

Student Success: measuring and measures of employability

Episode one podcast transcript

—

Dr Andrea Macrae, Principal Lecturer, Stylistics and Student Experience, Oxford Brookes University

Dr Roger Dalrymple, Associate Dean: Student Outcomes, Oxford Brookes University

Key

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

Transcript

AM: Welcome to the first in our series of short podcasts previewing the findings of our literature review on employability 2016-21. This is part of the Advance HE Connect Benefits Series 2021-22 on Student Success. My name is Dr Andrea Macrae from Oxford Brookes University and i'm joined by one of my collaborators on the review Dr Roger Dalrymple also of Oxford Brookes.

The podcast 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 within the series is a theme that Roger principally researched 'measuring and measures of employability'. So Roger, how widespread is this theme in the literature?

RD: Thanks Andrea yes a very widespread theme and actually this is one of many themes that we found in fact overlapped and interrelated with some of the other themes we were looking at. So measurement of different employability interventions and employability development obviously can feed into other themes that we explored and picked up, such as measuring the impact of internships or the measurements of the impact of placements, things of that kind, so a very prevalent theme. And actually teasing it out as a distinct theme that doesn't in fact overlap and interrelate with other areas was one of the challenges of working on this aspect of the review.

AM: Within all of that are there any innovations in the what and the how of measuring employability and interventions that you found?

RD: Very much so and this was one of the most interesting things that struck me in the process of collating this literature and reviewing it. There's very much movement around how we measure and the scope of what is measured. So in this age of external metrics, graduate outcomes, surveys, destination of leavers surveys, the TEF and so on there is actually increasing interest in the literature. At least it'd be interesting to explore how far this is also true in practice but in the literature there's increasing interest in the student's self-report, the student's self-perception and their own ideas around their employability. And

likewise I would say after a long-standing sense of employer views might tend in one direction, student views might tend in another, lecture of views might tend in a third direction, actually there's many more attempts now to be relational and contextual and to convene contexts where actually all those stakeholders have a role in talking about what kind of measures are valid and what kind of metrics are appropriate. So I was quite surprised in that sense around it isn't just the predominance of those extrinsic measures, things like the teaching excellence framework, the graduate outcome survey, there's increasing interest from a scholarly perspective, at least on how do students self-report - how do they examine and perceive their own employability?

AM: I can see the advantages of all of that, although it does sound like the landscape of measuring employability is therefore becoming more complex in a way and there's kind of more to get to grips with. While we tried to take these different angles on things, were there any studies that stood out for you within this theme?

RD: Yes I mean I think there's a spectrum there. There are some studies that are smaller scale and highly qualitative and offer quite a lot of rich detail about you know what are these variations in perception and how qualitatively differently can somebody experience employability learning and their employability experiences. There are also some quite large-scale longitudinal studies. A study stood out for me by Silva et al from 2018 which was looking to chart longitudinally the employment rates for graduates of programmes at a number of Portuguese HEIs and particularly looking at the impact of internships. What was the added value of those? Was there demonstrable impact to having undertaken an internship? Interesting findings from that study.

Likewise there were long term studies - Goodman and Treadway - quite early in our review window we're looking at the impacts of student volunteering for example, and one theme that emerged around this whole measurement question was a theme that emerges in another of our podcast series around differential access to opportunities and potential inequalities arising from anything that's perceived as extracurricular or an option or an add-on. A lot of employability initiatives that are being measured in this theme are ones that do also feature under that umbrella of actually how equal is the access and the opportunity to some of these things extracurricular activities, and as I say in that example there, what was the demonstrable impact around volunteering? Well there were some indications of promise that volunteering is a very positive thing to have done but obviously that raises whole questions about 'does everyone have equal scope to volunteer while undertaking the not very small endeavour of doing a full-time degree' at the same time.

AM: That's a really good example of a study which crops up across a number of sections, as you mentioned earlier, in that it relates to inequalities which is dealt with distinctly, it relates

to embedded versus non-embedded provision, and it also relates to work integrated learning because it can be considered as a form of that. So yes some of these key studies crop up here and there is pertinent to a variety of themes that run through the literature review, don't they?

RD: Absolutely and then some are comparative. I think one of the things that's been quite a privilege in undertaking this review is the opportunity to see comparative work between different national systems. And one example there i'd single out by Jackson and Wilton - again quite early in our review window - that's a study from 2017. They were comparing the perceived employability and then the actual outcomes for two cohorts of business undergraduates at two HEIs, one in the UK one in Australia. And I think there some of the - again we're back to this idea of qualitative variation in how people perceive and how they anticipate employability outcomes that offers quite a valuable opportunity to think about different national systems, different employability discourses, how truly uniform is the kind of neoliberal more marketized view of employability across regions and cultures, and how much actually is their scope for local variation? And I think one thing that does come out both of this theme and others is that sense of the contextual and the relational. And actually quite a lot of evidence that employability perceptions and employability learning do very much nuance and inflect according to context and setting, and thus that introduces a caveat to those who would generalize.

