

Competing perspectives on graduate employability: possession, position or process?

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Employability has become, and is likely to continue to be, a major issue for a variety of stakeholders in higher education. The article examines three competing perspectives on employability, termed here as the ‘possessive’, ‘positioning’ and ‘processual’ approaches. The first of these, based on notions of skills and attributes, dominates the policy and practice discourse but, it is argued, is deeply flawed in theoretical terms. The second perspective, based on social positioning theory, is shown to be more in accord with the evidence of employment outcomes, but tends, arguably, to lead to a ‘counsel of despair’. The processual perspective is then presented, particularly focusing on the concept of graduate identity. The article argues that this is theoretically robust, is supported by empirical evidence, and provides a sound basis for curriculum and other forms of intervention to enhance graduate employability.

Keywords: graduate employability; identity; university-industry transition; skills

Introduction

Any contemporary discussion of higher education is likely to include reference to notions of the knowledge economy, globalisation, human capital and related matters, particularly in the context of the financial and economic crisis at the end of the first decade of this century (UNESCO 2009). Whilst higher education systems in different countries may differ because of their institutional bases (Teichler 2000), they are common in one key aspect: individual persons enter and progress through higher education as students, and exit as graduates, going on to their post-graduation lives. In addition to their personal, biographical consequences, those post-graduation lives will significantly affect wider society, the economy and the political order, as graduates take on influential roles in those domains. The way in which higher education institutions help prepare students for their post-graduation lives is, then, a legitimate concern for a variety of stakeholders, particularly in relation to policy interventions and to institutional practice. If such concern is to be rationally examined, and the actions that are intended to address such concerns are to be effective, separately and together, it is vital that sound research in this area is conducted. How, then, should we approach such research, policy and curriculum development?

Discourse in this area typically focuses on a major aspect of such post-graduation lives, that of employment. As increasingly greater economic investments by

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governments have been made in higher education, largely on the basis of a human capital investment rationale, an increased focus has been placed on post-graduate employment outcomes. This has been further emphasised where governments have sought to expand higher education whilst limiting or reducing public expenditure, as students themselves, or their families, have been required to bear an increasing share of the costs of higher education, on the pretext of a significant premium in lifetime earnings. Often the costs are paid through an up-front loan, repaid from post-graduation earnings, further emphasising the importance of employment outcomes. Whilst those who would wish to hold to a liberal-humanist view of higher education may lament this increasing focus on the role that higher education can and does have in enhancing post-graduation employment, there seems to be little doubting this as the current reality. Although a crude measure, employment outcome does, arguably, provide an indication of what society values as educational outcomes, at least in economic terms. Moreover, employment outcome is a significant factor in the distribution of economic and social benefits, and of social and economic advancement for individuals and their families. As such, governments and higher education institutions that espouse a concern for greater social equity, as in the UK, will have further concern for the employment outcomes of higher education.

The article is mainly based on developments in higher education within the UK. However, given the increasing global concern (see e.g. World Bank 2000), the issues raised are, arguably, of more general relevance. Those issues implicate a wide range of stakeholders, whose interests and spheres of action and influence may be regarded in terms of different levels. At the *macro* level, national and regional governments and their agencies, inter-governmental agencies, and institutions and agencies interacting with government, will be particularly concerned with the identifiable economic and social benefits of higher education in relation to the funding provided, and with the governance of the higher education *system*. At the *micro* level, students (and their families) will be concerned with the extent to which their 'investment' (including time and effort) in their degree studies does lead on to desirable employment, and employers will be concerned with the extent to which they are able to recruit and employ graduates they deem capable of undertaking the work roles available. Teaching and support staff will, generally, wish to ensure that their students are well-prepared for their post-graduation lives (albeit that some may question the employability agenda). Between the macro and micro levels, we may consider the *meso*, or 'mid-range' level, of persons and agencies who mediate between levels, broadly operating at institutional level, at subject-discipline or support service level across institutions, and so on.

The point of making such a distinction is that we should recognise that the issues of concern are *different at these different levels*. Although some stakeholders may span levels, the matters that they deal with are different, or at least have significantly different aspects. In dealing with the matters of interest to them, they will make use of what they consider technical concepts, and so implicate particular sets of theory. Crucially, we should not assume that a particular *term* has the same meaning when used as a *technical concept* in these different levels of discourse. Nor, arguably, should we assume that a particular term, used a technical concept, has the same meaning when used *within* a particular level of discourse by different stakeholders. The consequence of doing so is that we are likely to commit a category mistake (Ryle 1949), leading to what Wittgenstein (1953) referred to as the 'bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'.

