

**Understanding the competencies of college graduates:  
possession, position, or process?**

**Keynote presentation to**

**International Forum on Higher Education Evaluation, Taiwan National Normal University,  
October 2008**

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## Preamble

Any contemporary discussion of higher education is likely to include reference to notions of the knowledge economy, globalisation, human capital, and related matters. Whilst the governance and funding regimes for higher education vary between nations, all education systems are common in one key aspect: individual persons enter and progress through higher education as students, and exit as graduates, going on to their post-graduation lives. Those post-graduation lives will significantly affect wider society, the economy and the political order, as graduates take on influential roles in those domains. The way in which higher education institutions (HEIs), universities and colleges, help prepare students for their post-graduation lives is then a legitimate concern for policy intervention and curriculum development, and, one hopes, for research on which such intervention and development might rationally be based. How, then, should we approach such research, policy and curriculum development?

Discourse in this area typically focuses on a major aspect of such post-graduation lives, that of employment. As increasingly greater economic investments by governments have been made in higher education, largely on the basis of a human capital investment rationale, an increased focus has been placed on post-graduate employment outcomes. This has been further emphasised as students themselves, or their families, have been required to bear an increasing share of the costs of higher education. Whilst this may be lamented by those who would wish to hold to a liberal-humanist view of higher education, and education generally, there seems to be little possibility of doubting this as the current reality. Although a crude measure, employment outcome does provide an indication of what society values as educational outcomes, at least in economic terms. Moreover, employment outcome is a significant factor in the distribution of economic and social benefits, and of social and economic advancement for individuals and their families. As such, governments and HEIs that espouse a concern for greater social equity, as in the UK, will have further concern for employment outcomes of higher education.

A further feature of the discourse in this area is the vocabulary of competence. At a commonsense level, this may be seen as shifting attention from the supposed-traditional orientation on students' ('mere') knowledge (abstracted from 'real-life', 'ivory-towered'), and towards the practical abilities that may be valued outside of academia. Moreover, the vocabulary of competence is constituted by a range of disaggregated elements, referred to be a range of terms, such as 'skills', 'abilities', 'capabilities', 'competencies', often prefixed with qualifiers that, supposedly, distinguish between different *types*, eg 'personal', 'transferable', 'generic', 'core'. A further shift in the vocabulary is the adoption of apparently broader terms, such as 'attributes' or 'characteristics'<sup>2</sup>. For the purpose of this paper, the various terms are taken as having the same, or at least functionally similar, meaning – although what they may mean, particularly in respect of any denotational reference, will be subject to consideration. The term 'college graduates' will be taken to mean those who exit higher education institutions (HEIs) with first degrees ('bachelor's'). Thus the phrase 'core competencies of college graduates' will be treated as equivalent to the phrase more commonly used in the UK, 'skills and attributes of university graduates', and so on.

The reason for drawing attention to the vocabulary is that we must distinguish between the terms, words and phrases, used and the *concepts* that we make use of in attempting to understand the issues of interest and concern. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1954) made the distinction between technical and untechnical concepts. In everyday, mundane discourse, we use a whole variety of terms that may be regarded as *untechnical* concepts. We neither need, nor seek, to consider what such terms 'really mean' in such a context; we understand and move on. However, there are times when we often use the very same terms as *technical* concepts, having specific meaning within a specific form of discourse; as Ryle puts it, they 'carry the luggage of a specific theory' (p. 91). In the context of the current

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<sup>2</sup> This shift may be seen as a 'softening' of the vocabulary in response to critical response by academic staff to the use of terms like 'competencies' and 'skills', particularly as related to employment.

discussion, we can say that we ordinarily talk of someone having skills, or say someone is competent, without worrying too much about what that *'really means'*. Indeed, to say someone *is* skilled in some particular area, and to say they *have* a particular skill would normally be treated as meaning the same thing (Holmes, 2006a), probably with little or no thought for to stop and think would prevent smooth discursive flow. On the other hand, in the technical discourses concerned with policies and practices in relation the link between higher education and the sphere of employment, the terms 'competencies', 'skills' and the like have *technical* meaning, we are using technical concepts. Depending upon the nature of the discourse, we may draw upon any of a number of different bodies of theory, different theoretical 'luggage'.

