

Theory of employability



Chapter 1

1. Introduction

The theory of employability can be difficult to identify; there can be many factors that contribute to the idea of being employable. Little (2001) suggests, that it is a multi-dimensional concept, and there is a need to distinguish between the factors relevant to the job and preparation for work. Morley (2001) however states that employability is not just about students making deposits in a bank of skills, Knight (2001) further considers the notion of employability to be:

“ A synergic combination of personal qualities, skills of various kinds and subject understanding”. (Knight and Yorke. 2001)

The understanding of employability can be seen to be more complicated than the emphasis that Dearing (1997) has placed on student’s personal qualities, which suggests less emphasis on these qualities and more on generic academic skills. However, it could be assumed that the individual’s personal skills could have considerable bearing on a particular student’s success in the employability stakes.

The jobs market is rapidly changing with new sectors emerging, changing the nature of work and the way employees perceive the workplace. Graduates will have to be flexible and have the personal capabilities to manage changing and challenging work situations. Employers are looking to recruit graduates who fit into the organisational culture and utilise their abilities and skills to transform the company by facilitating innovative teamwork. (Harvey et al., 1997)

According to Yorke and Knight (2004b) employability is seen to be influenced, amongst other things by students' self efficacy beliefs, student's self-theories and personal qualities. They highlight that what is of critical importance is the extent to which students feel that they can " make a difference". This, importantly, not only broadens the focus to include a wider range of attributes required to be successful within employment but also includes the attributes required to manage one's career development in ways that will sustain one's employability.

It's important to identify the significance of self-efficacy in influencing career intentions since the level of self-belief which individuals have in their ability to be successful in the quest of a particular career is likely to control which path is chosen. Individuals will require higher levels of self-efficacy if they are to select a route which is perceived as difficult, challenging or non-traditional. According to Bandura (1997) self-efficacy beliefs are " beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments"; indeed, " people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

The literature review will look in turn first at, the employability definition, second, employability and transferable skills, third, employability attributes and finally, personal and self-efficacy attributes

1. 1 Methodology and methods

1. 2 Aims of the research project

The main aims of the research project are to:

- Provide an evaluative summary of the literature on employability (through the provision of a literature review)
- Present a picture of graduate employability to employers
- Explain how self-efficacy has a major influence in the graduate's employability profile.
- Make recommendations for further research on graduate employability.

1. 3 Personal aims include:

- Completion of the compulsory component for the award of an Honours degree in Business Management
- Preparation for employment

1. 4 The objectives of the research project are to discover:

- Identification of the definition of employability.
- How graduate employability is viewed by employers and Government.
- The role of universities in graduate's employability attributes.
- Higher education influences on student personality.
- Employers approaches in recruiting graduates.
- How self-efficacy contributes to employability.

1. 5 Literature search and review

Secondary data will be accessed through Library and Information Service using a selection of tertiary and secondary information sources such as Blackboard, commercial bibliographic databases and Internet search engines and directories. Sources accessed and retrieved will be used to write the literature review.

1. 6 Source critique of secondary data

The criteria for source critique are authenticity, time relation, independency, and tendency avoidance. Authenticity means that the source should be correct and not misleading. Time relation means that the source should be up-to-date. However this does not mean that all old sources should be rejected, as these can include valuable information that is still useful. Independency and tendency avoidance imply that sources for example should be impartial and objective.

The above criteria have been considered to greatest possible extent throughout the work with this paper. To ensure authenticity, the use of original secondary sources will be used, by doing this there is minimal risk of misinterpretations and there is opportunity for the reader to look up and evaluate the original source. To ensure authenticity and high quality of sources only peer-reviewed and well cited sources have been used. There is however a few sources that are not frequently cited. These though have been included to bring interesting and broader aspects to this work.

1. 7 Scope and limitations of the study

The literature search will aim to be comprehensive; however restricted access to primary literature, for example due to the commercialisation of some of the material sought, will exclude consideration of some sources in the actual literature review.

1. 8 Statement of the Problem

Which employability skills are desired in today's local workplace for an entry-level applicant? There is a suggestion from some graduate recruiters that students are not prepared for work. However, through efforts from

universities and government directives is it the case that employers and universities have not synchronised the expectancy of what makes a graduate employable? Determining what employers want and matching the needs with under-graduate courses can only be achieved if universities obtain the specific needs articulated by potential employers, and keep up with the changes that are taking place in today's workplace, and produce a graduate ready for the world of work.