With these reminders for our thinking, we can proceed to explore three main ways of considering the outcomes of higher education in terms of the post-graduation lives of those who undertake it. The first of these, what we may term the *possessive* approach, is one in which graduate skills and attributes are treated as if they are capable of being possessed and used. This approach is dominant, certainly in the UK; but, it will be argued, this is deeply flawed. The second, which we may term the *positional* approach, is mainly found in critical literature, drawing upon critical educational theory, and views higher education as a system that is so structured as to reinforce social positioning and status. The discourse of graduate skills/employability is part of the process of societal reproduction, masked as an objective, technical-rational approach for allocation to social positions. Although this approach does, to a significant extent, appear to be compatible with empirical evidence of employment outcomes, the article will argue that it does not take sufficient account of the interactional nature of the education-employment trajectories by which individuals gain, or fail to gain, desired employment outcomes. Thirdly, the *processual* approach seeks to examine such interaction, particularly between graduates seeking employment that they deem suitable and those who are gatekeepers to such employment. This will be presented as an approach that is both theoretically sound and compatible with empirical evidence. Moreover, it opens up novel lines of research and may thus be regarded as yielding a 'progressive research programme' (Lakatos 1970).

Before moving on to discussion of the three approaches in turn, we need to consider the distinction between employment and employability.

Employment and employability

Over the past two and half decades, there has in the UK been an increasing number of initiatives focussing upon the role that higher education institutions can and/or should play in relation to graduate employment. This development may be seen as having two aspects. First, there have been and continue to be various studies to ascertain what is happening in terms of graduates going into employment: large-scale data collection, amenable to analysis in terms of gender, ethnicity, subject discipline studied, degree classification, salaries earned, institution awarding degree, and so on. The largest study is the annual 'Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education' Survey (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2008), whereby every institution is required by the government to survey all its graduates six months after completion using a common questionnaire. This is clearly a 'snapshot' study, but is conducted annually across the whole sector, with relatively high response rates (generally over 90% nationally). This is now being supplemented, since 2007, by a series of longitudinal surveys conducted three and half years after graduation (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2007). Longitudinal research has also been conducted on a cohort of (initially) 4,500 graduates from the same year (1995), from 38 institutions, at intervals of three to four years (Elias et al. 1999; Purcell and Elias 2004; Purcell and Pitcher 1996). Other, smaller-scale surveys have also been conducted for specific research projects.

The second aspect of the increasing focus upon the role of higher education in relation to employment is now indexed by the notion of *employability*. At a common-sense level, the notion seems to be readily understandable and acceptable. Given that higher education institutions do not themselves control the labour market (and neither does any other agency, in a market-based economy and free society), they cannot guarantee employment outcomes. What they can do, it is argued, is take

steps to promote the *likelihood* that their graduates will gain what may be deemed as appropriate employment. Moreover, governments can legitimately expect higher education institutions to do this. As the-then Chancellor of the Exchequer, later Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, stated in 1999:

Given the substantial public investment in university students, it is particularly important that they are employable upon graduation. (HEFCE 1999, 27).

Over the subsequent period, higher education institutions in the UK have been subject to performance evaluation in terms of a number of measures, including employment outcomes, based on the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey. The performance indicators on graduate employment rates, as calculated and reported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, are related to *benchmark* rates accorded to institutions on a range of differentiating factors.

The emphasis on graduate employability was further enhanced in the policies promoted by the Labour Government in 2009 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2009), and has continued under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government that took over in mid-2010. A circular letter from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in June 2010, to coincide with a speech by David Willetts, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, required all higher education institutions in England to develop and publish ‘employability statements’, ‘intended to be a short summary of what universities and colleges offer to their students to support their employability and their transition into employment and beyond’ (HEFCE 2010, para. 13).

However, although government concern over employment *outcomes* is clearly expressed in terms of measurement, through the annual Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey and the longitudinal surveys referred to above, the focus on *employability* is more diffuse. Whilst an annex to the HEFCE circular letter provides a set of ‘web resources to help develop employability statements’, it does not specify what would constitute *appropriate* approaches to employability. Indeed, paragraph 17 states that higher education institutions ‘that have distinctive or innovative approaches to supporting employability are encouraged to reflect these in their statements’. To echo the previous discussion on the different levels at which various stakeholders are located, and at which they have particular concerns, neither government nor its agencies in the governance of higher education (at the macro-level) define employability in any degree of specificity to direct activities related to its application in practice at the meso- and micro-levels. Rather, the key purpose of such statements is to ‘help prospective students make informed choices’ (HEFCE 2010, para. 2), ‘intended to improve information for students *rather than to change strategies in universities for employability*’ (HEFCE 2010, Annex A, Sector Impact; emphasis added).

