

## Social mobility and professional development: A study of two pathways in higher education

Alice Diver, Liverpool John Moores University and Helena Knapton, Edge Hill University

### Abstract

The main purpose of higher education is to deliver social mobility via acquired qualifications and a variety of 'employability skills'. Government priorities bear this out, reflecting its policy of linking degree success to the UK's future economic growth (Wolf, 2002) and highlighting how increased social mobility offers public and personal benefits. Moreover, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals require HEIs to consider ethical impacts upon the wider community, in terms of alleviating poverty and promoting social inclusion and equality<sup>1</sup>. In England, this is most clearly evidenced by the new Teaching Excellence Framework, with Student Outcomes used to help measure quality and 'value' of a University education. 'Graduate employment' is a key metric, so that the ability to generate 'work-ready' (Dhakal, et al. 2019), professionally 'employable students' and 'ideal' future employees (Allen et al, 2013) has become an over-arching concern within the sector. However, there is no generic blueprint that can deliver employability: 'whole person models of experiential learning' instead frame employability as 'integrative, reflective and transitional' (Eden, 2014: 266). As Newcombe and Moutafi (2009) argued, many employers now seek more than traditional 'CV'-based displays of academic ability, seeking instead some evidence of professional 'belongingness' (Yorke, 2016) or 'work attachment' (Knight and Yorke 2003:5). Despite shifts towards the integration of employability within undergraduate study, the defining, embedding and *delivering* of evidenced employability continues to be difficult.

However, there are programmes that consistently deliver high levels of employability and opportunities for upwards social mobility, i.e. those that lead directly into professions such as teaching and law. Within such courses, it is argued, the key task for academics is to ensure that graduates face 'the correct level of challenge' (Eraut, 2007: 418) to prepare them for their future career. This should be achieved by having them complete assessments that spark high levels of motivation and maintain (or engender) both resilience (Pryce-Jones, 2014) and academic buoyancy (Martin, 2008). The literature shows that there is little research on employability development across different professional programmes, with the aim of informing the delivery of employability within traditional graduate programmes. Working within a University in the North West of England, the authors are investigating key employability skills and attributes across the legal and education professions as identified by significant stakeholders (employers): we ask how these are addressed through appropriate challenges as incorporated into assignments, tasks and experiences within the associated degree programmes. The findings highlight key areas of both commonality and difference. The project has the potential to impact upon the academic sector in identifying how and when skills and attributes can be realistically integrated into (and developed within) degree programmes. It will also provide evidence to the private sector of what exactly might be achieved, and what employers of recent graduates might need to address at the start of their employment.

### Introduction

In 2015 at Edge Hill University three senior lecturers were awarded the post of Senior Teaching and Learning Fellow for their individual Faculty and therein began a journey that has led them to delve more deeply into and to question the ways in which employability is developed for their students. The three lecturers are involved in the delivery of professional programmes – Law, Mental Health and Education – which all have high employability rates which supported social mobility within the region and believe their programmes to be well respected in their respective sectors. The driver for the initial project was the intention to identify how and when appropriate employability skills and attributes can be realistically integrated (and developed within) degree programmes. In addition, it was hoped that it may provide evidence to the private sector of what can be realistically achieved within a degree programme, and what employers may need to address at the start of their employment.

The initial investigations focused on a comparison of the approaches that each programme utilised to support the aspirations of its students and seemed to align favourably with the research as we understood it. However, further and more rigorous investigation with the employers of our graduates has led the researchers to question some of our pre-conceptions and understandings of how employability is developed within a Higher Education context, even on professional programmes. Although the investigation is on-going with further rounds of research and analysis to be undertaken, this article provides an insight into our initial findings.

### Literature Review

Within current political rhetoric, at least, there is the drive to redefine the main purpose of higher education to be a vehicle to deliver social mobility via the acquisition of qualifications and a variety of 'employability skills' that we are told that employers want. The idea is not a new one and rests upon the wider notion of enabling students to be socially aware 'critical thinkers' (Nussbaum, 1997). As UK Government policy the purpose of a university degree to deliver social mobility has returned to prominence but had been evident earlier, such as in the linking of degree success to the UK's future economic growth (Wolf, 2002; Goddard, 2009) and highlighting the impact on both public and personal benefits. However, this argument for the potential benefits of social mobility can not only mask a prejudice against the working classes but also seek to pass the blame onto the poor neighbourhoods for society's ills (McKenzie, 2015).

