

What is graduate identity? Conceptualisation, confusions, correctives.

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Abstract

This paper notes an increased and increasing use, over the past three decades, of the term 'graduate identity' in discussions about graduate employability. However, in many cases, there is clearly a failure of scholarly due diligence, whereby the originating publications are not cited and/or not correctly understood. 'Graduate identity' is thus often viewed as inclusive of, or additional to, the skills and attributes that graduate should 'acquire' and 'possess'. Such texts fail to recognise that the originating concept of graduate identity was as an alternative to the skills and attributes approach. In doing so, they prevent the concept from acting as a basis for resisting the dominance of neoliberal visions of higher education. The paper outlines the key areas of confusion, and seeks to correct these. The paper outlines the key areas of confusion, and seeks to correct these.

Full paper

Introduced in 1995 (AUTHOR, 1995 [details anonymised for review purposes, to be included on acceptance]), the use of the term 'graduate identity' in publications about graduate employability, has clearly risen significantly over the past three decades. Albeit a rough-and-ready guide, Google Scholar identifies 25 publications in the seven years from 1995 to 2001, rising to 967 between 2016 and 2022. However, many of these involve problems of scholarly due diligence, particularly in terms of (a) failure to recognise and cite publications in which the concept was introduced and developed, and/or (b) failure to engage correctly with the originating conceptualisation. This paper will argue that these failures have not only caused confusion but also inhibited the potential of the concept for resisting the dominant 'possessive' skills and attributes approach to employability. As that approach may be seen as an aspect of the dominant ideology of possessive individualism (AUTHOR, 2023), it promotes the acceptance of, or compliance with, neoliberal visions of the purpose of higher education as primarily that of serving the economy. The paper will argue for a return to the originating conceptualisation of graduate identity, as the basis for resisting such limiting views of higher education.

The paper will locate the origins of the concept of graduate identity in the early stages of the development of the employability agenda in the early- to mid-1990s. In developing the concept, as the originator, I considered the conceptual and theoretical basis for the-then notions of 'transferable skills', 'personal skills', competencies, etc deeply problematic. The concept of graduate identity thereby drew upon the intellectual traditions of linguistic philosophy, philosophy of action, discursive and cultural psychology, and interactionist approaches to sociology. The work of philosopher of science Rom Harré was a key element in this (Harré, 1983; Harré and Secord, 1972; Davies and Harré, 1990), as he sought to

develop an alternative to the positivist dominance in mainstream academic psychology. The key understanding that the social world is relational, negotiated, interactionally constructed, co-produced by social actors is fundamental to this perspective. By abductive reasoning, two key concepts may be seen as critical for understanding how meaningful human behaviour comes to be construed as behaviour-of-a-particular kind: the practices relevant to the situation, and the identification of the social actors involved.

The concept of graduate identity, as originally proposed and developed, gives rise to other key notions that have implications for higher education and graduate employability. This include the re-casting of the *language* of skills and attributes as modes of warranting claims on and affirmations of identity. This indicates that the forlorn search for such mysterious phenomena may be abandoned in favour of exploration of how warranting takes place and how students/ graduates may be helped to develop their repertoires of warranting, in their interactions with the 'gatekeepers' to sought-after employment and careers.

The model of modalities of emergent identity [to be included after review] enables us to conceptualise the trajectories that individual graduates may take in their early ventures into the post-graduation employment arena. The model of claims (by the individual) and affirmation (or disaffirmation) by others, initially presented as showing four possible identity positions (AUTHOR, 2000), was later developed into a model with *five* positions taking account of the dynamic nature of identity trajectories and of issues of transition, uncertainty, liminality, precarity (AUTHOR 2001, 2013, 2015)(Lourens and Fourie-Malherbe, 2016). However, failure to recognise the significance of the model, or misrepresentations of it, by authors who do not take account of the underlying theorisation, inhibit their ability to deploy the model in their studies.

Of crucial significance of the originating conceptualisation of graduate identity, and based on the notion of warranting, is the idea of the *double warrant*. This refers to idea that the post-graduation careers of graduates may lead into two separate domains: employment, and post-graduate higher education. With the claimed advent of 'lifelong learning' and/ or pressures of credential inflation (Dore, 1976), a large proportion of graduates will want to, or need to, re-enter higher education for advanced study. Their graduate identity claims will need to be expressed in terms of scholarship rather than 'employment-readiness'.

Examples will be presented of texts where the term 'graduate identity' is used differently from the originating conceptualisation. The paper will argue that these reduce the potential of that original concept from overcoming problems with the possessive attributes and skills approach, and from enabling academia to engage effectively with policy issues regarding the purpose and role of higher education beyond that of preparation for labour market entry.

References

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