Such agnosticism, on the part of government and the HEFCE, on how graduate employability might be understood and how it might be developed points to a need for more rigorous analysis, which is the main purpose of this article. In particular, we should be alert to the varying meanings that ‘employability’ has had in the past, and continues to have in the present. Gazier (1998) identifies a range of differing meanings and uses of the notion, going back over a century. During the 1980s and 1990s, labour market policy in North America and the UK shifted to a supply-side approach, and the term ‘employability’ was adopted within educational policy discourse

(McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Taylor 1998). In such discourse, the notion has become ‘hollowed out’, according to McQuaid and Lindsay, to have a ‘singular focus on the individual and what might be termed their “employability skills”’ (2005, 205). The term ‘employability skills’ was adopted by the consultants PricewaterhouseCoopers in their report to the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (the corporate body brings together the heads of higher education institutions in the UK, now called ‘Universities UK’) (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals/Department for Education and Employment 1998). Over the previous decade, a variety of initiatives had been undertaken concerned with enhancing what would now be called ‘graduate employability’. In most cases, these initiatives adopted the terminology of skills, competencies, capabilities and, more recently, attributes and the combination term, graduate ‘skills and attributes’. This now-dominant approach to graduate employability will be examined in the next section, as the first of the three perspectives under consideration.

Graduate employability as possession

The currently dominant approach is, then, based on the assumption that employability may be defined in terms of certain characteristics of individuals graduating from higher education. One definition commonly cited is that promulgated by the UK’s Higher Education Academy’s Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team. This states that employability is:

a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Yorke 2004, 8)

The work of the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team follows in a line of various initiatives from the late 1980s that have sought to develop curriculum-based approaches for improving or enhancing the employability of graduates. These initiatives have generally created or adopted lists or frameworks of what are termed ‘skills’ and/ or ‘attributes’ that, purportedly, are the components of graduate employability.

We should note that the skills and attributes approach does have a history, one that begins in the mid-1980s, as can be seen by the *absence* of such discourse in earlier publications (see, e.g. Directory of Opportunities for Graduates 1980; Roizen and Jepson 1985). An early, and significant, development on this was the report on *Higher Education and the Needs of Society*, jointly published in 1984 by the National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education and the University Grants Committee, the national agencies concerned with what was then a binary higher education system. That report stated that:

The abilities most valued in industrial, commercial and professional life as well as in public and social administration are the transferable intellectual and social skills. (4)

A follow-up document continued this theme:

The personal or non-academic skills of students, which higher education is expected to develop, include the general communication, problem-solving, teamwork and inter-personal skills required in employment. (National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education 1986, 3)

There soon followed various attempts to elaborate this limited statement, particularly with the impetus of a funded initiative by the UK Department of Employment and in the context of the developing 'competence movement', notably in respect of the reform of the vocational qualifications system and in respect of management development (Bates 1995; Burgoyne 1993). A variety of terms were used, usually phrases which are composed of various combinations of the words 'personal', 'transferable', 'generic', 'core' and/or 'key' with the words 'capabilities', 'abilities', 'skills' and/or 'attributes'. Various institutional and departmental projects produced various listings of the 'skills' which were deemed to be necessary or desirable (Drew 1998). Noting that the potential list of skills can become so long as to be self-defeating, the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report) stated:

we believe that four skills are key to the future success of graduates whatever they intend to do in later life. These four are: communication skills; numeracy; the use of information technology; learning how to learn. (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997, para. 9.18)

This led to increased curriculum change, at institutional level, aimed at 'embedding' such 'skills' etc., using various lists. Table 1 presents examples of such lists. Such institutional-level curriculum development interventions were rarely, if ever, directly based on empirical research. Published research studies tended to be based on surveys of employers, students/graduates and/or teaching staff (e.g. Drew, Nankivell, and Shoolbred 1992; Harvey, Burrows, and Green 1992; Smith, Wolstencroft, and Southern 1989). Harvey, Moon, and Geall (1997) undertook a study of graduates' employment through a series of over 250 semi-structured interviews with strategic and line managers, graduates and non-graduate employees. The Association of Graduate Recruiters produced a report adopting the term 'self-reliance skills', presented as a set of twelve 'career management and effective learning skills', in which the ideas presented 'resulted from discussions' with various informants, including employers, graduates (employed, unemployed and self-employed), key staff in higher education institutions and others (Association of Graduate Recruiters 1995). An 'action research project' at Sheffield University produced a 'model' of 108 'skills' organised into eight categories within four 'zones' (Allen 1991; Allen 1993). More recently, Knight and Yorke (2003) have developed a framework referred to the USEM model, the acronym referring to (subject) understanding, skills, efficacy and meta-cognition. Table 2 presents examples of the lists of skills purportedly identified through such research projects, constituting a small selection of the various lists and frameworks that have existed and/or currently exist.

