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Title Exploring Employability Gain: Findings from LEGACY

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Introduction

In recent years the importance of employability gain has increased in tertiary education, perhaps as a result of the Browne review (Browne, 2010); the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees at £9,000 in England and subsequent concerns about value for money in Higher Education (Which?, 2014). As a result some universities have invested in employability related activity (Investing in your future, 2017; First for graduate employability, 2017) and thus increased the range of interventions and services available to students to prepare them for life and work after university. This interest in students' employability related learning gain may be bolstered by the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to measure the teaching quality of higher education institutions (HEIs). The TEF measures student outcomes and learning gain using the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) to determine whether graduates are in 'highly skilled employment or further study' (DfE, 2016 p27).

This paper focusses on students from Russell Group Universities who generally hold more tariff points and are often more financially and socially advantaged. This does not, however, guarantee that they are more employable and employability enhancement tends to be seen as desirable for Higher Education students in general (Jackson, 2014; Wilton, 2012)

Method

The paper discusses three ways in which student employability gain can be explored: Measuring Career Adaptability using the CAAS-UK; undertaking an experience designed to increase their exposure to global and international influences; and the evaluation of an R2 Strengths intervention aiming to increase students' self-efficacy.

(1) Career Adaptability

Students' career adaptability refers to their capability to make a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work and underlying occupational and organisational knowledge bases may be subject to considerable change (Bimrose et al, 2011). The study focusses on a survey of previously identified cohorts of students who tend to show lower levels of graduate level employment than the institutional average over the 2016/17 and 2017/18 academic years using a UK version of the CAAS (Careers Adapt-Ability Scale) (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, Wright & Frigerio, 2015).

Career readiness and resources are measured on 4 dimensions: Concern, Control, Curiosity and Confidence as well as overall Career Adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Longitudinal and cross sectional evaluation is undertaken via mixed methods using repeated measures of the CAAS-UK and a small number of repeated interviews. Engagement in employability related activity at university is also surveyed at the same intervals and associations with CAAS-UK scores tested.

(2) International experience

For over twenty years research has shown an association between student international experience and employability gain, e.g. Wilson (1993); Crossman & Clarke (2010). Exploring this association further, the study seeks to identify the employability gain of three groups of students: those who have studied abroad, those who worked abroad and those who undertake an internationally focussed on-campus experience.

Using a predominantly qualitative methodology comprising interviews pre and post experience, enriched by repeated measures quantitative data, the strand seeks to identify learning gains (qualities and skills) reported to be enhanced by a students' international experience. The findings will be mapped onto global employability skills as reported in the literature R2 Strengths

(3) R2 Strengths

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

The evaluation focusses on a survey of approximately 500 students. The students were split in three groups: Group 1 received an electronic profile and one-to-one feed-back; Group 2 only received the profile; and Group 3, the control group, did not receive a strengths intervention. The paper presents descriptive findings based on an online questionnaire conducted pre and post intervention and a number of qualitative interviews.

Preliminary findings

The preliminary findings of the evaluation of the R2 Strengths indicates that students are aware of their strengths but feel insecure in terms of job search strategies and preparation for interviews with potential employers. Further evaluation may indicate whether the intervention has helped students to improve their job search skills, and if differences between the specific groups can be identified. Early findings indicate that international experience may enhance skills gained at university rather than developing new skills in students. There are, however, differences between the three groups of students in terms of their motivation or ability to undertake international experiences and in their learning gain and personal development. With regards to the Career Adaptability strand, preliminary findings suggest that there may be an increase in engagement with their future for student participants over the first year of study but no indication yet whether this is an artefact of study participation. Early indications also suggest that the scale may serve as a diagnostic tool to identify particular student need as well as an employability related intervention.

The utility of these methods for enhancing and measuring employability related learning gain and the feasibility of institutional integration will be evaluated via a framework which links the strands and their findings.

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