

Graduate outcomes and a spatial approach to decent work

Research Policy Leadership graduate outcomes Employability



Graduate outcomes are now a staple ingredient to measuring the performance of higher education in many countries globally ([see the latest CABS analysis here](#)). It can be entrenched in ongoing teaching quality metrics and rankings, at undergraduate, postgraduate, and postgraduate research levels, and it is imaginable in the future that this will also be introduced for executive education offerings ([FT, 2021](#)).

Such metrics and rankings have at least some influence on future recruitment and engagement with employers, which means graduate employment are intimately connected to financial sustainability of business schools and universities. In the UK at least, political moves will accentuate this relationship ([THES, 2021](#)).

Against this backdrop, we already know that **'not all jobs are created equal'**. In the UK, for example, only certain jobs are deemed 'graduate', and crude proxies such as salary are used to construct rankings despite controversial criticisms ([Brant, 2018](#)). This is increasingly problematic for graduates in some popular business and management sub disciplines given the employment terms and availability of typical graduate entry jobs. This is not a phenomenon just in business and management, but is particularly prevalent in the social sciences, humanities and arts, despite a political commitment to these subjects ([SHAPE, 2021](#)). Notwithstanding these, there are signs that there are moves towards more holistic consideration of graduate outcomes such as meaningfulness, connectedness to future plans, and life satisfaction ([Graduate Outcomes, 2021](#)).

Moves towards a more holistic assessment of graduate jobs reflects wider global trends towards the rise of precarious work, that is, work with relatively low pay and unstable arrangements. Research in the US 20 years ago, before the rise of the 'gig economy', found that 1 in 7 jobs offered relatively low pay and no access to health insurance or pension benefits. Counteracting this trend, 'Decent Work', as a particular category of job, has become an increasingly shared aspiration with the rise of the Sustainable Development Goals. According to Decent Work's original proponents, the [International Labour Organization](#) defined it as summing up:

“the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.”

Psychologists have defined Decent Work as a working context where there is:

- (a) physically and interpersonally safe working conditions (e.g., absent of physical, mental, or emotional abuse),
- (b) hours that allow for free time and adequate rest,
- (c) organizational values that complement family and social values,
- (d) adequate compensation, and
- (e) access to adequate health care. ([Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016, p. 130](#)).

There is evidence that Decent Work is spatially distributed (Herod, 2001) and helps to explain the high variability observed in employer assessments of value and employment outcomes across regions ([Tomlinson, 2021](#)). Research has identified that even within a single industrial sector there is “considerable variation in how members of different disciplinary and occupational subgroups value and conceptualize important skills... strongly tied to geography and organizational culture, among other contextual factors” ([Benbow & Hora, 2018, p. 483](#)). These findings highlight the geographic differences in marginalising factors such as ethnicity, gender disparities in education, and the gender-segregation of industries ([Sutton, Bosky, & Muller, 2016](#)).

However, university and business school employability practices may inadvertently undermine graduate outcomes towards Decent Work. Graduate employability is often understood as the **direct matching** of labour supply and demand, or the pragmatic logic of upskilling each graduate to meet the needs of employers. This often results in institution- or business school-wide lists of transferable skills and desirable attributes, which are often criticised for being verbose or obvious ([Tomlinson, 2021](#)). The 'sheep dipping' approach could, in essence, be flooding labour markets with similar, undifferentiated graduates. A **signalling** perspective, alternatively, focuses on graduates' signals of future performance through hiring processes, and practically informs CV-development and interview practice ([Jackson and Wilton, 2017](#)). Unlike the matching practices, signalling practices help explain why graduates might under-sell their skills compared to others and lead to under-employment, but is narrowly focused on formal hiring processes.

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Distinct from direct matching and signalling, an **institutionalist** perspective argues that graduates and employers are entrenched in the sociocultural systems of occupations, sub-occupations, organisations, and importantly, geographies ([Hora, 2020](#)). Here, signals are not absolute or universally interpreted, but are symbolic and understood in the context of the team, organisation, occupation, and in the geographic location in which they all collide. This perspective explains how and why discrimination can occur at all informal and formal stages of the recruitment process from networking through to retention. This works through stereotypes of minority groups including gender, ethnicity, age, and other perceived characteristics such as disabilities and LGBTQIA+ identification. From an institutionalist perspective, then, it is more likely that there will be diversity in expectations of graduates than harmony, thereby rendering unified lists or aspirations of transferable skills less predictive of graduate outcomes. This is the power of targeted recruitment events for specific industries or locations.