1. 9 Delimitations

The specific delimitations imposed on the study depict what issues the study deals with and what issues it covers. It therefore can be argued that this study focuses on hypothetical, rather than on practical argument; the picture given of different aspects of the processes of employability will be somewhat limited in comparison to an empirical/practical study of issues of the same processes. A study with a purely theoretical focus will inevitably tend to simplify some aspects of process studied. However, in the process of more or less ignoring certain aspects that otherwise might have contributed to the over-all portrayal of a biased reality, other aspects can be examined, described and analysed with further rigidity.

Chapter 2

2 Literature Review

2. 1 Literature Review Introduction

Defining employability is a difficult process; as Hillage and Pollard (1998) suggests, it is a term used in a selection of contexts with a variety of meanings and can lack clearness and accuracy as concept. This literature review is an attempt to analyse the concepts of employability in regards to

UK graduates. And further exploring the affects, self-efficacy has on student's ability to be successful in the workplace.

2. 2 Employability

Baruch (2001) suggests that individuals assume responsibility for their ongoing employability while employers provide opportunities for development. This simplistic view of employability is where individuals manage their careers across employment opportunities and organisations, who in turn offer employment as long as the person is needed. Hillage and Pollard (1998), however, see employability as being capable of getting and fulfilling work through the ability to be self sufficient within the labour market, to realise the potential through sustainable employment. Further, their finding from their report for the DFES for developing a framework for policy analysis on employability, found that employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain that employment and if necessary find new employment. Knight and Yorke (2003), however, define Employability as:

“ A set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen careers.” (Knight and Yorke, 2003)

Employability of a graduate is the predilection of the graduate to show attributes that employers predict will be required for the future successful functioning of their organisation.(Harvey, 1997) He further suggests that graduates will need to be flexible due to the increasing number of short time contracts and part-time work in the work place.(Harvey, 2000)

From the HEIs perspective, employability is about producing graduates who are capable and able, Williams and Owen (1997) state the most perceived graduate qualities are the ability to learn, intelligence, ideas and imagination and communication skills. Billing (2003) adds employers want employees who are “ effective communicators, problem solvers and critical thinkers, and can work well within a team”. (Billing, 2003)

To understand employability requires a consideration of the various component parts and the different ways in which it is described and evaluated, the generic transferable skills nurtured through university, through to competencies required for employment.

This suggests that employability is likely to be less about nurturing attributes, techniques or experiences just to enable a student to get a job; it is about learning with less emphasis on ‘ employ’ and more on ‘ ability’. The prominence is on developing critical and reflective skills, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner. Employment is a by-product of this enabling process (Harvey, 2003; Lees, 2002; Knight and Yorke, 2002).

Therefore if employability is defined as the ‘ set of personal attributes acquired by the under-graduate as a result of their investment in higher education’, then what are the attributes that make graduates employable?

Much of the literature broadly defines employability attributes as: key, core, generic, personal transferable skills, work/employment related skills (Holmes 2001). However Lees (2002) suggests this imprecision makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly what is meant by the term ‘ employability skills’. It can be

argued, it is where various employers' needs and individuals' attributes meet.

2.3 What are employability skills?

Competencies such as ability, aptitude and qualities developed in context that can be applied to an occupation or career can be identified as employability skills. These competencies might develop employability skills as a result of the teaching and learning process in higher education or from work experience. Employers generally see a good degree as an essential entry requirement to any graduate position. It is widely accepted for graduates to be competitive in the labour market, which is seeing a massive reduction in recruitment numbers due to the economic situation; they need to have additional skills to complement their academic achievement. Surveys by AGR, an independent voice of UK-based graduate recruiters, highlighted the following deficiencies in employability skills:

' Softer' skills such as team-working, leadership and project management

Awareness of their chosen industry sector; commercial awareness and business/organisation understanding. (AGR, 2007)

AGR state that more than 70% of their members use competency-based selection methods. They further suggest that graduates lacking these qualities, or evidence that they have them, will find it more difficult to secure graduate jobs.

It is seen as one of the toughest challenges for employers to recruit from an increasing number of graduates, with employers realising that the future of

their organisation depends on the selection of the best candidates to add value. The CIPD reports that since the 1980's the number of students entering HE has significantly increased by more than double, but further states, that even with this increase employers still have difficulty in recruiting the types of employees they need. (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007a, b, c)

It is recognized that having a degree will no longer be enough to get a graduate job. There is evidence that graduate recruiters are looking beyond qualifications; they are looking for people with qualities to enable them to cope with the changing demands of the job in an uncertain and competitive world.

