HR Graduate Employability: An Exploration of Organisational Contributors (0292)

Emma Mullen
Northumbria University, UK

Growing attention is being paid to the role which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play in preparing students for the Graduate Labour Market (GLM), from the UK government and academic community alike (Smith et al, 2000, Harvey, 2001; 2002, Little, 2011). Despite the efforts of HEIs to prioritise graduate employability, there is a notable amount of research which suggests that employers are still claiming a skills gap at the graduate/employer level that needs to be addressed (Hesketh, 2000; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Cramner, 2006; Jackson, 2012).

In conceptualising 'graduate employability', a large body of literature focuses on the role of 'skills'. Despite this, it is interesting to note that criticisms of skills-led approaches are also represented (Little, 2011; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011, Tomlinson, 2012). Alternative approaches to conceptualising graduate employability are offered, such as Graduate Identity Approach (GIA) (Holmes, 2001; 2012; 2013) which challenges the fundamental assumption that skills are observable entities which can be possessed and 'used'. GIA proposes that there is a subjective element to graduate employability which infers that insight into social interactions, interpretations and behaviours are key to understanding 'skills' and 'graduate employability'. From this perspective, it is assumed that the process of entering graduate level employment is not simply a matter of matching skills required and skills possessed.

In regard to expanding our understandings of graduate employability, increasing attention is also being paid in the literature to transference of 'skills' and 'employability' to the workplace, rather than mere possession of skills. Research in this area has also emphasised socialisation or 'early adjustment' (Nicholson and Arnold, 1991) relating to an organisation's internal norms and values and, more specifically, the changes in graduates as they adjust to these norms. Furthermore, it can be the case that identities which students develop in HE are transferrable into workplace settings, holding particular relevance during their initial stages of 'becoming' a graduate (Holmes, 2013; Bjerregaard and Jonasson, 2014; Daniels and Brooker, 2014). Jackson (2014) goes are far as proposing that, in addition to learner and degree programme characteristics, workplace characteristics (levels of support, existing group norms) can directly impact upon a graduate's ability to transfer their skills into the workplace. Despite increasing emphasis in this area, James et al (2013) emphasise that there is still little empirical investigation into whether or not graduate 'skills' are actually transferred into the workplace, offering that there are often discrepancies between 'skills' in the HE context compared with the workplace.

This purpose of this research is to expand on existing understandings of graduate employability through exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of 'significant others' (Holmes, 2013), in this case, those with direct line management responsibilities for graduates in the workplace. Holmes's (2013) asserts that the starting point for research in this area should be with performance, or behaviour of graduates working in graduate level jobs. As such, these 'significant others' provide valuable insight into graduates' working in graduate level work drawing from frequent interactions with such individuals.
The context of this research is focused on Human Resources (HR) graduates, a discipline that has seen little qualitative inquiry across the Higher Education (HE), employability and HR literature.

This study draws from a social constructionist standpoint, with an interpretivist methodology. Twenty two semi-structured interviews have been conducted with individuals who have direct experience of managing HR graduates working in HR roles. This is a UK based study covering a range of organisations offering formal HR graduate programmes. As such, one of the contributions of this study is an exploration of perspectives across five different industry groups, for which participants are allocated; Manufacturing, Banking & Finance, Public Sector, Retail/B2C, and Fuel & Utilities. Qualitative data has been analysed through a 'progressive focusing' approach, incorporating open and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This study has gained insight into a range of individual and interpersonal factors contributing to HR graduate employability and skills, and has worked towards building up a richer 'picture' of HR graduate work. That said, this paper reports on a third category; organisational contributors to HR graduates' employability and ability to effectively transition from HE into a HR role, insights which are not currently reflected in extant empirical work on HR graduate employability and skills.

Key findings in relation to organisational contributors support Jackson's (2014) model for graduate skill transfer, in that levels of support from senior colleagues, line managers and fellow graduates are perceived as influential by the participants. The role of social norms as graduates transition into the workplace (Nicholson and Arnold, 1991) is depicted by each industry group in two aspects; 'resentment' felt by existing staff who may feel 'threatened' by HR graduates, and the tendency for HR graduates to 'pack together'. Additional organisational factors are also offered in the context of HR graduates, such as understanding the purpose of HR in organisations and 'embracing' other areas of the business aside from the HR department. Each group emphasises the need for HR graduates to fully understand the type of environment/industry in which they intend to work, and the implications this holds for the 'type' of HR work they will undertake.

This research holds implications for a range of stakeholders. From an academic standpoint, this paper provides an empirical contribution to understanding graduates in the workplace, with specific insights in the context of HR graduates. The broader issues surrounding employability are also of particular interest to UK HEIs and graduate employers. Further insights in the context of HR graduates may be transferable to HR curriculum and teaching. Professional body implications are resultant for the CIPD and links with their professional standards for early career HR professionals and accredited HR programmes.

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