Problems

The very existence of such a plethora of lists and frameworks of such 'skills and attributes' should, one might think, cause some pause for thought. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals/Department for Education and Employment 1998) previously mentioned, claims that 'there are many lists of skills being produced but considerable similarity between them'. However, whilst there may be similarity at the level of *untechnical* discourse, we should exercise caution in assuming that this extends to the usage of such terms as *technical* concepts (Ryle 1954). Otter (1997), who would probably be considered to be a proponent of the

Table 1. Examples of skills and attributes frameworks: institutional frameworks.

Source	Skills/ attributes
National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report)	communication skills, numeracy, the use of information technology, learning how to learn
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority	communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance, problem solving
Bangor (University of Wales, Bangor)	communicating, analytical thinking, interpersonal skills, managerial skills, maths and information technology, creativity, enquiry and research
Huddersfield & Lincolnshire and Humberside Universities	communication, application of number, IT, problem solving, working with others, improving own performance
Luton University	information retrieval and handling, communication and presentation, planning and problem solving, social development and interaction
University of Northumbria at Newcastle	managing and applying intellect, self management, working with others, effective communication, information technology, use and application of mathematics
Sheffield University	communication, teamwork, problem solving, managing and organising
Teeside University	use of IT, research skills, critical thinking, problem solving, information gathering, decision making, communication/ presentation, public speaking, group skills, negotiating, influencing, persuading, interviewing, consulting, leading discussions, intellectual skills
Wolverhampton University	communicate effectively, organise, gather information, use IT, act independently, work in teams, numeracy

Source: Key Skill Dissemination Project, Nottingham University. <http://www.keyskillsnet.org.uk>; no longer available.

skills approach, states that ‘the use of the same ability in different universities does not mean that they necessarily share common understanding, and it often obscures fundamental differences of principle’. Such a view is consonant with the conclusions reached by Hirsh and Bevan (1988), in their study of ‘managerial skills language’, who state that

if we ask the question ‘is there a shared language for management skills?’, the answer seems to be ‘yes’ at the level of expression but ‘no’ at the level of meaning. (45)

This study is noted by Smith, Wolstencroft, and Southern (1989), but, despite the caveat they issue by citing from Hirsh and Bevan, they nevertheless engage in an analysis of 20 ‘transferable employment skills’ by employment sectors.

The assumption of shared, agreed meaning amongst respondents in such ‘research’ projects is often compounded by the assumption that the meaning of the terms remains stable across research projects. The lists used are often constructed from those used in other projects. For example, in a relatively early study, Smith, Wolstencroft, and

Table 2. Examples of skills/ skills frameworks: frameworks from research studies.

Source	Skills/ skills
Smith, Wolstencroft, and Southern (1989)	<p>‘Personal transferable skills’, to do with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving (e.g. ability to learn quickly, specifying personal objectives, critical thinking . . .) • Communication (e.g. communicating your ideas orally, communicating your ideas in writing, listening to others’ views) • Working in a group (e.g. working in a team, ability to lead, ability to negotiate)
Harvey, Burrows, and Green (1992)	15 ‘qualities’ listed including: effective communication, team work, ability to solve problems, analytic skills, flexibility and adaptability, self skills (confidence etc.), decision making skills, independent judgement
Allen (1991)	8 categories of ‘transferable personal skills’: organising; social and group; communication and linguistic; creative; cognitive; contingency; self-managing; physical
Harvey and Green (1994)	<p>‘generic or core skills’</p> <p>willingness to learn, team work, problem solving and a range of personal attributes including commitment, energy, self-motivation, self-management, reliability, co-operation, flexibility and adaptability, analytic ability, logical argument and ability to summarise key issues</p>
Association of Graduate Recruiters (1995)	Self-reliance skills, or ‘career management skills and effective learning skills’, including: self-awareness, self-promotion, exploring and creating opportunities, action planning, networking . . .
Harvey, Moon, and Geall (1997)	<p>‘Attributes of graduates’:</p> <p>personal attributes (knowledge, intellect, willingness to learn, self-skills) interactive attributes (communication, teamworking, interpersonal skills)</p>
Knight and Yorke (2003)	<p>USEM model of employability</p> <p>U – (Subject) Understanding</p> <p>S – ‘Skills’</p> <p>E – ‘Efficacy beliefs, students’ self-theories and personal qualities’)</p> <p>M – Meta-cognition (‘encompassing self-awareness regarding the student’s learning, and the capacity to reflect on, in and for action’)</p>