The paper is mainly based on developments in higher education within the UK<sup>3</sup>. However, given the increasing global concern<sup>4</sup>, the issues raised are, arguably, of more general relevance. Those issues implicate a wide range of stakeholders, whose interests and spheres of action and influence may be regarded in terms of different levels. At the macro level, national and regional governments and their agencies, inter-governmental agencies, and institutions and agencies interacting with government, will be particularly concerned with the identifiable economic and social benefits of higher education in relation to funding provided, and of governance of the higher education *system*. At the micro level, students (and their families) will be concerned with the extent to which their 'investment' (including time and effort) in their degree studies does lead on to desirable employment, and employers will be concerned with the extent to which they are able to recruit and employ graduates they deem capable of undertaking the work roles available. Teaching and support staff will, generally, wish to ensure that their students are well-prepared for their post-graduation lives (albeit that some may question the employability agenda). Between the macro and micro levels, we may consider the '*meso*' level, of persons and agencies who mediate between levels, broadly operating at institutional level, at subject-discipline or support service level across institutions, and so on.

The point of making such a distinction is that we should recognise that the issues of concern are different at these different levels. Although some stakeholders may span levels, the matters that they deal with are different, or at least have significantly different aspects. In dealing with the matters of interest to them, they will make use of what they consider technical concepts and so implicate particular sets of theory. Crucially, we should not assume that a particular *term* has the same meaning when used as a *technical concept* in these different levels of discourse. Nor, arguably, should we assume that a particular term, used a technical concept, has the same meaning when used *within* a particular level of discourse by different stakeholders<sup>5</sup>. The consequence of doing so is that we are likely to commit a category mistake (Ryle, 1949), to lead to what Wittgenstein (1953). referred to as the 'bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'

With these reminders for our thinking, we can proceed to explore three main ways of considering the outcomes of higher education in terms of the post-graduation lives of those who undertake it. The first of these, in which graduate skills or competencies are treated as if they are capable of being possessed and used, is dominant, certainly in the UK; but, it will be argued, this is deeply flawed. The second approach is mainly found in critical literature, drawing upon critical educational theory, views higher education as a system that is so structured as to reinforce social positioning and status. The discourse of graduate competencies/ skills is part of the process of societal reproduction, masked as an objective, technical-rational approach for allocation to social positions. Although this approach does, to a significant extent appear to be compatible with empirical evidence of employment outcomes, the paper

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<sup>3</sup> And more specifically, within England and Wales: Scotland has always had a slightly different educational system, increasingly so since devolution and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Note, for example, the World Bank Task Force on Higher Education and Society Task Force on Higher Education and Society 2000. *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, Washington, D. C., The World Bank. and the OECD conference on 'Outcomes of higher education: quality, relevance and impact', September 2008

<sup>5</sup> Or even, we may venture to say, when used by a particular party to discussion, who may stray across different sets of theory.

will argue that it does not take sufficient account of the interactional nature of the education-employment trajectories by which individuals gain, or fail to gain, desired employment outcomes. The third approach will then be presented as one that is both theoretically sound and compatible with empirical evidence. Moreover, it opens up novel lines of research and may thus be regarded as yielding a ‘progressive research programme’ (Lakatos, 1970). Before moving on to discussion of the three approaches in turn, we need to consider the distinction between employment and employability.

## Employment and Employability

Over the past two decades, there has been in the UK an increasing emphasis upon the role that higher education institutions play in relation to graduate employment. This may be seen as having two aspects. First, there have been and continue to be various studies to ascertain what is happening in terms of graduates going into employment: large-scale data collection, amenable to analysis in terms of gender, ethnicity, subject discipline studied, degree classification, salaries earned, institution awarding degree, and so on. The largest study is the annual ‘Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education’ survey<sup>6</sup> (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2008), whereby every institution is required by government to survey all its graduates six months after completion, using a common questionnaire. This is clearly a ‘snapshot’ study, but is conducted annually across the whole sector, with relatively high response rates<sup>7</sup>. A longitudinal study has been conducted on a cohort of (initially) 4,500 graduates of the same year (1995), from 38 institutions, at intervals of three to four years (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996, Elias et al., 1999, Purcell and Elias, 2004). Other, smaller-scale surveys have also been conducted, for specific research projects.

