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CONCEPTUALISING ROUTES TO EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF EDUCATION STUDIES

This paper contributes to critical understandings of the significance of employability in current debates about the transformation of Higher Education (HE). We express our concerns about the implications of orientating HE to utilitarian demands in the light of a tendency to align discussions about the significance of studying at university with the idea of employability. The research underlying this article explores how the experience of UK university students in the context of education studies programmes shapes their conceptions of employability and their understanding of their subject of study. Ideas developed by Gert Biesta are used as a framework to discuss different forms in which thoughts about employability are articulated. The analysis of data that includes reflections on the experience of placement suggests that tensions between education as training for teachers and education as the possibility for change, point to the emergence of a new form of understanding employability that may have to work the boundary between both. We argue that lessons learnt from the case of education studies can be useful to other subjects and programmes of study that also share an interest in the theoretical study of a discipline or where a narrow career expectation is being challenged by broader possibilities.

Keywords: employability, education studies, higher education, teaching

Introduction

In recent years, we have seen how ideas associated with the entry and success of university graduates into the labour market and the skills demanded have populated the discussions on Higher Education, and have become an increasing area of interest. The economic climate following the 2008 global financial crisis and the continuous institutionalisation of the policies of marketisation have contributed to this trend. The UK Government, as in many other countries, has been demanding a greater focus on employability in HE (see DfBIS 2016; Tomlinson 2012), to the extent that it has become one of the most significant and contested parameters for measuring and

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comparing university performance.

Employability became a strategic component of recent changes introduced in HE that influenced institutional, teaching, and organisational practices. Bates and Kaye (2014) report on how the introduction of higher tuitions fees in the UK, among other expectations, brought an increase in student awareness of graduate job prospects. The recently extended practice of facilitating work experiences as part of university programmes has become an important feature that contributes to aligning student interests with the market, society and the global situation (Heyler and Lee 2014). However, at the same time that employability has become an increasing expectation for students (Glover et al. 2002), it has put extra pressure on lecturers and institutions who have to respond to external demands, which are sometimes perceived as unrealistic (Nixon, Scullion and Hearn 2016; Morrison 2014a). Despite the many efforts already made to meet those demands and expectations, existing approaches and initiatives are seen as insufficient (Morrison 2014b; Knight and Yorke 2004) and as a result a stronger focus on employability is demanded by different stakeholder groups (Tymon 2013; Jameson et al. 2012). This overarching context sets the scene for this paper, in which we look at the particular case of the study of education as a discipline in HE with the aim of exploring how the experience of UK university students in the context of education studies programmes shapes their conceptions of employability and their understanding of their subject of study.

Employability and its discontents

It is clear that discussions about employability are central to current HE debates and practices (Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne 2017). The potential of students to obtain and maintain an appropriate job is a common starting point to articulate ideas about

employability but despite some attempts to develop a comprehensive explanation of what it means (see for example Yorke 2006; Knight and Yorke 2003; Bowden et al. 2000), there is no consensus definition that provides a broader understanding (Sin and Neave 2014; Brown, Hesketh & Williams 2013). Therefore, it is not strange to see that those discussions and associated initiatives in HE have been approached with distrust and thus, more critical and nuanced ideas in relation to the context of specific disciplines are demanded.

There is a risk when focusing excessively on understanding the outcome of university education in relation to employability as an 'obvious tangible benefit' that is measurable (Kaye, Bickel and Birtwistle 2006, 86) in terms of specific skills or abilities gained at university. For Harvey (2001), the efforts made by HE institutions to embrace a standardised and objective definition are counter-productive as it leads to unhelpful comparisons and contributes to the promotion of pervasive classifications among different institutions. As a result, external demands (e.g. from employers or the global market) are put at the centre of the discussion, whereas the more localised community and educative concerns are marginalised. One critique is that institutional agendas are more concerned with progressing in league tables and demonstrate 'entrepreneurial utilitarianism' rather than promoting a deeper understanding of what is really happening within university classrooms and in relation to students' individual expectations or lecturers' motivations (Neave 2013).

