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Title Enhancing student employability: reconsidering innovations in integrating employability and skills development into our curriculum
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Higher Education rising to the challenge: Balancing expectations of students, society and stakeholders

Round Table Proposal: Enhancing student employability: reconsidering innovations in integrating employability and skills development into our curriculum

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

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Part 1: Abstract (150 words)

In the UK, the skills agenda continues to dominate Higher Education (HE) policy (Leitch, 2006, Holmes, 2015, Jackson, 2016) with universities facing criticism from a range of stakeholders (particularly employers) regarding the employability of graduates. This paper focuses on the implications of these pressures for HE academics involved in the design and delivery of skill development/employability focused curriculum via a round table discussion. More specifically, an overview of contemporary debates regarding challenges for UK HEIs in delivering on student employability is offered, drawing from the author's empirical research on UK graduate employment, with a focus on learning, teaching and curriculum design and illustrative examples from a postgraduate employability module at Northumbria University (*approx. 30 minutes*). Next, the paper poses a series of questions to the attendees around how we may address these challenges in the context of our own student cohorts (*approx. 30 minutes for discussion*).

Key words: graduate employability, skills, higher education, employers

Part 2: Paper Outline (1000 words)

Globally, competition for highly skilled labour has escalated (Tomlinson, 2012), but the education sector persistently faces criticism for not developing the right skills needed in the workplace (CIPD, 2015; Prospects, 2015). As a result, the topic of graduate employability (GE) has received increasing attention across academic literature and UK HE policy alike during the past few decades (Maxwell et al, 2009; Holmes, 2015), indicating that this is an area worthy of discussion in both theoretical and practical terms, supported by Collet et al.'s (2015, p. 533) recent claim that: 2

“...the debate over graduate skills and employability remains one of the core elements of a wider educational debate...”

As a result of UK HE expansion, particularly since the 1990s (Daniel, 1993; Wilton, 2011), the economic value of graduate credentials has declined (Tomlinson, 2015), graduate supply increasingly exceeds demand, and graduate employment destinations have diversified. The UK GLM has seen dramatic changes during the last few decades as a result of increased graduate supply. Essentially, what is considered to be a graduate job has broadened and graduate work is no longer restricted to permanent, professional level employment (Connor & Pollard, 1996; Yorke & Harvey, 2005). Shared with this is diminution of the traditional notion of ‘a job for life’, with employers even struggling to retain their graduate trainees (Sturges & Guest, 2001; McCracken et al., 2015). However, findings of extant studies still indicate that employers perceive graduates as valuable human capital.

As the GLM has become increasingly diverse and dynamic, expectations of graduate employers and their graduate recruitment and selection processes have followed suit (BIS, 2015), in turn altering what makes a graduate ‘employable’. Hence it is not surprising that as the GE debate has progressed, increasing emphasis has been placed upon understanding employers’ perceptions of graduates (Cai, 2012). As asserted by Jackson (2009b, p. 31):

“...it is essential to continuously ascertain and articulate employer opinion on what makes a graduate employable, and ensure that undergraduate programs are suitably aligned...”

With this transition, dissatisfaction amongst employers over graduate skills has increased also (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Jackson, 2014; Collet et al. 2015); an issue which did not appear to be as prevalent during the previous ‘elite’ HE system (BIS, 2015), yet is also surprising given the expanded ‘pool’ of graduate candidates available for employers to select from. Amongst these concerns are claims from employers that the quality of graduates has declined as a result of increased graduate supply. Growing attention is being paid to the role which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play in preparing students for the 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).

HEIs are often on the receiving end of criticism around the work-readiness of new graduates; namely that students are not leaving university with the skills and attributes required by employers and that the quality of graduates has declined as a result of increased graduate supply (BIS, 2015). Even in 1997, Dearing drew attention to the responsibility of HEIs for student employability and skill development through high quality and relevant HE provision. UK HE has undergone significant changes as a result of these pressures. There has been a move away from traditional HE provision with increased emphasis on ‘sandwich degrees’ and embedding skill development into programme curriculum (Sewell and Pool, 2010; Helyer and Lee, 2014; O’Leary, 2016) in response to the ‘skills agenda’ (Leitch, 2006). However, due to Government and policy level priorities around widening participation in HE and increasing diversity in student populations within UK HE, challenges are present for those involved in delivering such curriculum. From an academic standpoint, 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 round table discussion is aimed at offering a detailed overview of contemporary challenges in producing ‘employable’ graduates, drawing from the issues highlighted hitherto, with a particular emphasis on enhancing the quality of our 3

skill/development/employability curriculum in line with employer expectations. Primarily, implications of this round table discussion are intended to inform learning and teaching practice at both local institutional level and also policy level. More specifically, to provide insights into trends and debates around delivering employability and skill development curriculum, acting as an opportunity for best practice to be shared across a range of institutions and disciplines. It is hoped that practical implications can be drawn in terms of informing our own employability curriculum moving forward, in order to subsequently improve the job-readiness of our students. Such discussions are particularly relevant to the SRHE 2017 conference theme, in terms of stimulating discussion of good practice and consideration of how we may continue to address employer expectations in a challenging graduate job market.

Discussion points

- What innovative approaches/methods/L&T initiatives are you currently utilising for your own skill development/employability modules?
- What literature/models inform your curriculum?
- How are your initiatives received by students? Are employer/graduate views evaluated?
- In lights of contemporary debates and challenges highlighted in the literature, how may we continue to demonstrate value in our skill development/employability curriculum?

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