself is complex and both staff and students have diverse views about what it means. Definitions of employability typically fell into distinct categories 'narrow' (instrumental) and 'broad' (holistic) and course leaders felt that the narrow definition of employability can negatively impact the way that Education Studies students approach their studies. The findings indicate that it is important for course leaders to unpack the definition of 'employability' with students when developing or refining their model of employability.

Various degrees of value were also placed on employability among students and lecturers and this may be linked to a variety of factors. For students, their ideas around employability may be influenced by the rising university fees, but it may also be heavily influenced by their age, socio-economic status, previous experience, or entry route to the course. Equally, how much course leaders and lecturers value employability provision may be linked to their own skills, competences in supporting students, views about wider employability agendas, and their own career development.

The continual 're-shaping' of student career identities was a key finding of the research. While some students had very concrete ideas about what they wanted to do as a career, others did not, or changed their mind during the degree, which caused lots of anxiety for students. Students made reference to 'known' and 'unknown' career paths and seemed to refer to the idea of "possible selves" (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011), where students consider their ideal and not so ideal future identities. Supporting students who may be uncertain career aspirations would therefore be important.

Overall employability provision was delivered in a variety of ways, from embedding employability within the degree curriculum and teaching practices, to seeking and signposting resources within and outside of the university such as the university careers service, guest speakers, and careers fairs and events. Course leaders and lecturers tailored their provision to the types of students they had enrolled and the expected careers they may go into. For example, Education Studies courses geared more towards teacher training would incorporate school-based case studies when teaching and welcome PGCE students as guest speakers. However this was more difficult for courses where the range of careers that students could go into was more diverse.

A key part of employability provision for many students was placements. It was recognised that placements were key to preparing students for the future because it exposed them to real-world experiences. Staff and students described many of the benefits of placements for employability, however the perceived future value of placements did depend on whether they were closely matched to the course content and types of students on the course. Course leaders are encouraged to consider a range of placements factors to ensure that placements adequately prepare students for future career opportunities.

It was also clear from the research that Education Studies students required more than knowing about 'jobs' and gaining 'skills'. Students and staff discussed the importance of

signposting to opportunities which can boost their confidence and ‘expand their horizons.’ Course leaders may wish to consider how they can maximise opportunities for learning which would benefit students for diverse experiences in the future. Provision may include: making connections between Education Studies content and other disciplines such as economics and business; encouraging students to think about global issues and visiting places abroad, and getting involved in co-curricula and extra-curricular activities.

### **Implications of results**

The findings reveal some of the difficulties and opportunities for students and staff on Education Studies programmes when considering employability. There are numerous career trajectories for students on Education Studies courses, thus degree programmes may struggle to accommodate the employability needs of every student. Some students may lack a career identity and face career uncertainty, which can raise levels of anxiety. The ‘Employability in Education Studies’ toolkit utilises the findings of this project and provides recommendations for those involved in Education Studies programmes.

### **References**

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