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## The student perspective on employability

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Despite ongoing debate about whether they can and should, most higher education institutions include the development of employability skills within their curricula. However, employers continue to report that graduates are not ready for the world of work, and lack some of the most basic skills needed for successful employment. Research into why this might be abounds from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including government, employers, higher education institutions and graduates. Interestingly though, the views of undergraduates, the recipients of this employability development, are not well known. This could be important, because learning theory tells us that motivation and commitment of learners is an essential prerequisite for effective outcomes. So the question is raised as to whether undergraduate students are engaged with employability skills development. This article reports on a study exploring the views of over 400 business studies, marketing and human resource management undergraduate students about employability. Findings suggest there is only limited alignment between the views of students and other stakeholder groups. There are differences between first, second and final year students, which could explain an observed lack of engagement with employability-related development. Some suggestions for improving engagement are made, alongside ideas on what can, realistically, be done within higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** employability; graduate skills; development; proactive personality; engaged learning

### Introduction

Despite ongoing differences in views amongst stakeholders on what employability is, whether it can be developed and, perhaps most heatedly, the role of higher education institutions in its provision, there is increasing pressure for all academic courses to include employability development. Evidence suggests that, although the provision of employability skills is not consistent, many universities are expending a great deal of effort on developing the employability of their students (Harvey 2005; Higher Education Funding Council for England 2003; Yorke 2004). Yet research continues to report that graduates do not have the skills needed for the modern workplace (Bowers-Brown and Harvey 2004; Cumming 2010; Heaton, McCracken, and Harrison 2008). In the UK, the 2008 survey by the Confederation of British Industry found that 48% of employers were experiencing problems filling jobs with appropriately skilled graduates. Branine (2008) reports on a survey of 700 UK-based employers, where more than 60%

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mentioned problems of poor-quality graduates in terms of their employability skills. These statistics could imply that this is a UK issue alone, and, as Jackson (2009) points out, there is significantly more research and survey data on graduate employability deficiencies in the UK than elsewhere. However, the demands of economic globalisation on higher education institutions across the world are recognised by many scholars (Cumming 2010; Jackson 2009; Kreber 2006). Kreber identifies employability as a key graduate outcome across multiple countries, and Jackson suggests that industry and governments worldwide would welcome effective ways to bridge graduate skills gaps. So the amount of UK data could be due to other factors; for example, the recent changes to university funding in the UK may have given the issue a higher profile for UK stakeholders. Either way, Cumming states: 'A dominant theme emerging ... is that many graduates lack appropriate skills, attitudes and dispositions, which in turn prevents them from participating effectively in the workplace' (2010, 3).

The nature of these skills can be derived from a study by Archer and Davison (2008). They found that communications was consistently ranked as the primary skill sought by employers, but in terms of employers' satisfaction with the quality of communication skills demonstrated by graduates, it ranked only sixteenth. Team working and integrity were ranked second and third in terms of importance, but only seventh and ninth in terms of satisfaction for employers. The authors go on to say: 'It appears that while many graduates hold satisfactory qualifications, they are lacking in the key "soft skills" and qualities that employers increasingly need in a more customer focussed world' (2008, 8).

This article aims to explore some of the myriad reasons why this situation may exist, including: the difficulties of defining the term 'employability' along with the transferable skills which it may include; and the extent to which employability matters to the various stakeholder groups. The article questions whether these skills can actually be developed, and if so, whether higher education institutions are the appropriate place to do so. The article then discusses what appears to be a less well-researched area: to what extent undergraduate students are engaged with the concept of employability, and are they willing and able to benefit from employability skills development in higher education institutions? This discussion is based on data collected from over 400 UK-based business students during October 2009.

