

Cross-sectoral and cross-subject mobility of graduate skills: transfer or translation?

Lena Nuechter

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, Justus-Liebig-Universität, Giessen, Germany

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Abstract

This paper discusses the cross-sectoral mobility of graduate skills and the reliability of skills terminology as a lingua franca between universities and employers based on an exploratory employer survey on humanities graduates with 31 British and German respondents. Where graduates enter the labour market in sectors non-typical for their degree subjects, they move into and through a variety of knowledge economies and communities of practice. Do their skills simply travel with them, are they translated, or do they encounter barriers? I show that while some skills appear to be 'mobile' in that they remain semantically relatively stable across different contexts, the practical meanings of others may be highly context-specific. This likely contributes to employer perceptions of graduate skills gaps. For such skills, particular efforts of reflection and translation are required on the parts of graduates, higher education institutions, and employers to ensure a satisfactory fit.

Full paper

The labour market situation of humanities graduates remains problematic (Britton et al., 2021; Konegen-Grenier, 2019; Lyonette et al., 2017). One challenge of enhancing these graduates' employability is their high cross-sectoral mobility (HESA, 2018): When they move across sectors, do their skillsets travel with them

intact (transfer), or are they adapted (translation)? Is skills terminology, ubiquitous in curricula and hiring processes, in practice useful for cross-sectorally mobile graduates? What could skills mobility look like, and how could it support successful entry into non-typical sectors?

This paper presents a hypothesis developed from preliminary results of an explorative cross-sectoral pilot survey of 31 German and British employers. The small and non-randomised sample has value in exploring first data on employers' perceptions and practices concerning a subject-specific group of graduates. Exploratory data analysis (Döring and Bortz, 2016, pp. 621–630) was used to generate hypotheses that are pursued in further qualitative research within an ongoing project. Respondents' own background (humanities-adjacent or not) has emerged as a variable of interest in connection with graduate skills. Two items in particular support the hypothesis that employers may be evaluating graduates according to skill understandings typical of their own disciplinary cultures.

I conceive of disciplinary cultures as cultures of knowledge, “those practices, mechanisms and principles which, bound by relation, necessity, and historical coincidence, determine *how we know what we know* in a given area of knowledge” (Knorr Cetina, 2002, p. 11).¹ If such cultures include discipline-specific ways of *doing* and *understanding* skills, transferring skills between different sectors and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) becomes potentially problematic. Drawing on practice theory (e. g. Krämer, 2016; Nicolini, 2012) in its focus on the context-specific doing of skills, my hypothesis questions the nature of skills transfer into and within communities of practice, highlighting the potential of resistance towards such communities and the possible retention of previous learnings and doings in new contexts that may influence how individuals interact with and assess others.

The actual transferability of so-called transferable skills has been questioned before (Jackson and Hancock, 2010); yet investigations that illustrate its concrete difficulties through employers' understandings of particular skills terms remain scarce. Lloyd (2011) describes different scopes of information literacy in higher education and the workplace. Penkauskienė et al. (2019) demonstrate the

breadth of understandings of “critical thinking” among European employers. Moore and Morton (2017) report Australian employers’ emphasis on the highly specialised and unique nature of the writing skills practised in their organisations.

My data indicate that in addition to organisationally specific practices and understandings, employers’ background may contribute to transfer problems. It appeared to influence how respondents rated some skills of humanities graduates in general (e. g. “communicating effectively”), while leaving the rating of others unaffected (e. g. “team work”). This suggests different degrees of skills mobility ranging from relatively mobile (“team work”) to highly context-dependent: “communicating effectively” might be understood e. g. either as nuanced communication showing all sides of an argument, or in terms of concisely informative briefings.

In addition, respondents’ background affected how they assessed particular skills of members of staff with a humanities background – e. g. information literacy. This skill term likely has different meanings to employers trained in subjects where information is text-rich, and to employers who understand it predominantly in terms of numbers or big data. The humanities-adjacent group rated their humanities staff’s skills higher on average, further suggesting that they may be evaluating employees according to a humanities-typical skillset, whereas the non-humanities group may be using other skillsets. Where the strength of association (ϕ coefficient) could be computed, it showed varying strengths of relationship between a humanities background and ascribing particular skills to humanities graduates; again indicating that some skills manifest in more context-specific, others in more universal forms.

The paper accordingly proposes that skills exhibit different degrees of ‘mobility’. Some remain semantically relatively stable and therefore mobile across sectors, whereas others develop to a high degree of specialisation within disciplinary cultures and communities of practice. Context-specific skills require translation effort to become successfully mobile. Where they are transferred across sectors untranslated, they may contribute to persistent employer perceptions of graduate skills gaps. Higher education efforts to enhance graduate employability in the humanities would then have to include increasing awareness for the degree of mobility of

particular skills, and to develop graduates' ability to exercise them in context-appropriate ways.

[1] „diejenigen Praktiken, Mechanismen und Prinzipien, die, gebunden durch Verwandtschaft, Notwendigkeit und historische Koinzidenz, in einem Wissensgebiet bestimmen, *wie wir wissen, was wir wissen*“ (original emphasis, my translation).

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