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MARKETING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY *The Language Of Employability In Higher Education*

EMPLOYABILITY NARRATIVES

In this chapter, we report on a study that focussed on a rarely acknowledged but important feature of massification: namely, the increasing pressure exerted on higher education institutions (HEIs) to market their courses to prospective students.

Students invest considerable time and money in their higher education studies. Although most students select their program and major on the basis of interests and strengths, they expect their efforts to be rewarded with graduate-level paid work. Students' expectations of this work are informed by their academic and personal self-efficacy, subjective norms, behavioural intentions, and their engagement with multiple communities of practice. Students are also influenced by institutional messaging, including that contained on university websites.

Together with rapid changes in the nature of work, the increase in graduate numbers (e.g., almost 300% in Australia since 1990 and in the UK almost double since 1992) means that graduates are far more likely to transition into non-traditional forms of work and to take longer to become established (Challice, 2018; ONS, 2016). Despite this, little is known about how the process of employability development is foregrounded in the marketing materials of institutions or indeed, whether the employability narratives delivered to current and aspiring students are realised within the student experience. This dimension of future-capable graduates has also yet to be considered in relation to the rhetoric around access and participation.

In the chapter, we investigate how employability discourse is communicated to external audiences, including prospective students, via institutional websites. We ask how this discourse compares with the narratives of the people tasked with employability development within those institutions. We build on Smith, Bell, Bennett and McAlpine's 2018 *Employability in a Global Context* report by mining the data from qualitative interviews undertaken with academic and student support staff from eight institutions in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. We describe how the interviewees conceptualise employability within their institutions and in what ways they believe employability to impact the marketing narratives at their institutions. Using Holmes' conceptions of employability as possessional, positional or processual, we then revisit Bennett, Knight, Kuchel, Divan, Horn, van Reyk and Burke da Silva's (2017) study of how employability is portrayed on university websites to consider the presentation of employability on the websites of the same eight institutions. Using these two sources, we expose tensions in the representation of employability to internal and external audiences.

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EMPLOYABILITY: PROCESS OR OUTCOME?

Graduate employability is a key focus of HEIs in many advanced Western economies, driven largely by government-level policy approaches that align higher education with economic prosperity. The rationale for this alignment is that by delivering higher-level knowledge and skills, graduates can manage the highly-skilled roles with which economies are driven forward. Following this line of thought, as more individuals participate in the higher education system, economic value is further enhanced. Thus, policies have focussed on expanding higher education into a massified system.

At the same time, the language of employability used by the government and by employers has tended to emphasise current skill deficits and the future skill requirements of industry, conflating employability with employment outcomes. Lindsay (2014, p. 147) suggests that in this environment, students as learners are caught up in discourses of skill, employability, attributes and performance: a “new educational ‘body’ on which markets, institutions and regulatory machinery of higher education work is less the young person ‘in formation’, or the ‘citizen-specialist’ in training, than the burgeoning *homo economicus*”. Thus, the discourse around graduate employability is dominated by a focus on the acquisition of cognitive human capital in the form of economically useful skills and technical knowledge.

The economic perspective of employability is reductive, and it is heavily contested by some authors (see Bennett, 2019; Cole & Hallett, 2019). Holmes puts forward an alternate view, arguing (2013, p. 259) that graduates must possess a set of skills and also “act in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of a person worthy of being employed”. Holmes emphasises the *process* by which the graduate identity develops over time through engagements with opportunities and interactions with employers and work that affect students’ sense of self and their ability to position themselves in the labour market. That employability is a fluid and dynamic process requiring life-long learning and reflective development is highlighted by a number of authors including Yorke and Knight (2006), who suggest that “employability is not something static but something that a person can develop throughout their life-time”, and by Bennett (forthcoming), who characterises employability as a necessary, life-long critique of self and career to inform the skills, knowledge and attributes required for sustainable and meaningful work in a complex labour market.