### **What is employability?**

It is suggested that one potential problem with trying to develop employability is a lack of coherence about what is meant by the term itself and the subsequent measurement of it. Most authors agree that employability is complex and multidimensional and warn against being simplistic when trying to define it (Harvey 2005; Holmes 2006; Rae 2007). Hugh-Jones, Sutherland, and Cross (2006) suggest that part of this complexity is because it can be viewed from three different perspectives: that of the employer, the student, and the higher education institution. Further complexity is noted by Rothwell and Arnold (2007), who highlight that employability can be viewed as having both internal and external dimensions. However, similarities exist across many of the definitions used, which resonate with that of Yorke, who defines employability as:

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 benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (2004, 410)

This definition and others (e.g. Harvey 2005; Little 2001; Pool and Sewell 2007) distinguish between the *ability* to get a graduate-level job and *employment*, potentially due to the external factors reported by Rothwell and Arnold (2007). Thus, as Wilton states: ‘it is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed’ (2011, 87). This difference, between employment rates and employability, makes measurement of the concept challenging. Currently, most stakeholder groups use statistics from graduate destinations surveys to measure employability, whereas what these provide is a limited snapshot of employment. Yorke’s definition also places focus on quality and sustainability of employment, a theme mirrored by others (e.g. Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004), who stress the future-oriented nature of employability, with a need for adaptability and transitioning in future career market places.

Most definitions recognise that employability requires the possession of skills, but also personal attributes, which are aligned to personality theory. This link to personality theory, along with the qualitative nature and future orientation of the definitions, presents yet further challenges to measurement of the concept of employability.

### **What are the skills and personal attributes that make up employability?**

Many terms are used in the literature to describe transferable skills and attributes: “generic skills”, “attributes”, “characteristics”, “values”, “competencies”, “qualities” and “professional skills” (De La Harpe, Radloff, and Wyber 2000, 233). Along with each term there is often a proposed framework or list, some stretching to as many as 80 items. Table 1 provides a comparison of six such frameworks from numerous different perspectives: Kreber (2006) summarises a list of what universities should provide, derived from the World Conference on Higher Education; thus she suggests it has considerable agreement across countries. Andrews and Higson’s (2008) list was synthesised from multiple sources as a basis for interviews in four European countries with both employers and graduates. Abraham and Karns (2009) show competencies from both an employer and business school perspective in the United States; the top 10 in each category are listed. Archer and Davison (2008) provide a UK employer perspective, whilst Cumming (2010) cites an Australian government perspective.

Table 1 indicates some agreement on the skills and attributes linked to employability, both amongst the different stakeholders and internationally, with communication/interpersonal skills and teamwork appearing in all lists (see items in bold). However, there is less agreement on other items, and perhaps this is why authors such as Harvey (2005) and Yorke (2006) urge caution when assuming that there is agreement on what employability is. There are many examples where frameworks differ. Notably, these skill and attribute divergences are not confined to those between separate groups of stakeholders, as there is evidence to show that views also differ within groups of stakeholders. Differences between the views of *graduates* from the UK, Europe and Japan were indicated by Little and contributors (2003). Differences between *academics* across different higher education institutions and even within the same institution have been noted by Barrie (2007). The lack of shared understanding of skills, or attributes, has perhaps been best explored in relation to *employers* as a group of stakeholders. Little (2001) raised the issue of whether employers behave rationally when recruiting graduates and suggested evidence to the contrary, a view supported by Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (2003). According to Moreau and Leathwood, ‘Employers may want, for example, someone who is strong and decisive, but they will inevitably read these qualities differently in different applicants’ (2006, 319). This suggests that the three

Table 1. Comparison of employability frameworks.