The second aspect of the increasing focus upon the role of higher education in relation to employment is now indexed by the notion of *employability*. At a common-sense level, the notion seems to be readily understandable and acceptable. Given that higher education institutions do not themselves control the labour market (and neither does any other agency, in a market-based economy and free society), they cannot guarantee employment outcomes. What they can do, it is argued, is take steps to promote the *likelihood* that their graduates will gain what may be deemed as appropriate employment. Moreover, governments can legitimately expect HEIs to do this. As the-then Chancellor of the Exchequer, now Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, stated in 1999

“Given the substantial public investment in university students, it is particularly important that they are employable upon graduation.”

(cited in Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1999 p.27)

**Over the subsequent period, HEIs in the UK have been subject to performance evaluation in terms of a number of measures, including employment outcomes, based on the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey.** The performance indicators on graduate employment rates, as calculated and reported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, are related to *benchmark* rates accorded to HEIs on a range of differentiating factors.

Gazier (1998) identifies rather differing meanings and uses of the notion of employability, going back over a century. During the 1980 and 1990s, labour market policy in North America and the UK shifted to a supply-side approach, and the term ‘employability’ was adopted within educational policy discourse (Taylor, 1998, McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). In such discourse, the notion has become ‘hollowed out’, according to (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), to have a “singular focus on the individual and what might be termed their ‘employability skills’.” (p. 205). The term ‘employability skills’ was adopted by consultants PriceWaterhouse Coopers in their report to the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (the corporate body bring together the heads of higher education institutions in the UK, now called ‘Universities UK’) (CVCP/DfEE/HEQE, 1998). Over the previous decade, a variety of initiatives had been undertaken concerned with enhancing what would now be called ‘graduate employability’. In most cases, these initiatives adopted the terminology of skills, competencies, capabilities and, more recently, attributes.

<sup>6</sup> Previously called ‘First Destinations Survey’

<sup>7</sup> The rate for 2007 was 93.8%, in 2006 this was 93.2%

## Graduate competencies as possession

The currently-dominant approach is based on the assumption that the terms used in lists or frameworks of what we may term 'graduate competencies' *refer to* some empirically real phenomena. We might call such a view one of 'possessive instrumentalism' (Holmes, 2006b), whereby the competencies are treated as phenomena capable of being possessed and used. In 'untechnical' discourse, we have no problem in talking about the competencies that students might be expected to *acquire* during their education, and the competencies they are expected to *possess* on graduation. We have no problem also in talking about the competencies students may *use* during their period of study and may *use* in their employment once they have graduated. To say, for example, that someone *has* competency in problem analysis is generally taken as equivalent to saying that they *are* competent in problem analysis or, in more colloquial terms, that they are '*good*' at analysing problems. However, the dominant approach to graduate employability in the UK goes further, and seeks to use the notion of graduate competencies, usually phrased as 'skills and attributes', as *technical* terms.

An early, and significant, development on this was the report on 'Higher Education and the Needs of Society', jointly published in 1984 by national agencies concerned with higher education. That report stated that:

"The abilities most valued in industrial, commercial and professional life as well as in public and social administration are the transferable intellectual and social skills."  
(NAB and UGC, 1984)

A follow-up document continued this theme:

"The personal or non-academic skills of students, which higher education is expected to develop, include the general communication, problem-solving, teamwork and inter-personal skills required in employment."  
(National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education (NAB), 1986 p.3)

There soon followed various attempts to elaborate this limited statement, particularly with the impetus of a funded initiative by the UK Department of *Employment*<sup>8</sup> and in the context of the developing 'competence movement' notably in respect of the reform of the vocational qualifications system and in respect of management development. A variety of terms were used, usually phrases which are composed of various combinations of the words 'personal', 'transferable', 'generic', 'core', 'key', with the words 'capabilities', 'abilities', 'competencies', 'skills'. Various institutional and departmental projects produced various listings of the 'skills' which were deemed to be necessary or desirable (Drew, 1998). Noting that the potential list of skills can become so long as to be self-defeating, the report of the National Committee Inquiry into Higher Education<sup>9</sup> stated:

"we believe that four skills are key to the future success of graduates whatever they intend to do in later life. These four are:

- communication skills;
- numeracy;
- the use of information technology;
- learning how to learn."

(National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997 para.9.18)

This led to increased curriculum change, at *institutional level*, aimed at 'embedding' such 'skills' etc, using various lists. Table 1 presents examples of such lists.