Holmes (2013) describes the iterative approach to employability development as processual and he differentiates this from possessional and positional approaches. In the possessional approach, for example, the focus is on graduates possessing the skills, abilities or characteristics required for work; this is the most common approach amongst universities. The possessional approach can align with university strategies in which students are provided with myriad employability curricular and/or co-curricular opportunities; these may lead to a formal credential such as a transcript, certificate or award. In contrast, the positional approach is often a “hands-off” strategy (Farenga & Quinlan, 2016) in which skills such as problem solving, communication skills and leadership are seen as being naturally developed through the academic programs and students independently approach the careers service to fill specific gaps they identify.

An analysis of the employability approaches at 107 research-intensive universities in four countries found that the near majority of universities aligned with the possessional approach (Bennett et al., 2017). However, not all graduates

with the same skills, knowledge and practices will achieve the same graduate outcomes. This highlights the role of social and cultural capital in the graduate labour market. Norton and Carroll (2015) agree that graduates with social and cultural capital are advantaged in the graduate labour market, using their resources to access higher earnings. Employers further reinforce this selective advantage by recruiting from prestigious universities (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012). Whilst building up personal capital through higher education study should enable graduates to better position themselves, attendance at the most prestigious institutions is still dominated by the most advantaged groups, thus leading to greater inequalities in the graduate labour market (Pitman, Roberts, Bennett, & Richardson, 2019; Tholen 2015).

In the competitive higher education environment, it is unsurprising that universities utilise their websites as both a means of information giving and as a tool to build up a distinctive image: to market themselves in a way that makes them more attractive to prospective students and other stakeholders. In his review of advertising expenditure, Matthews (2013) observes that marketing discourse is also affected by institutional status, with “elite” universities spending far less than other institutions on institutional marketing. The impact of status can also be seen in Milian and Davidson’s (2018) comparative study of promotional materials produced by public universities and community colleges in Canada. The authors reveal that publicly funded universities emphasise faculty and institutional-level accomplishments such as research grants and rankings, whilst community colleges, which lack access to these symbolic resources, employ corporate-like strategies such as taglines and non-traditional logos. Currently absent from the scholarly discourse is the extent to which institutional marketing of employability and employability practices and perceptions intersect.

APPROACH

This chapter extends the study conducted by Smith, Bell, Bennett and McAlpine (2018), who investigated how employability is termed, driven and communicated by universities internationally. That study commenced with a literature review from which the initial interview instrument was developed. Professional networks were used to identify potential participants, with invitations issued on the basis of ability to provide a representative view due to broad expertise or involvement in national and international associations. Target countries were those in which graduate employability is a concern for higher education and where employability development strategies involve both academics and careers services practitioners.

In the current study, we re-analysed interview data obtained by Smith et al. (2018). The Smith et al. study combined data from 19 institutions in Australia, Canada, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa, United Kingdom and the United States. We limited our analysis to the eight global institutions involved in the first round of interviews, in which websites were discussed. This resulted in a cohort of nine careers services practitioners and six academic leaders from the eight institutions.

Each university representative was interviewed by, and conducted interviews with, one or more participants from another university in another country. This process enabled a three-country exchange of theory and practice. Particular attention was paid to each institution’s working definition of employability and the strategies through which this was realised.

Where possible, each interview included a senior learning and teaching academic and a careers services leader from each of the institutions involved in that interview. We note that several careers practitioners had engaged in academic research and several academic participants had previous experience in careers services roles. Interview recordings were transcribed and the data independently coded by two researchers, enabling the systematic, replicable compression of text into fewer content categories (Weber, 1990) and inspection of the data for recurrent instances (Wilkinson, 2011). Next, interview data were coded and analysed for emergent themes with the assistance of NVivo analysis software.

