

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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How Students' Self-Perception Impacts on Themes of Graduate Employability

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

**Abstract:** This paper examines the implications of perceived employability for students in a post-1992 UK University. Using qualitative data and thematic analysis we examine whether an employability intervention, involving coaching from external professionals, embedded into the curriculum can change the perceived employability levels of students from different groups based on gender, ethnicity, disability, and economic background. By examining the data we seek to ascertain how students feel the intervention has impacted their perceptions of their own abilities to be able to achieve a graduate-level employment. Focusing on the themes of confidence, goal setting, future focus, recruitability issues, self-awareness and labour-market awareness, we will seek to ascertain whether coaching these students has had a positive impact upon them by boosting their career capitals and enhancing how they feel about these key areas.

**Paper:** Graduate employability of is one of the top priorities of HE institutions in the UK due to the emphasis placed on it through surveys, such as the Graduate Outcomes Survey and the TEF rankings. In response to this prioritisation, many universities seek to enhance their students' employability to help them to achieve graduate-level employment after completing their degrees. One factor that may boost students' employability and help them to achieve positive graduate employment outcomes is students' own perception of their ability to gain such positive graduate employment.

The development of key employability skills may enhance this perception. There has been a pressure from successive governments, and since reports such as the Dearing Report (1997) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills report (2009) to enhance graduate employability skills. These and subsequent reports have encouraged universities to provide employability skills that employers require, such as communication, motivation, independence, analysis, confidence and problem solving skills. As a result, HE institutions have invested substantial resources in developing these skills (Wilton, 2012). Universities deliver such skills in different ways, for example, embedding skills into degree programmes or offering them, in different forms, outside the curriculum (Wilton 2012),

Employability is defined here as 'the individuals' ability to keep the job one has, or to get the job one desires' (Rothwell and Arnold, 2007: 25). We define perceived employability as the individual's perception of their possibility of obtaining and maintaining employment (Vanhercke et al., 2014: 594), which Tomlinson (2017) classifies as a 'micro level' concept due to the focus on how employability varies amongst individuals.

This paper examines the implications of perceived employability for students in a post-1992 UK University. We will examine how students' socio-economic backgrounds influences their perceived employability. We use qualitative data and thematic analysis. The research focuses on students who participated in a large employability intervention that was embedded into the curriculum. We examine data from interviews and focus groups to establish whether gender, ethnicity, disability, and economic background has any impact on participants' perceived employability. We will look for perceived employability through a thematic analysis. Examining data at this micro level will allow us to establish whether students who come from different backgrounds and who attend a 'non-elite' university can develop and enhance their perceived employability levels.

Despite the fact that the education profile of the graduate is likely to have a significant impact on their future labour market outcomes (Tomlinson 2012), we will examine whether a large-scale employability intervention, which offered students four coaching sessions from professional external coaches, has a positive impact of their perceived employability. To do so, we examine our data, focusing in particular on themes, such as confidence, goal setting, future focus, recruitability issues, self-awareness and labour-market awareness.

By examining the data in this way, we can ascertain how students feel the intervention has impacted their perceptions of their own abilities to gain graduate-level job. We will then be able to ascertain whether coaching these students has had a positive impact upon them and been able to help boost their career capitals by enhancing how they feel about these key areas. This will allow us to make a link between how they feel about their employability and the coaching intervention. Thus, allowing us to establish whether such an intervention has the intended positive effects. We argue that boosting these key areas gives these students benefits that they would not ordinarily have had and mitigates, to a certain extent, the lack of career capitals they may not possess and thus opens up greater opportunities in the graduate job market by enhancing their perceived employability.

We contend that by intervening in this way, we can enhance the career capitals of students with differing characteristics. By enhancing employability in the curriculum, we can enhance students' perceived employability and improve their ability to gain graduate employment. By doing this, we can improve their ability to compete with graduates who attend elite universities and who go on to occupy high-earning and high reward occupations (Power and Whitty, 2006). At present, the data shows that a graduates' socio-economic background has a strong influence on the type of employment they gain after graduation (Tomlinson, 2012). Large-scale interventions to improve students' perceived employability may help to militate against that divide.

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