The UK Government has an unconscious ally in the United Nations whereby there is a wider imperative in their Sustainable Development Goals which exhorts Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to consider the ethical impacts upon the wider community, particularly in terms of alleviating poverty and promoting social inclusion and equality. In particular, Garpur and Rautdesai (2014) argue that the capabilities of students should be developed so as 'to be future generators of sustainable value for business and society at

<sup>1</sup> See further Goal 1 (ending poverty), 5 (achieving gender equality), and 16 (promoting peaceful, inclusive societies and accountable institutions) <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/> (date accessed 07.02.18)

large and to work for an inclusive and sustainable global economy...’ especially in those situations where:

...an unfair and unkind universe...divergent responses epitomize the North/South divide\* on development, income disparities, technology transfer, health, the environment, and related problems.’

(King, 2001:485) \* whether global or national.

If this is the case then ‘there remains an acute need for a much ‘sharper focus upon the notion of the greater, common good’ ... to engender a socially conscious ‘new breed of faculty.’ (Muff et al, 2013). And therein lies the question – what is education for? The wider promotion of economic and social development? (Van der Horst and McDonald, 2007) or the ‘Advancement of knowledge through research and teaching?’ (Brennan, Durazzi and Sene, 2013)

In England, the governmental view is evidenced by the new Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework which uses destination data and the earnings of graduates as a metric to measure the quality and value of a University education. Whilst this is approach to valuing a University education is hotly contested, graduate employability will remain as a key metric and so the ability to generate work ready professionally ‘employable students’ and ‘ideal’ future employees (Allen et al, 2013) has become an over-arching concern within the sector. This is against a backdrop of ‘...the demands of increasing marketization and consumerism...’ (Thornton, 2015) within the sector and the apparently competing and contradictory need to ‘Promote motivation and resilience...’ (Pryce-Jones, 2014).

Despite these competing tensions regarding the purpose of Higher Education there have been proven to be clear links between education, employment and employability so that the ‘upskilling’ associated with the achievement of a university degree cannot be easily ignored (Cable and Willets, 2012).

Whilst this may be the case, there is no generic blueprint that can deliver employability: ‘whole person models of experiential learning’ instead frame employability as ‘integrative, reflective and transitional’ (Eden, 2014:266). As Newcombe and Moutafi (2009) argued, many employers seek more than traditional ‘CV-based displays of academic ability, seeking instead some evidence of professional ‘belongingness’ (Yorke, 2016) or ‘work attachment’ (Knight and Yorke 2003:5). Despite shifts towards the integration of employability within undergraduate study, the defining, embedding and delivering of evidenced employability continues to be difficult. As is apparent in the delivery structures embodied in professional courses (such as in Education and Health) and semi-professional degrees such as Law, there is a recognition that ‘...classroom bound delivery limits the integration of theory and practice; a key element of developing work-readiness skills.’ (Ferns and Moore 2012, p. 208). As a result, such programmes ensure that there is significant engagement with not only employers but the environment that they will go into. In Health and Education, this is undertaken through extensive placement opportunities, working alongside professionals and with increasing levels of

responsibility whilst on placement. For Law students, opportunities to work with solicitors and barristers to apply their skills with actual clients and to participate in extensive role plays makes for both a richer experience for the students but also to acquire those work ready skills that not only reflect the ‘right level of challenge’ as undergraduates (Eraut, 2007: 418) but also ‘the ability to perform the roles and tasks required by one’s job to the expected standard..’ (Eraut and du Boulay, 2001) and thereby embed preparedness for professional practice (Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall, 2009). For Law this would be to reflect the Solicitors Regulatory Standards, and for Education those who want to teach are expected to evidence their competency against the Teachers’ Standards (2013).

The achievement of students against the standards set by the relevant professional bodies are taken to be indicative of other attributes that employers are said to be looking for, such as some evidence of professionalism ...perhaps a visible sense of ‘belongingness’ (Yorke, 2016) or ‘work attachment’ (Knight and Yorke 2003:5) and allows for some useful degree of ongoing reflection upon why a particular career or learning pathway was chosen? (Jones and Higson, 2012)

### Methodology

The initial stages of the investigation between programmes had allowed us to compare the processes which we each employed in the delivery of our programmes and to identify how we understood they aligned with the literature. The next stage was to identify from the employers and potential employers of our students what they expected from newly qualified graduates coming into the profession and what they understood of our students’ experiences that would prepare them for their entry into the profession. Consequently, an exploratory qualitative methodology was used to integrate both positivism and pragmatism, whereby participants have agency in their responses – an aspect that became significant as the research has developed.

