

What constitutes employability in the eyes of employers?

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Universities are under ever-greater pressure to provide students with the means by which to access graduate-level employment by equipping them with the skills, knowledge and attributes required by employers and the ability to convey their possession. For many vocational degree programmes, work placements as part of a sandwich programme of study have long been a cornerstone of the process of preparing students for the labour market. Whilst recent evidence has pointed towards the declining take-up of work placements among students (Walker and Ferguson 2009), and a reduction in the availability of placements provided by employers, the 'placement year' is likely to remain a strong feature of undergraduate 'employability' provision, retaining a recognisable currency both for employers and students, despite the proliferation of alternative means by which students can acquire meaningful work experience (Universities UK 2009). Subsequently, universities continue to invest heavily in efforts to improve the provision of, and preparation of students for, work placements. However, employers continue to bemoan the (lack of) work-readiness of recent graduates and recent research questions the assumption of improved employment outcomes for placement students compared to their non-placement peers (Wilton 2012). Therefore, a proper understanding of the relationship between work experience, the development of individual employability and labour market attainment would seem more critical than ever.

Introduction

This article presents some initial thoughts arising from an exploratory research project investigating employers' perspectives on the recruitment and management of work placement students and the reasons for, and potential benefits of, employing such students. The article explores one aspect of this project, specifically, to disentangle what constitutes student 'employability' in the eyes of employers, through an understanding of both formal and informal recruitment practices. In some ways this piece can be considered a continuation of the discussion of employability provided in an earlier CESR Review article on *'The Shifting Sands of Employability'* (July 2011) that explored the increasing policy focus in higher education and wider social policy towards individualised notions of employability.

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Employability and desired attributes in the recruitment of work placement students

For the purposes of government or higher education institutional policy and practice, employability is typically conceptualised as individual 'human capital' in the form of a list of generic qualities that recruiters expect or desire in applicants, whether for placements or graduate roles. For example, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2009) report, *'employers particularly value [in graduates] broad 'employability' skills, such as communication, motivation, independence, analysis, confidence and problem solving... this is one of the strongest messages from employers to government'*. Such lists of employability skills and attributes constitute a 'narrow' concept of employability (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005).

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The employer interviews conducted for this project tended to bear out the idea that there exists a set of minimum requirements that managers expect of a prospective employee, in the form of the demonstrable possession of particular competencies, including: strong work ethic, computer literacy,

willingness and ability to learn and to ask questions, confidence, pro-activity, problem-solving ability, time management and communication skills. Despite these common criteria, there was an understandable degree of variation in emphasis, not least between employers offering relatively generic management work placements and those offering specific technical roles. More variable still was the extent to which employers prioritised academic performance with some stressing minimum standards of achievement in and prior to HE and others using academic performance as a proxy for particular competencies, but accepting alternative means of demonstration, such as prior work experience or volunteering. Recruiters use extra-curricular activity and (any) employment experience as a proxy for applicant possession of desired attributes such as personal ambition, maturity and motivation. These findings reflect those (albeit in the context of graduate employment) of Lowden *et al.* (2011: 24) who report that:

"Employers expect graduates to have the technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and often managerial abilities or potential."

These largely generic requirements are reassuring for higher education institutions in the process of developing means by which to prepare students for the labour market. However, the interviews also revealed that in many instances, managers also seek a range of rather more vague attributes by which to differentiate and, ultimately select, among candidates, as in the following quote:

"[We look for] somebody who's got the patter, who's got some charm, who's able to talk the client, not talk the client into things but who clients will warm to and will listen to because to be honest, if you've just got the patter, clients aren't interested at all, it's got to be somebody that they trust."

(Company partner, Construction)

Therefore, whilst the possession of generic employability skills or attributes appear to represent 'table stakes' that allow students to progress from application to interview or assessment centre, the problem remains of high levels of subjectivity or 'invisible' criteria being applied to select from a pool of applicants. In this sense, therefore, human capital 'employability' is rather more than the demonstrable possession of skills, knowledge and attributes that might be developed in

HE and can be viewed as something more esoteric. As such, the standard 'policy' models of employability (for example, Confederation of British Industry 2009) based on attributes of a 'good' employee (for example, someone able to work in a team, who is resilient and self-motivated...) is only of limited utility. Moreover, there was some evidence that even within the same firm, recruitment criteria and the importance attributed to particular aspects of employability can vary according to the preferences of the recruiting manager and even formal selection criteria unevenly applied.