Some critical voices maintain that intensifying concern about employability by contemporary neoliberal states responds to an interest in reorienting the function of HE, with the intention of decentralising its pedagogic and knowledge production functions to stress its training purposes and fit within a globalised economic model (Noonan and

Coral 2015; Peters and Roberts 2000). The threat of introducing pedagogical changes to satisfy market demands and perform an economic function contradicts some of the intellectual, cultural and democratic values that have made universities a significant social institution (Giroux 2014; Gumport, 2000). For Boden and Neveda (2010) the transformation introduced by the discourse of employability has three profound implications. Firstly, the division between universities for leaders and universities for a docile work force. Secondly, universities are required to respond not only to government demands, but also to employers. And finally, and in line with some of the arguments already discussed, the influence of the employability discourse interferes with pedagogies and curricula and its final consequence is a questionable social justice agenda that prioritises the promotion of individualistic rationalities and market values while subduing democratic aspirations.

The presentation of HE, and education in general, as a product or commodity, the function of which is to provide and classify qualified workers, is not new (Collini 2012; Clark 1930). However, in the last few years we have observed an intensification of the introduction of political and educational changes. Some of them, under the auspices of the employability agenda, make more visible the presence of market dynamics that accelerate the instrumentalisation of education. Whilst it is widely accepted that external forces legitimate the increase of market orientated initiatives in HE that demand knowledge with immediate applicability (Brown 2015; Barnett 2011; Gibbs 2001), there is also resistance from students and lectures that opens and expands the discussion about employability and the value of HE. From this perspective, Williams (2013) challenges the idea that students and lecturers are passive in relation to the marketisation and instrumentalisation of HE. When they have an appropriate space, students and lecturers can engage in meaningful discussions that go beyond arguments

about employability, economic parameters or accountability. Here it is suggested that students and lectures must focus on open debates that explore different ways of understanding the purposes of education.

Different authors warn us that the instrumentalization of the curriculum and some responses to the utilitarian demands displace some of the constitutive values of the university, such as curiosity driven education, critical and complex learning and preparation for civic and democratic life (Brown 2015; Giroux 2014; Biesta 2007). HE is exposed to a high pressure to build employability into their programmes (Knight and Yorke 2004; Gibbs 2001) through 'the adoption of instrumentalist skill based pedagogies' (Furedi 2011, 5) that aim to produce skilfull and work-ready employers (Plastrik, Seltzer and Taylor 2003; Robts 2007). But HE is also about promoting critical thinking and being (Dunne 2015; Barnett 2007) and should not forget to encourage and dispose students to develop as moral beings and to participate in their communities (Sullivan and Rosin 2008). From this perspective, we stress that academic challenges and career enhancements are not opposed. The development of an employability plan or agenda should not be in conflict with the development of academic knowledge when aiming to enhance working opportunities. As Gedye, Fender and Chalkey (2004) argue, 'a rigorous intellectual training is in itself an excellent foundation for entry to the world of work' (393). Employability issues are not external to HE or opposed to more philosophical or critical approaches to education, but in our contemporary moment, it has become a constitutive element that underlies teaching and learning practices even when it is not explicit.

Employability in education studies

The tensions between vocational and academic interests have been a constant in the

history of British education and it is in this context that the study of education as a pluralistic area of knowledge is grounded (Crook 2002; McCulloch 2002). The new education studies university courses emerged in the UK in the 1980s as a contestation to the emphasis on the practical nature of teaching that transformed teacher education into teaching training, resulting in the disappearance of critical elements from much of the curriculum (Barlett and Burton, 2006). Whilst education studies programmes are not providing a teaching qualification (QTS), they allow more flexibility in terms of subject combinations, theoretical content and career options, at the same time as keeping open alternative graduate routes for those interested in becoming primary or secondary teachers. Davies and Hogarth (2004) have described education studies programmes as a 'rich tapestry of provisions' with 'no clear consensus' (431) although looking at the Quality Assurance Agency subject benchmark for education studies, (QAA 2015) we can see that there is a common framework used to develop education studies programmes, but also that some flexibility and diversity is present and celebrated. This flexibility disassociates education studies from the current vocational approach of teacher training courses, keeping open multiple employability aspirations (Hodkinson 2009). Although teaching is a common employment reference and to some extent the main pathway, it is also important that education studies is represented as a course open to other pathways (generally associated with the educational, social and caring sectors). In other words, employability discussions in education studies are divided into two main alternatives: "teaching" and "other careers".