	Andrews and Higson (2008, 413)	Abraham and Karns (2009, 352)		Archer and Davison (2008, 7)	Cumming (2010, 7)
		Top 10 competencies identified by businesses in the USA	Top 10 competencies emphasised in the business school curriculum in the USA		
<p><b>Kreber (2006, 5)</b> Multiple countries – competencies higher education institutions should provide.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Be able and willing to contribute to innovation and be creative</i></li> <li>• <i>Be able to cope with uncertainties</i></li> <li>• <i>Be interested in and prepared for lifelong learning</i></li> <li>• <b>Have acquired social sensitivity and communicative skills</b></li> <li>• <b>Be able to work in teams</b></li> <li>• <i>Be willing to take on responsibilities</i></li> <li>• Become entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Prepare themselves for the internationalisation of the labour market through an understanding of various cultures</li> <li>• Be versatile in generic skills that cut across disciplines</li> <li>• Be literate in areas of knowledge forming the basis for various professional skills, for example, in new technologies</li> </ul>	<p>Employer and graduate perspectives: multiple sources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Professionalism</i></li> <li>• <i>Reliability</i></li> <li>• <i>The ability to cope with uncertainty</i></li> <li>• <i>Ability to work under pressure</i></li> <li>• Ability to think and plan strategically</li> <li>• <b>Capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking</b></li> <li>• <b>Good written and verbal communication skills</b></li> <li>• Information and communication technology skills</li> <li>• <i>Creativity and self-confidence</i></li> <li>• Good self-management and time-management skills</li> <li>• <i>A willingness to learn and accept responsibility</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communication skills</b></li> <li>• Problem solver</li> <li>• <u>Results oriented</u></li> <li>• Interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Leadership skills</li> <li>• Customer focus</li> <li>• <u>Flexible/ adaptable</u></li> <li>• <b>Team worker</b></li> <li>• <i>Dependable</i></li> <li>• Quality focussed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communication skills</b></li> <li>• Problem solver</li> <li>• <b>Team worker</b></li> <li>• Leadership skills</li> <li>• Technical expertise</li> <li>• <b>Interpersonal skills</b></li> <li>• Business expertise</li> <li>• <u>Hard worker</u></li> <li>• <u>Results oriented</u></li> <li>• <u>Dependable</u></li> </ul>	<p>Employers in the UK.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communication skills</b></li> <li>• <b>Team-working skills</b></li> <li>• <i>Integrity</i></li> <li>• Intellectual ability</li> <li>• <i>Confidence</i></li> <li>• <u>Character/ personality</u></li> <li>• Planning and organisational skills</li> <li>• Literacy (good written skills)</li> <li>• Numeracy (good with numbers)</li> <li>• Analysis and decision-making skills</li> </ul>	<p>Government in Australia.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communication</b></li> <li>• <b>Teamwork</b></li> <li>• Problem solving</li> <li>• <u>Initiative and enterprise</u></li> <li>• Planning and organising</li> <li>• Self-management</li> <li>• <u>Learning</u></li> <li>• <u>Technology</u></li> </ul>

**Highlighted in bold** = commonly cited items which appear in all frameworks.

*Highlighted in italics* = attributes with clear links to personality traits.

Highlighted by underlining = attributes potentially linked to proactive personality.

different perspectives mentioned by Hugh-Jones, Sutherland, and Cross (2006) could be significantly expanded.

In addition, any apparent agreement on skills, or attributes, is amongst a list of *labels* and not a detailed examination of what these mean to the individuals, or groups, concerned (Holmes 2006). For example, do ‘communication skills’ or ‘team working’ or ‘flexibility’ mean the same to any two stakeholders at the same time? According to Jackson, ‘Empirical studies on graduate employability liberally adopt different terms for competencies, resulting in confused findings’ (2010, 29), which is a concern if these studies are then used to inform policy or practice.

## **Can employability be developed and, if so, how?**

### ***Can skills be developed?***

Skills are defined as: ‘any component of the job that involves doing something’ (Harrison 2003, 269), and include manual, diagnostic, interpersonal or decision-making skills. Along with knowledge, skills development is well documented in learning, training and development literature. Although it is recognised that some skills are more difficult to develop than others, there is agreement that skills can be trained or, at least, developed.

### ***Can personal attributes be developed?***

Personal attributes, on the other hand, cross into the differential psychology literature on personality traits and other individual differences such as intelligence or cognitive ability. Personality can be defined as: ‘the overall profile or combination of traits that characterise the unique nature of a person’ (French et al. 2008, 97). To what extent personality traits are inherited, or can be developed, is still a contentious subject (Rutter et al. 1997). But, even if personality can be developed, it is recognised that these highly individual traits are deep rooted, with many formed at an early age. They determine success, performance, and career choices, and any development of them is a long-term and slow process (Woods and West 2010). Table 1 shows that many of the items fall into the category of personality traits (see items in italics). Woods and West tell us that managers are looking for personality as often as skills, saying they want ‘employees who are reliable, dependable, able to work under pressure, creative and enthusiastic. All of these reflect personality characteristics’ (2010, 71).

