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Title Paper 5: Employability aspirations of first year students of chemistry and chemical engineering

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Dr Janja Komljenovic

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Abstract

This paper focuses on employability and career aspirations of first year students of chemistry and chemical engineering at four universities in two countries. Employability of graduates is by now a key policy aim at national and university levels. This has reflected in the university structures in that universities have established or strengthened their career and alumni offices. It has also reflected in the rise of measurement and benchmarking around employability, such as the DLHE survey in the UK. Moreover, universities have included employability statistics and employability promises into marketing of their institutions or study courses. Finally, this has laid ground for private actors to develop products and services catering employability, which now students and universities use or buy. Such is the case with the LinkedIn platform. This paper analyses how students think of careers and employability and how they relate to the before mentioned transformations of the higher education sector.

Extended Abstract

Employability is part of the knowledge economy discourse in that universities are seen to educate the human capital for the economic well-being of states and regions. This has led to a policy expectation that universities would deliver the learning outcomes that employers look for (Knight & Yorke, 2003) and such a utilitarian notion has resulted in universities being called upon to change their curriculums and teaching practices in order to deliver the required *skills* (Teichler, 2011). The retraction of the Keynesian state's commitment to full employment and jobs for life (Jessop, 2008) shifted the responsibility from the state to the individual, so that it is now the citizens who are responsible for safeguarding their own futures by accumulating particular skills, engaging in lifelong learning and becoming 'employable' (Brine, 2006; Mulderrig, 2008). Finally, the employment policies constitute the basis for higher education policies (Fairclough & Wodak, 2008). Consequently, employability of graduates has become key policy aim of higher education (Boden & Nedeva, 2010).

The second change for universities that has happened in the past few decades are processes that are conceptualised as marketization, commodification and privatisation of higher education (Ball, 2004; Ball & Youdell, 2007; Marginson & Considine, 2000). This together with higher education governance and funding reforms has increased competition among universities (Robertson, 2010). Various information mechanisms were introduced in the emerging higher education (quasi)market, such as rankings, benchmarks, league tables (Ball, 2015). In the UK, the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education Survey (DLHE) was developed to specifically monitor the employability of graduates and provide information to future students, their parents and other interested publics. Universities have picked up on this and have made data on employability of their graduates central to their branding (Drori, Delmestri, & Oberg, 2013).

The policy and institutional focus on employability was also happily used by numerous private companies that have developed services and products to support graduate employability. They span from trainings of students for interviews with employers, providing support to prepare their CV, training on how to network and use social media, and so on. Such is also the case with LinkedIn, a USA based private company providing a digital platform, which connects employers with workers. It has targeted higher education to develop tools and digital products specifically for students and universities. Not surprisingly, students are its fastest growing demographic. Universities are motivated to encourage their students, alumni and staff to create and populate user profiles. Moreover, universities use LinkedIn groups to keep relations and communication with alumni. LinkedIn is by now recognised as ‘the’ digital player in the global labour market place and is used by universities to foster employability of their graduates (Komljenovic, 2017).

Graduate employability is a widely researched topic and much is known about policy changes in relation to employability (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003), how universities are changing curriculums to encompass employability (Cranmer, 2006; Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009) or how students need to be equipped with career management skills to find jobs (Bridgstock, 2009). This paper will, however, focus on students’ interpretations and ideas around employability. Such research is scarce and not much is known how students make sense of universities’ employability strategies. Particularly, this paper will explore relations between the student, the university and the private companies in fostering employability. The research questions are:

- What role do perceptions on employability play in student decision making in deciding what and where to study?
- Do students use benchmarks and information on employability in their decision making on where and what to study?
- How students see their responsibility for employability in relation to the university’s responsibility for it?
- Which tools and services outside the university supporting their employability students know and have already used?
- How students use LinkedIn?

The paper draws from empirical data of the UK-SA project, namely on interviews with first year students of chemistry and chemical engineering. The interviews were conducted between January and June 2017, transcribed and analysed with thematic analysis. The before mentioned research questions will therefore relate to two specific disciplines and complement the overall study of the symposium on disciplinary impacts on students’ ways of thinking and identity. The results will bring missing empirical data on how students relate to national and institutional policy aims, accessible statistical data, universities’ marketing material, and services offered by private companies around employability.

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