

Employability skills: a gap in the discourse

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The recent Australian Learning and Teaching Council report described 'employability skills' as 'defining a theoretically ideal employee from an employer's perspective'¹. Working within careers education in an Australian university, research, theory and policy about developing employability skills is ever-present; however, there is a gap between the accepted understanding of its importance and students' everyday experience.

The gap between a term and the reality of its use is essentially what was called *la différence* by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. He explained that there is always a communicative gap between what we suggest when we say a word and what we think about. The same is true of the term 'employability skills'. While it is rooted in economic theory and institutional policy statements, it is not interacted with in any meaningful way by students and employers – key stakeholders within higher education (HE).

Studying the discourse of employability skills within the UK has been undertaken recently by researchers Holmes and Coughlin, who adopted a framework to review the components of the discourse: macro use by governments in policy papers and legislation; meso use by institutions; and micro use by individuals who are subjects of the discourse – the HE students. This article uses the same framework to analyse the discourse's components within the Australian HE system.

Governmental use – macro level

Contemporary ideas about the purpose of HE are strongly based on concepts of the need to deploy education to build human capital in the economy, as explained by the economist and sociologist Gary Becker. This human capital theory holds that by promoting and expanding educational levels within the population, positive effects will be created on the economic progression and development of any country – a concept publicly known as a 'Knowledge-Driven Economy'². The acceptance of human capital discourse in education over the last 50 years has led to governmental action to educate more people to ensure continuing economic development. The result has been more HE institutions and a massive increase in student places.

As HE has expanded, thoughts have turned to what and who are the key consumers of HE processes, and as a result of viewing tertiary education as a key tool in economic development the most important consumer has been identified as prospective employers of recent graduates. This focus on the outcomes of HE within the workforce gained emphasis as more and more employers found that not enough graduates were work ready. To address such concerns, an effort was made to recognise these needs, with more focus on employer surveys and liaisons with

corporate bodies in an effort to meet the needs of this now enshrined Knowledge-Driven Economy.

In Australia, a large-scale survey was carried out in 2002 by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) on the expectations of graduates by employers³. The findings led to an influential report in 2006 entitled 'Employability Skills for the Future'. It collated the employers' responses, identified eight key core employability skills – communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning, and technology – and established a national document describing employability skills. Though this partly eliminated the problem of definition for a period within Australia, and there has been adoption by HE institutions, the report is known mostly to those insiders in the discourse – HE policy-makers and student support practitioners – and not necessarily by the academics, students or employers. Additionally, as the initiative has not been repeated, the findings are becoming dated and therefore of decreasing reliability or utility.

Institutional discourses – meso level

For institutions, it could be thought a challenging notion that a degree, any degree, is the key to employability, since universities are structured heavily towards degree specialism in their research and administrative functions, and not explicitly towards generic skills. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that emphasising generic competencies of a degree, rather than direct subject knowledge, has not been more heavily debated and criticised by HE institutions. However, educational institutions have sought to take advantage of the link to employment opportunities and to promote this aspect of their product (Ivy, 2001). In other words, the need for individuals to increase their own career prospects by undertaking tertiary study has become a core part of institutional branding.

Although there has been a publicly expressed consensus for the need to embed employability skills within HE in Australia, the methods of ensuring that students gain these skills through their discipline-based degrees are neither clear nor easy. The best way of ensuring that employability skills are learned at university is still being debated and dealt with in campuses across Australia. Along with this debate, there is also discussion about how HE institutions should assess individuals' employability skills and, subsequently, how to provide students with the ability to prove to employers that they have gained them.

One method of assessing employability skills has been for HE institutions to map where they appear in subject-specific curricula. For example, teamwork can be gained through successfully working in a group for a project in class time in one unit, and communication skills through succeeding at oral presentations as

part of another unit's assessment. This skill-mapping is, however, mostly an internal activity for institutional policy or quality assurance use, and usually not available for students as a document to take to employers as proof of their achievements. This could potentially be addressed if graduate attributes were provided as part of the degree transcripts. However, Australia has just undertaken a major review of the expected national standards on information provided after graduation, and on the new Australian HE Graduation Statement (AHEGS) there is no specific section for the graduate's employability skills to be recorded – again showing a disconnect between high-level policy positions and operational behaviour.

Individual experiences – micro level

The understanding by students of the detail and importance of employability skills is also in question, although recent research has found that as hard credentials such as degrees are devalued, the graduates' concern has moved to worry that they need more than 'just' a degree to get professional jobs (Tomlinson, 2008). Graduates understand that they need another 'signal' and it is suggested by the discourse of employability skills that being able to describe and cite evidence about the skills they have developed is an essential addition to their transitioning into the workforce (Bangerter, Roulin and Konig, 2009). From personal insight as a careers education practitioner in HE, it is easy to see that while students are keen to attend sessions that explain techniques to improve résumés and cover letters, they are much less interested in topics relating to more abstract employability skills.

As part of the move to embed employability skills within HE, more professional employment while studying is being included in degrees with a rise in sandwich and placement years, co-operative learning, internships and other forms of work-based learning. This authentic real-work experience while studying, with periods of up to a year in the workplace, might seem to sit oddly with the human capital theory that individuals benefit more from tertiary study than undertaking work, but these work experiences linked to study are routinely assessed for credit, and there are frequently specific activities to undertake as part of degree requirements.

A popular strategy for enabling this assessment is using e-portfolios to record students' reflections and include artefacts of their experiences. As well as reflecting post work-integrated learning, e-portfolios can enable students to record examples demonstrating employability skills from courses, extracurricular activities, and voluntary or paid work. How these e-portfolios would be used by subsequent first employers is not clear, nor is the portability of the e-portfolio systems, as students might not necessarily be able to use or access them after they leave university.

Despite this technical problem, many Australian institutions are considering the use of e-portfolio systems for recording employability skills, but in the most recent studies, none are used as a formal record of overall results, nor is there any proposal to adopt them in the new AHEGS. While universities do not formally issue e-portfolios with graduation, nor employers require them, professional associations that grant entry into specific professions

(such as teacher registration and accountancy professional groups) do pay attention to collections of evidence of specific skills relevant to the profession. It is ironic, therefore, that the greatest support for skills recording is not related to the generic employability skills that are beloved of the human capital theory, but instead to specific professional work-entry standards.

Summary

It is clear that the discourse of employability skills is complicated, sometimes confused, and over-determined by the input of varied stakeholders. The organisational actors (governments and institutions) that propagate the discourse speak in macro-economic language; the impact of these theories on an institutional level (meso) is operationally questionable and possibly consists of empty high-level policy statements; while the effect on individuals (micro) is equally uncertain and confusing.

There is a marked gap between what the discourse of human capital purports the worth of a degree to be to initial employment outcomes of students, and the realities of how graduates are perceived by employers. But as the major contributors keep speaking of employability skills, the existence and necessity of such notional skills becomes actual, if inscrutable. The employer-driven demand is locating employability skills in additions and increments to the degree, whereas if the human capital theory worked as stated, to secure professional employment, gaining the degree itself would be enough and then there would be less of *la différence* between the discourse of employability skills and how they operate in practice.

Endnotes

- 1 National Association of Careers Advisory Services & Australian Teaching and Learning Council, *Career Development Learning: Maximising the contribution of work-integrated learning to the student experience*, Final Project Report, June 2009.
- 2 L. Holmes and A. Coughin, *Between policy and practice on graduate employability: lost in translation?* Presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education, Liverpool, UK, December 2008.
- 3 Department of Education, Science and Training, *Employability Skills for the Future*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2002.

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