

Exploring the processual nature of Human Resources Graduate Employability (HRGE): a line manager perspective (0302)

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### **Part 1: Abstract**

In the UK, the skills agenda continues to dominate Higher Education (HE) policy (Leitch, 2006, Holmes, 2015, Jackson, 2016) with universities facing criticism from a range of stakeholders (particularly employers) regarding the work-readiness of graduates. Yet, Holmes (2001, 2013, 2015) asserts that expanding our understandings of graduate employability (GE) cannot be achieved by the skills agenda alone. Instead, Holmes advises that empirical studies should seek to understand the processes by which graduates engage with post-graduation trajectories, including interactions between graduates and employers and the social and contextual influences relevant to these processes. This paper outlines findings from twenty-two semi-structured interviews with line managers of graduates working in HR graduate level jobs in the UK. Findings draw attention to the influence of workplace relationships on HR graduates' university-workplace transitions, and shed light on the processual nature of employers' perceptions of HR graduate employability (HRGE). Such findings challenge our assumptions regarding conventional HE provision. Whereas HE policy focuses on skilldevelopment and boosting the human capital potential of graduates, the findings of this paper pose the question: are we teaching what the workplace actually requires?

*Key words:* graduate employability, process, skills, HR, line manager

### **Part 2: Outline (1000 words)**

Growing attention is being paid to the role which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play in preparing students for the Graduate Labour Market (GLM), from the UK government and academic community alike (Smith et al, 2000, Harvey, 2001, Little, 2011). Despite the efforts of HEIs to prioritise GE initiatives, there is a notable amount of research which suggests that employers are still claiming an expectation gap at the graduate/employer level that needs to be addressed (Hesketh, 2000; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Cramner, 2006; Jackson, 2014).

Consequently, empirical studies have sought to clarify such expectations particularly from an employer's standpoint. Such studies, either directly or indirectly, tend to draw from Human Capital Theory (HCT) assumptions (Becker, 1993), or what Holmes (2001, 2013, 2015) refers to as a 'possession' approach. Both Holmes and Tomlinson (2007) criticise such assumptions, claiming that the complexity of GE cannot be reduced down to matching of what is 'possessed' (human capital, skills, degree credentials) with what is expected by the demand side of the GLM. Instead, Holmes offers a 'processual' rather than 'possessive' perspective on GE arguing that GE is not fixed; it is formed over time hence it is an ongoing process.

Holmes (2015, p. 223) conceptualises the process view of GE as drawing from "*the processes by which individuals experience, make sense of, and engage with their particular social settings*", which, in the case of this paper, focuses on the experiences of employers. Central to the processual perspective on GE is a focus on interpretations of graduate performance and behaviours based on social interaction, which can be influenced by the social practices which these interactions are

embedded in (Holmes, 2001). Such interpretations are not objectively observable, but rather socially and contextually bound and meaningful within these social contexts, with multiple possible interpretations of the same process. Thus, according to Holmes (2001, pg. 112):

*“...what is needed is a way of framing, in conceptual and theoretical terms, the interactional processes by which graduates and their employers engage with each other, and the outcomes of such interactions...”*

For his own research into GE, Holmes (2013, 2015) frames this interactional process via identity theory in order to explore the processes why which graduates engage with identity claims on ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ a graduate, which may be ‘warranted’ or ‘disaffirmed’ by their employers through constant, negotiated interaction (Holmes, 2012). In this sense, the social practices and contexts which Holmes emphasises can be attributed to particular situated identities (Holmes, 2001) which extend past mere acquisition of a university-level qualification. However, the present study focuses on the perceptions of employers, not graduates. The processual approach serves as a useful ‘platform’ for exploring how employers’ frequent interactions with HR graduates within workplace contexts may influence their perceptions of HRGE, and how processual insights into HRGE can be developed from these perceptions. More specifically, this study sought to examine perceptions of ‘gatekeepers’ (Holmes, 2013) to such employment trajectories as they interact with graduates and develop their expectations. Thus, rather than static perceptions of HRGE pertaining solely to evidencing, or lack of evidence, of skills, the participants’ interpretations of HRGE are assumed to be iterative and open to influence by a series of social and contextual factors.

This study adopts an interpretivist methodology. Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who have direct experience of managing HR graduates working in HR roles. This is a UK based study covering a range of organisations offering formal HR graduate programmes. As such, one of the contributions of this study is an exploration of perspectives across five different industry groups, for which participants are allocated; Manufacturing, Banking & Finance, Public Sector, Retail/B2C, and Fuel & Utilities. Qualitative data has been analysed through a ‘progressive focusing’ approach, incorporating open and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Whereas the ‘possession’ perspective provides an (arguably) static representation of GE, the findings of this study suggest that, in fact, employer perceptions of HR graduates are quite complex; they fluctuate and change over time. For instance, across all five industry groups there is a strong view that a HR degree does not contribute to a HR graduate’s prospects of gaining HR employment. Yet, as graduates transition through their early stages in the workplace and work towards becoming HR professionals, the participants’ views on the value of HR education become more positive. Considering the processes by which HR graduates transition into the workplace, the participants also draw attention to the role of workplace relationships which may support or hinder these transitions. In particular, issues of jealousy, resentment and intimidation emerge from their perceptions of both graduate-manager interactions and graduate-graduate interactions.

This research holds implications for a range of stakeholders. From an academic standpoint, this paper provides an empirical contribution to understanding graduates’ university-workplace transitions, with specific insights in the context of HR graduates. Conceptually the findings also build on Holmes’ processual approach, drawing attention to the influence of workplace interactions on employer perceptions of GE. The broader issues surrounding employability are also of particular interest to UK HEIs and graduate employers. Further insights in the context of HR graduates may be transferable to HR curriculum and teaching. Professional body implications are resultant for the CIPD and links with their professional standards for early career HR professionals and accredited HR programmes.

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