This form of grouping career options into "teaching" (narrow-clear definition) and "something else" (broader definition) is not exclusive to education studies programmes. It can also be applied to other subjects and programmes where the teaching route has a

strong presence, or indeed into other disciplines where a narrow career expectation is being challenged by broader possibilities.

Theoretical framework

For the aim of this research, we draw on Gert Biesta's theoretical contribution to education by linking and expanding his ideas about the ends and functions of education to the terrain of discussions about employability. While employability is widely seen as measureable by means of verifying how many students are employed after graduation, Biesta has articulated a strong critique of the prevalence of measurement as a way of assessing the effectiveness of education (e.g. see: Biesta 2009). Some critics might argue that the concept of employability and Biesta's opposition to measurement in education are not compatible. Other readers may think that Biesta's approach is simply not applicable to issues of employability, deeming that his framework is mainly conceptualised to discuss issues about liberal, justice, or citizenship education. However, we consider his approach relevant for different reasons. Firstly, for his insistence on the exploration of fundamental questions of education at multiple levels (Biesta 2015, 2013, 2010). Secondly, for defending the democratic role and social value of universities (Biesta 2011, 2007, 2005, Biesta et al. 2009). Thirdly, for explaining how the new language and politics of learning are eroding some conceptions of education (Biesta 2013, 2012, 2006) that are associated to certain views of employability. Finally, because discussions about employability can be contextualised as part of the question of purpose of education that is central to Biesta's work, enriching the quantitative explanations with qualitative arguments.

This question is approached as dynamic and multidimensional for the reason that multiple views and voices are involved and because education is defined in relation to at

least three different domains or dimensions: qualification, subjectivation and socialisation (Biesta 2015, 2013, 2010).

- The domain of *qualification* refers to the transmission of knowledge, skills and dispositions and we associate this dimension with those interpretations of employability that centralise their arguments in exploring the way in which universities prepare and qualify skilful workers. We understand that discussions that focus on how to develop and transfer skills, key competences, essential knowledge and abilities belong to this domain.

- The domain of *socialisation* refers to the relationship between subjects involved in education and the existing order. This domain 'has to do with the many ways in which, through education, we become members of and part of particular social, cultural and political orders' (Biesta 2009, 40). Through the socialisation function, we recognise that employability is presented as a bridge between the educative world, the labour market and a specific profession.

- Finally, the domain of *subjectivation* refers to the qualities of being a subject and considers how education contributes to the development of students and lecturers as persons who can be free (Biesta 2015). To explore this domain, the point of departure is that lecturers cannot produce or control the event of subjectivity (Biesta 2013) but they still play a fundamental role in the process. From this perspective, we realise that lectures are not responsible for producing the event and they cannot predict the careers that students are going to pursue after university or the skills that they are attaining.

Exploring how the three domains are articulated, combined and displayed allows us

to illustrate and comprehend different answers to these fundamental questions and explore how they relate to ideas associated to employability debates.

Description of the study

This article is grounded in a collaborative effort between a researcher group composed of 24 university students from different levels and 6 lecturers to explore issues about employability in education studies programmes in the UK. Six research teams were set up, consisting of four education studies students and one education studies lecturer from the three different HE institutions that lead the project (2 Post-92 and 1 Research Intensive). The members of the research teams were students from the lead institutions who volunteered to become co-researchers, participating in the negotiation of research strategies, gathering data from other students and participating in its discussion. Each research team developed their own set of questions that aimed to expound different elements associated to the debate about employability in Education studies.

