Research domain: Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Individual Paper Submission: "Brown Shoes?" Interrogating hidden inequality and diversity barriers in the graduate labour market.

Part 2: Paper Outline

As Burke et. al. (2016) have suggested, "global forces are profoundly reshaping the policy and practice of teaching in HE". As a result of a combination of factors, which include government and business pressures to help students become "job-ready" and thus contribute to economic growth as well as the introduction of student fees, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been paying increasing attention to the "employability" of their graduates. Current political and business discourse has very firmly positioned the responsibility for employability with HEIs. The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) will add a further incentive to HEIs to continue to improve their employability offering as the TEF's proposed use of DLHE as one of the metrics to judge teaching excellence will forge that link, however imperfectly aligned that link appears to be.

As demonstrated in a recent report from the Social Mobility Commission (2017), access to Britain's professions remains dominated by those from backgrounds that are more privileged. Even when people from working class backgrounds get into the professions, they face an earnings penalty and do not necessarily go on to achieve the same levels of success. The difference is partly explained by the fact that people whose parents have professional jobs tend on average to be better educated. They are also more likely to join bigger firms or work in London, again associated with higher pay. The report also highlights that those from poorer backgrounds may be less likely to ask for pay rises, have less access to networks and work opportunities, or may exclude themselves from promotion because they don't 'fit in'. Unconscious or conscious discrimination could explain the class gaps as could 'cultural matching' and other hidden employment processes. In effect, HEIs are having to produce employable graduates who can, not only get into a system that is potentially rigged against them if they are from less privileged backgrounds, but who can also compete for promotion and earnings with their more privileged peers.

There is no doubt that the majority of students entering higher education envisage a professional career (see Hardee, 2012, 2014). Their 'possible' selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) therefore must inevitably incorporate an image or perception of their chosen profession or a possible 'identity' for their future selves. Erikson introduced the concept of identity (Erkison, 1946, 1956) and argued that this period of early adulthood is the optimum time for the formation of a personal and social identity. Erikson also suggested that young people should be given a time and place in which they can experiment with different roles before making a commitment to an occupation. Gurin et. al. (2002) argue that this period

should involve a confrontation with diversity and complexity "lest young people passively make commitments based on their past experiences" and that they should actively think and make decisions informed by new and more complex perspectives. Higher education can provide an opportunity to support young adults through this identity development stage and we suggest that their perspectives on equality and diversity, particularly in the context of their chosen profession, should be challenged during this period. Therefore, it is our belief that not only should we be tasked with producing employable graduates but that we should also be teaching them to challenge their own perceptions and biases during this identity development phase. We should be helping to raise awareness of structural inequalities and career hurdles; to help students develop personal strategies to overcome these; and thereby maximise their employability.

This paper is an extension of the Fairness Project*, which is a collaborative quantitative research project across three Universities equipping students to maximise their employability through understanding and responding to inequality and unfair diversity barriers in the legal profession and inspiring them to create a fairer legal profession for the future. The project seeks to empower students to understand and thus resist the diversity barriers. The project was situated within a range of employability modules across the three institutions. Questionnaires were used in advance of the taught activity to gauge students' knowledge and awareness of equality and diversity in the legal profession. The taught activity centred around students investigating the structural barriers existing within the legal profession and a recruitment activity. During this teaching phase of the project, students are encouraged to address their own biases, both conscious and implicit, to enable them to become fairer employers and managers in the future, and thus to change the culture of elite professions. This was then followed up by a post activity questionnaire to establish any changes in student perceptions. Data was analysed by a Research Associate using SPSS.

In looking at the data from Northumbria University, which is situated in a relatively geographically isolated area in the North East of England, we realised that students attending the Law School are a relatively homogenous group. 80% of our students are white and many live at home and attendance at university might simply be seen as an extension of 'one's home environment' or replicating the 'home community's social life' which can impede the personal struggle and conscious thought that are considered important for identity development (Gurin et al, 2002). This makes the teaching of equality and diversity issues within the first year employability module all the more important. In comparison, the University of Central Lancashire, based in Preston, has more than double the national average of BAME students, almost 50% are from low socio-economic groups and almost double the national average of low participation households. Teaching equality and diversity to this cohort has its own challenges.

While the Fairness Project operated within the legal sector, evidence of lack of social diversity is equally apparent across a broad range of professions (Social Mobility Commission, 2016) and therefore meaningful engagement is needed across all academic disciplines.

*The Fairness Project is a three-year project, initially developed in 2015/16 by the University of Central Lancashire and is now being carried out in collaboration with Sheffield University and Northumbria University.

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