

Perspectives on: Employability

Is it time to move the employability debate on?

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Introduction

The employability of our graduates has been a concern across the sector, and a subject of much debate, for a number of years. The increasing focus in more recent years can be seen as a management response to the growth in importance of the 'Destination of Leavers of Higher Education' (DLHE) process and its impact on league table rankings. However there is also a genuine concern amongst colleagues to do the best for their students and help them make a successful transition into the graduate labour market. The Chartered Association of Business Schools recently published a report "[21st Century Leaders: building practice into the curriculum to boost employability](#)" which shows that, if anything, employability issues are growing in prominence within businesses and business schools. The report also reveals that significant resources are being dedicated by business schools into supporting a range of initiatives, projects and research into boosting graduate employability.

The main purpose of this thought piece is to provoke a debate, and hopefully a sharing of practice, about employability amongst the Chartered ABS membership. The thought piece is not meant as a comprehensive review of the literature but highlights the main themes which have underpinned the employability debate over the last 15 to 20 years and suggests that a degree of consensus now exists within each of the themes. The central argument though is that the continuing work, and debate around these themes, has become sterile and repetitive. The thought piece therefore considers how work around employability can be moved on to a more productive stage. A number of areas are also suggested as being in urgent need of consideration by researchers, practitioners and institutional policy makers.

Employability themes and the emergent consensus

Over the last 15-20 years the employability debate has generated numerous papers, funded research projects, conferences and policy statements from a wide range of sources, both within the HE sector or closely associated stakeholders such as employer organisations and Government sponsored reports. Leaving aside the macro level debate around the relationship between employability and economic growth, three inter-connected themes have dominated the debate:

- The outlining of lists of employability 'skills' from work undertaken with, or by, employers and professional bodies
- Research around the factors influencing employability
- The development of a number of employability frameworks

The work around employability 'skills', or 'attributes' to use the more recent terminology, has a long pedigree. The approach taken has generally focused on employers' perceptions of what they expect

the skills, or attributes, required by graduates are for them to be successful in the graduate labour market. This approach has produced numerous lists of ‘employability skills’ sometimes referred to as ‘soft skills’. However within business schools there seems to be a growing consensus around the list of skills in the CBI report (2009) “Future fit: Preparing graduates for the world of work” as the basis for employability skills:

- Team working
- Business and customer awareness
- Problem solving
- Communication and literacy
- Application of numeracy
- Application of information technology (although this one is increasingly being replaced by ‘digital literacy’)

This CBI list of employability skills, or the similar list in the ‘Skills’ section of the 2007 QAA subject benchmarks, probably forms the basis for the majority of the employability skills input into undergraduate Business School courses. Interestingly the skills section of the [recently revised subject benchmarks](#) does move away from this common list, particularly by the inclusion of an additional ‘generic skills and attributes’ section which emphasise personal development rather than just business related ‘soft skills’.

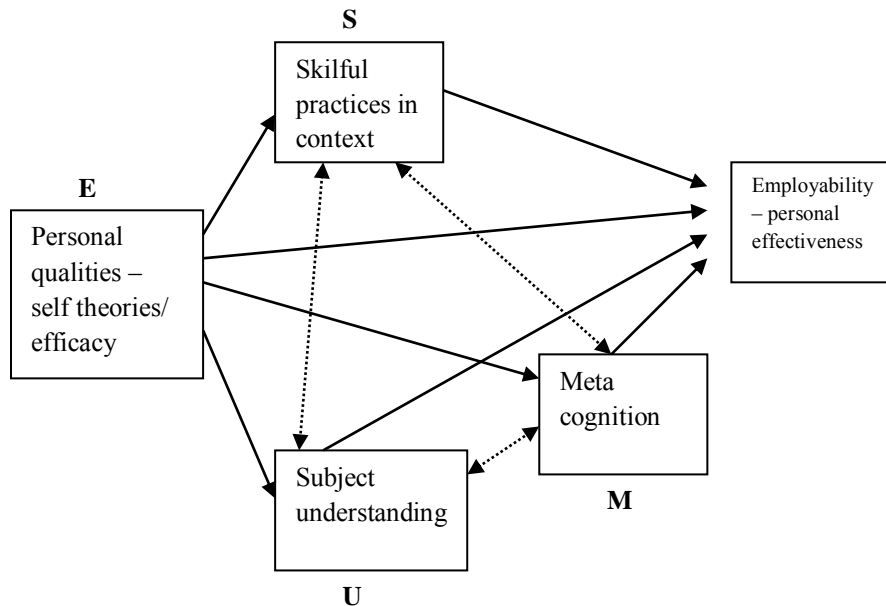
Another key theme within the employability debate has been around the factors which impact on a student’s employability. This has been explored in many ways from large quantitative studies (see for example Blasko et al, 2002) down to more student focused qualitative work (see for example Moreau and Leathwood, 2006 or Smetherham, 2006). From this work on factors impacting on employability there is an increasing consensus that:

1. A student’s degree class remains the single most important factor in making a successful transition into a graduate job
2. Students who have undertaken sandwich work placements have a greater chance of success in the graduate labour market. Whether the more recent move within business schools to incorporate shorter placements, live projects and work-based simulations has a similar impact is not yet clear
3. There are a range of social and biographical factors which may impact on a student’s initial success in the graduate labour market

The impact of the employability enhancement programmes increasingly found within and around a student’s course is much less clear – an issue returned to later in this piece.

Whilst much of the employability work has focused on skills and employability factors there have been some attempts at constructing employability frameworks. Amongst these various employability frameworks the most enduring one has proved to be the USEM (Understanding, Skills, Efficacy, Meta-Cognition) framework originally developed by the ESECT (Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team) funded through the LTSN initiative in the early 2000s (Yorke and Knight, 2006 and 2007).

The USEM framework of Employability



Source – Yorke, 2007

The four USEM elements shown in the figure in effect breakdown into two broad areas: Knowledge and Self. The two knowledge elements (U and S) reflect the distinction between subject knowledge (U) i.e. ‘knowing that’ and practice base knowledge (S) i.e. ‘knowing how’. The self elements draw on the work of the psychologists Dweck (1999) and Bandura (1997). The element of the framework ‘E’ refers to a student’s self-efficacy. Efficacy refers to the belief that you can make an impact on situations and events whereas metacognition refers to the awareness of what you know, can do and how you can learn more. As a basis for a holistic approach to employability the USEM framework has proved to be a useful underpinning framework.

The aim of the rest of this thought piece is to suggest that the time has come to move the employability debate on. Much of the work around employability has come from within business schools, however it is becoming repetitive. A quick search on Google Scholar, for example, of references to ‘graduate employability skills’ since 2011 produces an incredible 16,800 results! There does seem to be a broad evidence-based consensus around what employers regard as the key employability skills plus the main impact factors on a student’s employability. However there are areas relating to employability, both conceptually and from a practice perspective, which need to be investigated.

Time to move the debate on

Much of the practice-based work around employability is based on case studies, or individual examples of practice, with the focus being very much on trying to find ‘what works’. However what is missing from this largely instrumental approach is both a consideration of what ‘employability’ really means and whether the focus on ‘skills and attributes’ acquisition is actually correct. Again the purpose in this section is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of these areas but to, hopefully, show some pointers as to how the employability debate might be usefully developed.

- **What do we actually mean by ‘employability’?**

Many institutional definitions of employability are based around, or reflect similar aspirations to, the Mantz Yorke definition which came out of an ECSET project into employability in the early 2000s referred to earlier.

“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 benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2004)

In fact when examined closely, the Yorke definition encapsulates one of the central problems that is confusing the employability debate – the conflation of two different types or conceptions of ‘employability’. Acceptance of the Yorke statement as **the** definition of employability fails to recognise that ‘likely to gain employment’ and ‘be successful in their chosen occupations’ are actually different perspectives on employability. The ‘likely to gain employment’ is an output driven view, the student on graduation makes a successful transition into the graduate labour market, with ‘successful’ meaning the DLHE defined ‘positive destination’. However, the ‘be successful in their chosen career’ represents a more open ended view with employability seen as an on-going developmental process. What is also important to recognise is that the ‘skills, understandings and personal attributes’ required for the outcome view of employability are actually different than those required for the developmental view. To enhance your chances of being ‘likely to gain employment’ a student needs to understand how to play the graduate labour market entry game – constructing focused CVs, labour market search skills, understanding recruitment practices in different sectors, coping with assessment centres, interview skills, etc. The ‘be successful in their chosen career’ developmental view of employability though suggests a different set of skills and attributes, ones which are more aligned with the CBI employability skills list. As discussed earlier it is this second set of skills and attributes, those aimed at a developmental view of employability, which has been one of the dominant areas of the employability debate over the last 15 – 20 years.