Convenience sampling was used in order to benefit from the opportunities that would arise from working within the departments that we were situated and allowed the researchers to make use of the professional networks that arose from their own professional identities. Whilst this could incur bias, it provided access to participants with the necessary expertise and experience in the recruitment of new graduates on a regular basis to provide informed responses to our questions. To provide comparability across the professions it was agreed that each researcher would undertake 10 interviews representing their own profession. This gave an overall sample size of 30.

The intention was to undertake semi-structured interviews so that the participants would be able to reflect upon and interpret their experiences to shed light on how and when students developed appropriate employability skills and attributes. The initial questions were informed by our initial analysis of our programmes vis-à-vis the research as indicated below:

e.g. What do you look for in a new-to-the-profession employee?

Thinking it may include ...

- \* ability to be self-directed in their development (reflective practice);
- \* to be part of a team, to 'fit' the environment (belongingness)
- \* to know what it means to be successful within the environment (profession ready)?
- \* professional competency, e.g. Teachers' Standards, BSB, Law Society, SRA

### Initial results and analysis

The initial results and analysis have been limited because one of the researchers was unable to undertake the interviews when originally arranged. However, the data that has been obtained has revealed both expected and unexpected differences between the different professions. With regard to education, 9 interviews were conducted with senior leaders responsible for employing newly qualified teachers and from a range of school settings. The interviews were transcribed and provided a rich data set to work with. In contrast, arranging interviews with those in the legal profession proved problematic. At least 15 private practice solicitors were contacted, of which 7 responded. The major difficulty was that with 'interviews' had to be conducted by email, resulting in a reduced data set and without allowing the researcher to delve more deeply into their answers. As a consequence, discussion and analysis developed at two different levels: one as an initial thematic analysis of the data, and the other to understand the different approaches to engaging in the research itself.

The thematic analysis of the data introduced the researchers into approaches and attitudes that were significant in their contrasts. There was one area of commonality, however, which was in that sense of belonging, (Yorke, 2016, Knight and Yorke 2003). Within education, this concept would be expressed in terms of being able to 'fit in with the school' or to 'match the characters of the school'. In the legal profession, this would be expressed more obliquely, such as 'completing the LPC' (Legal Practice Course) or 'by reading up on the business objectives and business plan prior to employment'.

Other identifiable themes of 'beliefs and values', journeying, i.e. developing as a practitioner and the employers role were all significantly different. For those in education, the requirement for new-to-the-profession staff to have a strong ethical underpinning to their role was extremely strong and was regularly mentioned within the interviews – hence the necessity of identifying this to be a theme. In the legal profession, ethics and values were mentioned extremely rarely.

The other two themes are closely related in that in education, it was clear that the schools both recognised that new colleagues did not come as 'the finished product' but that they were at the start of the journey and that the school had a

significant role to play in their development. For a number of the participants this was a direct reflection on their own experiences - both positive and negative – and their desire for new colleagues to be able to thrive within a very demanding context. For the legal participants, the responses indicated that they expected new colleagues to 'acquire these new skills/ attributes after 3 months in the job' with a significant reliance on completing 'the LPC and had gained some experience of dealing with matters in the workplace' indicating that there was a heavy reliance on new colleagues to be self-directed and self-motivated.

The contrasts that have been identified in the thematic analysis are also evident in the levels of engagement by the representatives of the different professions. The law department and the education faculty at Edge Hill University believe that they have very good relationships with the employers that they work with which is evidenced in the range of experiences and placements that students are engaged in. The responses not only challenged this perception, but also the possibility of working more closely with some professions to develop those 'work ready' and 'professionally employable' students (Allen et al, 2013) that universities are expected to be able to develop.

### Where next

The next steps in the research are to obtain a full data set across all three professions, which is in hand, and to be able to conduct a more detailed thematic analysis of the three data sets, using the Miles, Hubermann and Saldänä (2014) approach to qualitative data analysis. This will allow the researchers to critically review earlier findings as well as identify, code and analyse the entire data set.

### Tentative conclusions

As has been argued by Wilson (2012), Goddard (2009) and others, universities have a key role in developing the employees of the future. However, it is not a simple transaction between the university and the student but requires engagement and understanding between future employers and universities as well (Wilson, 2012). This research has indicated that this is possible, but not inevitable with work needing to be undertaken on both sides if it has any chance of delivery the social mobility that Government and the UN seem to desire.

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