Southern (1989, 26) refer to the ‘[n]umerous ways of categorising skills’ and that ‘there is clearly no universally agreed classification’, then state:

However, after examining the literature and the views of employers, it emerged that three main types of general skills were most frequently mentioned: these were to do with problem solving, communication and working in groups.

Later, Yorke (1999) describes a survey of 104 small enterprises on their expectations of the skills and attributes of graduates, using a list ‘based on a much longer list’ devised

by Harvey and Green (1994). Yet Harvey and Green themselves provide no explanation of how they arrived at the items in *their* list, nor why these can and should be regarded as having singular meaning. If, therefore, the meanings of these skills terms cannot be shown to be clearly specified as technical terms, no confidence can be placed in the purported findings of the various projects.

Problems also arise with regard to the methodology adopted in the research projects on such graduate skills and attributes. In most cases these projects have been survey-based: various stakeholders, students/graduates, academic staff and particularly employers are invited to respond to questions that typically present a list of purported skills and/or attributes and ask for an indication of the relative importance of these. Crucially, all such studies investigate the *expressed 'perceptions'* of the respondents: none attempt to devise some form of objective measure of the purported skills and/or attributes, nor even discuss the theoretical and practical prospect of so doing. Normally, only the most modest of descriptive statistical methods are applied, with no attempt to apply inferential statistical techniques. Such surveys cannot legitimately claim to identify the skills or attributes that actually *are* possessed and/or used by graduates, nor those required by employers, even if the meaning of the terms used could be unequivocally established.

We should also consider the practical difficulties that arise for all parties concerned, in the existence of such a plethora of lists and frameworks. Students are, supposedly, required to acquire the desired skills during their studies, and be assessed on these; employers will then, it is asserted, be able to make recruitment and selection decisions on the basis of the information made transparent through the system created: e.g. personal portfolios. How can any employer make sense of the multitude of lists of skills, in order to make a decision between candidates who come from different institutions? How is any graduate to know whether the skills they 'possess' are the 'right' ones?

Perhaps most problematic for adherents to graduates' skills and attributes, as requirements for employability, is that it appears to fail to explain employment outcomes. In their study of 'employability skills initiatives' at institutional level, Mason, Williams, and Cranmer conclude that

there is no evidence that the emphasis given by university departments to the teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills has a significant independent effect on either of the labour market outcomes considered here [i.e. whether or not graduates had gained employment within six months of graduation, and had secured 'graduate level jobs']. (2006, 24)

In particular, the approach provides no way of explaining differences in employment outcomes between graduates from particular demographic groups. Graduates from minority ethnic groups have been shown to have poorer employment outcomes (Connor et al. 2005; Performance Innovation Unit 2006), as have those from working class and other disadvantaged groups (Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Pollard et al. 2004; Purcell et al. 1999). There are no reasonable grounds for assuming that such graduates systematically differ from others in their 'possession' of such purported skills. It might, of course, be suggested that employment disadvantage arises from discriminatory practices by employers, explicit or tacit or structural; however, unless this explanation can be related to the purported skills, this merely increases the number of explanatory elements with no theoretical gain. Such problems provide clear grounds for considering alternative ways to attempt to understand the matters under consideration.

Graduate employability and social positioning

Starting from the findings that demonstrate differences in employment outcomes between different groups, discussed above, we may consider an alternative view: that of societal positioning. A number of writers in the 1960s and 1970s presented critical analyses of the technocratic, functionalist perspective on education, in which higher levels of knowledge and skills were required by the technological developments taking place, leading to ever-increasing opportunities for social mobility. Such critical writers argued, on the contrary, that education serves to reinforce existing patterns of the way that advantage and disadvantage are distributed within society, to reinforce social position and societal stratification (e.g. Berg 1970; Collins 1971, 1979; Dore 1976; Halsey 1977; Jackson and Marsden 1962; Turner 1960). Halsey concluded that 'education is increasingly the mediator of the transmission of status between generations' (1977, 184).

