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Whose job is it anyway?: Inclusive approaches to developing work-ready students for the graduate labour market

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Work-readiness

The extent to which graduates are 'work ready' is seen as “indicative of their potential in terms of job performance and career advancement” (Caballero and Walker, 2010, 12). Finch et al (2016) provide a dynamic capabilities view of employability aligned to the conceptualisation of work-readiness, which proposes that work-readiness of students is based on: intellectual capital, personality, job specific skills and meta-skills.

The work-readiness development of a graduate is transient and relational. Environmental influences and interactions including university, work experiences, friends and family all provide spaces in which transformation of students can happen. It is here that students' employability capabilities are developed, preparing them for success in the workforce.

Work-readiness is shaped via the formation of professional identity (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2001), professional skills awareness and development (Sin et al, 2012) and self-reflexive understanding of the individual (Brown et al, 2004).

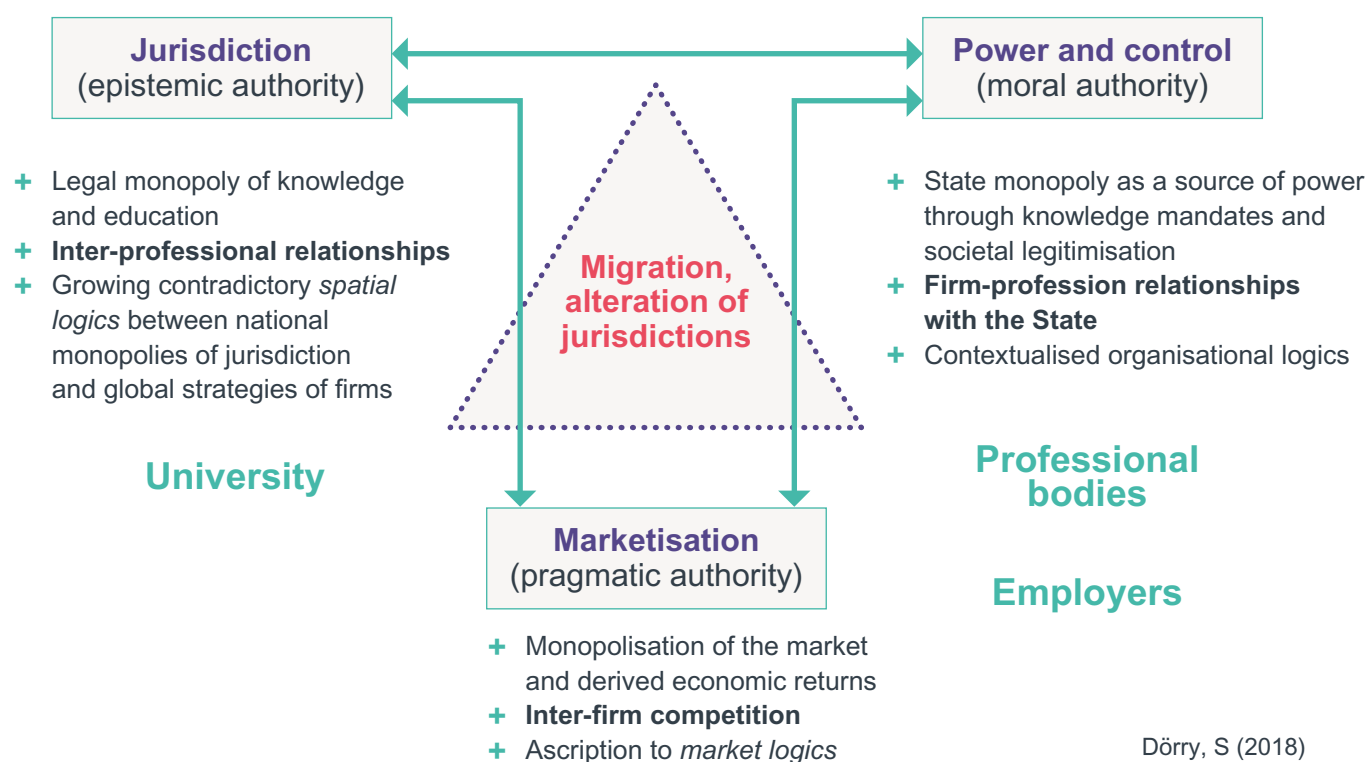
Work readiness – competing logics

The question of whose responsibility it is to develop work-ready graduates is a long contested and controversial issue (Barnett, 2000). Many employers and students believe that university education has the primary purpose of preparing students for work in the graduate labour market. It is reported that some students perceive that it is possible to develop work-ready skills simply by undertaking three or four years of university education (Crebert et al, 2004).

