Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Conformity of Employability Messages and Student Perceptions

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Research Domain: Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract: Understanding and selecting the best university that will enable a student to gain the desired employment, is an important decision. Universities use messages around successful employability skill acquisition and alumni destinations as key external communications strategy. Jones et al (2018) identified that rather than offering differentiation and clear competitive advantages using employability messages, universities are presenting homogenous messages.

Gathering qualitative data from 1st year students we extend this work exploring how students perceive employability messages, whether they discern differences between different institutions' communications, and how messages may have informed their decisions in choosing a place of study. Findings may inform opportunities for universities to review their employability message, and provide students with greater clarity when deciding on the significant investment that is higher education.

References

Jones, C.E., Montano, S. and Horton-Walsh, S. (2018) The Language of Employability: A Comparative Analysis of HEIs' Promises and Predictions. Paper presented at SRHE, 2018

Paper: Background:

Since 2008, employability has become a central tenet of university strategy and formed the basis of key promises made to students regarding higher education choice (DIUS, 2008). Furthermore, a key measure of the Teaching Excellence Framework is the number of graduates gaining highly skilled employment. While the discourse around conceptualising employability continues, here, we adopt the position that success in one's chosen occupation has two sides, firstly, discipline knowledge, which is subject to change and secondly, softer skills which are enablers of managing that change (Gioli, G., Tomei, N., Kumar, A. & Sijwali, S, 2017; Knight, P. & Yorke, M., 2002, 2004).

It is argued that students themselves choose their university based, in part, on graduate role potential (Soutar and Turner 2002; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2015; McCowan 2015). Therefore, understanding and selecting the best university that will enable a student to gain the desired employment, is an important decision. Universities then use messages around successful employability skill acquisition and alumni destinations as a key external communications strategy.

Given such a competitive market, with 164 HEI's in the UK (universititesuk.ac.uk) and the importance of graduates finding high level graduate roles both for their own development (Soutar and Turner 2002) and for university metrics, it is now necessary to understand what messages students themselves are seeing and the effect of such messages on student choice. However, Veiga et al. (2019) note that convergence has arisen with the HE sector, due to the political co-ordination of the European Higher Education Area. Furthermore, Jones, Montano and Horton-Walsh (2018) identified that rather than offering differentiation and clear competitive advantages using employability messages, universities are presenting homogenous messages. It is apparent that rather than distinguishing themselves as universities with best practice, there has indeed been university convergence and conformity. Given competition between HEIs and the marketisation of the university sector (Bobe and Kober 2015), the homogeneity of employability messages is contradictory. Indeed, it is argued that the framing of employability messages (Arora et al. 2006) towards students, plays a key role in influencing student university choice. Therefore, we propose to close a significant "theoretically underdeveloped" gap by understanding the student choice experience (Koenig-Lewis et al. 2016:59), as influenced by such employability messages.

Research Project:

The overarching theme of this project is around how universities articulate their messages about employability. The project comprises a number of phases exploring employability messages through the lens of creators and recipients.

Phase 1 of the project noted the lack of distinction in the employability messages made by universities (Jones et al, 2018). Extending the work, Phase 2 moves to exploring employability messages from the students' perspective, gaining an insight into how they perceive the employability messages, whether they discern differences between different institutions communications, and how

messages may have informed their decisions in choosing a place of study.

Research participants will be drawn from first year undergraduates whose programmes have a business and/or management component, drawn from two university Business Schools. These courses have been selected since managerial competence transcends sectors, hence findings may be generalised across disciplines.

Overall Research Aim is to:

- Explore how students perceive employability messages

Objectives:

- Identify which specific employability messages can be recalled

- Explore what differences students perceive in employability messages

- Identify how employability messages are differentiated.

- Explore to what extent institutional employability messages inform university choice

Methodology:

The aim is to interview a sample of first year students from each institution to explore their perception of employability messages. A semi-structured interview has been designed with prompt questions to encourage students' narrative of their particular experience. In doing so, participants are encouraged to reflect on the messages and their impact. The sample of students from whom data is to be collected will be determined by convenience, primarily accessibility, and through self-selection.

Using qualitative methods adds richness and depth to research, providing the researcher with the chance to explore details, thoughts, processes and feelings, while a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to probe and develop from the themes emerging from the literature (Creswell, 2003). This phase of the study probes the personal thoughts of the students which quantitative methods cannot expose, thus verbatim quotations will be included in presentation of the findings, to reflect their voice.

Phase 1 of the project was undertaken using the employability measure from two, publicly available, sets of University League Tables. Phase 2 of the project revisits this data as students will be shown the

employability messages from the highest, middle and lowest ranking universities, as well as those of the respective home institution. Participants will be invited to discuss the impact of the employability messages on their choices.

Content Analysis will be used to enable analysis and interpretation of the interviews, surfacing similarities and differences in response (Graneheim and Lundman, 2017). Following Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) the research approach will be fit for purpose so a combined inductive / deductive approach to analysis will be adopted. Interviews are structured around themes to provide a framework for the narrative, while open coding of the data will provide an opportunity to incorporate emerging ideas.

The data collection allows for discrete analysis of this cohort, and further will establish a baseline for comparison with data collected from subsequent first year cohorts to determine change in perceptions. Future research is planned to include international students to determine the reach and relevance of employability messages beyond the UK.

Data collection is planned for October/November 2019, with initial findings presented at SRHE 2019.

Conclusion:

Phase 1 of this project showed the lack of distinction in the language universities use in employability messages. Phase 2 will explore that idea with students who will have been recent members of the audience at whom employability messages are directed. Should research suggest that students' perceptions concur with our findings about conformity of message, this suggests an opportunity for universities to address their profile and trumpet their strengths. Further, this is an opportunity to provide students with greater clarity when deciding on the significant investment that is higher education.

References:

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