However, such analyses sound out-dated in the context of massive expansion of higher education, given that those who enter higher education and successfully exit as graduates are those who, on the face of it, have 'succeeded' in the educational contest. Recent critics have deployed the concept of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) to analyse the role of higher education in social opportunity, including employment. Bourdieu argues that a dominant class in society monopolises cultural capital, a form of wealth arising from control over knowledge, ideas, symbols etc. For those born into the dominant class, the family is a primary mechanism by which they acquire such cultural capital. Moreover, the education system privileges the mode of language (e.g. accent, vocabulary, mode of expression), set of values (e.g. on what constitutes 'success') and practices (e.g. dietary habits) of the dominant class. The 'rules of the game' are already set so that students from privileged backgrounds are able to gain advantage in the system.

Drawing upon Bourdieu, Brown, and Scase (1994) argue that, despite the expansion of higher education in the UK, access to the 'fast track' graduate employment opportunities are still mainly taken by those from privileged backgrounds. These people have, according to Bourdieu's sociological theory, high levels of 'cultural capital', which has already played a key role in achieving 'personal capital' (e.g. credentials). Moreover, the background circumstances of such candidates (family, educational, social etc.) constitute *habitus*, the background system of shared understandings, perceptions, orientations, taste, etc. that give rise to the practices of the social grouping to which they belong, and which they 'internalise' within their own patterns of behaviour (speech, posture, thinking, etc.). Brown and Scase argue that employers make their selection decisions not only on 'capability' but also on 'acceptability'. They present a set of quotations from interviews with graduate recruiters, stating that what these:

reveal is that the whole question of acceptability is intimately connected to the recent emphasis on personal and transferable skills within higher education ... [highlighting] the increased significance attached to social as well as academic qualifications. (133)

Such employers operated on the basis of a hierarchy of universities, such that anyone from a university lower down that hierarchy, or not even 'on the list', would most likely be screened out of the selection process at a very early stage.

In a later study, Brown and Hesketh (2004) draw on this previous work, using positional conflict theory to analyse empirical data from research conducted over two years, studying the graduate recruitment processes and practices amongst 15 'leading edge'

private and public sector organisations. This included interviews with 60 graduate applicants, about half of whom were re-interviewed over the period. Their study goes beyond the simplistic survey-based methodology typical of 'research' under the skills and attributes approach, and provides interesting material on the comments made by recruiters in the process of discussing candidates (particularly at assessment centres), and of candidates on their job-seeking practices. Whilst certainly drawing upon the work of Bourdieu, they say that the concepts of cultural capital and *habitus* are 'blunt instruments' for explaining graduate recruitment, for the simple reason that, at the level studied, candidates have similar backgrounds (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 37–38). They, therefore, examine two 'ideal type' approaches adopted by candidates, those of the *purist* and of the *player*. Those who adopt the purist approach think and act as if the graduate recruitment process was mainly meritocratic, and that the aim was to gain the job that they best suited to and that best suited them. Graduates who adopted a player approach regarded the process as one of competition for position, requiring them to engage in tactics that provided them with a competitive edge over other candidates.

The differentials in employment outcomes noted certainly seem to support an analysis that the notion of graduate skills relates strongly to issues of social positioning and societal reproduction. However, despite emphasising the role of human agency, the ability of human beings to act upon social circumstances and thereby change them, the background understanding does tend to suggest that the approach is one that may be called a 'counsel of despair'. If the elite positions go to those who already have the cultural capital that their elite background has provided, then anyone from a more disadvantaged background can and should have no reasonable hope of making progress. To some extent this may be viewed as a side-effect of the focus on 'elite' graduate recruitment by Brown and Hesketh, itself a relatively small segment of post-graduation employment under a mass system of higher education (Elias and Purcell 2004).

Such pessimism does not, however, take account of the interactional process by which individual persons, real human beings rather than members of a social category, make their way into, through and out of higher education, and onto the social arenas of their post-graduation lives. The differentiation of 'players' and 'purists' in the analysis by Brown and Hesketh does indicate that individuals can make a difference to their likelihood of gaining desired employment by *what they do*, the actions they take. Such action is not taken once-for-ever, nor in solipsistic isolation, but over time and in interaction with others; it is *processual*. We shall, therefore, now turn to the third approach, taking such a processual view.