There is evidence of an apparent mismatch between employers' expectations of graduates and the skills of graduates entering the labour market (AC Nielsen Research Services, 2000; Precision Consulting, 2007). Similarly, it is clear that many graduates' expectations of employers differ from employers' expectations of new graduates (Bandow, 2004; Walker et al, 2012).

Business students, unlike say nursing students, do not interact with their professional statutory regulatory bodies (PSRBs) very much during their studies. Yet, the decision to undertake a chosen business course is often driven by PSRB accreditation (Gee, 2015). PSRBs have firm professional relationships with the state. Durkheim (1984) explains, “the fundamental duty of the state is laid down in this very fact: it is to persevere in calling the individual to a moral way of life” (p69).

Figure 1. Jurisdictions of work-readiness agents; universities, PSRBs and employers, adapted from Dörry (2018)



The competing logics between multiple agents (universities, PSRBs and employers) who have authority to develop students' work-readiness, make the spaces of transformation in which students can develop their work-readiness extremely difficult to navigate. Consequently, students migrate from different jurisdictions and have to reframe their understandings of work-readiness in preparation for entry into the graduate labour market.

Student voice – work-readiness development

This paper argues that the student voice is a critical voice within the conversations of responsibility and accountability of developing students' work-readiness. A dialogic approach creates opportunities for better understanding by universities of structures of opportunity (Roberts, 1977) and challenges in navigating these spaces, for different student groups. Career theory is used as a framework with which to scaffold the students' perceptions.

As such, the student voice is centred to allow the exploration of students' perceptions relating to where and with whom the responsibility lies for preparing them for success in the graduate labour market. The paper analyses students' perspectives to explore the power and responsibility dynamics between the different agents who are involved in developing the work-readiness of students.

Approach

This case study, undertaken at a Russell Group University, focuses on the baseline findings from qualitative data collected from students regarding the multiple agents with varying authority in the development of students' preparedness for the graduate labour market.

The participants of the study include Year 2 accounting/banking and finance students (n=87) and postgraduate business students (n=38).

Data collection

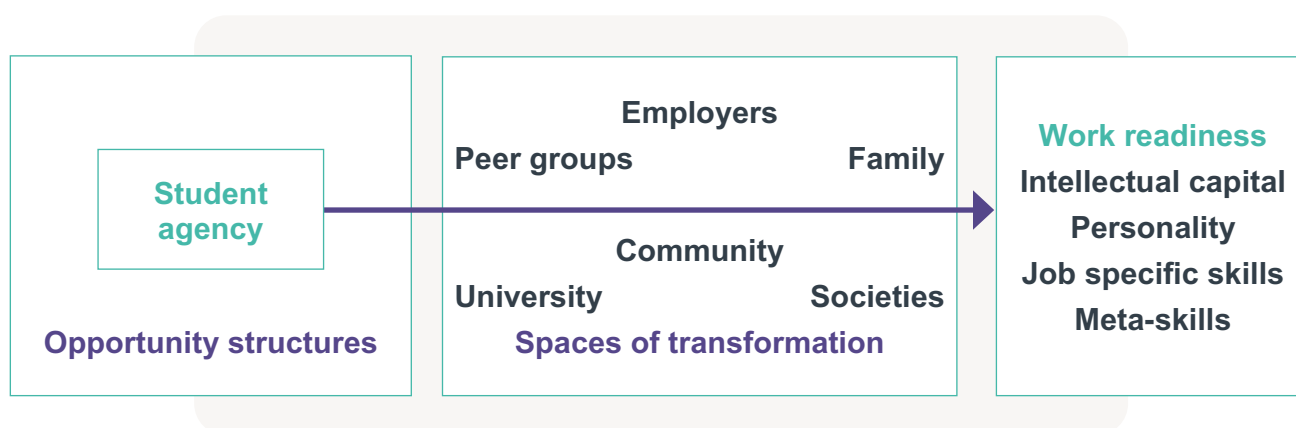
- + An online questionnaire was circulated to Year 2 accounting/banking and finance students during November 2018 that asked questions about their development of skills awareness and understandings, achievements and identity formation
- + Four focus groups were run in July 2019 with postgraduate business students who were asked to reflect on their experiences during a five-day study tour in Zurich in which they visited six Swiss companies to learn more about business operations in Switzerland.

Data analysis

Qualitative data was collected from both student groups relating to authority and responsibility for the development of students' skills awareness, skills development, intellectual capital, professional identity and job-specific skills.

Career theories were then applied to draw out themes using the systematic six-step thematic analysis approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This requires an iteration of analysis from the data to the literature and back again to draw out themes.