In the United States, this area of research has been linked to ‘proactive personality’, a term defined by Seibert, Kraimer, and Crant as ‘a stable disposition to take personal initiative’ (2001, 847). Erdogan and Bauer add: ‘Rather than accepting their roles passively, proactive persons challenge the status quo and initiate change’ (2005, 859). A growing body of literature has shown some important links between proactive personality and career success from two angles. First, proactive personality has been shown to make adjustment to work a quicker and smoother process, resulting in people reaching effective performer status faster and more easily (Seibert, Kraimer, and Crant 2001). Second, there is a link to the process of job search, with people high on proactive personality more likely to succeed in this self-driven activity (Brown et al. 2006). Amongst the items listed in Table 1 are traits that could be linked to proactive personality (see items underlined), so perhaps stakeholders need to be more realistic about what can be developed in the higher education curriculum. Villar and Albertin (2010) summarise the work of many

authors when they suggest that the role of higher education institutions should be to encourage students to develop their proactive personality traits. They propose this is done by getting students to take more responsibility for their education through active participation in educational experiences and intentional investment in their own social capital. At the very least, this area deserves further research.

### ***Are higher education institutions the best place to develop employability?***

The advent of mass higher education seen in the last three decades, and related growth in the number of vocationally oriented courses offered, appears to have changed expectations for many stakeholder groups (Bowers-Brown and Harvey 2004; Wilton 2011). Certainly, there is an expectation from government and employers that higher education institutions have a responsibility to prepare graduates for the world of work (De La Harpe, Radloff, and Wyber 2000; Heaton, McCracken, and Harrison 2008). In response, higher education institutions continue to build employability into their programmes (Bowers-Brown and Harvey 2004; Fallows and Steven 2000; Harvey 2005). Data also show that the majority of graduates recognise that higher education institutions are trying to support the employability agenda (Doctorjob.com 2004; Wilton 2008). But the expectation that higher education institutions can, and should, develop employability is not universally shared.

Many authors maintain that employability is better and more easily developed outside of the formal curriculum (Andrews and Higson 2008; Ng and Feldman 2009; Rae 2007; Yorke 2004), with particular emphasis placed on employment-based training and experience. There is little doubt that employers and employers' organisations are probably best placed to provide this work based training and experience, which in the past they did. However, organisations are becoming increasingly reluctant to invest in developing the transferable skills of graduates due to economic pressures and beliefs about the lack of commitment from 'generation Y' employees (Jackson 2010), and so higher education institutions are expected to fill the gap and produce work-ready employees. Yet Cranmer (2006) concluded that there was no evidence to show that employability skills development within universities had any effect on employability, compared to employment-based training and experience, which had positive effects. Graduates themselves are aware of the power of work experience in developing employability skills, with as many as 90% saying, 'work experience was the best way to gain the skills they needed for work' (Doctorjob.com 2004, 2). In addition, students on degree courses that include a work placement (sandwich courses) are up to 14% more successful in finding graduate employment compared to non-sandwich course students (Harvey 2005), due to the high value placed on work experience by employers. Although this could also be due to the opportunities these students have had to develop contacts. But this evidence suggests a need to be realistic about the effectiveness of employability skills development within higher education institutions and whether they are the best place to try and do so.

### ***Are higher education institutions able to develop employability?***

In addition to the debate on whether higher education institutions are the right place to effectively develop employability skills, there is also the question of whether they are able to do so. Kreber (2006) points out the multiple pressures on higher education institutions which could make it harder for them to give increased focus to the employability

agenda: competing in the research arena; increasing numbers of students and their diversity, implying they are less prepared for university; along with declining resources. Rae (2007) tells us that universities are independent enterprises competing for student numbers in order to secure income, and this has not encouraged them to consider employers' needs when planning courses. He suggests that this has led to an increase in the number of 'trendy courses' offered at the expense of more traditional courses which employers value.

### ***Should higher education institutions develop employability?***

Far more contentious and fundamental than whether higher education institutions can develop employability skills is the philosophical question of whether they should.

