

Student Success: critiques of employability

Podcast transcript

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Key

- + **RD:** Roger Dalrymple (host)
- + **AM:** Andrea Macrae (host)
- + **MP:** Maia Pal

Transcript

RD: Welcome to the third in our series of short podcasts previewing the findings of our literature review on employability 2016-2021. This is part of the Advance HE Connect Benefit Series 2021-22 on Student Success. My name is Roger Dalrymple from Oxford Brookes University and I'm joined by two of my collaborators on the review, Dr Maia Pal and Dr Andrea Macrae also of Oxford Brookes.

The podcast series is designed to trail some of the emerging themes from our review ahead of its publication at the end of September 2021. The focus of this particular podcast is a theme that Maia principally researched critiquing and conceptualising employability. Andrea and I are going to ask Maia a few questions around this area and Andrea will kindly lead off.

AM: Thank you Roger. So Maia, what distinguishes this theme from the others discussed and what were its challenges?

MP: Thanks Roger and Andrea, so we always knew this one would be slightly tricky to work around in terms of the same criteria of our search data set. So we had three criteria which were demonstrable impact, emerging impacts and evaluations, and broader horizons. These criteria were defined according to the collection of primary data mostly and following the brief that we were following in terms of what works and how various literature tried to assess the impact of employability strategies and practices on students and higher education institutions. So when we were looking at literature that assessed, conceptualised or assessed the conceptualisation of employability and also looked at ways in which this conceptualisation needed to be the basis of critique, the determining impact was much more difficult. And using impact as a criteria for differentiating between different scholarship became a little bit more difficult.

So what we decided is that to try and assess and give a general view of this theme, we decided to look less at primary data collection and look more broadly over our three criteria. So when I wrote up this section I have, obviously, some scholarship that came up from the

'demonstrable impact' which is based on primary data. Then actually in some ways what I was surprised with is there's probably more than I originally thought there would be - actually using primary data - but I also integrated scholarship that would be qualified as 'broader horizons' and that was more based on secondary literature or was more purely conceptual and abstract or even purely theoretical, and was trying to explore different theoretical avenues and ideas. So it was an interesting mix of studies that really tried to be based on specific local and student and practitioners' experiences and literature that was exploring much more conceptually these issues.

So that was one challenge in trying to compare and assess this scholarship together; trying to acknowledge that they were often starting from very different research methods, very different research objectives and the aim was never to grade them or compare them in that sense but just try and give a flavour of some of the concepts and issues that were being discussed.

AM: Thanks Maia, that's really interesting. Moving on to a further question, could you share with us how employability is generally conceptualised and how this fits general theoretical framings and research methods used across our selected data set?

MP: Yes so this was always going to be a challenge as well and I think some of the other podcasts have mentioned it a little bit in terms of the competing definitions of employability which were also mentioned in the previous literature review that we followed. So we tried to not let that be a stumbling block and to try and just build on and try and assess some of the evolutions and trends in conceptualisations of employability. So we assessed that there was a general emphasis in the literature on human capital theory which is not new and has been present in the literature for quite a while and across various disciplines. There's also the bulk I think of the literature we all looked at, which was trying to broaden human capital theory and trying to integrate a variety of social, institutional, strategic innovations into that definition of human capital theory which tends to be more microeconomic, more focused on the attainment of employment, and more focused on a kind of rational choice model of student/practitioner behaviour. And so the bulk of the literature tries to move beyond that kind of micro approach and more economic approach and really provide or be based on a definition of employability that is much broader socially, psychologically in terms of various market demands and needs etc. And in terms of various actors, as well, involved in the process of employability. And we've seen that across the different themes, whether it's in career planning, whether it's in types of placements, some discussions we've had before. So there's been a lot of attempts to - based on often the work of Bourdieu which is quite popular in this field - to think of different types of capital: social capital, psychological capital etc, family capital which is important for kind of a non-western context and to try and think a bit more broadly.

And I think the definitions developed by Advance HE, that were also definitions used as a baseline to some extent and to think about employability, reflect these new trends to broaden out the definition of human capital theory.

So that was really interesting to try and trace and see the impact of, for example, the definition that Advance HE has used on the literature itself and I think that comes across quite clearly. It was also kind of a third trend, a smaller trend but nevertheless one that was important to note, and will be interesting in the future to watch more closely, is more radical critiques whether it's Marxist or based on work by Foucault and other post-structuralist. And also work on the global south and colonial theory, to try and think and decentre a lot of the focus that is on the global north and the anglophone centric sphere.

So that's been interesting as well and then there was the mix of research methods. So you know there's a general kind of theoretical framework and then the whole range of research methods, which I won't go into detail, but with everything from website content analysis to longitudinal large-scale studies to much more specific focus groups, interviews questionnaires, statistical regressions, a lot of comparisons, so there was a rich range of methods used. And this is also a testament to the amount of different disciplines that we encountered in our literature review and that can obviously be a problem as well in terms of trying to map the similarities.

RD: Fantastic, the next question really links with an area I led on around measures of employability and that raised questions of definitions. You know, how do we define employability and what kind of model are we working with? So I was particularly interested in what you found were the main concerns raised by literature that is offering critiques of employability. What are the main areas of lack or of need that these critiques are drawing attention to in the way employability is conceived?

