

The Impact of Postgraduate Management Education on Students' Perceptions of Employability. (0241)

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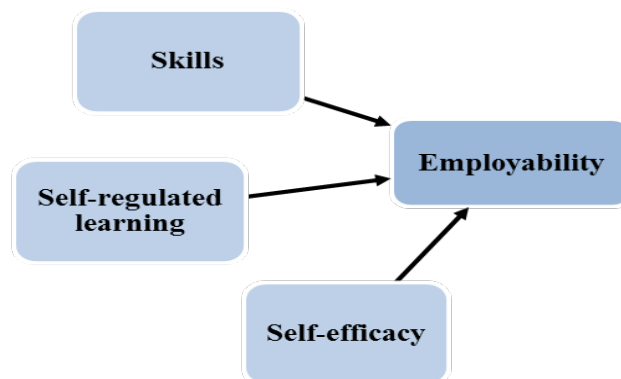
Rationale:

In 2008 the then Department for Industry, Universities and Skills proposed that employability should be central to the mission of all universities (DIUS, 2008). This position has shown no sign of abating and employability remains a focus within Higher Education (HEFCE, 2011; McCowan, 2015).

Employability has been defined variously as ranging from a wish list of skills to something more multi-faceted (Knight and Yorke, 2002; Dweck, 1999, 2007; Yorke, 2001; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011). There has been a considerable shift in the employability discourse from an individual simply 'getting a job' towards a more sophisticated view of the individual gaining a range of attributes which have broad appeal (Lees, 2002; Boden and Nedeva, 2010).

Informed by literature (Connor and Brown, 2009; Bagshaw, 1997; Ackhurst, 2005; King, 2003; Leitch, 2006; Wilson, 2012 and Lees, 2002) this paper presents a definition of employability as *the ability and attitude to apply and adapt knowledge and skills to current and future opportunities across a career path enabling contribution to a range of occupations in public, private or not-for-profit sectors*. In sum, the theoretical framework underpinning this research is that employability is a construct of self-efficacy and an ability to manage learning, as well as skills. The definition presented in this paper informs a model (Fig. 1) which captures the key elements comprising employability.

Fig. 1 Components of Employability



The relationship between learning and self-efficacy within the employability debate is captured in the assertion that one aim of education should be to equip students with the ability and self-belief to develop themselves (Bandura, 1995), since students with the self-belief that they can achieve what is required are more likely to be successful in chosen occupations than those lacking self-belief (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). Employers look for those who can develop and learn, as occupational requirements and roles change, and it is those capable of self-regulation who broaden their knowledge and adapt, while poor regulators lag behind (Zimmerman, 1990; Bandura, 2001).

Much of the literature around employability relates to undergraduate studies while postgraduates appear to be “a forgotten group who are not explicitly encouraged to think either about their skill or career development” (Lees, 2002:7). Though there is some evidence of research into postgraduate employability, this area remains relatively untapped (Maxwell et al 2009; Rothwell et al, 2009; Morgan, 2014) compared with the extent of work at undergraduate level, and given the call for more research into the postgraduate arena (Wilson, 2012), this work is timely and relevant. The impact of this research is in tapping into the postgraduate arena, exploring changing perceptions of employability of those engaging in education at this level.

Research Methods:

A survey of 450 students from two Universities' Business Schools was undertaken at three points during the postgraduate programme of study. Of this population, 152 were surveyed at the start of their programme, 189 mid-programme and 109 end-programme. This enabled analysis of the entire research population (n=450), and analysis at these 'snapshots' during the programme.

In addition, those students surveyed at the start (n=152) or at the mid-point (n=189) were invited to undertake the questionnaire a second time, on completion of the taught programme. This sub-set of the study comprises 159 participants with responses start-end or mid-end enabling direct comparison of an individual's responses. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS.

Findings:

Interrogation of the data offers an insight into postgraduate students' perceptions of employability, presented as a construct of skills, self-efficacy and self-regulated learning.

Analysis of the research population as a whole (n=450) showed students with work experience perceive their employability higher than those without work experience. Male students perceive their skills and self-efficacy higher than females. Correlation analysis shows there to be a positive relationship between student perceptions of self-efficacy, skills and self-regulated learning.

Survey findings from the matched responses (n=159) shows no increase in perceptions of employability following engagement with the programme.

Interrogating the 'snapshot' findings reveals both males and females' perceptions of their skills decrease slightly. However, while males consistently perceive their skills higher than females, the gap in perception between genders on completion of the taught programme is no longer significant. In other words the gap narrows between the genders. What may be deduced from this is while the impact on perceptions of skills could be said to be less than anticipated, the programme has a more positive impact on females than males, in other words benefits females more.

Discussion and Conclusion:

Underpinning this work is the contention that increasing students' perceptions of employability requires postgraduate education to enhance students' perceptions of their skills, their perception of themselves as independent learners, and their perceived self-efficacy. Survey findings suggest postgraduate management education is not achieving this aim. This has implications, not just for the students undertaking postgraduate study, but for HEIs in terms of the programmes they are developing and delivering, considering what employability means and how interventions may be introduced to enhance this.

The issue of discrepancy between genders is a key finding from this research. While there are implications for the students, there are also implications for other stakeholders. What this study has found is evidence that females benefit more than males from their postgraduate experience. Much of the evidence in the literature has noted females have lower expectations than males (Sullivan, 2009; Hogue et al, 2010; Choi, 2005; Colbeck et al, 2000; Mellanby et al, 2000). This study suggests that the postgraduate arena is the stage of education where they thrive more. Reflecting on the reasons for this, the findings from this research indicate that the strategies used in these postgraduate programmes accommodate females in particular.

Of further interest is that this study has found those *without* work experience perceive their skills and self-regulated learning to be enhanced following the programme. There are implications for HEIs, employers and professional bodies here strengthening existing relationships to engender greater collaboration in the delivery of the curriculum to reflect the 'real world' experience.

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