Figure 2. A theoretical framework of this study, 'Whose job is it anyway – inclusive approaches to developing students' work-readiness



Outcomes – data results

The results below summarise students' perceptions identified from analysis of the qualitative data collected from the questionnaire and focus groups, of whose 'job' (ie responsibility) it is to develop their work-readiness.

The role of universities

- + A dominant theme that emerged is what Savickas (2012) refers to as 'life design'. This is the sense that students can be strangers in their own lives. Respondents felt quite strongly that universities should help them infuse their projects and experiences (often not job related) within their spaces of transformation with their own career development plans
- + Student respondents suggested universities are responsible for helping them understand and control their narratives. In practice, this means universities supporting students' articulation of aspirations, skills and career management strategies
- + Students expressed that universities should place an emphasis on developing work-ready graduates who are competent within their discipline fields. They also recognise that, as graduates, they are required to possess the abilities necessary to negotiate a world of work that is in constant flux (Barrie, 2006; Nagarajan and Edwards, 2014)
- + Students asserted that universities should help develop their personal effectiveness (self-efficacy, agency, self-actualisation) (Quendler and Lamb, 2016; Schmidt and Bargel, 2012)
- + Students perceived that universities are responsible for providing knowledge and education that prepares them for work tasks but also opportunities to change, flex and adapt in complex situations (Brew, 2010)
- + (Postgraduate) students expressed expectations that personality and intellectual capability would be developed at university through interactions with 'stars' ie successful, impressive lecturers/students
- + (Postgraduate) students expressed that university spaces should provide spaces through interactions with staff and other students where students can learn how to be professional

The role of employers

- + Students suggest that it is the employer's responsibility to provide opportunities to develop task-focused functions of the job and opportunities to apply education and knowledge
- + Students perceive employers can provide exposure to the 'real world' and an authenticity of experience to develop skills useful and valuable for work
- + Students sought validation and confirmation of their preparedness for success in the workplace from employers

- + Students expected employers to highlight areas of improvement of self and identify that students need to be successful in the workplace
- + Students perceive employers helping a shifting of mindset, through broadening of horizons, enhanced network capital and a sense of what is possible in their life design

The role of students

- + Personal trade-offs are consciously made by some students when making choices about what spaces of transformation to occupy to develop their work-readiness
- + Some students acknowledged that they need to take advantage of opportunities; to view them as an investment rather than a cost (expressed by postgraduate students)

The role of professional bodies

- + There was no reference in the responses to the role of professional bodies (PSRBs) by students when discussing whose job it is to develop their work-readiness.

Summary

Students perceive dichotomous yet overlapping responsibilities between multiple agents in developing their work readiness. The extent to which students engage with different spaces of transformation and extracted value from those interactions in terms of work-readiness development is influenced by their opportunity structures. This supports the theory that structures of opportunity influence the sense of agency that students feel they have and should have in developing their work readiness.

Students held an expectation that their professional socialisation starts within university and is validated by employers through tasks and development in authentic occupational contexts.

The data suggests there is an increasing expectation by students that universities should support their life design and the articulation of their work-readiness narratives. However, a strong view held by many student respondents was that it is employers who provide an insight into what is possible and help shape and reshape the narrative. This suggests that universities and employers could work together to help students 'write themselves into existence' – that is, to better understand what they need to get to where they want to be and what impact this will have on self and their identity. This will pose important questions about the extent to which students need to re-migrate within spaces of transformation, or indeed change elements of themselves and their identity.

Life design embodies developing students' personal epistemologies, their knowledge of themselves and their life narratives. Students perceive that university is not just a space where they develop knowledge and skills capabilities. They perceive that university is a place where they learn about their place in the world.

Conclusion

A conclusion from this study is that the academy needs to consider that students' ability to develop work readiness is influenced by their ability to exercise agency and engage with spaces of transformation. Some of these influences are structural and others are linked to their understanding of themselves and their employability capabilities. Students perceive that the role of universities in this context goes beyond creating spaces to enhance skills awareness and development. Students suggest that universities ought to support students' personal epistemologies.

Further developments

An area of future work for this study is to facilitate enhanced employer engagement and to look at radical epistemologies which encourage employers to consider a review of what Yosso (2005, 70) refers to as “community cultural wealth”. This approach adopts a critical perspective of the foundations on which perceptions of work readiness are based. In doing so, the bias and prejudices associated with perceptions are surfaced. Meaningful discussions regarding how these biases and prejudices are embedded into graduate recruitment and selection processes can take place. These conversations are currently underway with some very large organisations and it is hoped that we will report on the findings at next year's Advance HE employability symposium (2021/2022).

In pursuing such conversations, we can better support students to navigate and take ownership of their life design in order to achieve the graduate outcomes that they deserve rather than being constrained by their opportunity structures.

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