Such institutional-level curriculum-development interventions were rarely, if ever, directly based on empirical research. Published research studies tended to be based on surveys of employers, students/graduates, and/or teaching staff (eg Smith et al., 1989, Drew et al., 1992, Harvey et al., 1992). Harvey

<sup>8</sup> ie *not* the Department of Education and Science, which normally would view all matters to do with universities to be within their jurisdiction.

<sup>9</sup> established by Prime Minister John Major in 1995, in response to growing concern about the funding of higher education. The report was published a few weeks after Tony Blair and the Labour Party won a landslide general election, and was used as support for significant changes, not least that of the introduction of a student loan scheme.

(1997) undertook a study of graduates employment through a series of over 250 semi-structured interviews with strategic and line managers, with graduates, and with non-graduate employees. The Association of Graduate Recruiters produced a report adopting the term 'self-reliance skills', presented as a set of twelve 'career management and effective learning skills', in which the ideas presented "resulted from discussions" with various informants including employers, graduates (employed, unemployed and self-employed), key staff in HEIs and others (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 1995). An 'action research project' at Sheffield University which produced a 'model' of 108 'skills' organised into eight categories within four 'zones' (Allen, 1993). More recently, Knight and Yorke (2003) have developed a framework referred to the USEM model, the acronym referring to (subject) Understanding, Skills, Efficacy, and Meta-cognition. Table 2 presents examples of the lists of skills purportedly identified through such research projects, constituting a small selection of the various lists and frameworks that have existed and/or currently exist.

### *Problems*

The very existence of such a plethora of list and frameworks of such competencies/ skills/ attributes should, one might think, cause some pause for thought. The PriceWaterhouse Coopers report (CVCP, 1998), previously mentioned, claims that "there are many lists of skills being produced but considerable similarity between them". However, whilst there may be similarity at the level of *untechnical* discourse, we should exercise caution in assuming that this extends to the usage of such terms as *technical* concepts. Otter (1997), herself a proponent of the skills approach, states that "the use of the same ability in different universities does not mean that they necessarily share common understanding, and it often obscures fundamental differences of principle". Such a view is consonant with the conclusions reached by Hirsh and Bevan in their study of 'managerial skills language', who state that

"...if we ask the question 'is there a shared language for management skills?', the answer seems to be 'yes' at the level of expression but 'no' at the level of meaning."  
(Hirsh and Bevan, 1988 p.45)

This study is noted by Smith et al. (1989) but, despite the caveat they issue by citing from Hirsh and Bevan, they nevertheless engage in an analysis of 20 'transferable employment skills', by employment sectors.

The assumption of shared, agreed meaning amongst respondents in such 'research' projects is often compounded by the assumption that the meaning of the terms remains stable *across* research projects. The lists used are often constructed from those used in other projects. For example, in a relatively early study, Smith et al. (1989, p.26) refer to the "[n]umerous ways of categorizing skills" and that "there is clearly no universally agreed classification", then state

"However, after examining the literature and the views of employers, it emerged that three main types of general skills were most frequently mentioned: these were to do with problem solving, communication and working in groups."

Later, Yorke (1999) describes a survey of 104 small enterprises on their expectations of the skills and attributes of graduates, using a list "based on a much longer list" devised by Harvey and Green (1994). Yet Harvey and Green themselves provide no explanation of how they arrived at the items in *their* list, nor why these can and should be regarded as having singular meaning. If, therefore, the meanings of these skills terms cannot be shown to be clearly specified as technical terms, no confidence can be placed in the purported findings of the various projects.

Problems also arise with regard to the methodology adopted in the research projects on such graduate skills and competencies. In most cases these projects have been survey-based: various stakeholders, students/ graduate, academic staff, and particularly employers, are invited to respond to questions that typically present a list of purported skills and/or attributes and ask for an indication of the relative importance of these. Crucially, all such studies investigate the *expressed 'perceptions'* of the respondents: none attempt to devise some form of objective measures of the purported skills and/or

attributes, nor even discuss the theoretical and practical prospect of so doing. Normally, only the most modest of descriptive statistical methods are applied, with no attempt to apply inferential statistical techniques. Such surveys cannot legitimately claim to identify the skills or competencies that actually *are* possessed and/or used by graduates, nor those required by employers, even if the meaning of the terms used could be unequivocally established.

