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**Title** The Impact of Management Education on Students' Perceptions of Employability.  
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**Title of Paper:** The Impact of Management Education on Students' Perceptions of Employability.

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### **Introduction**

This paper introduces a major longitudinal study exploring the extent to which undergraduate management education contributes to the perceived employability of its graduates. Developed from earlier work exploring perceptions of employability among postgraduate management education students (Jones, 2015), this new study uses a refined version of the original survey instrument which has been adapted to reflect themes emerging in the employability literature. The survey population spans four universities, offering an opportunity to explore students' perceptions of employability, drawing comparisons across groups and identifying differences, should they exist. This paper introduces the rationale for the project, establishes the theoretical underpinning and presents the data collection plan indicating the researchers' next steps.

### **Rationale**

The concept, language and theme of employability permeate Higher Education. Almost a decade since the then Department for Industry, Universities and Skills proposed that employability should be pivotal to the strategic vision of all universities (DIUS, 2008), this concept has become firmly embedded within the lexicon of higher education (HEFCE, 2011; McCowen, 2015). More recently, a key tenet of the emerging Teaching Excellence Framework is that many students engage in higher education in order to gain skills and qualifications required to access higher level professions. In addition, the changing landscape of higher education has seen a significant widening in participation, one aspect of which is the increasing number of students representing the first generation of their family to attend university (Wharton, Goodwin and Cameron, 2014). In sum, there is a changed, and changing, student population many of whom see higher education as a gateway to their future career, for whom the notion of employability translates simply into securing graduate employment.

There is no one accepted definition of employability. Literature notes the movement in the employability discourse from an individual simply acquiring a job towards a more complex

and holistic view of the individual attaining a portfolio of attributes which have broad appeal (Lees, 2002; Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth, 2004). Akhurst (2005:8) offers a view that rather than acquisition and retention of a job, employability is about graduates being armed with “skills, attributes and knowledge in order to develop a career path that may encompass a variety of occupations, in a number of sectors, and to contribute to the knowledge based economy of the 21 century”.

Capturing this shift, employability is defined here 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 (Jones, 2015). Attitude is incorporated since having ability does not necessarily mean using it (Connor and Brown, 2009). Current and future opportunities reflects the idea that employability is not simply securing a job, but something longer term (Ackhurst, 2005; Knight, 2004).

### **Research Plan: Next Steps**

In September 2016 a pilot study was undertaken with a cohort of undergraduate Business students to explore their perceptions of employability. The survey was repeated in April/May 2017, the aim to determine whether there has been any change in perceptions during this period. Subsequent to this there have been some modifications to the survey instrument to better reflect emerging themes in the literature. The pilot has also highlighted issues relating to administration of the questionnaire which can be addressed for the survey proper.

The research plan is to administer the questionnaire in September / October 2017 to a sample of year 1 students enrolled on business and management programmes from the four HEIs participating in this study. Management education may be viewed as more generic than a specific functional specialism (for example, Marketing) and thus findings may be generalised across disciplines. This initial data collection offers a snapshot of perceptions held by students embarking on a programme, in itself providing a rich seam of data. A follow-up survey of the same students will be administered in April/May 2018. Inclusion of the student’s id. number maintains anonymity but enables responses to be tracked and directly compared.

This two-phased approach will gather data at the start and on completion of the students’ first year of study offering an insight into any changes of perception. The unique nature of this study is in the scale of opportunities for comparison. It will be possible to interrogate trends within an institution, and to compare and contrast findings across institutions. Extrapolating this further, the project team aim to repeat this data collection in 2018-9 and 2019-20 which offers scope to chart individual student’s perceptions across the course of their undergraduate programme, and to interrogate broader similarities and differences across the institutions.

## Conclusion

This study will provide a unique opportunity to record the student voice. Exploring employability as presented in this study will capture the views of students as they experience higher education. This approach addresses the concerns that undergraduates, as opposed to graduates, are under-represented in the employability discourse (Tymon, 2011; Speight, 2013).

There are three key points which drive this work. Firstly, and at its heart, the belief that employability is more than a set of simple skills, rather, as noted by Knight and Yorke (2002) is something informed by subject knowledge, skills, an understanding of one's self and self-belief. Secondly, that those entering higher education are a diverse and changing population. Thirdly, that HEIs have been tasked with addressing employability, and many make claims to that effect in their marketing literature. In examining whether institutions are having an impact on their students' perceptions of employability, the outputs from this study may have far-reaching implications across our sector.

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