AM: We were seeking to learn from other national contexts and look for transferable findings but equally we did discover aspects that were quite particular and specific, weren't they?

RD: Yes exactly and I think you know that's something that stands out for us in this study, and some of the subsequent podcasts in this series will pick up on this theme. There is much to learn from different regions and that perhaps there's been something of a global north emphasis on some of the employability discourse. Our colleague Maia Pal, in her section of literature review helpfully emphasizes those considerations that there's much to learn from this more locally nuanced and locally alert vision of what employability might be.

AM: Some of that might come up in Maia's own later podcast within this series on critiques of employability. You've mentioned a few things that have come up in your review of this theme which have surprised you, is there anything else that perhaps challenged your preconceptions in any way or might have changed your view on measuring and measures of employability within HE?

RD: Yes I mean one thing that did surprise me and from my own kind of professional interests and teaching interests struck me as certainly worth further exploration is a finding around measuring the employability outcomes of students following a joint honours programme, as distinct from single honours. And there again some of the assumptions we might make, that by studying two subjects we're gaining two strings to our bow, do not necessarily translate into employability outcomes by a particular set of measures. So Pigden and Moore in 2018 looked at this neglected area really of what's the value added or what's the differential outcome of studying a joint honours degree? And to my surprise they found some patterns that weren't always positive in employability terms, although again we introduced a caveat about 'how are they measuring' but they found an employment gap between joint honours and single honours graduates at a certain census point shortly after graduation. With those who did joint honours, consistently three percent less likely to be in a highly skilled graduate job at the time of the study. Now I think that's interesting. One because again what do we measure by? It could well be that those students are finding ways those graduates are finding ways to work in rewarding high-value, high-identification subject areas that do draw upon both of those award areas, and you know perhaps by that metric they're very content in what they're doing. And that's a point that actually Pigden and Moore make, you know there are different measures that might be used but it did for me suggest that some of those assumptions we might make about exposure to other disciplinary knowledge structures is a value-add, opportunities to work in an interdisciplinary fashion is a value-add, that didn't necessarily follow based on this Pigden and Moore study. So I think that's an area that left me wanting to go away and look further and read further and very much reflect as someone who's involved in joint honours - and that's an area of provision we do a lot of at Oxford Brookes.

AM: Thank you, these are really useful insights. I was wondering, I mean you've touched on some of this already and what you've said but on the basis of what you've been able to review as part of this work can you see any trends or kind of persistent challenges standing out in the direction of travel with regards to measuring employability?

RD: Yes I would say there's some element of disconnect that the trend in the policy discourse and in so many of the drivers around funding and league tables and those external metrics figure so widely in the sector. I think on the day that we're speaking, the latest international league table came out where obviously extrinsic metrics are so important around employability but the disconnect perhaps between that and the fact that in the literature - in the scholarly literature - there's more and more interest in student self-report, student concepts of what they value in employability which opens onto things such as social contribution, the sustainability agenda and also the wellbeing agenda. A different consideration of work-life balance that is such that somebody doesn't necessarily want to be looking for a higher level graduate job three years post-graduation but actually wants to be doing something that balances social contribution and economic productivity in a way that

they define more for themselves. So i think there's an element of disconnect in that trend. It would be interesting to see how far that research literature is also able to translate into practice initiatives because I think for obvious reasons, the policy discourse and the university responses to employability are very much directed and shaped by those extrinsic measures such as the TEF but it's interesting to find this in growing knowledge base really and theorized knowledge base around different measures of value from higher education and different measures of the link between the employment environment and the higher education environment, increasingly coming on stream, being given credence and being given theoretical underpinnings. So i think it'd be a challenge just to harmonize those two but I think that there's an interesting bit of work there within that space to do just that.

AM: Yes I think what you're saying also really highlights the value of bringing together the body of work, the body of high-quality peer-reviewed research in these areas to speak to not just what kind of educators and practitioners are doing on the ground but also the people shaping the policies and enabling more conversation and discourse across those different groups to push things forwards in a fully aware fashion.

So Roger thank you for adding a little spotlight on that particular theme within the review. This is just one short preview of one of the several themes arising from the employability literature review where we also address such topics as entrepreneurship and work integrated learning, critiques of the employability agenda and inequalities in employability provision. These form the focus of the other podcasts in this series.

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 dissemination events and activities led by Advance HE and the review itself will also be accompanied by a searchable data set of the to 2021 peer-reviewed literature to enable you to conduct your own research in this area of the field. So many thanks to Dr Roger Dalrymple for sharing these interesting literature findings with us today and many thanks to our listeners who are encouraged to listen out for the other podcasts in this series on the usual platforms.

Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201

enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500

communications@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

   @AdvanceHE

Advance HE helps HE and research be the best they can be.

We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address systemic inequalities and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector. We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607 Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

© 2021 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at Advance HE:

+44 (0) 3300 416201 or publications@advance-he.ac.uk