We should also consider the practical difficulties that arise for all parties concerned, in the existence of such a plethora of lists and frameworks. Students are, supposedly, required to acquire the desired competencies during their studies, and be assessed on these; employers will then, it is asserted, be able to make recruitment and selection decisions on the basis of the information made transparent through the system created. Starting with the last-mentioned, how is any employer to make sense of the multitude of lists of competencies, in order to make a decision between candidates who come from different institutions? How is any graduate to know whether the competencies they ‘possess’ are the ‘right’ ones?

Perhaps most problematic for adherents to graduates’ competencies and skills, as requirements for employability, is that it appears to fail to explain employment outcomes. In their study of ‘employability skills initiatives’ at institutional level, Mason et al. conclude that

“there is no evidence that the emphasis given by university departments to the teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills has a significant independent effect on either of the labour market outcomes considered here [ie gaining employment within 6 months of graduation<sup>10</sup>, and securing ‘graduate level jobs’].”

(Mason et al., 2006, p. 24)

In particular, the approach provides no way of explaining differences in employment outcomes between graduates from particular demographic groups. Graduates from minority ethnic groups have been shown to have poorer employment outcomes (Connor et al., 2005, Performance Innovation Unit, 2006), as have those from working class and other disadvantaged groups (Purcell et al., 1999, Pollard et al., 2004, Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). There are no reasonable grounds for assuming that such graduates systematically differ from others in their ‘possession’ of such purported competencies. It might, of course, be suggested that employment disadvantage arises from discriminatory practices by employers, explicit or tacit or structural; however, unless this explanation can be related to the purported competencies, this merely increases the number of explanatory elements.

Such problems provide clear grounds for considering alternative ways to attempt to understand the matters under consideration.

### **Graduate competencies and social positioning**

Starting from the findings that demonstrate differences in employment outcomes between different groups, discussed above, we may consider an alternative view: that of societal positioning. A number of writers in the 1960s and 1970s presented critical analyses of the technocratic, functionalist perspective on education, in which higher levels of knowledge and skills were required by the technological developments taking place, leading to ever-increasing opportunities for social mobility. Such critical writers argued, on the contrary, that education served to reinforce existing patterns of the way that advantage and disadvantage are distributed within society, to reinforce social position and societal stratification (eg Turner, 1960, Jackson and Marsden, 1962, Berg, 1970, Collins, 1971, Dore, 1976, Halsey, 1977, Collins, 1979). Halsey concludes that “education is increasingly the mediator of the transmission of status between generations” (op. cit., 184).

However, such analyses sound out-dated in the context of massive expansion of higher education, and by the fact that those who enter higher education and successfully exit as graduates are those who, on the face of it, have ‘succeeded’ in the educational contest. Recent critics have deployed the concept of

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<sup>10</sup> Six months after graduation is the time frame for the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education survey, data from which is used by Mason et al. in their study

cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) to analyse the role of higher education in social opportunity, including employment. Bourdieu argues that a dominant class in society monopolises cultural capital, a form of wealth arising from control over knowledge, ideas, symbols etc. For those born into the dominant class, the family is a primary mechanism by which they acquire such cultural capital. Moreover, the education system privileges the mode of language (eg accent, vocabulary, mode of expression), set of values (eg on what constitutes 'success'), and practices (eg dietary habits) of the dominant class. The 'rules of the game' are already set so that students from privileged backgrounds are able to gain advantage in the system.

Brown and Scase (1994) argue that, despite the expansion of higher education in the UK, access to the 'fast track' graduate employment opportunities are still mainly taken by those from privileged backgrounds. Employers make their selection decisions not only on 'capability' but also on 'acceptability'. Brown and Scase present a set of quotations from interviews with graduate recruiters, stating that what these

"reveal is that the whole question of acceptability is intimately connected to the recent emphasis on personal and transferable skills within higher education [... highlighting] the increased significance attached to social as well as academic qualifications."  
(p. 133)

Such employers operated on the basis of a hierarchy of universities, such that anyone from a university lower down that hierarchy, or not even 'on the list', would most likely be screened out of the selection process at a very early stage.

