

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Employability For What And For Whom?

Fenella Somerville¹

¹*University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa*

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Abstract: Employability as a function of higher education is seen as particularly important by countries with high unemployment. But what are graduates being prepared for? I conducted a mixed methods case study of media graduates from private higher education institutions in South Africa. The capability approach and human development formed the conceptual framing to evaluate ways in which graduates' higher education choices and opportunities play out in the labour market. The study found that notwithstanding the development of discipline-specific skills and knowledge, not all graduates are able to mobilise their higher education opportunities in the workplace. This paper argues that an employer-centric focus of employability continues to reproduce inequalities. Paying attention to who the diverse graduates are who enter institutions could direct employability strategies to enable more diverse, flexible and equitable labour market opportunities for graduates. This is all the more important given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the labour market.

Paper: There is a dominant notion that employability in higher education ought to direct learning outcomes towards enhancing graduates' likelihood of gaining employment and enjoying a successful career (Yorke, 2006). Employability has become a particular priority in South Africa, a country plagued by an unemployment crisis (Mahlaka, 2020; StatsSA, 2021). Higher education is increasingly focused on trying to produce skilled and work-ready graduates for the labour market. Private institutions in particular, have a strong orientation in their programme offering and delivery towards graduate employability, and the rapidly growing private sector is integral to the national strategy of a higher education system that enables more equitable access to opportunities and develops the critical skills needed for social and economic development (DHET, 2013). However, questions need to be asked about what employability means when work takes place online from home, and what shape employability will take after the Covid-19 pandemic. More importantly, the pandemic has highlighted the significant inequalities created in and by the labour market (Francis & Valodia, 2020). As we emerge to a transformed world socially and economically, it becomes all the more essential to reconsider the purpose of employability for what and for whom.

My research was a mixed methods case study of media graduates from a sample of private higher education institutions in South Africa. The purpose was to investigate graduates' experiences within

five years of graduating, to evaluate the opportunities provided in and through their higher education and to understand how these are differently realised in the labour market. Using a human development (Haq, 2003; UNDP, 2015) and capability approach (Sen, 1999) I investigated the perspectives of diverse graduates, as well as institution staff and employers, on the role and purpose of higher education in preparing graduates for the working world. The findings show that employment outcomes vary distinctly between different graduates, strongly shaped by personal biographies and the ways in which they intersect with social, economic and environmental factors. It was evident that notwithstanding graduates' qualified competence in the skills and knowledge of their field, not all students are able to mobilise their higher education opportunities in the workplace.

In this paper, I argue that rather than continuing to adopt an employer-centric focus of graduate employability for a diminishing number of jobs in a rapidly-changing labour market, institutions need to adapt in response to transformative times. This includes recognising the influence of technology on the nature of work and the economy, and paying attention to alternative work options beyond formal employment, including self-employment and the informal sector. It also requires institutions to respond to the diversity of graduates entering higher education, to adapt what they do and how they do it, so that employability can be focused on who the individuals are that are becoming employable, and for what.

The evidence for my claim comes from the analysis of the empirical data, where I identified different student enrolment and graduate employment typologies. The combined enrolment-employment typology matrix provides a description of who the students are on entry to higher education and the corresponding employability outcomes for different types. This is represented as follows:



What this means is that *Reputation seekers* who are generally middle-class students without financial constraints enrol at 'the best' institution. They are able to capitalise on institutional reputation and social connections to become '*those who make it*' into employment. *Identity shifters* generally come from under-resourced backgrounds. Despite restricted choices, they are prepared to take risks and adapt as they respond to any opportunities to work, earn and '*to make it happen*'. *Hobson's choicers* generally come from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. With very limited resources or freedom of choice, they work hard and hope to make it on their own merit. In a workplace environment in which graduates outnumber available jobs, they are left '*to make application*'.

Higher education is not solely responsible for employability. Nor is it able to alter who enrolls in institutions. However, the data also showed that the graduate employment typologies are not immutable. Given the impact of the global pandemic and the potential for deepening inequalities, institutions have an obligation to prepare graduates to be able 'to make it' through transformative times and expand their opportunities equally to earn a decent livelihood.

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