

Student Conceptions of Employability: a phenomenographic study of placement vs non-placement business students (0267)

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Despite its everyday use in the higher education discourse, there is still ubiquity around the concept of employability where it continues to be used in a number of contexts and with reference to a range of meanings that include skills, knowledge and attributes in varying degrees of importance (Knight & Yorke, 2002; Moreland, 2006) to a multi-dimensional psycho-social construct based upon career identity, personal adaptability and social and human capital (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashworth, 2004). Although HEIs have placed a greater emphasis on developing employability support for students (Rae, 2007), employers are still finding graduates lack appropriate skills, aptitude and behaviours for the workplace (Tymon, 2013). Despite this extensive discussion, there is little that considers how well students understand the concept of employability and how this affects their job seeking behaviour.

To investigate this understanding, two groups of business students completed an email survey and were asked to reflect on their experiences of working with others, their self-perceived graduate potential and what they understood by the term 'employability'. The first sample (n = 35) comprised non-placement undergraduate business students, ie: those who had not considered undertaking an optional year in an industrial placement. The second sample (n = 29) comprised placement students, those who were currently undertaking, or had already completed, an industrial placement.

Their written accounts were analysed phenomenographically to investigate the qualitatively different ways that business students conceive of employability. This methodology was selected over a content analysis since the focus is how students perceive of employability as relating to them and their experiences, rather than offering an objective description of the term itself. With strong roots in educational research, suitability for analysing how a group of respondents think of their daily experiences (Austerlitz, 2007) and how they interpret this reality (Kaapu & Tiainen, 2012) phenomenography was selected as the most appropriate methodology. Although the qualitative accounts obtained through this study were paper based, rather than through in-depth interviews, there were no issues with understanding the wording of the questions and these students are used to writing reflectively, producing comprehensive accounts of their understandings (average word count of n=304). To maximise variation in the sample, participants were first to final year students, and were following a mixture of generalist business and specialist programmes, including Accounting, Marketing, Human Resource Management and Information Technology. The responses were analysed in three phases (Marton & Saljo, 2005); sorting quotes into groups oriented around the meaning of employability, examining each group further as a decontextualized set of responses and then determining categories of description to represent the outcome space. This methodology was selected to fully appreciate the variety and breadth of conceptions students held, and to identify a hierarchical relationship how students conceive of employability.

For non-placement students the study identified four categories in the outcome space, of which the first three focused on employability as a noun, something to achieve with the degree as the vehicle to achieve it. Their conceptions moved from the generic, ie: simply the ability to get a job, to acknowledging there is a job out there for them in particular, being more attractive than others for that role, and finally to having the ability to keep it long term.

Outcome space for non-placement students:

Employability as a possession meaning 'I can do any job'

Employability as an acknowledgement meaning 'I can do a particular job'
Employability as a position that 'I can do this job better than others'
Employability as a personal responsibility so that 'I can keep this job'

Those students who were already undertaking or had completed a placement however, had more advanced conceptions as one would expect due to the ability to contextualise their conceptions, and typically already considered themselves employable. There were, however, two key differentiators between the groups: personality and relevance. Although this group felt they could offer a wealth of skills and experience, it was their personality, who they were as individuals and their ability to fit in their role which they perceived as crucial to career success, and this success came from being relevant to their employer and organisation.

Outcome space for placement students:

Employability as a position that 'I can do this job better than others'
Employability as a personal responsibility so that 'I can keep this job'
Employability as a relevant competence so that 'I can develop myself to do this job better'
Employability as a life-long commitment so that 'I am an asset to my organisation through continuous personal development'

The findings here resonate with the literature in that there are a vast array of ways in which employability can be understood, and suggest that students who undertake a placement during their studies have more encompassing conceptions than their non-placement counterparts. Given there will always be a core group of students who have no desire to undertake a period in industry, the key message here is that contextualisation is vital but perhaps not fully achieved by current employability initiatives.

Therefore, the findings from this research have led the authors to recommend a practical learning and teaching initiative to harness the changed perceptions of employability of the students returning from a work placement. At the research site, many initiatives have already been developed, especially in the final year, to enhance employability. Careers events, mock assessment centres and reflective exercises in which student link their academic work with their employability are designed to ensure students are prepared for the job market. However, these are facilitated either by academic faculty, careers staff or outside speakers. The current study has inspired the development of "employability insights", a classroom based activity run by students returning from work placement to highlight how they see employability and to encourage their peers to identify links between their academic achievements and the skills developed, to position themselves for employment.

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