The differentials in employment outcomes noted above certainly seem to support an analysis that the notion of graduate competencies relates strongly to issues of social positioning and of societal reproduction. However, despite emphasising the role of human agency, the ability of human beings to act upon social circumstances and thereby change them, the overall thrust of this approach tends to be one that may be called a 'counsel of despair'. If the elite positions go to those who already have the cultural capital that their elite background has provided, then anyone from a more disadvantaged background can and should have no reasonable hope of making progress. Such pessimism does not, however, take account of the interactional process by which *individual persons*, real human being rather than members of a social category, make their way into, through and out of higher education, and onto the social arenas of their post-graduation lives. We shall therefore now turn to the third approach, taking such a *processual* view.

### **Graduate competencies as processual**

Under this view, the process by which someone moves in, through and on from higher education into their post-graduation employment and career as an *identity project* (Harré, 1983), or as Goffman (1959) would put it, a *moral career*. Put simply, to be successful an individual must *become* a graduate, not just in the formal sense of being awarded a degree but in socially and biographically significant terms whereby they act in ways that lead *others* to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed (ie in the kind of job generally considered appropriate to someone who has been highly educated). '*Becoming*' is used in two ways here: that of a process and that of appropriateness. The latter use of the term is now rather old-fashioned English language usage, found in the song 'Moonlight become you'<sup>11</sup> and also, in negative form, in the phrase 'conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman'.

The term 'identity' is here being used as a 'sensitizing concept' (Strauss, 1997), to enable us to address the issues with which we are concerned. Identity should be taken non-essentially, ie not as some existent entity. Rather, it is relational, the emergent outcome of situated social processes of *identification* or, better put, *identifying*, by the individual themselves and by significant others in the social setting. Identity is thus socially constructed and negotiated, is always subject to possible

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<sup>11</sup> as song by Bing Crosby in the 1942 film 'Road to Morocco'



contestation; it is, we might say, fragile. Jenkins refers to 'the internal-external dialectic of identification' (Jenkins, 1996) to express this interactional process. The term 'emergent identity' may be used to distinguish the concern here from notions either of identity as social ascription or of identity as self-concept. It is not either-or but both-and.

Emergent identity may thus be viewed as arising from, or (as we might say) 'in', the interaction between the individual and significant others in respect of the kind of person the individual is to be taken to be in, and in relation to, the particular situation. The individual may seek to lay claim to an identity, and this claim may or may not match the ascriptions by others, ie the claim may be affirmed or disaffirmed. The ascriptions by others may be accepted by the individual, or may be resisted. Of course, as the process is one of negotiation, there may be *intermediate* positions in which the individual and/or the significant others may be ambivalent or equivocal in their judgements. The model shown in figure 1 attempts to show these possible emergent identity positions in graphical form. The model provides, amongst other things, a method for 'mapping' individuals' trajectories through such positions, or *modalities of emergent identity*, as they undergo extended education and/ or training, such as graduates entering employment. Figure 1 presents this in graphical form.

From such an analysis, we can begin to construct an alternative approach to graduate competencies, and graduate employability. We should not regard this as a matter of possession and use of certain 'transferable' skills and attributes, or graduate competencies. Rather, we can consider it as the always-temporary relationship that arises between an individual graduate and the field of employment opportunities, as the graduate engages with those who are 'gatekeepers' to those opportunities, those who make selection decisions. In presenting themselves to a prospective employer, as a prospective employee, the individual is presenting their claim on being a graduate worthy of such employment. The selectors may affirm such a claim, so the graduate achieves the position or modality of emergent identity shown as that in 'zone 4', labelled 'achieved identity'. On the other hand, they may disaffirm the claim, reject the application, so the individual enters the modality shown as 'zone 2', 'failed identity'. In many cases, graduates may be given temporary appointment, which may be represented by 'zone X', 'underdetermined identity'.

We may now review the way we understand what we mean by 'graduate competencies'. The terminology of competencies may be seen as *elements in the discursive repertoire available to the various parties concerned, when warranting identity claims and ascriptions* (Holmes, 1995, Holmes, 2000). The most effective form of warranting is in relation to *practices* that are appropriate to the identity claimed. Identity and practices may be seen as basic concepts, enabling explanation of significant action. Drawing upon the interactionist, interpretivist, constructionist traditions within the social sciences, we may avoid the error of assuming that meaningful human activity can be understood in terms of objectively observable behaviour. Rather, what makes 'mere' behaviour meaningful, socially consequential<sup>12</sup>, is that it is behaviour-of-a-type, conducted by a person-of-a-kind, in interaction with other persons (Holmes, 2000, Holmes, 2001). In construing the observable<sup>13</sup>, but 'enigmatic', action of someone as meaningful action evoking some form of response, we draw upon some prior understanding of (a) what *type* of action it may be and (b) what kind of person is person has engaged in that action. These prior understandings implicate (a) a set of types of actions (which we may call 'practices') and (b) a set of kinds of persons (which we may call 'identities').