Employability has been used as a performance indicator for higher education institutions (Smith et al, 2000) and represents a form of work specific (pro) active adaptability that consists of three dimensions: career identity, personal adaptability and social and human capital (Fugate et al, 2004). At the same time, Knight and Yorke (2004) have put forward the four broad and interlocking components of USEM account of employability:

- Understanding (of the subject discipline)
- Skilful practices in context
- Efficacy beliefs
- Meta-cognition

Nabi (2003) says that employability is about graduates possessing an appropriate level of skills and attributes, and being able to use them to gain and remain in appropriate employment. From a human resource

development view, employability is a concept that emerged through the 1990s along with a growing perception among employees that they cannot count on their employers for long-term employment. Employability is a promise to employees that they will have the skills to find new jobs quickly if their jobs end unexpectedly (Baruch, 2001). Prior to this, Harvey (2001) has defined employability in various ways from individual and institutional perspectives. Individual employability is defined as graduates being able to demonstrate the attributes to obtain jobs. Commonly, institutional employability relates to the employment rates of the university graduates. However, Harvey argued that employment outcomes of graduates are not an indicator of institutional employability.

2.4 Transferable Skills

Amongst the numerous listings which identify the skills and attributes sought by employers, AGCAS Employability Briefing⁷(2003), suggests the most important are: “ motivation and enthusiasm, interpersonal skills, team working, oral communication, flexibility and adaptability, initiative, productivity, problem solving, planning and organisation, managing own development and written communication”. (HEA, 2006)

Atkins (1999) questions how transferable key skills are into employment contexts. Often, the skills most in demand by employers, as measured by the wide range of skills asked of future employees, are typically the least in supply, as measured by the skills, abilities, and competencies that university graduates bring to the job.

Eraut (1994) sees transfer as a learning process in its own right, although this may be easier for skills in relation to objects, rather than the ‘ softer’

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skills of interacting with and managing people effectively. Brown (1999) believes that the learning development, and transferring the understanding of that learning, is most likely to be effective if the learning situation closely resembles the work place. Knight and Yorke (2000) suggest that for there to be a transfer of learning from one context to another, the learner needs to use that knowledge in a variety of different situations. From these comments, it would seem that practice in a number of contexts is fundamental for the development of employability skills and attributes.

Dearing (1997) regarded key skills to consist of four components: communication, numeracy, information technology and learning how to learn. He further proposed that it was essential that these were developed at undergraduate level. The department for Education and Skills (DFES) adds teamwork and problem solving to this list. There are many different lists of key skills, although there is general agreement about the importance of communication, numeracy, teamwork, IT and problem solving (Dunne et al., 2000). These are considered to be generic skills as they represent skills that can be used to support study in any discipline. The possession of some key skills – IT, numeracy, for example, will facilitate the acquisition of subject understanding (Yorke, 2001), as using IT for research will enable students to learn more about their discipline.

2. 5 Personal Attributes

There are many factors that cause organisations to change, but in this current economic downturn it seems the main problem is downsizing and redundancy, therefore the graduate will need to be equipped with the relevant skills and attributes to cope with a flexible and perhaps short term

jobs market. Employers themselves want graduates who can quickly adapt to the organisational culture, and utilise their abilities and skills to facilitate innovative collaboration. (Harvey et al, 1997)

The CBI (2008) highlights the importance employers place on the ‘softer’ skills that make people more employable. This means being a good team-worker, communicator and problem-solver is vital, and getting work experience goes a long way with a future employer.

‘Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes which make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful.’ (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007)

It is widely accepted that lifelong learning through acquiring new skills improves employability. However despite there being different concepts to analyse the make up of “employability”, the consensus of these is that there are three key qualities when assessing the employability of graduates: These are:

1) Job specific skills: reading, language, and numeric capacity, listening, written communication, oral presentation, global awareness, critical analysis, creativity and self-management.

Lees (2002), Harvey (2001), Little (2001), Mason et al (2003).

2) Process skills: Problem solving, decision making, planning and delegating, understanding business and its commercial interests, prioritizing, team work,

and negotiating. These skills are developed through work experience rather than through academia.