As stated at the start of this thought piece, one of the drivers behind the increasing focus on employability is the DLHE stats and the importance these play as an institutional KPI and subsequent impact on league table positions. Quite obviously the focus on DLHE places the emphasis on the outcome view of employability but there is a problem implicit in the discussion above. Many institutions focus on employability skills within their curriculum as a means of trying to boost their DLHE figures. However, this is addressing the ‘skills, understandings and attributes’ associated with the developmental view of employability not the outcome view. There is nothing inherently wrong with enhancing a student’s chances to “be successful in their chosen career” but it needs to be recognised that increasing resources in developing CBI-type employability skills in students is unlikely to impact on their chances of being “likely to gain employment”. There is some research evidence to support this view (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009; Cashian, 2013). To improve the DLHE statistics the implication for institutions is that the focus needs to shift to the ‘skills, knowledge and attributes’ associated with the outcome view of employability – enhancing the student’s ability to play the graduate labour market entry game.

- **Do we need to shift the focus?**

Len Holmes in a recent paper (Holmes, 2013) makes the distinction between three types of graduate employability: 'possessional', 'positional' and 'processual'. The type of graduate employability discussed so far sits in the 'possessional' category where graduate employability is based around the acquisition of skills and attributes "... as if they are capable of being possessed and used" (Holmes, 2013, p. 540). As indicated earlier the 'possessional' approach to employability has been one of the dominant themes in the employability debate with a lot of effort being spent on compiling lists of employability skills and attributes, by researchers, professional bodies and Government agencies.

Looked at from Holmes' categorisation both the outcome and developmental views identified in the Yorke definition revolve around the need for students to gain possession of sets of skills and attributes. This is a very passive view of employability – students have things done to them to become employable. It may also lie behind the commonest complaint from staff, both academic and professional services, relating to the difficulty in persuading students to engage in employability related modules and activities. Increasingly attention is shifting to a view that to develop a better understanding of employability, of whichever type, should be based on a more student centric view. Recent work on employability has taken the view that "employability may be seen as a social process as much as a labour market 'outcome' and this process inevitably entails the active positioning of graduates within the wider labour market context within which that are located..." (Tomlinson, 2010, p.80-81 see also Boden and Nedeva, 2010 and Cashian, 2013). This idea of 'active positioning' underpins Holmes' 'positional' approaches to employability and the idea that "... individuals can make a difference to the likelihood of gaining desired employment by *what they do*, the actions they take" (Holmes, 2013, p.548).

From this active student centric focus, the key to enhancing a student's employability is not through them just passively acquiring employability skills and attributes from the CBI list, but by students developing their own distinct graduate identity (Holmes, 2001 and 2013, Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011) argue that course teams should not focus just on employability skills but on providing students with 'graduate experiences'. The graduate experiences, complemented by employability skills, enable students to develop a personal capability set which forms the basis of their unique graduate identity. Four categories of experiences are identified:

1. Values – personal ethical values and social awareness
2. Intellect – covering capabilities such as the ability to think critically, analyse and communicate information, and challenge and bring new ideas
3. Performance – the application of skills and intellect in the workplace
4. Engagement – the willingness to meet personal, employment and social challenges head on (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.580)

Holmes' (2013) final category is the 'processual' approach to employability. This reflects the developmental view of employability in that "... higher education is merely one stage, albeit an important one, within the biographical trajectories of students and graduates" (p. 548) – the development of a graduate identity is merely one stage in an on-going process.

The graduate identity perspective is one approach for shifting the focus of the employability debate away from 'skills and attributes' and the search for 'what works' solutions. More generally there is a need to develop more robust theoretical frameworks to help us explore employability as a concept from which practice related enhancements will emerge.

Areas and issues currently largely 'missing' from the employability debate in business schools

Currently much of the work on employability tends to focus strongly around undergraduate students and big business. Whilst both of these areas are obviously important there are a number of issues of (increasing) importance which are rarely discussed let alone subjected to empirical enquiry.