Competencies may thus be seen as generalised ways of talking about practices. This is not to say that talk about competencies is *only* talk: whether or not others accept a graduate's identity claim warranted in such language is not guaranteed, and may fail. One way that it may fail is when the

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<sup>12</sup> an action 'supplemented' by response of another person Gergen, K. 1994. *Realities and Relationships*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press., that is an act Harré, R., Clarke, D. & De Carlo, N. 1985. *Motives and Mechanisms: An introduction to the psychology of action*, London, Methuen., not merely 'movement'

<sup>13</sup> Our observation of what we take as an action may include no observable movement on the part of the person concerned: eg dumb insolence by a soldier, where silence is taken to be deliberate and improper behaviour

graduate is subjected to extended discussion, as in an interview, and where they do not display continued 'fluency' in the presentation of their claim-warranting. Later, if and when a graduate is employed in a particular post, they are likely to have to warrant their continuing claim on the graduate identity in relation to their job performance, perhaps explicitly and more often tacitly. Whatever the circumstance in which such identity claim-warranting takes place, it is most unlikely that their will be a specific and limited set of terms, such as those presented in the various lists and frameworks developed in the possessive-instrumentalist approach. Rather, it is the very plethora of terms, the richness of the vocabulary, that enables a graduate to maintain their warranting, adjusting their linguistic repertoire to the (untechnical) usage by interlocutors (Holmes, 1995).

This approach, the 'Graduate Identity Approach', and the model, provide for consideration of movement through the various modalities. In particular, it suggests the actions that might be taken by a graduate who is in the position noted as in 'zone 2'. The possessive-instrumentalist approach would just say 'develop the appropriate competencies'. A more realistic, and more practical more of action is indicated by the Graduate Identity Approach: develop ways of presenting your claim on the identity (of a graduate worthy of employment) in such a way that it stands a good chance of being affirmed by those who make the selection decision on job applications you make. As noted above, selectors warrant their decisions based on relate conventions of warrant, typically expressed in the language of competencies, of skills and attributes albeit in a different made from that assumed by proponents of the possessive-instrumentalist approach.

### **Becoming employed as a graduate: research applications of the Graduate Identity Approach**

As was argued earlier, there are significant problems with the research on graduate employability based on the possessive-instrumentalist approach to graduate competencies. It therefore is important that the Graduate Identity Approach can be shown to contribute novel modes of research into graduate employability, and the ability to contribute to our understanding of the key issues involved. We can do so in terms of examining the trajectories of individuals as they move through their lives as students and on to their lives as graduates. Presented below are the cases of two individuals, based on biographical, or life-story, narratives obtained through semi-structured interviews. These are part of a developing set of such interviews.

#### *Case study 1: Graduate SA: 'Making something of my life'*

SA graduated in 1994, with a degree in Business Economics from a 'new' university<sup>14</sup> in the London area. He had no clear idea what he wanted to do, just a general idea of working in sales and marketing. After several months of writing 20-30 job applications per week, without success, he was persuaded by his parents to travel to Pakistan to visit relatives there. This, he says, was "the most intense six weeks I've spent". The poverty and deprivation made him realise the benefits and opportunities available in the UK. He was affected by the wishes of his relatives for him and his family to succeed. This led him to decide to 'make something of my life, to make a difference'.

Initially he took a short computer course to remedy what he saw as an area in which he was lacking. He then saw the opportunity to take a business course for unemployed graduates, in another city. After some difficulty seeking a placement after the course, he eventually found one with a black training provider. This got him involved in community economic development field. He began to apply for jobs in the field, and was offered a post as policy officer with a London-based black training and campaigning organisation. The post was not specifically advertised as being for a graduate; however, the other employees are all graduates.