For this chapter, the project's interview data were coded deductively using Holmes's (2013) framework of possessional (possession of employability attributes), positional (focus on cultural and social capital) and processual (focus on the process of employability development) approaches to employability development. We then looked at the websites of the same eight institutions. We followed a protocol adapted from Gronemin, Hite and Railsback's (2010) work on university websites, which we developed and applied in our earlier research (Bennett et. al., 2017, p. 55):

1. Searches were restricted to three (rather than two) clicks from the identified page with the use of a scroll bar permissible; and
2. Searches were undertaken from the following pages:
 - a. Home page;
 - b. 'About' page on which the university was described;
 - c. Pages for future students: for example, admissions, new/potential students, courses;
 - d. Pages describing careers services/career development/student employment/workshops relating to employability;
 - e. Pages describing the university mission and its vision statement; and
 - f. Pages for current students: for example student life, activities and/or organisations.

In the final stage of analysis, we compared the alignment of the employability discourse communicated to internal and external audiences. The following sections provide an overview of these findings and then discuss their implications.

RESULTS

Illustrated at Table x.1, the employability discourse communicated to external audiences via institutional websites was aligned with the narratives of the people tasked with employability development in only two of the eight institutions. The extent of this mis-alignment and the diversity of different institutional positions had not been predicted.

Analysis of the interview transcripts indicated that four of the eight institutions constructed employability as a possessional approach, meaning that the focus was on graduates who possessed the skills, abilities or characteristics required for work. This was understood by the interviewees to be a collection of skills. At one institution, representatives constructed employability as positional, strongly linked with high institutional status. Three institutions constructed employability as processual, in which the graduate identity emerges

over time through engagements that impact students' sense of self and their ability to position themselves in the labour market.

Unlike the interview discourse, the most frequent website construction was positional. Analysis of the website discourse revealed that only two institutions constructed employability as possessional and only two institutions communicated that identity formation for employability was a key aspect of student development (processual).

Table x.1: Alignment of external employability discourses with the narratives of those tasked with its development

Institution	Internal discourse (interviews)	External discourse (website)	Alignment
Australia 1	Processual	Positional	No
Australia 2	Possessional	Possessional	Yes
Australia 3	Processual	Positional	No
Canada 1	Possessional	Positional	No
Canada 2	Possessional	Positional	No
Canada 3	Processual	Processual	Yes
United Kingdom 1	Positional	Possessional	No
United Kingdom 2	Possessional	Processual	No

Interview data from all round one institutional representatives who engaged in the original research (Smith et al., 2018) emphasise that external messaging is viewed as a crucial part of supporting employability. Several respondents, however, questioned whether it is useful for websites to include information about employability or the employment outcomes of a degree. They questioned whether prospective students visited institutional websites and cited a range of other marketing activities including school-based recruitment and university open days. In contrast, other respondents viewed institutional websites as a crucial point of information for prospective students: one respondent described prospective students as the “number one audience” for their website.

Despite these differences, there was a consistent view that institutions must differentiate between the development of employability and the graduate employment outcomes and metrics, which are often used as a cipher for employability. The three-country dialogues often led to a discussion about how employability is understood internally and whether this is accurately reflected in an institution's website. Participants agreed that internal organisational logic and understanding about employability might not always be considered when external marketing strategies are developed. This raised questions about how employability discourses are realised in different institutional and global contexts and how different organisations internalise employability as being in line with, or indeed in contrast with, the purpose of higher education.

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we investigate how employability discourse is communicated to prospective students via institutional websites and how these might compare with discussions taking place within the organisation. Our focus is the consistency between internal constructions of employability and their alignment with representations of employability communicated externally. We mined two datasets: interview data gathered from the people tasked with employability development within eight institutions globally (Smith et al., 2018); and an

analysis of their institutional websites using the methodology developed by Bennett et al. (2017).

We begin the discussion by considering internally- and externally-facing constructions of employability. We then consider the influence of employability in informing how students choose their institutions and programs. Finally, we discuss how and why external marketing should align with institutional language and approaches to employability development.

INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Six of the eight institutions had marketing narratives about employability which are inconsistent with the institutional practice reported by the professional and academic staff tasked with employability development. Further, we identified a tension between the understandings of employability within institutions. Employability was conceptualised at both a sophisticated level: for example, developing social, personal and academic capitals (Tomlinson, 2017), an academic identity (Holmes, 2015) or uniquely personal conceptions of self and employability (Bennett, 2018) and also at a functional level in terms of the skills and capabilities required to navigate the graduate labour market.

