

## **Q6 Cardiff Wednesday 6 December 17.30 - 18.00**

### ***Exploring 'mismatch' between line manager and graduate perceptions of university-workplace transitions (0624)***

**Emma Mullen**<sup>1</sup> *<sup>1</sup>Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom*

#### 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. 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 (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Cramner, 2006; Prospects, 2015). This paper offers a comparative analysis of employer and graduate perceptions around university-workplace transitions, drawing from empirical findings across two research studies. Key findings emerge around provision of support for new graduates, impact of prior work experience and impact of workplace relationships. The findings also indicate a mismatch in graduate/employer expectations around job design, and also a lack of awareness amongst line managers regarding personal, social and emotional factors involved in graduates' university-workplace transitions.

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

#### Part 2: Paper Outline (1000 words)

According to Collet et al.'s (2015, p. 533) recent claim:

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

The UK GLM has seen dramatic changes during the last few decades as a result of increased graduate supply. This has led to alterations in graduate employment destinations and employer demands of graduates. 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.

This paper draws together findings across two separate research studies to offer a comparative analysis of employer and graduate perceptions of university-workplace transitions. The first study, the author's doctoral research, was completed in 2016 and involved semi-structured interviews with 22 line managers of graduates, exploring their experiences with new graduates as they transition into the workplace. The second, post-doctoral study was completed in 2018, involving longitudinal inquiry into graduates' university-workplace transitions. Seven recent graduates from a UK university were involved in qualitative interviews via three phases of data collection over a one year period. Participants were requested to keep a visual diary of their experiences, thoughts and reflections during their transition from university into employment, populating their diary with photos or other images throughout the study for the purpose of discussion during the interview phases. Findings across both studies were compared and analysed further against extant literature around employer and graduate experience and perceptions of university-workplace transitions, to provide a holistic picture of expectations during this critical period, including mismatch in expectations and resulting implications for HEIs and graduate employers.

In terms of key findings, support provision for graduates is raised by Jackson (2014) as part of her quantitative, survey-based study on Australian business graduates. Jackson offers that graduates' perceptions of their work environment, including the extent to which they believe it is supportive, can influence transference of their skills to the workplace context. Findings of her study highlight that graduates value short- and long-term goal-setting, feedback on performance and access to role models/mentors/ 'buddies' at work, summarising that graduates prefer both supervisory and peer support, although Jackson's work is only based upon graduates' perceptions of these support mechanisms. As the providers of such support, it is also important to identify employer views on the effectiveness of their provisions, and insights into what support is available for new graduate recruits.

Line manager participants in the present study provide their views on factors which they believe can impact upon the actual level of support an HR graduate may require in the workplace. There is a strong perception that prior work experience enables graduates to transition into the workplace easier and with less support, compared with those who have little/no work experience which one participant describes as

starting out with “*a very low baseline*”. In contrast, another participant asserts that regardless of the support provided to graduates at work, they must be prepared to be challenged whilst on scheme. She advises graduates to expect to be faced with tasks which are “*real, and relevant to what the organisation is trying to achieve*”. The contrasts further with findings from visual elicitation interviews with graduates, where they claim they often are not challenged enough in their role.

A different view is also provided by a line manager participant, who believes that senior staff in his organisation have a “*poor view*” of graduates. He feels that graduates may be faced with unrealistic expectations from other staff, who are expecting them to enter the organisation and be “*perfectly rounded professionals*” despite not having prior experience. As a consequence, graduates may struggle and require additional support. Several other examples have been identified which indicate that levels of support required by new graduates can be influenced by their relationships with other staff in the organisation, including their managers. For example, one line manager was recruited into her most recent role to ‘revamp’ her organisation’s graduate scheme. She discusses at length the poor support mechanisms in place for new graduates prior to her joining the organisation, disclosing that she feels the graduates’ previous manager had not taken responsibility for their development. In this sense, these findings support the views of graduates in Dyess and Sherman’s study (2009), as they assert that they would benefit from longer-term support such as debriefing opportunities and closer relationships with ‘leaders’ in the organisation.

Across the various data sets, there is also evidence that there may be a disconnect between the two standpoints. More specifically, it could be argued that employers (in this case, line managers) are perhaps not fully aware of the personal struggles and emotional responses experienced by new graduates in the workplace. Where the literature suggests that graduates may focus on developing their knowledge and skills in the workplace (Jusoh et al., 2011), findings of the present study indicate that line managers expect much more of their graduates during this time. In fact, they expect graduates to be developing their organisational acumen, workplace credibility and innovative thinking, amongst other demands.

Perhaps the most striking finding is the discrepancy between line manager and graduate views during the early stages of graduates’ university-workplace transitions. Graduate participants in the visual elicitation study report notable emotional responses and needs during this period, including vulnerability (Fournier and Payne, 1994), perceived lack of control over work (Jusoh et al., 2011), and even a “*horribly disappointing, stressful and disenchanting time*” (Holton, 1992). It is clear that participants in the present study, line managers of graduates, are unmindful of these feelings, instead claiming that graduates require ‘baby-sitting’ and display poor attitude and naivety. Considering this, it is interesting to note that several participants assert the necessity for graduates to gradually, over time, develop the ability to be objective, emotionally intelligent professionals, yet the extent to which they exercise their own EI in their awareness of their graduates’ support needs may be questionable.

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