3) Personal qualities: AGR states that their research has shown that employers are looking for qualities that include “ self-confidence, self-control, self- esteem, social skills, honesty, integrity, adaptability, flexibility, willingness to learn, emotional intelligence, stress tolerance, punctuality, efficiency and the ability to reflect.”

These qualities are very much embedded with the personality type and shaped through life-experiences. Researchers have been seen to classify these qualities in various ways; the common denominator amongst them is that there is a distinction between core skills and soft skills, with soft skills being learned from different experiences. Martin (2007) states that:

“ Therefore, it is to be emphasized that an employer with employability focus is looking for an individual with potentials to be realized, rather than suitable skill sets.” (Martin, 1997)

Further research from the UK government stated that:

“ Our higher education system is a great asset, both for individuals and the nation. The skills, creativity, and research developed through higher education are a major factor in our success in creating jobs and in our prosperity. Universities and colleges play a vital role in expanding opportunity and promoting social justice. The benefits of higher education for individuals are far-reaching. On average, graduates get better jobs and earn

more than those without higher education.” (The Future of Higher Education White Paper. 2003, p4)

The ‘Skills plus Project’ highlights and emphasises the importance of ‘personal qualities’ and their insertion into the model of employability, further stating how these can have a considerable bearing on student success.

(Knight and Yorke, 2001, 2002, 2003; Yorke, 2001)

From the work of Dweck (1999) and Bandura (1997), there is recognition of the two broad categories of self-belief: an individual/permanent/fixed belief, intelligence for example, that cannot be changed, and an incremental/variable/flexible belief that development is achievable and even likely. They further make assumptions that students with a fixed belief about their intelligence are likely to be discouraged by failure; this is derived from the belief that failure is a lack of intelligence. From this assumption it could be fair to say that these students may avoid more demanding work for fear of disappointment. On the contrary, students with a malleable self-belief are more likely to characterise failure as a lack of effort, and believe that poor performance should lead to further learning. ‘Hence, it is the learning that becomes a source of self-esteem.’ (Dweck 1999. Bandura, 1997)

A range of cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural sub-skills will not be enough on their own, but these skills will have to be integrated into the challenges faced. (Yorke, 2001) Therefore, perceived self-efficacy or capability will play an important role in career choice and personal development. This in turn is essential in the individual’s employability.

Personal qualities are also important in the acquirement of subject understanding and the improvement of skills. “ A willingness to learn, often from mistakes, implies a preparedness to tolerate a degree of stress in order to achieve success” (Knight and Yorke, 2001; Yorke, 2001).

The self-construct characteristic of self-confidence enables the individual to have a positive, realistic view of their selves or in situations they find themselves. This characteristic refers to the individuals expectation of their ability to achieve, an influential factor in ensuring personal potential is realised. (Stevens, 2005) This statement suggests that a person high in self-confidence has a pragmatic view of themselves and their abilities, which gives them resolution in their endeavours. According to Neill (2005), self-esteem and self-efficacy in combination is what constitute self-confidence. Neill (2005) defines self-esteem as a general feeling of self-worth or self-value. It is widely recognised that an individual with low self-esteem believes that they are insignificant or insufficient, while a person who has high self-esteem believes otherwise. Self-efficacy on the other hand is the belief in one’s capacity to succeed at tasks. Self-efficacy according to Neill (2005) can be general or specific where general self-efficacy is belief in one’s general capacity to handle tasks, and specific self-efficacy refers to beliefs about one’s ability to perform specific tasks in certain things. Self-efficacy is also sometimes used to refer to situation specific self-confidence. From this, academic self-confidence can be viewed as self-efficacy. (Zimmerman, 1990)

There is a close link between self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem in providing the relationship between understanding, perception, skills, practice

and personal attributes and employability. According to Bandura (1995, p. 2):

“ Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations. Efficacy beliefs influence how people think, feel, motivate themselves and act”. (Bandura, 1995)

He further suggests that there are several sources of efficacy beliefs relevant to employability:

- Mastery experiences.
- Vicarious experiences provided by social models.
- Social persuasion.

Mastery experiences occur when people are given the opportunity to try a particular task themselves, such as work experience.

“ Mastery experiences are the most effective way of creating a strong sense of self-efficacy, and so play a vital role within employability.” (Bandura, 1995)

Vicarious learning occurs when learners decide, after viewing the actions of others, what types of actions will be effective or non-effective for their own performance of a task. The closer the others are in similarity to themselves, the more effective the experiences are.