Alongside the more generic attributes referred to by many of the interview respondents there were also a range of more specific competencies that placements students were expected to display during their employment and, therefore, evidence in the recruitment and selection process. This context-specific employability can be characterised either as relating to person-job fit or person-organisation fit. The former included such attributes as the ability to handle pressure, to work to tight deadlines and to handle long working hours. In most cases, these attributes were expressed in formal recruitment literature, made explicit in the recruitment and selection process or could reasonably be inferred from the job role that individuals were expected to fulfil. In this way, these job requirements can actively inform student preparation for the recruitment process. However, whilst, person-organisation fit was also important in recruitment decisions and, therefore, formed a key dimension of perceived employability, these attributes were not always foreseeable or made explicit. For instance, one company director referred to a desire to recruit *"someone I can go for a beer with"* (Managing Director, Business Services). Therefore, even if applicants demonstrate the possession of explicit or reasonably foreseeable generic and context-specific credentials, competences and attributes, then selection decisions can often be made on more nebulous or variable grounds which render the preparation of candidates applying for and securing placements that much more problematic.

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Marketing oneself and conveying the possession of attributes

One important and potentially problematic dimension of employability for placement students is the ability to convey the possession of the attributes that employers require. In the first instance, this demonstration is in the presentation of 'self' through CV, covering letter, demeanor and personal appearance. These are clearly areas where HEIs can aid students through coaching and support and which are largely in the control of the applicant. In addition, employers clearly use a range of proxy measures to assess the individual possession of required attributes, including previous academic performance, work experience and volunteering and personal extra-curricular pursuits. Such experience or achievement constitutes a means of self-presentation and again represents an area of possible intervention whereby institutions can both provide opportunities for students to develop required attributes and the language by which to articulate their possession. When respondents were asked what more HEIs could do to prepare students for placement recruitment, this tended to be the focus of responses. Most employers stressed that students often needed further assistance in *'getting the basics right'* in respect of attention to detail in application forms, covering letters and CVs and in ensuring students are aware of the need to properly research firms prior to interview. Beyond this, employers were ambivalent about the ability of universities to help students prepare for placement recruitment beyond such briefing on protocol. In this sense, therefore, employers were under no illusion that they expected to be recruiting the finished article and that investment of time, effort and money would be required during the course of the placement to assist in the development of employees.

However, there were also aspects of employability, as inferred by a potential employer, that remain largely outside the control of the individual. For instance, both placement and graduate jobseekers are perceived against a backdrop of the institution of study that they attend or attended. For placement students, this institutional context appeared to represent a source not only of 'traditional advantage' (or otherwise) associated with attendance at a particular HEI (for example, based on perceived academic 'quality' or standards or fit between programme and organisational demands) but also reputational advantage in respect of the 'quality' of institutional liaison staff (e.g. placement centre staff), academic staff which might have a role in supervising placement students and prior placement students. This latter group appears crucial in making a prediction of the 'future job performance' of an applicant from a particular institution. Therefore, being a student at a 'preferred provider' HEI represents a proxy for many of the academic and personal attributes sought by a specific employer.

Conclusions and implications

On the face of it, the findings of this exploratory research in the area of what constitutes employability are not particularly novel or surprising: of course, employers recruit according to those attributes that provide (what they believe is) the most reliable predictor of future job performance. However, by exploring employers' rationale for recruitment decisions in practice and, therefore, moving beyond a narrow understanding of employability, the preparation of students to acquire work placements can be viewed as more problematic than is often suggested. Much policy discussion of graduate and student employability tends to focus on the development of individual attributes in response to the demands of employers. Whilst this would seem logical it presupposes that there is both coherence and consistency in the demands of employers and relative uniformity of requirements both within and across workplaces and sectors of employment.

The discussion of recruitment practices and criteria in the interviews suggests that not only are some of the criteria used for selection 'unknowable' to applicants, but also the means by which employers infer the possession or otherwise of these criterion can lie outside of the control of the individual. Following McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) therefore, employability needs not only to be understood as a predominantly supply-side labour market concern (i.e. the attributes of individuals) but in its broader organisational and labour market context. They include, therefore, in a 'broad' employability framework, *recruitment factors* (as part of the external dimension of employability) including employers' formal and informal recruitment and selection procedures; employers' general selection preferences, employers' search channels and the form and extent of employers' use of informal networks. The interview findings presented here suggest that employability is far from a simple concept and can only be understood fully if account is taken of its absolute, relative, relational, reputational and contextual dimensions.

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