Education in its broadest sense has been shown to positively correlate with both fluid and crystallised intelligence, core task performance and citizenship performance (Ng and Feldman 2009), all of which can contribute to employability. For some academics this broad education experience is not only sufficient, but is a core principle of higher education. They believe that higher education institutions are not the place to train graduates for jobs; that this is the responsibility of employers. Bowers-Brown and Harvey (2004) refer to the concept of the 'elitists', who believe there is an over-emphasis on vocational subjects, which is not the role of universities. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) talk about the increased focus on skills development threatening academic freedom. Kreber adds to this: 'some critics caution that universities could far too easily lose sight of such traditional values as curiosity-driven research, social criticism and preparation for civic life' (2006, 7). Some academics object to the philosophical changes being forced on higher education institutions (Jackson 2009), which appear to have coincided with a documented shift in the motivation to study, away from intellectual discovery towards a more instrumental approach (Massingham and Herrington 2006). Cornford (2005) argues that government-created expectations that employers' demands should be immediately responded to is the root cause of many higher education issues.

So, it is by no means clear whether employability skills can be developed and, if they can, the best way to do so. It is also debated to what extent higher education institutions can, and should, be part of employability skills development. But even if we can answer these questions another one remains: does employability matter?

### **To what extent does employability matter?**

As with the definition of employability, the extent to which it is judged to matter varies by stakeholder group.

### ***The government perspective***

The UK government has a long-standing interest in higher education and employability, not least because it is the principal funder via taxation income. In more recent years, this interest has become more overt. Graduate employability has become a key objective for government and a performance indicator for higher education institutions. This focus on employability demonstrates what Cornford describes as 'an exceptionally instrumentalist approach' (2005, 41), and Wilton calls 'an economic ideology of higher education' (2008, 143) replacing the former view of what higher education



institutions are for. This suggests that *employment* matters to government but, as discussed earlier, this is not necessarily employability.

### ***The employer perspective***

Branine (2008) found that graduate employers are more interested in personal attributes and soft skills than degree classification, subject or university attended. This view is supported by the Confederation of British Industry (2008), with 86% of board executives putting skills and attitudes at the top of their list of demands; degree result was rated as important by 32% and university attended was rated as important by just 10%. Nevertheless, this is contradicted by other evidence. Research by Wilton (2011) confirmed findings from previous studies, by showing that new university students fared less well in the labour market than those from older universities. This could indicate that employers' actions may not be matching their words.

### ***The graduate perspective***

For many graduates the economic drivers are strong. They recognise the value of employability skills and that a degree on its own may not be enough (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Tomlinson 2008). The number of students graduating in the UK has increased dramatically in the last two decades, more than doubling since 1991, which has potentially led to an over-supply of graduates who find it hard to start their careers (Branine 2008; Rae 2007). This is evidenced by an increase in graduate unemployment, increased competition between graduates, and higher levels of uncertainty about what graduates can expect from higher education (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2006; Moreau and Leathwood 2006). Not surprisingly, the increase in the number of graduates has also changed employers' expectations. A degree, once a bonus or differentiator, is now almost seen as a prerequisite for a job, even in sectors which in the past would not have needed a degree at entry level (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003; Tomlinson 2008). Graduates are increasingly aware that they need additional skills and attributes for career success.

### ***The higher education institution perspective***

From the higher education institution perspective, the argument is simple: league tables can affect student numbers, which in turn affects funding. Despite arguments about the correlation between employability skills development and actual employment, higher education institutions need good employment figures. Therefore, they need to continue investing in, and promoting, employability development.

### ***Wider society perspective***

There are also those who suggest that employability skills are vital to society in general, as they enable people to contribute to the wider social environment (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003; Wilton 2008).

### *The missing perspective*

The missing perspective is the view of current students. Because these students are the intended recipients of employability skills development, their views are important. Most textbooks on learning theory highlight the need for learner motivation and engagement with the process to ensure effectiveness (e.g. Gold et al. 2010). Yet, we know little about the extent to which employability matters to current students, and what employability is from their perspective. Do they have similar views to other stakeholders on what transferable skills, or attributes, might be necessary? Do they think employability can, and should, be learned? Anecdotal evidence suggests that, for some students, most notably first and second years, there is a lack of engagement with the concept. These observations are supported by the literature (Rae 2007), which mentions the lack of appreciation by students of employability skills development.

