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Higher education and employability: developing a critical conversation with students (0147)

Introduction

Understanding the notion of employability as constructed through competing, and variously powerful, policy discourses allows us to understand that employability skills are not a neutral and unquestioned category, or a 'subject' to be learnt or taught as a functional curriculum. Undertaking focus groups and interviews with part-time learners shed light on the way that these learners understood HE learning in relation to their working and social lives, and helped us to understand how their personal motivations intersected with HE learning and changing economic circumstances. Engaging with student understandings about employability helped to develop the notion of a critical conversation about employability that centres around students' intentions, the labour market environment and the value placed on HE learning. We will be seeking to trial this 'critical conversation' approach with careers advisors over the next year.

HE and the employability agenda

UK and Europe lifelong learning and HE policy explicitly links the value and purpose of HE study to the economic imperative to develop and grow the national and European economies to support wealth accumulation in our societies and, by inference, a better life for all. The policy agenda at UK and European level demands that universities should develop graduate employability skills and focus on STEM subjects. This has resulted in a plethora of employability initiatives and a tightening of the employer engagement agenda. Boden and Nedeva make a persuasive case that developing graduate employability is now one of the performative functions of universities; that is, graduates with particular skills and knowledge sets are produced to serve an employer agenda at the expense of the broader interests of universities, students, social justice and the interests of civil society (Boden and Nedeva 2010:49-50).

A notion of employability as constructed through competing, and variously powerful, policy discourses allows us to understand that employability skills are not a neutral and unquestioned category or subject to be learnt or taught as a functional curriculum. One way of moving forward in this area is through surfacing silenced discourses, particularly those of students, to explore students' evaluative stances towards these policy discourses and to explore what might be helpful to them in a difficult economic environment.

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Data collection and analysis

The students recruited for these focus groups were working either full or part-time, were all distance learners and over 21. The participants self-selected and therefore were from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, but none were working in 'graduate level' employment. The focus groups were held in Manchester, London, Cardiff, Belfast and Dublin and individual telephone interviews were conducted with 6 students who were unable to attend. Stimulus material was provided and students worked in one or more small groups, and the outcomes of these small group discussions were then discussed by the group as a whole during a plenary session. Both the small- group and whole-group discussions were recorded and transcribed in full.

At the end of each focus group session participants were asked to carry out a reflective writing exercise. This exercise was designed to provide participants with the opportunity to contribute thoughts that they may not have felt able to discuss during the small-group discussions and to reflect on how the focus group discussions had affected their perceptions of notions of 'employability' and 'graduateness'.

The data was analysed thematically using NVivo software[i] . This was an iterative process with both members of the research team carrying out analyses individually and then discussing the emerging themes. The textual analysis reviewed the individual comments and this paper draws on that material, which was then used to pick up the broader emerging themes.

Findings and discussion

The range of responses identified a mix of personal and employment reasons for study, and the issue of learning for its own sake, alongside employment motivations in study has been discussed elsewhere (Pegg and Carr, 2010). What the reflective written data illustrated was the way in which hopes and aspirations were linked to the issue of self-confidence and self-achievement, the 'soft' skills of employability and specific sectoral knowledge that would allow a change of career or promotion. Although the participants were themselves aiming to graduate with a degree from their studies the idea of being a 'graduate' was called into question. Participants seemed to subscribe to the dominant discourse of graduates lacking the employability skills required by employers, whilst at the same time acknowledging the personal and social need to obtain a qualification to ratify their learning. Students suggested that discussing this issue was helpful in identifying an employer's perspective in relation to thinking about the way that employability skills might be described in interviews and C.Vs. Being able to adopt the perspective of the employer and to imagine what they might be looking for seemed to be an important aspect of coming to terms with the tensions in place between 'graduateness' and 'life skills' for these students.

Conclusion

Not all the students suggested that the focus group had changed their views of

employability, and that was not the intention, but many reported that they had clarified their ideas. Engaging with student understandings about employability helped to develop the notion of a critical conversation about employability that centres around students' aspirations, the local labour market environment and the value that they placed on HE study. What was striking about the discourse of employability for these students was how alienated they seemed to feel from the broader discourses of graduate employability; it could not apply to them because not only were they not young, inexperienced workers with little 'common sense', but the language of employers was also seen as remote.

Taking the employers perspective was helpful in beginning to imagine how experiences could be valued, and important in adding specific detail to a future that seemed only broadly and mistily imagined. Like Ball et al's (1999) younger students these mature students seemed to have limited information, a certain fuzziness and vague ideas about the specific employment opportunities that might be available for them, and the specific skills that employers might value and require.

References

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[i] For further details see: http://www.qsrinternational.com/