Between 2013 and 2016 the research teams visited 14 HE institutions across the UK that were accessed through the British Education Studies Association (BESA) network of contacts. We considered a convenient sample that included 49 education studies students and 12 lectures that volunteered to participate in open-ended interviews.

[INSERT HERE FIGURE 1: Research Groups and Participants information]

The participants come from institutions that offer Education Studies as an undergraduate programme of study and we ensured that there is representation from across a section of characteristics including different levels of study, genders and ethnic-groups. The majority of the institutions offering this type of programme are post-

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92 universities and for that reason, most of the institutions considered for our study are in this group. Paradoxically, post-92 universities are characterised for offering programmes that have a vocational tradition whereas programmes such as education studies have a more theoretical orientation.

After data collection, the members of the six research groups participated in two full day events that aimed to discuss data associated to the interviews. At this stage, we again present an attempt to put into practice the collaborative philosophy underpinning the methodology of this study. The students and lecturers that compose the research groups participate in discussions around the data obtained from the interviews. The strategy to ensure rigour is built on this collaboration and the capacity of the researchers to produce a common understanding that emerges from their different perspectives, their engagement with the theoretical ideas and their own experience of the phenomenon of study. The views of students and lectures are the main source of information of our study as we recognise them as the key agents in the educative process. Their responses provided to us some form of insight into the educative context where the problem of the study is situated. To examine the data obtained, we used a form of inductive content analysis (Krippendorff 2013; Elo and Kyngäs 2008) that helped us to eventually reduce data and focus on those categories with stronger presence in the interviews. We use Biesta's ideas to explore and give meaning to these categories, but we do not pretend to develop a full answer to what employability means for HE in terms of 'condensation of complexity into categories or themes' (MacLure 2010, 278), but rather aim to 'open new possibilities for thinking and doing' (277). Excerpts from transcriptions are used to clarify links between data, interpretation and conclusions (Corden & Sanisbury, 2006). They are presented in our discussion together with enriched descriptions that combine narratives grounded on data and ideas related to

our theoretical framework.

Our overarching intention is to invite the reader to think critically about the way that employability is presented and ingrained in education studies, similar programmes and HE more broadly. The arguments developed here are transferable to other programmes and areas that share similar form and concerns about employability. Moreover, we argue that these arguments are also useful to expound the present transformation that the educational space of HE is experiencing.

Findings and Discussion

Biesta's model of understanding education provides us with a useful tool with which to analyse and make some sense of our data. The interviews manifested broad themes for investigation and discussion: the conceptualization of education studies as a subject in relation to possible career directions and the understanding of education studies as offering possibilities for change through critical engagement with course content and placement experience.

Conceptualisation of Education Studies and its career possibilities

Our starting analysis of the data revealed that students' initial attraction to Education Studies as a course and the employability options that it provided focused on the flexibility of the discipline. On the one hand, it allowed them to progress into a professional teaching position, but also allowed them to develop a critical standpoint on education that could grow from engagement with the sociological and political roots of the discipline. Students spoke of the way that the course offered them flexibility, they spoke of it being a 'broad course', 'dipping in' to theoretical areas, and the course 'ticking all these boxes'. However, they also spoke of some initial confusion over the direction of the course; the 'what am I doing here?' question arose for them when

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compared to the clear direction of an education course that focused on the requirements for professional teaching qualifications. Students will have been aware of such courses offered at university open days where Education Studies is alongside professional routes to teaching. Students are aware of the potential for socialisation into a very specific education career path, and that this path is a useful option within the framework of the course, but they also see that their choice positions them in a more precarious place without clear definitions as to the path that they will take. The options on the course, which we might place in the domain of qualification, as they are about the way in which a course communicates and divides knowledge into areas of study, provide choice at the expense of the clear direction that a course primarily concerned with socialisation into a particular career might provide. We took this as a starting point to show how our data can demonstrate that these domains often overlap, and that experiences that students report are often framed in various combinations of the analytical framework. We did not find that Education Studies could be placed more in one of the domains than in another, but rather that the Education Studies interpreted these domains differently from other types of education courses. This is important in the context of employability because all courses of study, to some extent, can be understood in terms of Biesta's domains. For education courses, this form of analysis presents us with a more complex set of parameters. Faculties of education have a range of courses, and these may emphasize professional training or theoretical content, or a combination of both. However, for us, 'Education' works at two levels: it is both the experience of students on the course, and the content that they are engaging with.

