

Employability of Higher Education Graduates

Definition

Employability is a key policy issue in relation to a range of groups within the labour market, including graduates. However, whilst defining employability is reasonably straightforward, there is dynamic debate over how it is framed conceptually and so what provides employability.

Employability can be defined as a worker's ability to gain, sustain and progress in employment (Green et al., 2013). For graduates, it includes both the subject-related and the transferable skills and knowledge acquired during their higher education together with job-search skills and factoring in labour market conditions. In the context of a mass higher education system the employability of graduates has become policy-relevant for three reasons. First to service the high-skill labour requirements of a putative knowledge economy (Wilton, 2011). Second to increase graduates' chances to find qualification-appropriate employment, usually cast in the language of a 'skills match'. Third, as the costs of higher education study is shifted onto individuals, ensuring an appropriate (financial) return on this personal investment (Hogarth and Gambin, 2016).

Importantly, employability should not be confused with employment rates. Employment rates do not reveal anything about graduates' abilities; they purely refer to graduates' employment status at a particular period in time. Employability, however, is more than gained employment; it also encompasses graduates' abilities to remain and progress in employment.

The historical development of employability

It is important to note that conceptualisation of employability remains an 'on-going debate that cannot be viewed as a finite entity but must move and develop' (Helyer and Lee, 2014). As such the concept has evolved and continues to evolve as empirical research provides better understanding (Nickson et al., 2012).

The historical roots of the concept are traced by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005). At the start of the 20th century, a dichotomous conceptualisation of employability involved two polar and contrasting opposites: the employable and the unemployable. The two poles approach was then slowly replaced by a gradient of employability approach, in which the work abilities of socially, physically or mentally disadvantaged people were taken into account. In the 1960s, the concept of 'manpower policy employability' emerged, which expanded the existing employability framework by considering workers' abilities vis-à-vis the work requirements of employment. These concepts viewed employability from a supply-side orientation, focusing on the abilities of disadvantaged people and their deficiencies relative to what was required to be 'employable'.

From the 1970s, the concept of employability was enlarged by demand side considerations measured, for example, in terms of hours worked, payment and sustainability of employment. The concept of transferable skills was further included to highlight the need for individuals to potentially move between jobs, occupations and/or employers, and thus maintain their employability. In the 1980s, 'interactive employability' emerged as a concept and which acknowledges individual employability as relative to that of other individuals (Brown and Hesketh (2004). It too acknowledges that individual employability is influenced by economic conditions, employment regulations and labour market institutions. It is these two concepts – transferable skills and 'interactive employability' – that have come to dominate recent

frameworks (Wilton, 2011), such that supply, demand and other factors are now recognised as having importance in both understanding and delivering employability (Nickson et al., 2012).

Selected aspects of employability

In line with its historical development, there are two frameworks that attempt to describe the concept of employability: a narrower and wider framework (Green et al., 2013). The narrow framework focuses mainly on the supply-side dimension while the wider framework also includes the demand-side dimension and the range of contextual factors. It is no surprise that skills, knowledge and attitudes play an important role in graduates' employability; however, other aspects such as graduates' perceived employability; their career adaptability; and their mobility capital are relevant determinants for their employability. In addition to these aspects, the regional and occupational labour demands together with enabling factors indicates graduates' employability. The employability of graduates is sometimes cast in terms of 'graduateness', indicating that acquisition of a degree signals the personal possession of particular higher education derived characteristics, skills and abilities but it remains vaguely defined, as Tholen et al. (2016) note. Despite this vagueness, the following list loosely follows the wider framework and identifies a set of aspects as underpinning graduate employability (Green et al. 2013).

Skills, knowledge and attitudes

Arguably the most important aspects of employability for graduates are the skills and knowledge that they accrue during their higher education. These skills and knowledge can be further divided into: basic skills and knowledge; subject-specific skills and knowledge; and transferable skills and knowledge. Attitudes refer to graduates' behaviour to work and in the workplace. While no generally accepted definition and classification exist of the different types of skills, knowledge and attitudes, and their distinction can be blurry, the following outlines are useful:

Basic skills and knowledge are skills that individuals require in order to function in the adult world such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and mathematics. Other skills that are currently aligned as basic skills and knowledge include: ICT skills; having foreign languages; social, organisational and communication skills; appreciation of technological culture; and entrepreneurship (CEDEFOP, 2009). Notwithstanding the OECD's (2016) findings of basic numeracy and literacy weaknesses in UK graduates, basic skills and knowledge are seen as a given amongst graduates and thus regarded as necessary but not sufficient for gaining and sustaining employment in graduate jobs (Green et al., 2013).

Subject-specific skills and knowledge are explicit to the higher education course studied by graduates (Helyer and Lee, 2014). Examples for subject-specific skills and knowledge are medical knowledge for nurses or midwives, mathematical knowledge for graduates from natural science courses, or knowledge from a specific historical period for graduates from history courses. Higher education courses, in this context, can be divided according to their vocationality. Some courses prepare graduates for specific job roles and students learn the specific skills they will need to work in these jobs, e.g. medical, engineering or teaching courses while in other less vocational courses students acquire a higher degree of transferable skills and knowledge.

Transferable skills and knowledge, also sometimes called 'employability skills', can be acquired outside of the classroom, for example through extra-curricular activities, internships,

work placements supplementary to course studied, work parallel to study or while studying or working in a different country (Green et al. 2013; Tholen et al. 2016). Green et al. include the following skills associated with transferable skills and knowledge: core knowledge; people and social skills; specific job-preparation skills; citizenship values; academic skills (communicating, thinking, life-long learning); personal management (positive attitudes and behaviour, responsibility, adaptability); teamwork skills; literacy (defined as the ability to understand and use printed information in a range of daily activities) and applied numeracy; analytic and problem-solving skills; and creativity.