Some of our interviewees were cognisant of these tensions. Through their explanations, we gleaned multiple reasons for employability constructions not being aligned across an institution, the most common of which was lack of communication between different operations: for example, between marketing, the careers service and teaching and learning; and inconsistency in employability development across programs. Interviewees emphasised that these constructions must be aligned in order for employability development to be operationalised consistently for the benefit of all students.

EMPLOYABILITY, EMPLOYMENT AND STUDENT CHOICE

The study reveals how employability is understood and enacted internally can differ considerably from its representation to external audiences. Does this misalignment really matter? Here, we turn to the need for the higher education sector to shape itself along market lines (Tomlinson, 2018) and the resulting demand for institutions to demonstrate their value to their two main stakeholders: students and employers.

In the UK, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (DBIS, 2016) is intended to provide greater transparency in the “quality” of education provided by each institution. One of the core TEF metrics relates to graduate employment outcomes. The Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey has recently been replaced with a Graduate Outcomes Survey that records the number of graduates in employment (crudely defined) 15 months after graduation. Similar measures of employment outcomes are used in other contexts including in Australia, which employs a Graduate Outcomes Survey four months after graduation, and in Italy (Cattani et al., 2014), where students are surveyed by their institution at the point of graduation.

Data from the various graduate outcomes measures are known to inform the decision making of prospective students in terms of what and where to study. In the US, researchers including Morgan and Baron (2003) and Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Jacob and Cummings (2004) identify academic reputation, location, programme of study, employment opportunities and career enhancements as the most important variables affecting higher education student choice. The results of more recent UK-based surveys are broadly similar (see Diamond, Vorley, Roberts, & Jones, 2012). Concerning website use, a 2010 survey of 1,942 UK university students found that 88.4% of the students had used university

prospectuses and websites when deciding what and where to study (Oakleigh consulting & Staffordshire University, 2010). It follows that graduate employment data and institutional prestige feature heavily on university websites. The comments of our interviewees who questioned the relevance and use of institutional websites as a source of applicant information are clearly out of line with the behaviours of aspiring students.

All interviewees were consistent in their views that institutions must differentiate between employability and employment outcomes. There is considerable criticism in the literature about the conflation of employment and employability, the timing of graduate surveys and the inability of survey instruments to capture the nuances of graduate work within a complex labour market (see Altonji, Kahn, & Speer, 2016; Clarke, 2017; Holmes, 2017). Questioning the absence of a strong, sector-wide counter-narrative to national league tables, Christie's (2016, p. 415) analysis of the UK DLHE measure and its subsequent use in higher education commentary and public media reveals an "essentialist tone" in the reporting which "belies that the employability measure is a very limited view of the career paths that graduates may have and how well-equipped they are to start them".

As illustrated by Hoang and Rojas-Lizana (2015), website discourse is affected by social changes. Changing higher education funding structures and corresponding factors such as globalisation are challenging universities to develop strategies that nurture new relationships, and also to forge new identities which enable them to remain competitive. How this is played out in university marketing literature, specifically concerning employability, was recently studied by Knight (2017). Knight's critical analysis of prospectuses from 1977-2013 at four UK universities showed that *graduate employment* discourse has remained a significant theme over this period and that it is not, in fact, a new trend. In contrast, *employability* discourse was absent in the early prospectuses and then consistently found during the period 1992-2013.

In Knight's study, references to employability were typically related to authentic work experience and the acquisition of transferable skills: issues also emphasised by our study participants. However, in recent years the references to employability concepts have waned, replaced instead by the need to prepare students for *graduate employment*. The return to employment rhetoric is not surprising given the push by governments to align the operations of higher education to provide graduates with the appropriate knowledge and skills required by industry, and yet the dominance of employment displaces the developmental process that is at the core of university education.