Graduate employability as processual

Under mass higher education, it is surely not surprising that a significant number of graduates do not move straightforwardly into jobs that are recognisably 'graduate jobs' (Elias and Purcell 2004; Nove, Snape, and Chetwynd 1997). The skills and attributes approach tends to take graduation as an end state of higher education, the point at which the student should have acquired and should now possess the requisites for gaining suitable employment. Little or no account is taken of the reality that higher education is merely one stage, albeit an important one, within the biographical trajectories of students and graduates. Such a trajectory may be influenced, even strongly, by social background; it may also be significantly constrained by various factors outside of the control or influence of the individual. However, individuals are not mere pawns in a game, just 'victims' of a system stacked in favour of the few and against the many;

their futures are affected by the decisions and actions they take. Post-graduation trajectories are likely then to be considerably diverse and warrant empirical investigation. At the same time, in order to discern patterns within such diversity, we need to deploy appropriate conceptual and theoretical framings.

Relatively few studies have examined the employment experiences and trajectories of individuals in their early years after graduation. Such studies that have been conducted typically adopt qualitative methodologies, particularly semi-structured interviews, and so are mainly small-scale. Holmes, Green, and Egan (1998) undertook a study of graduates going into small businesses, ‘using the notion of “graduate identity” as the key concept for examining the social processes by which graduates achieve a satisfactory and settled position in employment’ (1). In a project for the University of Bedfordshire, Coughlin (2008) carried out a series of interviews with nine White and Asian female graduates. Holden and Hamblett (2007) present a selection of five case studies from their study of graduates, based on four interviews carried out with each graduate over a period of a year. Although different in details, these studies provide insights into the variegated nature of the experiences of graduates in seeking employment and either ‘succeeding’ or ‘failing’ to obtain employment, and their understanding of their situations as they unfold.

One way of conceptualising the process by which someone moves in, through and on from higher education into their post-graduation employment and career is to view it as an *identity project* (Harré 1983), or, as Goffman (1959) would put it, a *moral career*. Put simply, to be successful an individual must *become* a graduate, not just in the formal sense of being awarded a degree but in socially and biographically significant terms, whereby they act in ways that lead *others* to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed (i.e. in the kind of job generally considered appropriate to someone who has been highly educated).

The concept of identity has taken a central place in much of recent social science theorising and research (see e.g. Ashmore and Jussim 1997; Jenkins 1996; Layder 2004; Pullen, Beech, and Sims 2007; Pullen and Linstead 2005; Wetherell and Mohanty 2010). The term ‘identity’ is here being used as a ‘sensitizing concept’ (Strauss 1997) to enable us to address the issues with which we are concerned. Identity should be taken non-essentially, i.e. not as some existent entity. Rather, it is relational, the emergent outcome of situated social processes of identification, or, to put it better, *identifying*, by the individual themselves and by significant others in the social setting. Identity is thus socially constructed and negotiated, is always subject to possible contestation; it is, we might say, fragile. Jenkins refers to ‘the internal-external dialectic of identification’ (1996, 20) to express this interactional process. The term ‘emergent identity’ may be used to distinguish the concern here from notions either of identity as social ascription or of identity as self-concept. It is not either-or but both-and. Such conceptualising obviously follows in the legacy of Mead’s analysis, framed in terms of ‘I’ and ‘Me’ (Mead 1962), and of Cooley’s concept of ‘the looking glass self’ (1902).

Emergent identity may thus be viewed as arising from, or (as we might say) ‘in’, the interaction between the individual and significant others in respect of *the kind of person* the individual is to be taken to be in, and in relation to, the particular situation. The individual may seek to lay claim to an identity, and this claim may or may not match the ascriptions by others, i.e. the claim may be affirmed or disaffirmed. The ascriptions by others may be accepted by the individual, or may be resisted. Of course, as the process is one of negotiation, there may be *intermediate* positions in which the individual and/or the significant others may be tentative, ambivalent or equivocal in their judgements.

The model shown in Figure 1 attempts to show these possible emergent identity positions in graphical form. The model provides, amongst other things, a method for ‘mapping’ individuals’ trajectories through such positions, or *modalities of emergent identity*, as they undergo and move on from extended education and/or training, such as in the case of graduates entering employment.

From such an analysis, graduate employability can be considered as the always-temporary relationship that arises between an individual graduate and the field of employment opportunities, as the graduate engages with those who are ‘gatekeepers’ to those opportunities, particularly those who make selection decisions. In presenting themselves to a prospective employer, as a prospective employee, the individual is presenting their claim on being a graduate ‘worthy’ of such employment. The selectors may affirm such a claim, so the graduate achieves the position or modality of emergent identity shown as that in ‘zone 4’, labelled ‘agreed identity’. On the other hand, they may disaffirm the claim, reject the application, so the individual enters the modality shown as ‘zone 2’, ‘failed identity’; if employed at all, this would be a graduate in a non-graduate occupation, a ‘GRINGO’ (Blenkinsopp and Scurry 2007). In many cases, graduates may be given temporary appointment or internship, which may be represented by ‘zone X’, ‘under-determined identity’.