One of the tensions we found within the data was the ways in which students saw the difference between professional teaching routes leading to qualified teacher status and education studies. For example, in response to the question 'Have your career

aspirations changed since starting this course? two students suggested surprisingly different views:

> *[…] I enjoyed being up there[when previously studying Primary Teaching], but I felt that was just being constantly observed, and never left to do what you want, and that puts you on edge and it's just not as nice. Whereas on the placement I have just done, I was supporting SEN children, and they gave me a sheet with what PL support they needed each lesson, where I was going and then left me to it. If I had any problem, I could just ask them, and I found it was a lot freer and a lot… nicer* (Year 3 student- Institution 4).

> *It's a little bit more weird when you're not entirely sure where you're going to go after Uni. It's just a bit obscure. With the Primary Teaching […] you knew exactly what you were doing whereas on the educational studies unless you know that you want to go on to a PGCE; it is a bit more open, you are a bit more lost* (Year 3- Institution 4).

Such responses, which were typical of the range of views from something that is 'a lot freer and ...nicer' to something that is 'weird' and 'obscure', reveal the tension between the promise of well-defined structures, and the freedom to explore other ways of understanding the role of an education professional. There is also a sense, in the first of these examples, of the status attached to two ways of working in education: one is an enjoyment of being 'up there' in front of a class and public view, the other working in a support role where there is time to think and possibly make mistakes. For students who articulate these tensions, education studies offers an opportunity to question the value of structures that for some offer a clear path to a defined career, but for others are a limiting factor in becoming independent in their search for a concept of a different educator-self that makes sense to them. Here students reflect upon the structures of qualification that are present in two different approaches to becoming an educator, and this implies different understandings of the how students might grow into roles

associated with their discipline. It is clear that some sense of freedom to experiment is important, and so is operating outside of the perceived or real pressures of teaching. It is a space in which the event of subjectivity might be shaped in ways that are more open to possibility.

For some students, however the thinking around how they saw education was not a simple view of how it was different to professional courses or that one was necessarily more desirable than other alternatives:

> *"It really annoys me when people say: oh I'll just fall back on a PGCE. It's like saying that if someone really desperately wants to do that as a career, it's like oh what do I do now? I'll just do an extra year"* (Year 2 Student-Institution 1).

Here the student positions herself curiously as championing both the career aspirations of trainee teachers on those courses, and the idea that education studies can, and should, be more than just a 'fall back' option. For this student, engagement with a course that offers a broader view of education should be taken seriously not treated as a low risk option that can easily be converted into a more well defined career path. It is not clear exactly what it is that annoys this student. What we found in the data was that students were not just interested in the direct career path offered through a PGCE, they were also interested in the content of their course and the potential it had to offer different routes to work. It suggests that the safety net of a professional training qualification is one that some students might criticize, emphasising the content of their degree, not the qualification attached to it, as offering relevant knowledge and expertise to carry out a particular job.

For our analytical framework, we have found that Biesta's domains have relevance in interpreting the tensions that have arisen around this discipline and the potential that it offers students. For professional training courses, the domain of

'socialisation', is about students becoming a teacher, and the associated professional attitudes and aptitudes that it entails. 'Qualification' in this context, offers students a clear route into a job that, from the point of view of students, has some definition in its purpose. For education studies, which is positioned in the same discipline area, the purpose can have quite different meanings for students, at lease in their broad views that are presented here. 'Qualification' in the case of education studies, is about engagement with the discipline of education, which requires an understanding of education at a broader policy and theoretical level, before classroom practice can really be understood. It is more difficult to define 'socialisation' for education studies students, where the broadness and flexibility of the course offers many possibilities. One interpretation that we believe we have found, and begin to articulate in the sections below, is about reflection and the possibility of being an agent for change.