Three other potential sources of current student views have been uncovered. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) carried out a longitudinal study with 310 mixed-discipline undergraduates. For these students, from a post-92 university, employability began to emerge as an issue as the study progressed and some of their findings are relevant to this article. Rothwell, Herbert, and Rothwell (2008) examined the beliefs of 344 undergraduate business students about their chances of success in seeking a particular type of work. Their findings included that the university attended had little impact on their self-perceived employability, as opposed to subject choice, which was rated as the top influencing factor. A striking finding was the perception that their level of engagement with studying was the least important factor linked to their employability. However, these researchers did not overtly explore the term 'employability' and its importance, nor the skills or attributes it may comprise. Tomlinson (2008) looked at 53 undergraduates and their perceptions of the role higher education credentials would play in shaping their future labour market outcomes. These students believed that degree qualification had lost differentiation value, and that there was a need to develop their wider employability. However, this sample group was limited to final-year students; we do not know if their views were the same earlier in their university career, when employability development could have occurred.

### **Methodology**

Data was collected from first, second and final year undergraduate students in one post-92 UK university. Students were majoring in business studies/business administration, human resources and marketing. The final-year sample included sandwich students, newly returned from placement, and non-sandwich students. This conservatively includes 50% of the sample population for first-year students, 65% of the population for second-year students and 5% of the population for final-year students. It is recognised that the sample size for final-year students is low, and therefore care has been taken in reporting results from this group. There are other obvious limitations with this sample, which are discussed at the end of this article. The predominant method of data collection was via focus groups, which allowed the gathering of collective views and the collation of a joint construction of meaning (Bryman and Bell 2007). The non-sandwich final-year data was collected via questionnaire.

The questions posed were:

- (1) What is your understanding of the term employability?
- (2) What, if any, are the core/transferable skills that might make up employability?

- (3) Either: (a) For first year students: To what extent do you expect the university to support the development of your employability, and how? (b) For all other groups: How much does university support the development of your employability, and how?
- (4) To what extent do you think employability matters?

## Findings and discussion

### *General findings*

The number of responses per student increased by year, which indicates an increased confidence in self-expression. Focus-group observers reported that first-year students were more hesitant about contributing and their participation was far from equal. Second-year students appeared more confident in expressing themselves, with double the number of responses of first-year students, but again there was evidence that participation was unequal. Final-year students were extremely confident in expressing their views, with 14 times the number of items mentioned than by first-year students. This increasing confidence is of interest. It could be deemed to be evidence of enhanced communication skills and self-confidence, which regularly appear in employability skills frameworks, and which may suggest that these skills have been developed over the academic years.

### *Questions 1 and 2: what is employability and the skills/attributes it may encompass?*

There is some alignment between the views the students expressed and the literature on the definition of employability and the skills and/or attributes it may include. All years and groups agreed that employability involved possession of skills linked to the needs of employers. In line with the literature, communication skills and team working were most commonly cited. Planning and organising and information technology skills were also commonly mentioned, and these appear in some of the frameworks reviewed for this article (see Table 1). All groups and years also agreed that personal attributes were an inherent part of employability, with the most commonly mentioned being: flexibility, adaptability, hardworking, commitment and dedication. Again this shows some alignment with the literature.

There was less alignment with the longer-term, wider definitions of employability (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004; Rothwell and Arnold 2007). This could suggest that these students are more concerned with the instrumental or economic view of employability discussed by Cornford (2005) and Wilton (2008). The final-year students did show some awareness of employability in its widest sense, suggesting it was about 'ensuring future employment'. This supports the findings of Tomlinson (2008), whose final-year students did consider longer-term advantages for graduates over non-graduates.

This pattern of alignment with the literature by academic year was also seen in relation to the value of qualifications or degree classification. Less than 40% of first and second year groups mentioned qualifications or grades as being connected to employability, whereas for employers a degree has almost become a prerequisite (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003). Perhaps this finding may go some way towards explaining an observed lack of concern about grades for many first and

second year students, 'First-year results don't matter' being a comment anecdotally heard. However, views of final-year students on the worth of qualifications were similar to the literature, with comments such as 'Education is number one', and 'A degree is standard, you need more'. This confirms the findings of Tomlinson (2008), who reported that final-year students placed a great deal of importance on their qualifications and believed employers would use degree classification as a way to differentiate between increasingly large pools of graduates.

