

The employability of international masters-level student matters (0342)

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A gap in understanding the experiences of masters-level student cohort has implication for teaching and learning provisions (Bamber, 2015; Fakunle, Allison & Fordyce, 2016), their personal development (Baker et. al, 2014) and their employability.

At policy level in the UK, graduate employability is keenly discussed as a key objective for government and a performance indicator for higher education institutions' (Tymon, 2013) in a political environment where 'funding, fees and student employability' are integrated (Jameson et al., 2012). Linkages between employability and higher education have been made since the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education 1963). Recommendations in the Dearing Report (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997) that the employability of graduates should be a key goal of higher education is firmly brought to the forefront in the recently published Government Teaching and Excellence Framework (TEF) 2016. The TEF draws from the 2015 Government Higher Education Green Paper, 'Fulfilling our potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' which stated that its "core aims are to raise teaching standards, provide greater focus on graduate employability, widen participation in higher education, and open up the sectors to new high quality entrants" (p 3). The TEF include proposals for having three guiding metrics to inform further development within the framework, namely; employment/graduate destination, retention and student satisfaction. Rationale for the 3 metrics are drawn from student surveys, the International Student Barometer benchmarks and data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

It is however important to note that the TEF report recognise international students and further stressed the importance of having UK institutions as an attractive educational destination for international students for global competitive advantage and for economic reasons citing that in 2011 higher education export generated £10.7 billion for the UK economy contributing 2.8% to the country's GDP. Yet, a key metric in the TEF framework; employment/graduate destination is based HESA's published data on employability which excludes non-EU international students (undergraduates, masters-level and PhDs). HESA's data on graduate employability draws from the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education

(DLHE) survey which is used by higher education institutions (HEIs) to collect information from leavers with regards to their employment status or further study six months after graduation. The available data on graduate employability is important for research, evaluation and policy development. It should however be recognised that the published data does not fully represent the diverse student body studying at UK HEIs.

Studies on graduate employability carried out in the UK have largely focused on undergraduate students from current students at different years of their study to recent graduates. Using focus groups, Tymon (2013) collected the views of 400 first-year, second-year and final-year undergraduates studying business disciplines to understand the student view on employability. Tomlinson (2008) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 53 final-year undergraduate students to understand their views on how their educational credentials are advantageous in current labour market. As part of a bigger project, *skills plus*, Yorke (2004) examined how recently employed first degree graduates perceived their curriculum to have contributed to their success in the labour market. However, Woodley & Brennan (2000) argue that restricting studies on employability to 'young, first degree full-time students who are domiciled in the UK' is not representative of the whole body of students, and it means... ignoring aspects of internationalisation' (p 248). The changing demographics and diversity of students in UK HEIs (Kreber, 2009) are also not reflected in research excluding non-EU students.

Emerging studies on international student employability focus on one group; Chinese students (Huang, Turner, & Chen, 2014; Li, 2013). Chinese international students represent 28% of non-EU international students in UK HEIs in 2013/14 and the numerous studies on their experiences of studying in the UK make vital contribution to the literature. However, Chinese students as a group do not fully reflect the global diversity of students in the UK.

An ongoing study by the author is looking at the employability of non-EU students in the UK (non-EU students from 11 different countries including China). The diverse range of participants within the sample provides rich data exploring similarities and differences in perceptions of their employability as they study for a one-year masters-level degree in one university. Findings from this study will be disseminated in due course.

It can be reported though at this stage that the participants are studying at one of three pioneer institutions in the UK involved in implementing the Scottish funded project on enhancing graduate employability for masters-level students. The project, Making Most of Masters

(MMM) enables collaboration between employers and universities to create opportunities for masters-level students to embark on a work based dissertation as part of their one-year masters-level study. Although none of the study participants engaged in an MMM project with some citing challenges faced by participants engaging with the MMM project, such as, course mark requirements. At the same time MMM project coordinators report success with many projects involving masters-level students. Also, since inception around 5 years ago, four institutions have joined the initial three universities. This could be seen as a mark of success for MMM to support work based learning during masters-level study.

The value of work based learning is well emphasised as a preparation for future graduate employment (Crammer, 2006; Jackson, 2015). For example, through comparative analysis across four European countries, the study conducted by Andrews and Higson (2014) highlighted the importance of experiential learning during study. The participants in the mentioned study enjoyed year-long paid internships. This length of work experience is not possible within the one-year period of a masters-level study in the UK. Masters-level students on a MMM project do a short term work placement and have their experience of learning within the organisation written up in form of a completed dissertation. MMM show possibilities for enhancing the employability of all masters-level student including international students. But for now, it remains to be seen how policy initiatives in the UK, the larger body of work on graduate employability and projects such as MMM show how global higher education in the UK enhance the employability of masters-level international students.

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