The experience of placements

One of the ways in which students articulated the differences in what they did on the course, in terms of the process of becoming an educational practitioner, was through their reflections in placements. Many of the students interviewed talked about the value of the placement setting if you intended to do a professional qualification after the degree (in this case a PGCE), but others were less convinced about what a placement offered, at least in its current form:

> Student 1: *The things you have to do around placement, they're useful but, it feels like they are just there to tick a box...[...]and what you write isn't necessarily the way in which you developed.*

> Student 2: *It's not really a true reflection of what they have done, and because there isn't a lot of mentor feedback, people tend to elaborate on what they have done, and say they have done more than they have.*

Student 3: *I think it's difficult as well that they wanted the portfolio to be a reflective one, but they also wanted it to be academic [...]. So sometimes, you end up cheating in your assignment. You just put things in there just to get the mark. It's not truly coming from your own personal point of view* (Year 3 Students-Institution 12).

Here we see students talking about the messiness of their placement clashing with the need for some kind of authentic, logical series of experiences on which they are to reflect, as part of their journey towards becoming a more competent teacher. The stories offered in theories around education, for them, are not matched to the life that they see in school settings. They also talk about the clashes between what they perceive as 'academic' expectations and the need to be reflective. Our three domains of education may offer further insight. Socialization, here, happens in a work based setting in which we might expect a range of experiences and encounters with different people, and these will likely follow different paths depending on their career choices. The education studies course seems to expect the placement to offer an experimental space in which the 'portfolio' approach allows students to gather different experiences together in a piece of work, but something is not quite working. Again, we also see the possibility of the 'event of subjectification' that it is hoped would not only allow students to make sense of their experience, but also give them a stronger sense of the role into which they are growing. However, for these students, there is a problem, one that could be created by certain ideas about the needs of academic work and theory, or perhaps it is that they have not been prepared for the complexity of some settings upon which they are expected base their reflections. Whatever the cause, it points to the need to rethink placement aspects of courses on non-professional qualification routes.

Academic rigour and its relationship to change

We turn now to data from the interviews that explore the suggestion that a subject like education studies offers possibilities for students to consider change and to consider themselves as active agents in this change. We suggest that this can challenge the idea that employability claims a position of transcendence in the discipline, as suggested earlier in the paper. Consider these two statements from students talking about what they thought their education studies course offered them:

> *Somebody asked me about the course and he said it just sounds a bit woolly. I said, it is if you don't take it for what it can be, look at the potential of it and then I explained that I am not just looking at how to teach. I am looking at everything to do with education and how it affects children and it does help with your professional development because you are aware of the other factors in education* (Year 3 Student-Institution 12)

> *Many of the modules have been looking about the future and that's one of the differences between us and initial teacher training. The fact that we're looking at how can we change education, and they're looking at how can we teach education. I think that is the difference […]. how we can change education rather than how we replicate education* (Year 2 Student- Institution 2)

In these responses students articulate the value that they place in their course, and what they see the content doing for them as potential education professionals. Students respond to the suggestion that course content can seem nebulous when disconnected from a direct career route. For these students it opens up possibilities for change, where students are critical of 'Education' that is seen as a product or package that can be 'taught'. For them the engagement with theoretical perspectives allows them bring together theory with the 'real world' context for their future work.

What we are seeing in the voices of students who articulate such views is that there is a growing sense that connections between the course and students' aspirations in education are not linked by a set of skills and competences that one provides for the