- **What about postgraduate employability?**

There has been a considerable growth in full-time, predominantly international, postgraduate students, particularly within business schools, over the last 10 years. As a result employability support for international students is an area which UK business schools are being driven to pay more attention to, both by competition between ourselves and with our international counterparts. As evidenced by the [Home Secretary's assertions in January](#) we can expect little support from government in protecting and growing the income generated for the national economy by international students studying in UK business schools. Schools in Europe and further afield are making significant investment in employability as it is increasingly seen as a central part of their offering. Moreover, we should not be complacent about there being one way traffic from the East to the West; some commentators are noting that European and US students are being attracted to Asian business schools as their esteem with and [relevance to global employers grow](#).

However, despite this, virtually all of the public debate around employability continues to reflect a distinctly undergraduate mind-set failing to recognise that the needs and aspirations of postgraduate students are different. There are three obvious and important respects in which postgraduate students differ from undergraduates:

1. They are usually on 1 year courses
2. They are predominately non-UK students
3. A significant number will already have work experience

The above key differences mean that postgraduate employability, of either the outcome or developmental type, needs to be approached from a different perspective than for undergraduate. There are some basic questions to be asked. Are the 'skills and attributes' expected by business the same for postgraduate students as for undergraduate students? What are the factors which enhance a postgraduate student's chances of success in gaining an appropriate job on graduation? How do postgraduate students develop their 'post-graduate identity'?

- **Surfacing the social justice concerns around employability**

The marketisation of higher education exerts a strong push to the mainstream, personal capital models of employability (Tholen, 2013), particularly through the DLHE which has become both an important performance measure in its own right and as an element within the widely used league tables. As noted earlier though, an institutional focus on DLHE can lead to a narrow outcome view of employability as a one-off measure taken 6 months after graduation. However we may rail against DLHE with its methodological flaws and the overly simplistic use of it as an indicator of quality, we can be under no

illusions about its widespread use by a range of stakeholders: potential students, their parents, employers (self-fulfilling prophecies!) and regulatory bodies. So how do we surface concerns of social justice in the employability conversation in more meaningful ways than are assumed by the dominant discourse of one-way upward social mobility? Moreover, how do business schools ensure that those students who may require additional support in developing their employability continue to be welcomed into our communities and can access the resource that they need?

- **What are the links between employability and enterprise?**

The employability debate, particularly in relation to the ‘skills and attributes’ theme, has tended to treat ‘business’ as a single entity without distinguishing between different sectors or different types of organisations. In fact many of the lists of graduate ‘skills and attributes’ tend to come from work undertaken with big businesses. However, evidence shows that many of our graduates enter their first jobs in SMEs. This raises a number of questions. In terms of the developmental type of employability, are the soft skills and attributes required the same for SMEs? Are we preparing students for making a successful transition into graduate jobs at SMEs?

Moving the employability debate on to SMEs actually opens a whole range of related issues and questions. For example, another key area discussed in the report on “21st Century Leaders: building practice into the curriculum to boost employability”, is the growth in the amount of learning and teaching taking place in the work setting, often SMEs. This blurring of the boundaries between business schools and business organisations is directly linked to employability. As discussed earlier, experiential work based learning is one of the few clear factors which help a student’s employability, both in a developmental and labour market transition sense. Similar comments could also be made in relation to the approximately 60% of students who fund full-time study through part-time work (Richardson, Gbadamosi and Evans, 2009) – does this have any impact on a student’s future employability as they seek to enter the graduate jobs market?

However most of the current work relates to the traditional year-long sandwich placements and not the shorter more focused module-based experiences which the report points to. Do these have the same impact? How should we be preparing students, and employers, to maximise the benefits? Do we need to develop a ‘business as partners’ approach (similar to the ‘students as partners’ approach) to facilitate more interaction with SMEs and develop a better mutual understanding of our needs?

- **What does employability mean for part-time students already in work?**

Although part-time student numbers have been declining, particularly at undergraduate level, they still constitute a significant group within many business schools. As with postgraduate students, little work has been done on understanding the specific needs and aspirations of part time students who are already in work. The assumption is made that employability for these students relates to career development and progression (or in some cases change) but do the ‘skills’ content of our courses reflect this?

Concluding comments

All of the issues identified in the previous section should be of concern to business schools, some are probably already being considered. As stated in the opening section of this thought piece, the aim is to help trigger a wider debate on employability but also to encourage the sharing of work already taking place within the business school community and, hopefully, move the debate on.

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