Within such an approach, the terminology of skills and attributes may be seen as elements in the discursive repertoire available to the various parties concerned, when warranting identity claims and ascriptions (Holmes 1995, 2000). The most effective form of warranting is in relation to practices that are appropriate to the identity claimed. Skills may thus be seen as generalised ways of talking about practices. This is not to say that talk about skills is only talk: whether or not others accept a graduate’s identity claim warranted in such language is not guaranteed, and may fail. One way that it may fail is when the graduate is subjected to extended discussion, as in an interview, and where they do not display continued ‘fluency’ in the presentation of their claim-warranting. Later, if and when a graduate is employed in a particular post, they are likely to have to warrant their continuing claim on the graduate identity in relation to their job performance, perhaps explicitly and more often tacitly. Whatever the circumstance in which such identity claim-warranting takes place, it is most unlikely that there will be a specific and limited set of terms, such as those presented in the various lists

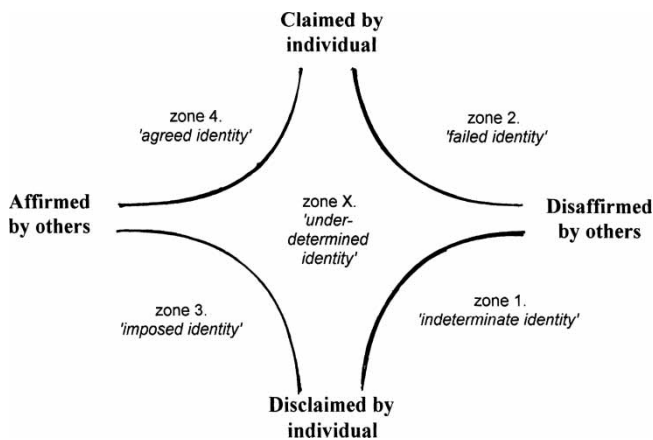


Figure 1. Claim-affirmation model of modalities of emergent identity.

and frameworks developed in the possessive-instrumentalist approach. Rather, it is the very plethora of terms, the richness of the vocabulary, that enables a graduate to maintain their warranting, adjusting their linguistic repertoire to the (untechnical) usage by interlocutors (Holmes 1995).

This approach, the 'graduate identity approach', and the model, provide for consideration of movement through the various modalities. In particular, it suggests the actions that might be taken by a graduate who is in the position noted as in 'zone 2': i.e. not employed in a graduate occupation. The employability-as-possession, the skills and attributes approach would just say 'develop the appropriate skills and attributes'. A more realistic, and more practical mode of action is indicated by the graduate identity approach: develop ways of presenting your claim on the identity (of being a graduate worthy of employment) in such a way that it stands a good chance of being affirmed by those who make the selection decision on job applications you make. As noted above, selectors warrant their decisions based on related conventions of warrant, typically expressed in the language of skills and attributes, albeit in a different mode from that assumed by proponents of the skills and attributes approach.

Conclusion

The discussion in this article has sought to frame current debates on the conceptualisation and theorisation of graduate employability in terms of three approaches. An underlying assumption has been that the issues of educational outcomes broadly covered by notions of graduate employability are worthy of considered and extended reasoning. Moreover, such reasoning should not start from premature assumptions about how we should understand the key notions. Consideration of three different modes of examining the issues of concern may then be conducted in an even-handed manner. This differs from the currently dominant approach to such examination, whereby the vocabulary of skills and attributes is allowed to close down prematurely the analysis that is necessary to ensure clear thinking and sound, appropriate empirical investigation. That dominant approach is often presented within a discourse that asserts its alignment with government interest and concern; however, as argued above, this does not reflect the agnosticism expressed in government pronouncements on *how* employability may best be achieved.

By opening up, rather than closing down, the analysis, we can see that the employability-as-possession approach to graduate employability has major flaws. One alternative, that based on notions of social *positioning*, provides little clear and positive guidance on how we might intervene at the level of the curriculum. The third, the *processual* approach, particularly in terms of identity project, it has been argued, avoids the problems with the other two approaches. It can claim to be conceptually and theoretically robust, to be empirically supported and to provide a basis for curriculum intervention. An open-minded approach would take the approach as a serious and useful contribution to what is undoubtedly an issue of major concern.

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