Is employability consuming the graduate attribute agenda?

Abstract
Employability and graduate attributes appear to offer similar views of today's higher education landscape. Though the terms are often used interchangeably, they represent different perspectival responses to the neoliberal idea that the purpose of higher education is to produce graduates who are prepared for the world of employment. In this paper, we examine these two agendas by interrogating academics' descriptions of attributes that are difficult to assess; referred to as invisible attributes. Two researchers coded the same transcripts using different perspectives; either employability or invisible attributes. The resulting codes showed differences in identification and descriptions of the attributes. We argue that academics' insights into developing cognitive and social capabilities required to thrive and contribute in society should not become limited by the employability lens.

Introduction
Employability and graduate attributes appear to offer similar views of today's higher education landscape. Though the terms are often used interchangeably, Yorke and Knight (2006) define employability in terms of achievements that make individuals more likely to gain employment. Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell and Watts' (2000) definition of graduate attributes

> …the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution and, consequently, shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and as a citizen. (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell and Watts, 2000, p.3)

is often seen as universities' response to the employability agenda (Kalfa & Taksa, 2015).

In this paper, we examine these two agendas by interrogating academics' descriptions of attributes that are difficult to assess. We argue that assumptions underpinning employability may mask broader work being done by academics, which may nevertheless support students as they move into the workplace.

Bowden et al's (2000) definition encompasses employability, suggesting that graduate attributes are determined by universities. However, the increasing influence of the employability agenda tends to overshadow this perspective. Lists of key graduate attributes and desired employability skills often overlap, but differences between the two perspectives are highlighted when we focus on those skills that are hardest to identify and 'test'.

Since 2014, we have been part of an Ako Aotearoa National Project Fund project, *Making the Invisible Visible'*, which explicitly focuses on those attributes that are challenging to teach and difficult or inappropriate to assess. We termed these Invisible Attributes (IAs).

During the project, we interviewed academics about the IAs that they considered to be important in their discipline. Our aim was to identify an academic-generated list of attributes rather than to suggest or reinforce pre-determined attributes. Interviews were transcribed and coded by members of the research team to identify key IAs in each of six disciplines. The resulting list included some that were relatively easy to assess, as well as others that would not be included in universities' usual lists of graduate attributes. For example, the IA 'empathy' was identified and explained differently across disciplines.

Following the team's initial data analysis, two research assistants separately undertook coding of 12 lecturer transcripts. Although they coded the transcripts using the same instructions, one (RA1) had taken the concept of employability as their focus, while the other (RA2) focused on invisible attributes in a way that was commensurate with the initial aims of the project. A simple content analysis revealed that RA1 had identified fewer types of invisible attribute than RA2 and, in many cases fewer examples within each type. We were interested to understand more about why this had occurred and interested to see how the notion of employability affected the way in which the data were interpreted.

Methodology
Employability and graduate attributes were treated as different theoretical lenses for considering the same phenomena (Silverman, 2014). This approach reflected Eisner's (1998) view that the assumptions we use to make sense of the world lead to different interpretations of the same experiences (in this case of text). We undertook a comparative analysis of the transcript excerpts coded by the two researchers, focusing on the types of activity each used to illustrate the attributes and the roles played by the different actors in relation to them.

Findings
The comparison of datasets indicated that an employability perspective produced less variety in the types of attribute identified. For example, RA1 identified 18 different attributes from three interviews with music lecturers whereas RA2 identified 31 attributes in these transcripts. Attributes identified by both RAs included collaboration, enthusiasm and adaptability but RA2 also identified attributes such as contextual understanding, self- critique and responsibility.

Evidence for IAs was also recorded differently. The following are examples taken from interviews with chemistry lecturers and focus on a single attribute: problem solving.

RA1 identified eight examples of problem solving as an attribute across three transcripts, whereas RA2 identified 21. Quotes selected by RA1 focused particularly on outcomes of problem solving, '*the ability to take information and do something with it*' (Laura) or the process of teaching it: '*in the first instance we would probably scaffold it*' (Elizabeth). RA2 identified the same quotes but also selected others that focused on the process of using problem solving skills; '*take facts and … apply them and use those to synthesise their own understanding … and can take into their own situation and take it forward.*' (Steve).

Discussion

Using different perspectives or lenses shows IAs in different lights. Two research assistants coded interview data differently depending on whether they were focusing on employability or invisible graduate attributes. RA1 identified attributes that were commonly associated with employability skills but RA2's attributes were more grounded in the text of the interviews reflecting the lecturers' educational agenda. Furthermore, RA1 tended to focus on skills-as-nouns whereas RA2 drew on other aspects of the attribute, by including verb-based descriptions.

These differences indicate that an analysis from the employability perspective may miss detail inherent in academics' descriptions of the attributes they view as important. This supports the criticism that employability focuses on the needs of employers and limits the academic freedom of academics (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017). The findings also support the view that *'graduate attributes are broader and more encompassing than "employability"…' (Hill, Walkington and France, 2016 p.156).* Hill et al (2016) further suggest that academics need to take ownership of the attributes that they value and actively foster them in their teaching. By focusing on attributes identified by academics we are in a better position to help them understand and develop the learner-focused activities required to foster them (Barrie, 2007).

Our study of 'invisible attributes' highlights differences between a narrow focus on graduate employability versus a focus on developing cognitive and social capabilities required to thrive and contribute in society. Academics are keenly aware of these processes and it is vital that their insights into the 'big picture' not become limited by the employability lens.

References

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