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Student's preparation for employment

Abstract

While it was always an aim for higher education, students' employment outcome has now become an explicit criteria to measure the performance of higher education institutions. As a consequence, the current interest in 'learning gain' encompasses changes in students' employability with their preparation for employment being one aspect of employability. Various ways exist how HEIs can help students to prepare for employment, such as internships; international experiences; or careers guidance. The paper presents findings based on an intervention to increase students' preparation for employment and on a secondary data analysis of HESA and DLHE data. The intervention uses a specific tool to help students realise their strength and weaknesses. The findings based on the intervention of R2Strength are contrasted with impact factors on graduates' self-assessed preparation for employment as analysed in the secondary data analysis. Both findings will be used to discuss methods to measure students' employability.

Outline

Introduction

Huge efforts are currently deployed to measure the *Learning Gain* of higher education students. The starting point of this current interest are findings from the USA (Arum and Roksa 2011) where the success of higher education to increase students' critical thinking skills and the accuracy of credentials to measure the outcome of higher education were questioned. In the UK, the interest in *Learning Gain* is further strengthened by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to measure the teaching quality of higher education institutions (HEIs). Amongst others, the TEF criteria to measure "student outcome and learning gain" refer to "employability and transferability skills" and "employment and further study".

In this research- and policy-related context, the presented paper concentrates on students' employability gain and discusses different ways to conceptualise and measure employability. Employability is discussed as a success criteria for higher education, and a framework to understand ways in which HEIs can impact on students' employability is discussed.

Theoretical and empirical approach

A specific focus of this paper will be the preparation of students for employment as one indicator of employability. The paper re-visits the discussion of the skills gap (Tymon 2011) in the light of the new teaching excellence framework (TEF) and the new funding regime for

higher education. Rather than reflecting on the subject-related skills graduates gain during their studies, it focusses on the preparation for employment in general. There are numerous ways how HEIs can help students to prepare for employment, such as internships or placements; international experiences; or careers guidance.

The paper discusses two ways in which students' preparation for employment can be assessed: (1) the evaluation of a specific intervention (R2 Strength) to increase students' self-efficacy and (2) the analysis of impact factors for all students using secondary data (HESA student data).

(1) R2 Strength

Realise2 Strengths (R2 Strengths) is an instrument which can students to assess their strength and weaknesses (Lindley 2008). Using an electronic profile and individual feed-back, students learn about their individual combination of strength and weaknesses, and how to enhance their strength in applications and interviews.

The evaluation focusses on a survey of approximately 500 students. The students were split in three groups: Group 1 received the electronic profile and individual feed-back; group 2 only received the profile; and group 3, the control group, did not receive any kind R2 strengths intervention. The paper presents descriptive findings based on an online survey conducted before and after the intervention.

(2) Impact factors on all students self-assessed preparation for employment

The chances to work in a graduate job are highly dependent on graduates' HEI and the subjects they studied, together with work experience (Behle, 2016). It is currently, however, questionable if the influences to employment in graduate job are comparable with students' self-assessed preparation for employment.

The analysis draws on combined secondary quantitative data, i.e. HESA student data and the DLHE. It utilises the responses of 2014/15 graduates who responded to the DLHE question "How well did your recent course prepare you for employment" with the options "very well", "well", "not very well", "not at all". Multilevel models will be used to identify the different impact factors for students' individual preparation for employment.

Preliminary findings

Findings will be presented based on both assessments of preparation for employment.

The preliminary findings of the evaluation of the R2 Strengths indicates that as such students are aware of their strengths but feel insecure in terms of job search strategies and preparation for interviews with potential employers. The paper will be able indicate if the intervention has helped students to improve their jobs search skills, and if differences between the specific groups can be identified.

HESA student and DLHE data will be used to indicate which group of students feel well-prepared for employment, and if the self-assessed preparation for employment can explain a successful transition into a graduate job.

Finally, the chances to interpret both findings in the context of employability gain are discussed. Both the evaluation of the R2 intervention and the secondary data analysis will be debated in the wider context of learning gain. One of the aims of the paper is to classify barriers to measure students' employability gain and to identify ways to overcome these. At the current stage, the methodologically most promising way to measure employability gain is to merge administrative and survey data. The paper will identify advantages and disadvantages of this approach to measuring students' employability gain.

References

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