Perceived employability

Perceived or subjective employability refers to a person's view of their own ability to gain, sustain and progress in employment. It is concerned with whether individuals' knowledge of their own strengths has implications for graduates' employability. In this respect, self-efficacy as well as other factors such as mental health, awareness of opportunities and self-presentation skills might be related to graduates' employability.

Career Adaptability

Adaptability can be defined as an individuals' capability to make successful transitions in a changing labour market and/or organisation of work (Brown et al., 2012). The concept of career adaptability follows graduates' attitudes to adjusting their skills and knowledge in the context of changing workplaces and labour markets. Focused on high-skilled employees, research has suggested four propositions about career adaptability: challenging work provides opportunities to develop 'adapt-abilities'; updating substantive learning is necessary for career adaptability; individuals learn to adapt through interactions at work; and self-directedness and self-reflexiveness (in harnessing learning and development opportunities) (Brown et al., 2012, Bimrose et al., 2011).

Mobility capital

Mobility capital (Murphy-Lejeune, 2004) refers to the skills and knowledge students acquire while studying or working in a different country. Life in a different cultural environment together with interaction with other students from a different cultural background and use of a foreign language in everyday life can enhance this capital (Behle and Atfield, 2013). This capital can enhance graduates' employability and can be very particularly for jobs with international employers and in international labour markets, and.

Labour demand

Labour demand whether local, regional and national as well as international, is a crucial factor in determining an individual's gaining, sustaining and progressing in employment but which too easily gets overlooked in discussion of graduate employability (cf. UKCES 2009; Tholen 2016). However, it is clear that graduates' chances of entering qualification-appropriate employment are dependent on labour market demand and the state of the economic cycle (Behle, in print). For graduates, a capacity to adapt to this demand is important.

Enabling factors

Finally, individual employability is dependent on enabling factors such as the support graduates' received by the Universities Careers and Employability Services. In addition to placements, internships and work experiences set in a work place, Careers and Employability

Services offer other enabling events such as careers advice and guidance, employers' presentations, jobs and careers fairs, as well as counselling and advice in the job application process.

Responsibility for developing employability

In general, the individual graduate is responsible for gaining his or her employability. However responsibility for developing this employability is now also being explicitly pushed onto the higher education sector and individual universities. The importance of work experience acquired during higher education studies for gaining qualification-appropriate jobs has been highlighted in both research (e.g. Helyer and Lee, 2014; Behle, in print) and policy (e.g. Wakeham Review, 2016; Shadbolt Review, 2016). In addition to developing their employability skills, internships, work experience or work placements generated by university and/or course can help students understand how their skills and knowledge relate to and map onto the jobs market as well as help them establish connections with potential future employers. Indeed, many students and graduates complain that they did not get enough opportunities in this respect and some employers of some entry-level positions need to train graduates to make them work-ready (Behle, in print).

Measuring employability

In a higher education context, increasingly employability is seen as a measurable outcome (see for example the current White Paper *Higher Education. Success as a knowledge economy* (BIS, 2016). Assessing the employability of graduates is also necessary as individual graduates want to know about their prospects on the labour market but also, in a growing pool of graduate applicants, employers want a sifting mechanism to help them select suitable employees (Tholen et al., 2015). The new TEF means that HEIs are required to measure students' learning gain not only in subject-related knowledge and skills but also their overall gain in employability.

While the influence of labour market demand on individuals' employability is undoubtedly enormous, measurements of employability often disregard the economic cycle and concentrate on graduates' individual skills and knowledge. As noted above, the ultimate responsibility for graduates' employability currently rests with the individual. Consequently, means to measure employability tends to focus on the individual and the importance of other factors is recognised by dealing with these as contextual elements.

In this regard, individuals' destination occupation and salary are often used as proxies for employability. This method is problematic as it does not refer to the level of skills and knowledge to gain, sustain and progress in employment and only provides a 'snapshot' of current employment. The other main measures of graduate employability are: measuring employability skills; qualifications; and perceived employability and career self-efficacy. All these measures, however, can be criticised. First, when measuring employability skills it is unclear exactly which skills can and should be measured; second, it is also unclear which instruments and tools exist for any measurement, and if the existing tools measure the desired employability skills; and, third, there are questions about the efficacy of the available data. The sole use of qualifications as an indicator for employability is problematic as it mainly certifies subject-related knowledge and skills and not necessary employability skills per se. Measures of perceived employability and career self-efficacy rely on individuals' assessments of themselves and can thus also be problematic.

Key Take Home Points

Conceptualisation of employability is an on-going debate which is both dynamic and evolving. As base, employability describes a worker's ability to gain, sustain and progress in employment.

In terms of its measurement, it is important not to confuse the concept of employability with employment rates; the latter simply indicates graduates' employment status at a particular period in time and can be a blunt and limited measure. Skills, knowledge and attitudes play an important role in graduates' employability; however, other aspects such as graduates' perceived employability; their career adaptability; and their mobility capital are relevant determinants for their employability. Other important aspects of graduates employability are the regional and occupational labour demands together with enabling factors provided for by the Universities Careers and Employability Services.

The individual graduate is generally responsible for gaining his or her employability, however, the higher education sector as a whole and the individual University are currently becoming more responsible for developing students' employability. One way to develop students employability is by offering work experiences or internships; by facilitating mobility experiences; by helping them to identify their strengths; and by helping them understand their chosen careers.

There is no generally accepted mean to measure employability of graduates, however, regularly graduates' employability skills, their qualifications, or their perceived employability and career self-efficacy is measured.

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