

Measuring Employability in Learning Gain (0239)

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Introduction

For the majority of students, the most important outcome of higher education is finding employment, as recognised by the government's White paper (BIS, 2016). Measuring Learning Gain, in this respect, always needs to include a way to measure students' specific abilities to gain, sustain and progress in employment, i.e. employability (Green et al., 2013). This paper reports findings based on three different projects addressing specific aspects of students' increase in employability. Learning gain from higher education, as seen in this paper, does not only include subject-specific knowledge and skills but also a growth in personality, and thus, in employability, which should be reflected in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Three projects measuring different aspects of employability

The first project, led by the University of Warwick, addresses the relationship between the knowledge of students' strengths and their career readiness and self-efficacy as one aspect of employability (see for example Yorke, 2004). The employability of 576 Home/EU final year undergraduate students is evaluated. Students who are in the process of actively applying for graduate jobs and further study places are recruited across different disciplines from six Russell group Universities.

Data on students' knowledge of their own strengths are collected as follows: Students are divided in three groups. A third of all students will complete a bespoke instrument, an online R2 Strengths questionnaire, which helps students understand their own strengths and weaknesses, followed by individual feedback from a trained R2 practitioner. A second group will also complete the online R2 Strengths questionnaire without obtaining individual feedback, and a further control group will not complete a Strengths profile. Students' increased employability will be captured by comparing their responses before and after 'treatment' together with their pathways after graduation.

The second project, led by the University of Nottingham, explores the four career adaptability resources of 'concern', 'control', 'curiosity' and 'confidence' using the UK version of the Career Adaptabilities Questionnaire (see for example Porfeli and Savickas, 2012, Wright, Bimrose & Frigerio (2016)). Building on a Higher Education Academy (HEA) pilot of the questionnaire across a number of settings (Wright & Frigerio, 2015), a subject cohort of undergraduate students who commence their studies in 2016 will be tracked over the academic years 2016/17 and 2017/18. A total of 49 qualitative interviews will be conducted at selected Russell group institutions

once in each year to discuss student experience of career development during that academic year.

The third project, led by the University of Birmingham, measures the impact of international experience on students' employability. While previous projects have focused primarily on overseas experience e.g. Behle and Atfield, 2013 this project will build on an earlier research project undertaken by the U21 UK employability group (Wright et al, 2014) and includes students who gained international experiences on campus. Employability learning gains will be measured of students who have undertaken one of the three following activities: Study Abroad, Work Abroad, and, an on-campus international experience. Altogether, qualitative data from twenty students from each of these three cohorts will be collected (pre and post experience) together with some quantitative data.

Expected results

The paper will be able to present findings based on all of these projects. It will enable us to understand how different aspects of employability can be measured, which group of students is more likely to increase these specific aspects of employability and how students' employability can change following specific employability enhancing procedures such as international experiences or individual coaching. However, all three projects will produce findings which will be of interests in their own rights:

The first project (Warwick) will create evidence of distance travelled across the dimensions of Strengths Knowledge, Strengths Use, Career Readiness and Self-Efficacy. It is expected that findings can identify a positive correlation between students' knowledge about their own strengths and their increase in employability. In practical terms, expected results are: (1) there will be greater distance travelled by the group receiving individual feedback; (2) the group not participating in the R2 profile activity will demonstrated less progress than the other two groups; (3) more of those who have completed the profile, with or without feedback, will secure the greater proportion of graduate job offers or further study places.

The second project (Nottingham), will assess the efficacy of the quantitative and qualitative measures of perception of learning gain for employability as measured by the Career Adapt-ability Scale-UK (CAAS-UK) and of Students' qualitative evaluation of career readiness. A further expected outcome is the facilitation of knowledge and capacity building for measures of learning gain by training and developing careers professionals to use the CAAS-UK with their students.

The third project (Birmingham) will provide further evidence for a relationship between international experiences and employability skills. It is expected that students who had international experience, either overseas or on campus, will identify high levels of self-perceived employability gain. A specific interest in this project is whether international experiences can be provided for at highly international HEI, and how this experience can enhance participating students' employability.

Conclusion

Findings based on all three projects will be drawn together to identify (1) which aspect of employability can be boosted by higher education in general and by specific employability enhancing schemes such as international experiences and specific

coaching; (2) how these aspects of employability can be measured; and (3) if these can be used to improve the TEF.

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