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The good news is that our emerging research has found that empowering students and graduates to change their circumstances can impact Decent Work outcomes. This means Decent Work can be a dynamic process open to disruption beyond work volition and adaptability ([Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016](#)). By empowerment we mean power within (e.g. confidence and self-esteem), power to (e.g. ability to effectively deliver change), power with (e.g. collaboration skills), and power over (e.g. abilities to direct and influence others), in the specific realm of changing and improving their employment circumstances.

For business schools, a spatial Decent Work approach might mean:

- **Mapping business school / university market positioning which targets Decent Work outcomes to provide strategic pathways to Decent Work.** Having an indicative mapping which links programmes (or educational activities such as executive education) to potential workplaces helps articulate expectations (akin to a [‘theory of change’](#)). A promising approach would probably group clusters by geography, industry, occupation, rather than individual organisations (unless they are a large employer). Taking a responsible approach, it is likely that this will need to balance the wider idealised positioning of the business school (and its wider university setting) such as regional business leadership in certain industries or sectors, with those who develop their aspirations and motivations in different ways or who need space and time through other opportunities (see below). Together, this provides a clearer steer as to what targeted employability empowerment might be delivered.
- **Considering the strategic value of vocational orientation in the business school’s educational portfolio.** In our emerging research in Vietnam, which has highly differentiated spatial characteristics, vocational training and education was the most commonly associated with aspects of empowerment and Decent Work out of a variety of governmental initiatives to support employability. The business school, in line with its positioning, may consider which sub disciplines or groups of students might benefit from development. For example, minority ethnic students and graduates can face some of the most challenging employability obstacles globally (Cieslik, Barford, & Vira, 2021). In modern business schools, there are a range of vocational arrangements including work-placement, work-based learning, and service learning opportunities ([Wall, 2017](#)).
- **Connecting to local, regional, national, and international expectations and priorities through strategic relationships.** Once an indicative mapping highlights where energies need to be targeted, it is important to have a strategic approach to become close to the expectations of industries and organisations in certain locations. At

the same time, as business schools (and their wider university hosts) become closer to organisations, there is an increasing demand on those organisations for time and space, e.g. to host placements. A promising approach would generate and collate intelligence about current and future needs (eventually artificial intelligence could build strategic decision-making support here). This sort of intelligence underpins relationships with strategically mapped geographies, industries, and organisations.

- **Connecting to targeted workplaces through teaching approaches.** Business schools have developed a wide range of pedagogical approaches which link to workplaces, from the earlier case study approaches, to invited guest lectures from industry specialists and site visits, and simulations, which can all build knowledge and awareness of specific contexts. In terms of Decent Work, however, such approaches may have minimal developmental impact on employability empowerment because of their relative capacity to express and develop decision making discretion and the associated gains in confidence and self-efficacy in ways which reflect local sociocultural patterns. Pedagogies which have more potential in this regard include work-based, experiential, or service learning approaches, especially when located in sites where there is capacity for decision-making discretion and its development ([Wall, 2017](#)). Recent evidence also suggests that arts-based methods which create safe spaces and allow the testing and exploration of embodied action to deal with complex issues at the local level may well have similar effects ([Wall, Österlind, & Fries, 2019](#)). It seems promising, therefore, to create close connections to the mapped and targeted workplaces through teaching, in ways which enable contextually relevant empowerment.
- **Embracing Decent Work throughout all interactions.** Some of the strategic ideas outlined above have already been rehearsed in business school research and knowledge exchange, and to some extent teaching (e.g. Boyer's engaged scholarship from over 25 years go – Boyer (1996) and Van de Ven (2007)). Though to create a climate where Decent Work becomes normative and aspirational, it needs to permeate all that a business school does so that it provides the sociocultural (and cognitive) reference point guiding implicit and explicit knowledge of what (decent) work is and can be (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, 2015). For example, it might mean that work based learning, placement, or volunteering opportunities are vetted even more stringently to ensure there are likely to provide a positive developmental experience ([Wall, Tran, & Soejatminah, 2017](#)). It might also mean that they are perhaps mapped against the different aspects of empowerment potential (power within, power with, power to, power over). It might also demand that business schools themselves set more stringent expectations about how they treat their own staff especially in times of difficulty. These are both challenging examples, especially for business schools who work within wider university structures who may dictate employability support, but thinking spatially offers a complementary perspective to guide tailored and targeted provision.

This means that graduate outcomes are not just indicators of business school or university performance, but rather, they are an indicator of the spatialised connections between business schools and organisations which are embodied in the vision for business and management ecosystem ([BAM/CABS, 2021](#)). In the context of spatialised Decent Work, they are unambiguously driven by inclusivity and responsibility.

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