

**Society for Research into Higher Education
Annual Research Conference
Celtic Manor Resort, Newport, Wales, UK
12-14 December 2012**

0157 SE

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH DOMAIN: STUDENT EXPERIENCE

NEGOTIATING THE EMPLOYABILITY DISCOURSE

The possession of employability skills is currently seen as key to higher education students' success in the post-industrial knowledge-economy. However, this trend can be seen as representing a significant shift in focus from employment being an issue of demand to one of supply. The individualisation of employability requires more nuanced analysis beyond the development of new competence statements and designing of skills modules. There is need to understand 'employability' at the level of meaning, accounting for the differing ways in which individuals struggle to create, appropriate and transform the discourse as they attempt to negotiate a secure sense of self. This paper offers an empirical illustration of the ways in which students respond when confronted by discursive equivocality. The paper concludes by urging a reconsideration of the support we offer students as they negotiate their identity as 'employable'.

OUTLINE

RESEARCH DOMAIN: STUDENT EXPERIENCE

NEGOTIATING THE EMPLOYABILITY DISCOURSE

The first section of the paper sets out the rhetoric concerning the need to enhance the employability skills of undergraduates in the UK. It describes a concern to identify generic employability skills (Deering 2007, QAA 2007) and the commitment of institutions of higher education to explore a range of innovative ways of embedding skills across the curriculum.

The paper goes on to reflect the assumption underpinning this trend: that while previously employers were regarded as having the responsibility for providing employment, now students are seen as having responsibility for being capable of being employed. Understandably, the individualisation of employability has prompted a number of studies that focus on how students perceive and understand such expectations (Willmott & Stevens 2006; Thomas and Jones 2007; Tymon 2011; Kenely & Jacklin 2011; Moreau & Leathwood 2006). However, the paper argues that these studies tend to be dominated by surveys that are reductive and generalising, where students are regarded as a universal homogenous entity that approaches the labour market uniformly as rational investor (Tomlinson 2007). Moreover, students are portrayed as passive recipients of 'employability' imposed upon them and the studies are decontextualized, ignoring the social structures that influence students' access to employment (Morley 2001; Wilott and Stevenson 2006). The paper argues the need for more nuance and detailed micro-analysis of the many, complex, contested and creative ways in which individuals respond to the dominant discourses of employability.

Theoretically, the study is concerned with identity. It rejects the idea that identity is a fixed essence, but rather assumes it to be constituted by our,

'subjective meanings and experience... our ongoing efforts to address the twin questions, 'Who am I?' and – by implication – 'how should I act?' (Alvesson et al 2008: 6).

Identity is assumed to be a temporary and evolving social construction; a process that involves an interface among self-understandings, ideals and in 'an ongoing social process of engagement with the labour process within which...[students]...operate' (Tomlinson 2007:287). Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to understand 'employability' at the level of meaning, accounting for the differing ways in which individuals struggle to create, appropriate and transform the discourse as they attempt to negotiate a secure sense of self, along with its social and political implications.

The paper goes on to describe the case study upon which this paper is based. It explains how employability skills were introduced as a core compulsory module on a range of post-graduate full-time business programmes – MBA, MSc Marketing, MSc Sports Management – at Green Valley Business School. Specific features included the use of a range of diagnostic tools and participation in a live group project. Students were also required to produce a reflective journal, undertake an initial and summative skill audit and write a 3,000-word essay reflecting on their development throughout the period of study.

The study employs a discursive methodology, predicated on an understanding that processes of organizing, including identity, are constituted through language: linguistic acts of naming, labelling, etc. We suggest that discursive positioning emerges through the articulation of similarities and differences, the way in which we make ourselves through ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’. We assume that this process is colored by emotions, moral judgments and approbations, and political or economic interests.

The paper presents a discursive analysis of two exemplary narratives from over 100 students’ reflective essays. They offer empirical illustrations of the ways in which these individuals’ employability identity is ‘negotiated and worked at’ (Tomlinson 2007:301). It focuses on the way in which they respond when confronted with feelings of discomfort between the different subject positions offered within the employability discourse, their own preferred interest as well as their relationship with others.

The first case study concerns Adema (a pseudonym), a 24 year-old female from Nigeria with a first degree in Mass Communications and with 12 months previous work experience. The second case study focuses on Carl (a pseudonym), a 25 year-old male student from the UK with a first degree in Business Management and gap year experience in Germany.

Analysis focuses on Adema and Carl’s struggle to reconcile her own and others’ perceptions of themselves. There is also evidence of the appropriation of the employability discourse to serve ends beyond mere acceptance and adoption of the ‘young professional’ identity. For example, in Adema’s case it is used to signal freedom from the monitoring that has characterised her previous school and university life. In Carl’s case, it suggests an acceptance of the responsibility required to realise his family’s investment in his education.

The findings raise a number of issues. Methodologically, they demonstrate the importance of processes for establishing ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ in identity formation. Theoretically, the study gives greater acknowledgement to students’ ‘equivocal position’ (Willmott 1997: 1337) as both objects and subjects of ‘employability’. The study also demonstrates the burdensome nature of the employability discourse, as students struggle with aspirations, expectations and comparisons. Most importantly, employability appears to be bound up with transition from student to adult, and the associated tension between the potential for freedom and acceptance of personal responsibility. These findings have significant implications for the design of employability skills initiatives in higher education, and

in particular the re-thinking of the support provided to students as they negotiate complex, contested and contextualised understandings of themselves as 'employable'.

References

- Alvesson, M., Ashcraft, K. L. and Thomas, R. (2008) 'Identity Matters: Reflections on the Construction of Identity Scholarship in Organization Studies'. *Organization*, 15(1), 5-28.
- Kenely, M. & Jackling, B. (2011) 'The Acquisition of Generic Skills of Culturally-diverse Student Cohorts'. *Accounting Education: An International Journal*, 20(6), 605-623.
- Moreau, M. & Leathwood, C. (2006) 'Graduates' Employability and the Discourse of Employability: a Critical Analysis'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 19(4), 305-324.
- Morley, L. (2001) 'Producing New Workers: Quality, Equality and Employability in Higher Education'. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), 131-138.
- Thomas, L. and Jones, R. (2007) *Embedding Employability in the Context of Widening Participation*. Series two of the The Higher Education Academy's 'Learning and Employability' series.
- Tomlinson, M. (2007) 'Graduate Employability and Student Attitudes and Orientations to the Labour Market'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 20(2), 285-304.
- Tymon, A. (2011) 'The Student Perspective on Employability'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-16.
- Wilott, S. J. and Stevenson, J. (2006) 'An Analysis of Gendered Attitudes and Responses to Employability Training'. *Journal Of Vocational Education and Training*, 58(4), 441-453.