other, or that the process of 'getting it' can happen quickly for a conveniently defined 'employable' person. The process is one that recognises the possibility for change, rather than reproduction; change that is not defined as some kind of creative approach (as is perhaps evident in literature around new pedagogy or educational technology), but a critical one that requires something more. If, as Biesta has suggested, 'employability' is often seen as disconnected from, and more important than, the context of the courses, then the way in which these students might be defined as 'employable' requires us to understand something more of the identity shifts that are taking place. They are not necessarily valuing one context over another—school placement experience or university knowledge—but seeing that there are values in both. This is not to say that these students wouldn't take part in the discourse of employability and its associated practices, but that they value engagement with the educational problems that the course opens up. It is engagement with these that allows them to begin to take part in a broader conversation about change, even though this may not necessarily be a desirable quality in some areas of employment and requires adherence to practices that either change slowly or require longer periods of service before the possibilities for being a change agent emerge. Again, we see in these statements a mixture of the domains of education that we explore earlier in the paper. Moving between Qualification-Socialization and Qualification-Subjectivation seems to require a growing critical reflection on the differences between the requirements of a discipline that, on the one hand has its roots in philosophy, politics, and sociology and on the other is part of increasingly systematic training programmes for potential teachers. The tension between these emerges as part of the student's process of becoming something that they see as a different type of worker, but not one that is not easily defined yet.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how relating the topic of employability with the question of purpose we contribute to unpacking employability initiatives and understandings that play only to the functional, market-driven versions of education in which employability is delineated by a defined route that articulates the student experience. Using the domains of education from Biesta has allowed us to put together ideas about employability and purpose in a meaningful form. In so doing, we contribute to open up possibilities to think more broadly and critically about students' expectations and aspirations, the way that they navigate the tensions between defined and open employability routes and ways of thinking about professional practice in education.

Although this article analyses the UK experience in a specific programme, it reflects a broader move in HE internationally. The arguments presented here are also relevant for other university programmes that share with Education Studies a theoretical approach to the study of a discipline or area of knowledge. They are programmes that privilege rigorous intellectual training over knowledge with immediate applicability. In many cases those programmes also share with Education Studies the word 'studies' (e.g. childhood studies, gender studies, media studies etc.) but their main common point is the condition that lecturers and students also experience similar struggles when trying to articulate responses to questions about employability. University programmes invest efforts in developing a clear and accessible narrative about employability. However, the current socio-economic context is characterised by uncertainty and rapid change demanding the inclusion of new ways of thinking about employability. The examples from Education Studies presented in this paper show that students value their developing competence as practitioners and this includes the possibility of questioning

the values on which they based. We showed evidence of resistance to a narrow definitions, but also of questioning experiences that distance them from the demands of work. What we have learnt from the Education Studies experience discussed here is that in the study of disciplines in which coexist a well-defined route into work with more open routes, students develop different approaches to understand employability. These approaches lead to different interpretations of the purpose of HE but also to wider and more personalised disciplinary understandings. The argument we put forward in this article is that employability initiatives need to be unpacked and carefully analysed, neither dismissed only as a neoliberal agenda, nor accepted without question and analysis but grounded in multiple views that emerge in conversations with students. We suggest that lecturers and students have to revisit the logic behind putting an under-developed version of employability at the centre of HE, with a view to bring to light how it can ultimately turn education against itself and themselves. The point here is not refusing to talk about employability, skills or traditional employability routes, since we run the risk of jeopardizing a significant aspect of education. It is about building bridges between academics and students comprehension of the purpose of HE, to reconnect them with less instrumentalist interpretations that allow education to happen (or not) as an open and unpredictable event. What we have learnt from the study presented here is that the concept of employability is open to new conceptualisations when students engage in understandings of their subject of study that enable envisaging multiple professional opportunities. Whilst there are numerous critics of employability as a market driven agenda serving only instrumental purposes, we recognise that such a position does not value the real concerns that students have for their time spent at university and the demands of the work that they will do beyond this. Through our study, we suggest a practical way of adapting the more theoretical programmes to the

demands of the market reforms by opening to further discussion issues about employability in the context of the classroom. Such discussions need not lead to programmes with specific employability elements, as we have seen in some programmes. Rather we should see the concept of employability as something that is part of a conversation with students about their emerging needs as they think and engage with theory. By providing opportunities to explore and celebrate the value of theoretical knowledge to perform both current and undetermined future professional demands, lecturers will be considering instrumentalist interests without betraying other forms of understanding the educative experience and the subject of study.

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