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Conceptions of employability: charting changing undergraduate perspectives amongst dominant political narratives (0238)

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Many stakeholders consider graduate employability to be the principle function of higher education institutions (HEIs), and a 'magic bullet' for national economic success (e.g. Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016; Harvey, 2001). For prospective students and their families, earning potential constitutes an 'equitable' return on university fees (Tomlinson, 2017), while many employers' increasing graduate recruitment indicates their expectation of employability attributes developed through higher education (HE) (Confederation of British Industry (CBI), 2017).

Yorke (2006, p.5) defines employability as 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 benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy". Employability's inclusion in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), as measured by the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey demonstrates its perceived value. Furthermore, employability frequently constitutes a facet of 'learning gain', which is likely to assume greater prominence as TEF develops.

Yet, the shifting inter-relationship between HE and the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012), and industry dissatisfaction with the generic skills once typical of the UK's liberal education system (Little and Archer, 2010; Hansen, 2011), prompt concerns that HE became too loosely coupled with industry (e.g. Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Consequently, HEIs are adopting an increasingly pragmatic, market-driven approach to graduate employability (Toland, 2011; Prokou, 2008).

HEIs typically translate this into 'shopping lists' of graduate attributes (Barrie, 2006), yet Wellman (2010) found large variance in lists, with one list featuring 49 attributes (Gow and McDonald, 2000), creating unwieldy 'shopping lists' for students to tick off. Cornford (2005) argued that such lists prioritise employer requests and exclude social and personal skills that are transferable beyond conventional employment.

As a result, extant research is dominated by large-scale surveys assessing the graduate attributes required by employers, the gap between these and actual skills levels at graduation, and assessing 'outcomes' in terms of graduate roles and salary (e.g. DLHE survey, CBI (2017)). These studies are disseminated largely through the grey literature, and assume a positivistic, objective approach to employability, frequently from policymakers' perspectives. Johnston (2003) highlighted the dominance of government and powerful employer perspectives, arguing that "the voices of other partners in the graduate recruitment process, the graduates, are deafening in their silence" (p.19). Recent research (e.g. O'Leary, 2017, Matsouka and Mihail, 2016) addresses these graduate perspectives - yet *undergraduates'* understandings and experiences remain underrepresented in the literature (notable exceptions include Tomlinson's (2008) study). Students' perspectives on

employability and their expected and experienced journeys through HE have yet to be explored in depth, and yet understanding this process should underpin pedagogic approaches to sufficiently support and guide undergraduates' negotiation of that journey.

Therefore, there is relatively little research relating to pedagogic theory and practice for developing these graduate attributes in HE from a student perspective (Gray *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, Eraut (2007) argued that existing research concerning pedagogic approaches to employability tends to construct theories of practice that are "ideologically attractive but almost impossible to implement" (p.6), imposing theory on existing conditions, rather than understanding pedagogic processes in emerging contexts. Yet these contexts are fluid. UK undergraduates' attitudes to employability changed as UK HE fees increased: students anticipated that the 'massification' of HE would devalue formal qualifications, and future employment would be risky and flexible (Tomlinson, 2008). They "internalis[ed] the rhetoric of the new economy" (Tomlinson, 2008, p.289) and prioritised active management of their employability, principally through achieving a 2:1 or above, while overlooking the utility value of soft skills and extracurricular activities (Ackerman, Gross and Perner, 2003). In contrast, 82% of employers rated generic employability skills as key to graduate recruitment, versus 68% valuing degree-specific skills (CBI/National Union of Students, 2011). Employers also report that graduates overestimate their skills in areas such as emotional intelligence, professionalism, and leadership, while graduates consider their skills adequate for employment (Matsouka and Mihail, 2016).

Only 54% of students reported that the importance of employability had been explained while at university, and only 49% felt clear about employers' requirements (CBI/NUS (2011). Knight and Yorke (2003) rallied HEIs to make "the tacit explicit" about the nature of graduate attributes, ensure students recognise their skill levels, and can match these to employers' needs. Yet, there is little research about how to achieve this in the classroom, or how to ensure the "negotiated ordering between the graduate and the wider social and economic structures through which they are navigating" (Tomlinson, 2012, p.428).

This paper explores the narratives of employability for these multiple stakeholder groups, and the role of HEIs, academics and careers teams in bridging these divides and negotiating graduate outcomes through pedagogic approaches.

This paper also outlines an ongoing research study which aims to explore first year students', employers' and academics' changing understandings of graduate attributes and employability through the development, implementation and ongoing review of a module using a participatory action research methodology. This will explore pedagogic best practice for developing identifying and negotiating graduate attributes, charting changing understandings of attributes between stakeholder groups. This module, therefore, crafts a Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to inform vocational learning in a quasi-professional context. Embedding employers into the classroom permits students to experience Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), as they observe and engage with the implicit values, behaviours, language and understandings of their future professional community (Wenger, 1998). We hypothesise that the 'shared repertoire' of competent behaviours, language and other attributes will develop as they journey from novice to full community member (Wenger, 1998), building upon Vygotskian (1930/1978) principles of the

critical role of social interactions in development and learning, and the enabling role of others.

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