

**Serial number** 0319

**Title** What is employability and how should we measure it?

**Submitter** Ms. Arwa Asiri, Mr. Paul Bocij, Andrew Greasley

## **What is employability and how should we measure it?**

### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to define and analyse the concept of employability in the context of higher education institutions in the UK. It is argued that since employability is difficult to define, it continues to be used in a variety of contexts and with different meanings that lack clarity, consistency and accuracy. The work discusses various perceptions about what constitutes employability and how it can be measured. Several existing measures and indicators of employability are considered including employment rate, job type, timing, further learning, graduate employment rate and employability skills. A number of concerns are noted regarding current definitions and measurements. Additionally, it is argued that employability has become a performance indicator within higher education but one that fails to consider fully a range of important socio-economic and other factors. These include gender, age, ethno-cultural origin, prior work experience, subject discipline and type of higher education institution. Clearly, such factors might impact upon the eventual outcomes achieved by students regardless of the opportunities provided to learners in their undergraduate programmes of study. New measurements of employability are advised that take into account some of these social factors.

**Key words:** employability skills, higher education providers (HEPs), social factors, graduates

### **Employability in Higher Education**

Employability is considered a difficult concept to define. A number of attempts have been made to define employability in the context of UK Higher Education, ranging from students "having a job" to them having the wide range of "knowledge, skills and attributes" expected from higher education graduates. An early definition of employability was "the ability of graduates to obtain a job" which used the simple measure of testing whether a graduate had obtained a job within six months of leaving HE, relying on figures from the first destination survey (Dacre, Pool and Sewell, 2007).

A similar definition of employability was presented by Harvey as "the propensity of the individual student to get employment" (2001, p.97). He noted that this definition is normally looked at in relation to one or more of the following five aspects:

- Job type can be interpreted in several ways such as securing any job or obtaining a graduate level job
- Timing relates to securing a job within specific time after graduation

- Attributes on recruitment, meaning the ability of an individual to demonstrate required attributes at the point of recruitment or the individual's ability to develop required attributes quickly
- Further learning, reflecting one view of employability that suggests an undergraduate degree is not enough and that graduates who are ready and willing to develop further are more appreciated
- Employability skills, meaning that an individual possesses basic, core or key skills that a given employer specifies.

Perhaps a clearer and more detailed definition of employability is that developed by Yorke (2006) and the Higher Education Academy's *Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team* (ESECT):

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

(Yorke, 2006, p.8).

As Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne (2016) explain, the importance of this definition is found in the way it looks at employability as a position that an individual occupies. Put simply, the definition suggests that while employable individuals are more likely to be employed, being employed is not the sole indicator or measure of employability.

Yorke's definition also suggests that the benefits of well-developed employability skills are not restricted only to individuals but extend further to society and the economy. Another interesting element of Yorke's definition is that he is careful not to claim that the achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes he mentions are only developed in HEIs. In fact, he states clearly that employability is developed through person's working life.

While Yorke's definition seems fairly comprehensive at first glance, there is still a need for greater clarity in places. As an example, precisely what skills, understandings and personal attributes do graduates need?

### **Current Measures of Employability**

Given that common definitions of employability are relatively vague, it should not be surprising to find that measuring employability outcomes is also extremely difficult. It is easy to find strong criticisms of some of the current methods used to measure graduate employability. As an example, a commonly used measure is the number of graduates able to secure employment within six months of graduation. However, this says nothing of what students have gained from their studies and the extent to which their skills have improved. Measuring employability based on an "obtaining a job" definition also raises the question of what a "graduate level job" really means and involves (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). In addition, there is a consensus that employability is more than obtaining employment and that higher education providers (HEPs) should not focus primarily on helping students to obtain their first job but support them in building their own careers (Cole and Tibby, 2013).

## Social Factors

In terms of socio-economic factors impacting on student employability, Knight (2001), argued that relationship between employability and employment is strongly mediated by social factors such as unequal access to employment opportunities and labour market preference. Similarly, Morley (2001) argued that employability has been considered as a performance indicator in higher education context, even though it disregards interaction between social structure such as, gender, social class and disability with opportunities within labour market. Harvey (2001) identified additional factors including:

- **Age** is considered the area of the most notable discrimination. Recruiters are actively discriminating against older graduates
- **Prior work experience** is highly valuable by employers whether in form of full time job or extracurricular part time work
- **Discipline**. The mix of subjects offered by a university can influence employment rate of its graduates.
- **Type of HEI**. Some institutions have good employability rates because of their reputations.

All of these social factors should be considered when measuring employability of graduates because of how they may affect the relationship between employability and employment.

## Conclusion

This discussion has highlighted some of the difficulties in defining and measuring employability. It has shown that a wide range of issues need to be taken into account and that common definitions and measures are flawed in various ways. Given the number of social factors influencing graduate employment, more robust methods of measuring employability than those based on the employment rate of graduates are advised.

## References

Artess, J., Hooley, T. and Mellors-Bourne, R. (2017). *Employability: A review of the literature 2012 to 2016. A report for the Higher Education Academy.*. [online] Available at: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/employability\\_a\\_review\\_of\\_the\\_literature.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/employability_a_review_of_the_literature.pdf) [Accessed 14 Jun. 2017].

Cole, D. and Tibby, M. (2013). *Defining and developing your approach to employability A framework for higher education institutions and.* York: Higher Education Academy.

Dacre Pool, L. and Sewell, P. (2007). The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability. *Education + Training*, 49(4), pp.277-289.

Harvey, L. (2001). Defining and Measuring Employability. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), pp.97-109.

Knight, P. (2001). Employability and Quality. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), pp.93-95.

Morley, L. (2001). Producing New Workers: Quality, equality and employability in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), pp.131-138.

Yorke, M. 2006. *Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not.* The Higher Education Academy.