

Background

It is a decade since the then Department for Industry, University and Skills proposed that employability should be central to the vision of all universities (DIUS, 2008). In the intervening period, we have seen Higher Education Institutions declare their commitment to employability in the information they provide to the public, suggesting this idea is firmly embedded (HEFCE, 2011; McCowen, 2015). More recently, a key measure within the Teaching Excellence Framework is that of the numbers of students securing highly skilled employment following their studies. The concept of learning gain looks, in part, to determine the increased preparedness of students for the world of work as a result of their studies. Worldwide, the QS rankings use employer reputation as part of their assessment as they argue that “students will continue to perceive a university education as a means by which their can receive valuable preparation for the employment market” (www.topuniversities.com).

Soutar and Turner (2002) argue that job prospects are a key attribute and reason why students choose a university and programme. Outcomes are a key critical factor in university choice (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2015) therefore, homogeneity of message may make it very difficult for students to differentiate between the offerings and to select a university that best suits their needs.

In sum, this suggests graduate employment is a key outcome of higher education with increasing numbers of students seeing their studies as a gateway to accessing a career, and universities themselves operating in a competitive market environment (Soutar and Turner, 2002). Universities have responded by centring their marketing literature with references to enabling success in the workplace. But what is the exact message HEIs construct? Is there any distinction in these messages to enable students to make an informed choice regarding the excellence of an institution and their own employability prospects?

Research Project

This paper directly answers the call from Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) that as students from diverse backgrounds make differing choices, further research needs to be carried out to understand how messages are presented to students. Furthermore, Maringe (2006) calls for universities to review their promotional statements, of which employability messages are a key part.

This research seeks to understand the key messages around employability that students seek out during the “search behaviour” (Maringe, 2006) stage of selecting a university.

The key research question is:

To what extent are HEIs’ employability promises distinctive?

Our objectives are to:

- Appraise the differences and similarities in marketing messages around employability

- To investigate if there are differences in messages in International, UK leading institution and UK lowest ranking institutions
- To explore how universities are presenting the concept of employability in their marketing documentation.
- To identify opportunities where messages may be clarified to facilitate student choice and support better inclusion

Drawing on two sets of University League Tables, the scale for employability (defined as Graduate Prospects and Career after 6 Months), from the last three years was reviewed. The three best and worst performing universities informed by comparing both tables were identified for further analysis. In addition, a similar review was undertaken of the QS World Ranking of International HEIs, looking at the measure of Employer Reputation.

The researchers explored publicly available information provided by each institution to determine the extent to which it may be considered possible to make a meaningful distinction between them, in terms of employability outcomes.

The methodology used was Content Analysis. Content Analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) is a method that is particularly effective when analysing volumes of textual information (Elo et al. 2014). This method allowed the researchers to critically analyse the data and interpret the employability promises made (Elo et al. 2014). Graneheim et al. (2017) note that Content Analysis is a suitable methodology as it allows researchers to assess similarities and variation, which is a key objective of our research. The coding framework was inductive (Saldana, 2016) and enabled the researchers to carry out open coding and create key categories (Elo et al. 2014). This inductive approach enabled us to identify key patterns (Krippendorff, 2013) with the data and to understand the meaning of the messages communicated regarding employability.

Main Findings

The key findings suggest a strong similarity in the employability message across the universities reviewed. The consistency appears at odds when compared with the relative position of HEIs in the league tables (focussing specifically on the employability scale).

Furthermore, there has been a well-documented shift in the language around employability from the pedestrian view of securing employment to a more holistic interpretation of the acquisition and development of attributes, knowledge and skills (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth, 2004; Akhurst 2005). Employability has been defined as ability and attitude to apply and adapt knowledge and skills to current and future opportunities enabling contribution to a range of occupations in public, private or not-for-profit sectors (Jones, 2015). This idea is encapsulated Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi (2013:3) who argue for the need for “citizens ready to take personal responsibility both for themselves and for the world around them: citizens who have, and seize, the opportunity to learn and relearn throughout their lives... who are ready and able to take their knowledge of the best that has been thought and said and done and apply it to the problems of the present and the future”. The findings from this research suggest that universities have not embraced this concept and continue to present employability in the language of employment, where the key measure of success is in getting a job.

Conclusion

Those entering higher education are a diverse and changing population and the HE sector is diverse and dynamic. What this study shows is the lack of distinction in the language and message used by HEIs, and a disinclination to embrace a more nuanced view of employability.

This conference raises the question of diversity and inclusion *to what extent can institutions develop and maintain a distinctive mission?* What this research suggests is universities are not presenting employability in such a way as to enable those seeking to undertake higher education the information to make an informed choice.

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