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THEME: The relationship between Higher Education and Employment

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Unknowing and unprepared? Undergraduate expected labour market outcomes and career management strategies (0157)

Background

There is growing emphasis on a skills agenda within Higher Education (HE), linked to notions of graduate employability. Framed in terms of human capital and economic participation, graduate labour market outcomes are becoming important as a proxy measure of universities' performance and ability to deliver a 'worthwhile product', which provides a return on the investment in HE by individuals and society. Given the current UK context of increasing fees, and associated notions of consumerism, these issues will come to the fore as students, or those funding them, begin to ask what they are getting for their investment. For the majority, this will be assessed in terms of labour market outcomes. There is mounting concern regarding the employment which graduates enter and the increasing potential for them to be underemployed, that is, to hold a job which is below that which their skills, knowledge, experience or qualifications appear to fit (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). In the case of graduates this means less than would be expected for someone qualified to degree level. However what expectations do individuals hold and is there an emerging divergence between expectations and reality? In light of the increasing heterogeneity of the graduate population there is a need for a better understanding of employment expectations and how they vary, or not, in light of this diversity. Picking up the theme of the relationship between HE and employment, this research examines how undergraduate students in the UK understand graduate employment outcomes, in the context of the wider changes that have occurred in Higher Education and the labour market, and explores the extent to which this group are engaging in appropriate career management strategies and behaviours.

Theoretical Approach

Individuals makes sense of their careers "in terms of persisting, socially recognised and sanctioned temporal and (socially) spatial patterns...with indicators of individuals' progress and social standing." (Collin, 2000: 90). For graduates there are 'accepted' norms which underpin the assumptions people hold with regards to the employment outcomes that will follow the 'investment' in Higher Education qualifications. There remains a "conventional wisdom" that education will "deliver the economic 'goods'" (Brown and Scase, 1994: 16). However, what these 'goods' are, given changes in both HE participation and the labour market, is becoming progressively more unclear. This lack of clarity chimes in with significant changes in contemporary career contexts which requires a shift in expectations, and emphasise individual responsibility for the realisation of career goals and thus requires them to engage in career management (Hall, 2002).

Yet there is a question over the readiness of undergraduates to engage in career planning and decision making, with Bridgstock (2009) arguing universities need to understand the

acquisition and use of career building and self-management skills when considering employability. Career self-management is the effort individuals put into the realisation of their career goals, encompassing both reflective (development of career aspirations) and behavioural (enacted career management behaviours) components (De Vos and Soens, 2008). This is an important yet neglected aspect of the employability debate. Whilst much focus has been on skills development, greater understanding is needed of the career self management undertaken by undergraduates.

Methodology

We adopt a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of graduate employment held by undergraduates, and their understanding and enactment of career self management. To capture the heterogeneity of the student population we draw on focus group data from two universities in the northeast of England which represent different parts of the sector – a Russell Group university and a post-1992 university. We conducted 15 focus groups at each institution, comprising students from a range of disciplines at different stages of their programme.

Preliminary Findings

The career expectations of participants appeared to be informed by a prevailing discourse of graduate careers that is out of kilter with labour market realities. Their perceptions about ‘graduate jobs’ hark back to the era of elite education, failing to acknowledge the substantial increase in the proportion of young people entering universities, and the increased diversity of the student population. Students internalised discourse of ‘graduates as higher earners’, with the majority of individuals making a distinction between graduate and non-graduate jobs in terms of salary. ‘Fast tracking’ and ‘high level entry’ were implicit in the defining characteristics of graduate jobs, with characteristics of non-graduate employment identified as ‘starting at the bottom’ and being ‘low level’ in terms of skills, knowledge and qualifications required.

Despite a prevailing view that difficulties would be faced on entry to the labour market, an overwhelming majority of participants were not actively engaging in *any* career management strategies, *nor* did they have any plans to. In addition, there was a general consensus that this was something that would be engaged with on completion of the degree, or potentially after completion of a Masters which a large proportion of participants saw as the inevitable next step of their ‘career’.

Conclusions and Implications

When expected employment outcomes and labour market realities are too far apart there is a risk that new graduates will be discouraged when entering employment. This can lead to feelings of underemployment, the experience of which has been linked with negative consequences for individuals and society. In addition a lack of engagement with individual career management strategies and behaviours can have negative long term consequences for individual career success.

Undergraduate degree programmes equip students with a range of skills, and in recent years there has been a great deal of attention paid to the nature and type of skills that should be developed. However, this does not automatically result in a specified labour market outcome – there is a need for receptivity and engagement by the student in both reflective and behavioural components of career management. Our study highlights limited recognition

from students of the need to do this. We are not suggesting individuals adopt an instrumental attitude towards their study – continuously wondering “what will this do for my CV?” – but we highlight the need to emphasise the importance of these behaviours to students, and to wider audiences. This research contributes to emerging debates on education to employment transitions and ‘outduction’ (Outduction Project, 2011).

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