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Title Employability Promises Comparative Analysis of Embedded Employability Skills Assessment across Four Higher Education Institutions.
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Introduction

“Embedding employability into the core of higher education will continue to be a key priority of Government, universities and colleges, and employers. This will bring significant private and public benefit, demonstrating higher education’s broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development” (HEFCE, 2011, p5). This statement from the Higher Education Funding Council for England is equally relevant in a global context for both home and international education. The context for this research is also global and international as each of the participating institutions in this study recruits students from overseas, and so it is important to recognise the implications concerning global graduate employability. The focus of employability continues apace not only not only from the demand side but also the supply side as Woolcock (2014) argues companies are having difficulty filling graduate vacancies, as students do not have the required employability skills. This concern is not restricted to one nation as graduates enter a global marketplace and have to compete for graduate roles with fellow graduates from around the world. Ng contends that “the global war for talent is a fierce competition” (2013, p281) thus, graduates need to be mobile for work (Luekitinan, 2014) and equipped with comparable employability skills. Furthermore, graduate employability is used as a key determinant of the success of degree programmes and in various metrics for higher education league tables. The teaching excellence framework (TEF), introduced in UK, places yet more emphasis on the need for universities to provide such opportunities that enable students to develop and gain the employability skills required to access their chosen profession. The TEF draws explicit links between graduate destinations and the quality of teaching, making employability a specific criterion within the TEF framework. Now more than ever universities must evaluate their employability provision to help design interventions which support graduate employment outcomes.

Employability

Preparing students for the workplace is widely accepted but what is meant by the term employability and how is it relevant to this research study? Yorke’s commonly used definition states: “A set of achievements-skills, understandings and personal attributes-that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (2006). This definition is somewhat problematic in that it suggests a limited output driven view, devoid of the necessary richness of context or relevance to diverse student groups whose motivations for different programmes of

study or prior sociocultural experiences will be inherently different. Tomlinson (2010) is equally critical of the skills and attributes approach and suggests it reduces individuals to rational beings whose focus on learning and employment is reduced to a utilitarian tactic. So for the purpose of this study we draw more broadly on an employability and enterprise model advocated by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (2012) and that was adopted by Bath Spa University, this includes five areas of activity that are attitude and mindset; commercial awareness; real world expertise; transferrable skills; and articulation of ability. These areas represent a framework of opportunities for higher education institutions to evaluate and design employability skills assessment around.

Research Plan

In the current context it is important to identify how universities embed employability promises within their curriculum and furthermore how such skills are assessed at the course and module level. This is a desk based project using qualitative content analysis to review where and how employability skills are assessed within both general and business specialist undergraduate degree programmes that are delivered at four different UK higher education institutions. Whilst, content analysis is a research methodology that originates from the nineteenth century (Harwood and Garry 2003), it is a method that is directly applicable to a key contemporary issue of how to analyse employability messages in the curriculum (Evans 1991). We propose qualitative content analysis to explore the embeddedness of employability skills assessment (Krippendorff, 2012). 'Qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material' (Schreier, 2012, p.1). The qualitative material here refers to what is identified in the course specification documents and module handbooks provided by the authors of the study.

For each of the four participating higher education institutions we have firstly identified one general and one business specialist undergraduate degree programme, for example marketing or accountancy, each with circa 200 students.

The next stage is to design the coding framework. As the theoretical background draws on prior knowledge from the employability literature this study adopts a deductive strategy. Thus the coding frame was built deductively to ascribe the categories and sub categories that were developed around employability skills assessment mentioned above in relation to attitude and mindset; commercial awareness; real world expertise; transferrable skills; articulation of ability. The data will be analysed by the research team involved with the purpose of discussing and comparing the coding categories to look for consistency in order to support research credibility (Schreier, 2012). We aim to present the findings of this comparative analysis to highlight the degrees of convergence and divergence in our respective institution communication of employability skills.

Conclusion

This study adds to the employability discussion by presenting the results of a cross institutional comparative analysis of employability skills assessment embedded in

both general and business specialist undergraduate degree programmes that are delivered at four different UK higher education institutions. This insight will be important to not only provide the basis from which a follow up study will be developed, but will also enable us to share what works among the higher education community and the various stakeholders that is worthy of further critique for the betterment of society. We recognise that in undertaking this study it may be determined that consensus and commonality of approach to employability skills design are not necessarily desired, but that what is required is a commitment to delivering on the employability promises through recognition of local interpretation.

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