The importance of experience also revealed differences between the years. Final-year students stated that experience was essential, agreeing with the studies by both Moreau and Leathwood (2006) and Tomlinson (2008). This indicates an understanding of employers' wants (Cranmer 2006; Doctorjob.com 2004; Ng and Feldman 2009; Yorke 2004). However, experience was only mentioned by half of the first and second year groups. This may indicate that many of these students do not have an informed understanding, or awareness, of what employers are looking for at this stage of their education.

### ***Question 3: development of employability skills in the university***

Echoing the findings from Moreau and Leathwood (2006), top of the list on university support, for all groups and years, was the placement opportunity. This was closely followed by the (faculty) placement office's curriculum vitae writing support and the (central) careers and jobs centre. This implies that getting a placement and gaining experience was well recognised as a university support. A final-year student commented, 'The placement was the main reason for picking this degree', and responses for final-year students to this question were congruent with their other answers. Interestingly, this was not always the case for first and second year students, whose answers presented contradictions. The placement and job search support were rated as most important in answer to question three, and yet experience was not rated highly as a key employability skill in response to question two. This raises the question: do these students really value placements and work experience (at this time), or is this just 'lip service'? Perhaps this may explain the anecdotal, observed and researched lack of engagement with placement-related activities (Rae 2007).

All groups and years mentioned embedded activities, such as presentations, group work and meeting deadlines, designed to develop skills/attributes such as communications, confidence, teamwork and self-management. However there was less emphasis placed on these embedded activities compared to placements and work experience. The lack of emphasis on embedded activities could be due to the nature of them: do students recognise that they are designed to develop employability skills? However, this is a research stream beyond the scope of this article.

Another area of interest is the low perceived value of student-driven activities, such as involvement in societies, volunteering and other extra-curricular opportunities. These were mentioned by less than half the first and second year groups and not mentioned at all by final-year sandwich students. Conventional wisdom would view these as examples of demonstrating employability skills, and Tomlinson (2008) found that his final-year students believed that extra-curricula activities, such as societies and sports, were important. However, the evidence to support the value of these is mixed. For example, in respect of volunteering, Konidari (2010) found that the predominant reason for students carrying out volunteer work was to enhance their career and curriculum vitae. However, whilst students self-report that volunteering has improved

their skills and employability, there is little empirical evidence to show that it actually achieves this aim (Hill, Russell, and Brewis 2009). To quote Holdsworth and Quinn:

While there are subjective data on how students feel they have benefited from volunteering and in many cases students do get jobs through volunteering (e.g. youth and conservation work), the absence of a control group means that statistically the case for employability is not proven. (2010, 123)

So, perhaps our students are right to ignore our suggestions that they develop their employability through volunteer work. But this does indicate a need for further research.

#### ***Question 4: to what extent does employability matter?***

All students said employability mattered a ‘great deal’ or ‘massively’, but with focus on getting a job, any job, as opposed to employability in its wider sense, as discussed earlier. Comments included: ‘There is no point in university without employability’ and ‘It can put you above the rest, competition is fierce’. The majority of first and second year groups went no further with this question, which may indicate that the topic is not really important to them at this stage.

For those who did expand upon why employability matters, reasons tended to be individually and instrumentally focused: ‘job security’, ‘better pay’, ‘increased choice of jobs’. A small minority of groups went on to suggest that employability may improve quality of employment, with statements such as: ‘It will give you a more enjoyable career’ and ‘It helps you plan your life and shows your development needs’. This suggests that, for only a small number of students, employability may be a wider and more valuable concept than employment. Very few groups mentioned the benefits to others, such as employers, higher education institutions, taxpayers and society in general. The lack of expansion on this question, for first and second year students at least, leads one to consider whether or not they really do believe that employability matters, and are therefore engaged with the development of employability skills.

### **Conclusions**

This article set out to progress the discussion about the complex topic of graduate employability, most notably in the area of undergraduate engagement with the concept.

Whilst recognising that there is no universally accepted definition of employability, the views of most of these students are narrow in comparison to the literature. They seem to believe that employability is a short-term means to an end, being about finding a job, any job, or employment. Many of the literature definitions take a much wider stance, suggesting that employability should be more concerned with longer-term quality and sustainability of graduate-level employment. The more instrumental view of employability seems to correlate with the views of current and more recent governments, evidenced by the simplistic way in which employability is measured through employment statistics.