The attitudes and behaviours of other people or groups frequently change our own attitudes and behaviours. Conforming one’s attitude and behaviour to a person or group who can exercise authority or to an influential power, is <https://assignbuster.com/theory-of-employability/>

a sensible strategy for receiving further benefits as a basic social skill in general. Social persuasion occurs when people are convinced that they possess the capabilities needed to succeed in a particular activity. This encourages them to put in more effort and stay motivated in order to achieve success. . Bandura (1995, p. 17) further expands his discussion by saying that:

“ A major goal of formal education should be to equip students with the intellectual tools, efficacy beliefs, and intrinsic interests to educate themselves throughout their lifetime”. (Bandura, 1995)

It can be presumed from Bandura’s work that by providing the opportunities for in learning of mastery experiences, vicarious experiences and social persuasion, and encouraging reflection on and evaluation of these experiences, self-efficacy can be increased. A graduate who believes they can do whatever is necessary is far more likely to gain a position and be successful in whatever occupations they choose than a graduate who does not have that self-belief.

If self-efficacy is seen as an idea that one has the ability in a particular situation, then self-confidence could be seen as the way this is shown to the outside world. Self-confidence appears to be something that can be seen from a person’s manner and behaviour. According to Goleman (1998, p. 68) people with self-confidence are able to present themselves with self-assurance and have “ presence”. It has been suggested that self-confidence can be either a trait or something that is specific to certain situations.

Norman and Hyland (2003) point out that if self-confidence is seen as a trait,

which personality theorists suggest are relatively stable over time, then those who lack self-confidence would be unlikely to develop it through a learning activity. If, however, if it is viewed as a position specific concept, then it is possible for students to enhance their levels of self-confidence for any given situation. An increase in self-efficacy should be reflected by a boost in demonstrated self-confidence.

As a sub-set of employability skills, Meta skills can enable the student to expand and exploit the ranges of other skills they have developed. There is an understanding that reflection is a key graduate skill that can contribute to employability, the belief that the employability of students will be enhanced by their ability to reflect on their own learning. Knight and Yorke (2003b) describe employability as being a blend of self confidence and of meta-cognition, which includes students' ability to be reflective about their own progress.

Chapter 3

3 Discussion

3.1 Define Employability?

Personal attributes and attitudes can be connected to an individual's personality and educational background. According to Dench (1997) examples of attributes that are of great significance for employers are honesty, integrity, and reliability, generally fitting in, and playing the game. However, it is essential not to generalise since companies usually search for different attitudes and attributes. (Dench, 1997) Organisations generally put great effort into finding future employees with a personality profile that fit

into the organisation, while others are more concerned with finding people with particular job experience skills. (Dench, 1995)

Due to the economic climate and the need for employers to recruit the ‘right’ individuals for their organisations there has been an emphasis on personal attributes and skills. However, researchers have shown difficulty in unifying a common vocabulary. Among the most common terms used are behavioural, generic, transferable, core and key skills. These skills give indications of an individual’s behaviour and how the person could function in the workplace. However it is recognised that personal skills involve abilities regarding teamwork, problem solving, negotiation and communication. From the research literature it is argued whether or not that these attributes are taught or increased. There are arguments stating that skills are innate, while others claim it is a matter of training. Nevertheless, something that many researchers agree upon is that service is becoming increasingly important due to, for instance, customer demands, more knowledgeable customers, and increased quality check-ups. (Dench, 1997) Skills are perceived, analysed and measured differently by different people. Storey (2007) suggests “ it is about individual attributes and capacities people have for performing certain activities”.

3. 2 Who values transferable skills and qualities?

The review of the available literature has shown that graduate employers are looking for graduates with a range of transferable skills: skills that can be demonstrated in selection processes. The research undertaken by Harvey et al. (1997, p. 63) to establish the values placed on skills in the world of work concluded that:

“ There are a large number of graduates looking for jobs and employers, as we have seen, no longer recruit simply on the basis of degree status. A degree might be necessary or desirable but employers are looking for a range of other attributes when employing and retaining graduates”.

In the recruitment of graduates, the most common perceived graduate qualities are an ability to learn, intelligence, ideas and imagination, and good communication skills. The DfEE (1997, p. 2) endorses such standards and attitudes held by graduate recruiting organisations, and it further considers that national targets for education and training support its aim of improving the UK’s international competitiveness by raising standards and attainment levels in education and training. To be part of a flexible and adaptable workforc