

Graduate employability and employment: contestation and perspectives

As in any other field of enquiry, research into issues of graduate employability and employment can proceed satisfactorily only if it is based within a robust conceptual framework and addresses empirical issues that are appropriate to the key matters worthy of investigation. Arguably, research in this field has generally suffered from a contestable theoretical base and limited approach to investigation. This presentation will seek to contest the poverty of the theoretical basis for the dominant approach, and the limited range of issues it addresses, what Lakatos (1970) would term a 'degenerative research programme'.

We should first recognise that, conceptually, employability is NOT the same as employment, nor is employment the NOT same as employability. The two concepts are related, but the nature of that relationship is a matter of dispute (Gazier, 1998, McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

Of course, concepts are not themselves intellectually freestanding but are elements within theoretical frameworks, paradigms (Kuhn, 1970), or research programmes (Lakatos, 1970). Any consideration of the conceptualisation, or, perhaps, of *plural* conceptualisations, of graduate employment and graduate employability must therefore be a consideration of the theoretical frameworks within which such conceptualisations are located. Yet the dominant approach, based on notions of 'skills and attributes', is generally presented as the only mode of conceptualisation.

We know, on the basis of a range of empirical studies, that there is variability of employment outcomes, in terms of, inter alia:

- Social class origin
- Ethnicity
- Institution attended
- Age on graduation
- Subject studied
- Gender
- Class of degree
- Various combinations of the above

(see eg Purcell and Pitcher, 1996, Elias et al., 1999, Purcell et al., 1999, Connor et al., 2005, Blenkinsopp and Scurry, 2007, Smetherham, 2006).

There are also 'residual' differences between individuals. We need to consider how these can be explained in theoretical terms that provides for an overall, cogent analytical framework. Or, we need to consider what kind of framework that would be, rather than be satisfied with

separate modes of explanation. Clearly, the skills and attributes approach cannot serve as such a framework, unless we are prepared to accept that, eg, more black graduates somehow 'lack' the skills employers require than do their white peers.

We should recognise that various complicating factors will come into play. How should we take account of *under-employment* of graduates (Blenkinsopp and Scurry, 2007)? Where should we locate the growing trend on providing internships, and other temporary or 'bridge' forms of employment?

The presentation will examine three modes of conceptualisation and theorisation of employability

- As possession (skills and attributes)
- As positional (cultural capital, habitus)
- As processual

The possessive approach, it will be argued, is flawed conceptually, theoretically, evidentially and in respect of practical application.

The presentation will defer discussion of the positional approach to a co-presenter in the symposium.

Processual perspective will be examined in terms of a relational understanding of identity in terms of the 'negotiated' outcome of (a) the presentation of claims on an identity as a graduate, worthy of employment in an appropriate occupation and job and (b) the ascriptions by significant others, affirming or disaffirming such a claim. This will be further explored in terms of possible outcomes of such interaction, in five ideal-type positions or 'zones' (always essentially temporary). This provides for exploration of trajectories and transitions through such zones.

Such an approach, it will be argued, affords 'capture' of much of the existing empirical evidence, and provides for new areas for exploration. It enables the currently dominant 'skills and attributes' approach to be reframed as the language in which claims and ascriptions are warranted. This also provides for the reframing of much current 'employability work' in institutions, particularly in terms of 'identity workspaces' (Petriglieri, 2011) in which rehearsal of relevant identity and related modes of claim-warranting may be undertaken.

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