MP: So I tried to separate four different concerns and obviously these overlapped and had different meanings depending on the context and the disciplines in which they were used, but broadly there was a very strong focus on marketisation. And this was especially meant, not always exclusively, but mostly meant in terms of the marketisation of the higher education sector. And I think some you've mentioned Andrea and you've mentioned this already to some extent but the inconsistencies that were found between how employability strategies were used as marketing strategies on university websites - and I'll mention some studies on this which were fascinating - and the assumptions around what employability should be for students etc. So those inconsistencies are really discussed by a variety of authors and we have some large scale studies on this and some studies that looked at you know variety of websites but also on university prospectuses and career guidance websites etc, that tried to explain these inconsistencies to some extent. An interesting point was that they were often driven by the higher education market rather than the graduate labour market, so obviously the marketisation links to issues of neoliberalisation and kind of more

systemic general analysis of the role of higher education institutions in providing for employability.

Another interesting one which I think maybe was less obvious was subjectification and that term kind of relates more to the way in which employability strategies may be developed or assumed to be needed in terms of transforming students - their own identities - but also those of others and assumptions around that. So a lot of the analysis of the literature here were based on discourses and discourse analysis was employed, so going back to language that was being used by university websites etc. So these were more localised though a lot of the literature on marketisation was more systemic to some extent, looking at issues of authoritarian neoliberalism, academic workers and these kind of conceptualisations, social justice etc. Whereas subjectification was more localised and focusing more on specific contexts. And there's some in a really interesting study by Fotiadou from 2020, which looked at 58 university websites and that argued that the production of employable graduates does not necessarily produce jobs for them, and so the effect of the strategy producing employable graduates did not match what they were going to meet in the actual labour market. And this is something that links to the broader marketisation issue. The aim is to show that universities can produce employable graduates but then what happens to them further down the line? And this linked to another concern that we categorised as 'value and capital of university life' and here focusing again on life worlds, on how students' lives were affected at university and beyond. And here again this juncture between skills and values to some extent - and we come back to the human capital theory which maybe informs a lot of the institutional strategy, whereas the scholarship is looking much more broadly at employability and talking a lot more about values and how to affect life, careers, transitions in a much broader sense, and whether those disjunctions between these different visions of what employability are clash or create issues.

Some interesting studies from around the world here as well as. An interesting study by Kulbo, Wen and Addo, on Ghanaian and Kenyan students studying in China and that brought up some interesting links in terms of that type of institution didn't necessarily provide a better job which can go a bit against the grain of what we would assume in a lot of the metrics - the international metrics. There was generally a lot of studies are based on specific metrics of destination of leavers etc but some studies also argued the need to do a lot more longitudinal, small-scale studies and in-depth life history and try and integrate how employability affects graduate students on much longer time scales. So I thought that was an interesting way to kind of explore different ways of thinking about employability as well.

And then there was a range of models being used as well, modelling employability in different ways. A lot more large-scale comparisons here, we didn't have that many I think overall but there were still some interesting comparisons of various countries bringing up various issues in terms of how to really distinguish between variables on such large scales but really interesting different countries as well.

RD: Yeah I agree, it's really interesting area of the field. That on the one hand you have something very granular as you say, analysing the discourse on websites or in prospectuses things like that which are very focused in on individual lexis. At the other end of the scale you've got these mass longitudinal surveys kind of tracking outcomes over time and looking at what kind of conceptions are in play there. And I think that's a really interesting area, that blend of micro/meso/macro I think makes it an interesting strand that you brought out very clearly there, thank you.

AM: Yes obviously this is a very, as you suggested, a wide spectrum of literature. Was there anything within it that particularly surprised you?

MP: Yes absolutely, I mean we always knew and we were very attentive at the start of this process to not produce a purely Anglocentric analysis but obviously different challenges and surprises came out actually. There were quite a significant number of studies from across the world published in English. We obviously were limited by only anglophone ones but there were significant studies published in English on other regions of the world comparing other regions of the world with the global north, but also just inside the global south like I just mentioned previously in Ghana and Kenya and China, so that was interesting. And that a lot of the studies outside the global north were more large scale and were perhaps using definitions of employability that were perhaps more employment-based but in some other cases were also reflecting geographical differences, such as a focus on psychological and family networks trends, which tend to be less focused on in the global north. So I think some of those are interesting obviously. I think we need to be a bit cautious in the conclusions we draw on this because of our data etc but I think more work can be done from our data set and it'll be really interesting to see what people might produce actually. What we put together some of the issues as well in terms of linked to this context outside the global north where practices from the global north were being applied and were being seen to not work and how those challenges were being faced by practitioners in those institutions there, and trying to balance the dominance of the practices and literature in the global north with applying them to different contexts.

Another interesting thing also that came up was a lot of the radical critiques are from the global north but they're arguing that we shouldn't focus too much on the global north, so those kind of conundrums. I was curious to see where we could have found more radical critiques from outside the global north and those kind of issues there. I think are really interesting but generally I think what surprised me the most was the variety of the studies and the angles. I thought that was extremely rich. I mean just generally I think there's still a lot to cover and a lot to try and summarise and assess and compare in all these issues so I was really very happily surprised by the variety of scholarship and the emerging context in which it's being applied and reflected on.

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RD: Great so thanks so much Maya that's our short preview of just one of the several themes arising from our review, where we also address such topics as measuring and measures of employability, entrepreneurship and work integrated learning, and inequalities in employability provision. These form the focus of the other podcasts in this series.

AM: We hope you found this an interesting preview of the review which will be published in September 2021 and will be supplemented by a number of online events and activities led by Advanced HE. The review itself will also be accompanied by a searchable data set of the 2016-21 peer-reviewed literature to enable you to conduct your own research in this area of the field.

RD: So many thanks to Dr Maia Pal for sharing these interesting literature findings with us today and to Dr Andrea Macrae for discussing them with us. Many thanks also to our listeners who we would encourage to listen out for the other podcasts in this series on the usual platforms.



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