A further consideration is the extent to which aspiring students understand the concept of employability. Studies which have examined employability from a student perspective reveal students' diverse understandings and opinions. As Geyde (2017) writes, students emphasise short-term graduate employability goals together with credentials such as degree, subject, institution and grade. They value extra-curricular experience and they understand that employability is competitive. Although students' emphasis has similarities to other stakeholder groups, they are less likely to emphasise the longer-term aspects of employability such as sustaining employability over time. They are also less likely to identify more holistic interpretations of employability such as socio-economic contributions and a desire for meaningful work.

This brings us back to our question of whether it matters that institutional narratives relating to employability and graduate employment differ between external messaging and the lived experience of students. Giving an example from the discipline of law, Thornton (2014, p. 158) suggests that it matters considerably:

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The student who undertakes a law degree is promised employability, prestige and wealth; he or she is also assured of a glamorous and fun-filled career. As a result, the serious and difficult aspects associated with the study of law are sloughed off, as well as the centrality of justice and critique.

Thornton's point is an ethical one: that there is a balance between attracting prospective students and being honest about the demands and realities of both the program and career path. If, as Askehave attests (2007, p. 725), institutional branding has led institutions to "sell courses to our *clients*" rather than "teach courses to *students*" (Askehave's emphasis), then academic staff and careers professionals—the people tasked with developing employability—inherently inherit the unenviable task of exposing students to the reality of their decisions.

Smith, Bell, Bennett and McAlpine's 2018 *Employability in a Global Context* report highlights the importance of communicating coherent and consistent messages around employability to both internal and external stakeholders. As they attest, a "learning view" of employability is far more likely than a productivity and skills view to facilitate a collaborative relationship between academics, career professionals, industry and alumni. A learning view could also inform realistic and ethical narratives for external stakeholders.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study reported here utilised convenience sampling via an established cohort. Although the participants were selected for their ability to give a representative view of employability within both their institutions and their geographic regions, we do not seek to generalise the findings. We also acknowledge that our study looks at external institutional positioning using only the website and that other modes of communication might expand on this view.

Differences across regional and institutional status might emerge with a larger sample and we encourage other researchers to build on the study. We also encourage research that incorporates the student voice to expose the crucial perspective of how employability development is experienced.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this chapter, we investigated how employability discourse is communicated to prospective students via institutional websites and how these might compare with discussions taking place within the organisation. Interview data exposed a rich and varied practice within institutions, with employability understood as a broader concept than skills acquisition. This might highlight a process of employability development more along the lines of Bennett's (2019) metacognitive, strengths-based view of employability thinking: students' cognitive and social development as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens.

A processual view such as this one demands that a distinction is made between employability and employment. In contrast, we found that most institutions have employability marketing narratives that are limited primarily to positional and possessional approaches with a focus on prestige, skills development and employment outcomes. We argue that the inconsistency between institutional narrative and practice hinders the development of pedagogic practices that underpin students' employability development, misinforms student choice, is out of alignment with student expectations, and

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places undue pressure on the people tasked with students' employability development. As such, the inconsistency requires urgent attention.

Some time ago, James (2002, p. 81) emphasised that students need to develop "more complex and sophisticated expectations of university and of their own roles and responsibilities"; this need remains. Realistic expectations of higher education studies and graduate employability are created for students through appropriate, sufficient and consistent information, and the material provided on many institutional websites falls short of these objectives. Regardless of the intended purposes and audiences of institutional websites, their developers must be cognisant that the website forms part of a multi-part conversation with stakeholders. Regular communication between different operations such as marketing, the careers service and teaching and learning leaders is essential if institutions are to develop meaningful and accurate perceptions of employment and employability. Through these conversations, institutions might harness and resolve employability tensions to create a consistent narrative. More broadly, we advocate for a sector-wide counter-narrative as posited by Christie (2017) to challenge the conflation of employability and employment at every opportunity.

The alignment between external and internal messaging matters to aspiring and current students, to educators, to careers services professionals and to institutional reputation. As such, internal tensions between the different understandings and uses of employability must be resolved. We believe that institutions and other commentators could alleviate the tensions by defining employability metacognitively, by emphasising that it is a career-wide challenge and by being consistent in their use of the term.

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