

## Title

### **Graduate employability and qualitative pedagogy: Moving beyond the soft-skills agenda (0119)**

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## Research theme

Management: Exploring leadership. Governance and management development in the relationship between higher education and employment: **the skills debate**.

## *Research Paper Outline*

Despite very wide usage in debates over the purposes of HE learning, and not least its use in attempting to justify the £4.8 billion of tax payers' money which goes into HE teaching in the UK each year (David Willets 10 June 2010, Vince Cable 15 July 2010), the concept of '**graduate employability**' continues to be defined in terms of a relatively weak notion of 'graduate skills'. Although, as Cranmer (2006:171) points out, 'there was no evidence that the efforts devoted by university departments to the teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills had a significant independent effect on graduate labour market outcomes' HE institutions are proceeding on the assumption that they are providing young adults with useful employment skills. Similar questions have been posed over the extent to which research- and teaching-quality auditing improves the employment prospects of postgraduate students (Urwin and Di Pietro 2005, HEFCE 2008).

The robustness of the current business-led and skills-based notion of graduate employability is especially important given the precarious state of the graduate labour market (Thompson 2010, AGR 2010). An independent survey of 16,114 UK home-based final year students interviewed in March 2010, for example, demonstrated very high levels of pessimism and uncertainty amongst the undergraduate population. It reports that: 'just 36% of those finishing undergraduate degrees this summer [2010] expect to find a graduate job after university and that confidence in the graduate labour market is now at its lowest for fifteen years' (High Fliers, 2010).

Graduate employability has also become a major preoccupation for managers within HE institutions who are under pressure to demonstrate the employment-

enhancing effects of studying for a degree in the UK. The *Leitch Review of Skills* (2006) for example, sets some very ambitious targets for raising the skills capacity of the UK labour force to world-leading levels by 2020. In June 2010 the HEFCE Chief Executive Sir Alan Langlands invited all UK HE institutions to provide 'employability statements' 'to help prospective students make informed choices for entry in 2011-2012' (HEFCE 2010). This call was endorsed by the National Student Forum (based in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) requesting HE institutions to provide 'a clear university or college-wide employability strategy' (NSF 2009). Information about rates and types of employment following graduation will be used to develop performance-type league tables of employability in the expectation that prospective students will put employability right at the top of their selection criteria.

In looking for solutions to the drive towards employability many managers in UK HE institutions assume (we will argue somewhat simplistically) that employers know clearly what they want from their graduate employees, and that successful graduates will be those who meet this wish list of 'key skills'. This business-led model (Lee 2010) of 'skills for employment' invariably comprises a predictable repertoire of 'generic competences' and 'soft skills' including IT/ communication skills, team working, problem-solving and so on (e.g. Archer and Davison 2008, Institute of Directors 2007, CBI/UUK 2009). Some additional resources might be ear-marked for developing employability initiatives within institutions but for the most part, it is assumed that these aptitudes will be developed by students during the normal course of their university studies. Employability strategy usually takes the form of a gentle remodelling and rephrasing of stated learning outcomes so that the links between particular skills and employment are made more explicit. A leading example is the 'student employability profiles' set out in the CIHE document *Degrees of Skill* (Forbes and Kubler 2006). These profiles correspond closely with subject benchmarking statements and thus provide a key indicator of what kinds and categories of skills different disciplines imagine they are able to bestow.

The difficulty with the business-led and skills-based model, we will argue, is that it not only fails to see employability from the students' point of view (Lee 2010) but it also seriously fails to acknowledge the much more demanding and exciting intellectual aptitudes and capabilities which students develop as a result of their HE experience. These aptitudes and capabilities can be explicitly associated with the model of qualitative pedagogy which sees the primary purpose of the undergraduate experience as developing general intellectual capability rather than training people to become technically competent (Ransome forthcoming).

Focussing exclusively on ‘skills’, the current model is unable to embrace the much more holistic and person-changing effects of the HE experience, effects which provide a vital foundation for developing imaginative and productive careers. Graduates offer employers a deep repertoire of qualitative skills and aptitudes including resourcefulness, empathy, curiosity, resilience, independence, reflexivity and self-confidence, which far outstrip the ability to perform minimal technical tasks at work.

Our explanation of *why* the skills model tends to dominate the employability strategy currently being deployed in the UK HE sector is that it fits comfortably within the strategic parameters of audit culture. Audit culture and audit elitism foster a managerial strategy in which ‘success’ and ‘achievement’ are assessed almost exclusively in terms of the setting and getting of ‘targets’. From an audit-driven perspective, the quality of ends becomes largely indistinguishable from the means of measuring those ends. Discussion of quality (i.e. what the substantive benefits of enhanced employability might be) is subsumed by discussion of quantity (i.e. how can targets be set and met).

We conclude that there is an urgent need to shift the debate on graduate employability away from the tick-box accounting of unimaginative lists of soft-skills and towards a much more robust conception emphasizing the qualitative and person-changing effects of the HE experience. Only in this way can UK HE institutions recognize the increasing needs of employers *and* the growing expectations of UK graduates who are being required to bear an increasing proportion of the cost of achieving ‘world-class skills’ for the Nation.

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