More alignment between student views and the literature was found in terms of the skills and personal attributes associated with employability. The most commonly cited skills were communication, team working, information technology, and planning and organising. Personal attributes agreed upon included flexibility, adaptability, hardworking, commitment and dedication. However, it should be remembered that there is no universal agreement on the content of employability frameworks, either between or

within stakeholder groups. Further, any agreement is just between 'labels', with little evidence to suggest that any of the interested stakeholders, including undergraduate students, share a common understanding of these terms. Nor is there concurrence about how they are assessed.

It is also unclear whether many of these skills and attributes can be developed in practice and, if so, what the role of higher education institutions should be. Putting aside the arguments about whether higher education institutions are able, willing or designed to develop employability, there is evidence to suggest there are alternative options which may be more appropriate.

Skills can be developed and are embedded in the curriculum, but many first and second year students appear to lack engagement with these activities. This must reduce their motivation to learn and inevitably impact on successful development. Higher education institutions could make improvements in this area, perhaps by increasing awareness of employability in its wider sense and the benefit to students of their engagement with the concept and/or perhaps by making skills development activities more overt. As individual benefits were clearly the main reason why students thought employability mattered, this could be a feasible objective, even if it does pander to the instrumental view of employability.

Personal attributes are more complex, with many falling into the category of proactive personality. Planned and explicit development of these is possibly outside the capability and remit of higher education institutions. Student-driven activities may be a way to develop proactive personality, but only a minority of these students recognised student-driven activities as a useful activity to develop employability. As an interesting aside, it could be that students who do commit to self-driven activities may actually be already high on proactive personality. Perhaps the way forward here is to focus on raising awareness of what employers need or want in terms of personal attributes, promoting the message of Villar and Albertin (2010) of the need for students to become more actively involved and responsible for their education, investing in their own social capital. Providing students with a better understanding of how student-driven activities can develop and/or demonstrate proactive personality could be a practical step.

Promotion of work-based training and experience may need to be reconsidered. There is clear evidence that these are the best techniques for the development of many employability-related skills and personal attributes. However, first and second year students may require more help to see the benefits of these activities, as their conflicting answers raised questions about their real engagement with the concept. Additionally, although experience is highly attractive to employers, there seems to be an increasing reluctance for them to supply development in transferable skills. This is certainly a theme which deserves further exploration.

Finally, there is the possible lack of importance associated with qualifications or degree classification by first and second year students, which is at odds with other stakeholder groups, including final-year students. If we are to raise the engagement levels of students in their first two years, they need to recognise that employers do put emphasis on qualifications, and because of the laws of supply and demand, employers can afford to be selective about grades.

### **Limitations of this study and further research**

Various authors have suggested that business students should be more interested in, and have a greater awareness of, employability as they have opted to study a vocationally

oriented subject (Berman and Ritchie 2006; Jackson 2009; Parrott 2010). Therefore, these students could have a more informed perspective which may limit the potential for generalisation of the results.

Another limitation is the use of just one department in one post-92 university, meaning the results may not be representative. Rothwell, Herbert, and Rothwell (2008) showed there was little difference in student perceptions among three different pre-92 and post-92 universities. This, along with the reasonable sample size for first and second year students, should enable this data to make a useful contribution. However, further studies are recommended to validate the results, especially with final-year students.

According to Bryman and Bell (2007), there are limitations to qualitative data collection methods such as focus groups. These include: control, group dynamics and data analysis issues, all of which may limit the value of the findings and generalisations made. However, it is hoped that this article will provide some useful insights for those committed to the employability agenda and will provide a basis for further work in this area.

Areas of further research abound and include: more detailed analysis of the skills and attributes frameworks to explore shared meaning; empirical evidence for the value of volunteering and other student-driven activities; the discrepancy between students saying placements were of number one importance, but not rating experience highly as an employability element. One further research area that springs to mind is to what extent could proactive personality be a 'chicken and egg' situation? Simply put, are students who are high on proactive personality more likely to be involved in student-driven activities, finding placements and skills development activities embedded in the curriculum? It would be interesting to assess for levels of proactive personality at an early stage, and then relate this to their answers to the research questions used in this study, and their subsequent performance at and involvement in university.

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