

Student Articulations of their own Employability

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Context / Introduction

Despite the considerable focus on employability and extensive research in this area that has taken place over the last fifteen years (e.g. Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Yorke, 2006); CBI, 2009; Pegg et al.; 2012), there is still a limited understanding of what the term 'employability' means to undergraduates. Tymon (2011, p9) terms this group 'the missing perspective'. Tymon's study on student perspectives found that the students expressed a narrower view of employability than observed in the wider literature. This was particularly marked with first and second year students.

Of the other literature detailing student perspectives, Rothwell et al (2008) demonstrated that there was a general lack of confidence amongst students in terms of how well they thought they would fair in the job market, a finding evident in our work with Marine Sport Students (Beaumont and Gedye, 2013; Beaumont, Gedye, and Richardson, 2014). Tomlinson (2008) found that students considered employability as being in part about the credentials of their degree, and that this credential (where and what they studied, the grade they achieved) would assist them in getting a job in what they perceived as a hierarchical and competitive labour market. They also highlighted the need to have 'extra credentials' such as personal and social skills; attributes; and relevant experience. Tholen's (2012) comparative study between Dutch and British universities found that British students expressed their employability in terms of competition, measured by their exclusivity and distinction. They viewed adaptability, flexibility and the acquisition of generic knowledge and skills as an essential part of their employability 'offer'. By contrast, Tholen found that the Dutch students perceived employability about finding one's niche in the labour market, requiring reflection by students and a development of understanding of their interests, strengths and weaknesses.

As primary stakeholders, it is important that we focus on understanding student perspectives on their own employability. Through this focus we may attempt to address questions such as: What does employability mean to them? How do their understandings relate to how they operate? How do their understandings of this concept develop during their time at university in response to efforts by academics and other professional support staff? What do their thoughts about employability reveal about the quality of their understandings and how that might differ from that of other stakeholders?

This paper aims to contribute to this under-researched area. It builds on work previously conducted by the research team (Beaumont and Gedye, 2013; Beaumont et al, 2014) with Marine Sport Science students and expands it to incorporate students from other Hospitality, Sport, Leisure and Tourism (HLST) related programmes (funded by the HEA 'Social Sciences' under the theme of 'employability and global citizenship in the Social Sciences: Learner articulation of employability'). The research has enabled us to explore the comparison between the competition-driven, self-styled non-conformist surf students that inhabit the Marine Sport Science programmes, with the perhaps more job-aware students from vocationally oriented HLST degree programmes. Our data set also compares degree-level students to HLST students on pre-degree programmes. This paper therefore explores student articulations of employability from both disciplinary and progression perspectives.

Research Approach and Methods

Data was gathered in face-to-face sessions with groups of students to explore their articulation of their employability understandings, skills and behaviours. Participants were recruited from a range of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (HLST) programmes (n. 29). Included in the research were students on HLST undergraduate degree programmes and students studying pre-HE HLST courses (BTECs and Extended Diplomas).

Data was gathered using a peer-to-peer format in which students were guided through a series of questions by the researchers, given time to talk to a peer, and then record their responses on a questionnaire. The semi-structured articulation sessions were used to elicit responses from students about the contribution of their programme to their skills and behaviours, their participation in extra-curricular activities through the University (such as sports and societies involvement), and their engagement with the Careers Education services (such as careers events and competitions).

This research therefore draws on elements of peer research methods (e.g. Warr et al, 2011; Weems, 2006). It was felt that the benefits of using a peer-to-peer method of data collection were that:

- ◆ Encouraging students to talk about their employability with peers, would produce more active, engaged and responses.
- ◆ By getting students to talk to a peer rather than a researcher, this would shift the interviewer-interviewee power relationship. Students, it was felt, would be less likely to fear ‘saying the wrong thing’ or ‘what they thought the researcher wanted to hear’, thus providing a more authentic student voice (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 21; Porter et al, 2009).
- ◆ Peer-to-peer interviews, in which students recorded their own responses, provided an efficient and cost effective method of data collection.

The researchers acknowledge that the peer research method employed may have the drawback of eliciting shared rather than personal perspectives on employability and this should be recognised in the interpretation of the data (Porter et al, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

Our research with HLST students has provided insights into differences in articulations of employability. These differences appear to relate to:

- ◆ Disciplinary differences between vocational and non-vocational programmes.
- ◆ The stage of the student and their progression through their programme.

The differences observed relate to the ways students express their employability. We have identified the following variations:

- ◆ ‘External’ (what an employer wants) versus ‘internal’ (what they have to offer to an employer) views of employability.
- ◆ Differences in emphasis on what students think are the most important facets of employability.
- ◆ Diversity in expressions of the purpose of employability

We will discuss if ‘internal’ expressions of employability are more desirable than external expressions – do they indicate a more active approach to employability that the student owns? We also consider what these understandings tell us about how we might improve the development of student employability provision in HE.

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