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<sup>14</sup> ie a former polytechnic. Polytechnics and a number of former colleges of higher education have gained the title and status of university, following UK legislation in 1992. Such institutions are usually referred to as 'new universities', distinguishing them from universities that were established under Royal Charter. Generally, the latter are better resourced, and regarded as 'better'.

Initially, he was very unsure about whether he could do the job. Despite saying that he would take his time to settle in, he threw himself into his work. “Every day it would be like I felt I had to prove myself to be in this job.” He is now more settled, has a sense of ‘equilibrium’ in his life. He has strong commitment to the values of community-led economic development.

*Analysis using the model of modalities of emergent identity*

This graduate experienced disaffirmation of his identity as a graduate ‘worthy of employment’ (zone 2). For a time, he may be seen to have withdrawn his claim on that identity (zone 1), prioritising another identity, that of his family and ethnic identity, by travelling to and staying with relatives in Pakistan. Determined to ‘make something’ of his life, he re-established his identity claim, gaining tentative affirmation (zone X) by gaining entry to a short course for unemployed graduates. He eventually gained employment, not specifically in post advertised as a graduate entry job, but working with other employees all of whom are graduates (zone 4). Using the numbering of the ‘zones’ in the model, the trajectory may be shown as 1-X-2-X-1-X-X-4.

*Case study 2: Graduate SB: Leaving a traditional ‘graduate job’:*

SB graduated in 1996, with an Oxbridge mathematics and science degree. She chose to take these subjects ‘for love of the subject really, not as a career path’. During her first year at university, she sought advice from the university careers service and undertook a psychometric test. The personnel field was suggested as an appropriate career; this also happens to be her father’s profession. She applied to various companies for an opportunity for work experience, and spent a week shadowing the personnel director of a building society. Towards the end of her second year at university, she applied to the company for a summer job, and worked there for eight weeks in the personnel department. In her final year, she applied to a number of large companies, seeking a place in their graduate recruitment and training schemes. She had an offer from a major grocery retailer, which she accepted.

Following the initial induction and training period, she was placed in charge of the counters section of the store to which she had been posted. She found that she was working very long hours, because of the need to cover for staff shortages. The merchandising, display and selling parts of the job did not interest her. She did not welcome the prospect of 3 years working in such an environment, moving from one department to another, before she would be able to move on to personnel work at head office. After about 9 months, she decided she would leave. She started applying for jobs, was interviewed for the second company to which she applied, and was offered the job. She resigned her job that afternoon, which was the beginning of her holiday, and started her new job two days later.

Her new employer is a training company, providing training through TEC funding for people who are unemployed. There are 24 employees. Her post is that of placement consultant, finding client companies to take trainees on work placement and monitor the trainees on placement. She had applied for a post of course administrator. This had been advertised as “an ideal first job for a graduate seeking to go into personnel”; however, at the interview, the business manager discussed the placement consultant post and offered it to her. Most of her colleagues are graduates in their first jobs.

She is successful in her job, and is the only consultant that reliably gains commission for the income she brings to the company. She attributes this to the way she has organised her own system for recording trainee placements in client companies, so that accurate invoices can be sent for all placements. Her experience in her first job has made her ‘more determined’ to be organised. She drew up guidelines for trainees, to ensure good relations with client companies. She achieves a high level of repeat business. Her boss regularly “bounces ideas” off her.

Her experience in her first job has been useful in terms of her confidence: ‘if I can handle that I can handle anything really’; a colleague in her first job is rather in awe of the manager, “scared” to ask for advice. She is undertaking a personnel management course, and has just started to look for jobs with wider personnel work, preferably in a large company.

#### *Analysis using the model of modalities of emergent identity*

For this person, the move from an identity as a student, and thus *potential* graduate employee (claim and tentative affirmation) was quickly made, with a job offer before graduation, then to affirmation on starting the job (zone 1 through X to 4). However, she soon began to question (tentative disclaim, from zone 4 to X) the identity she then had, which was not matching her aspirations and claim on an identity as a personnel management practitioner. She effected her disclaim by resigning (from X to 3), to seek a post which was closer to her aspirations, and quickly gained one (from 3 through X to 4). This identity is further affirmed by her success in her new post, and by the interaction she has with her boss. However, this is not fully in line with her aspiration and is seeking to warrant a claim on an identity as a personnel management practitioner (from 4 to X). The trajectory may thus be represented as: 1-X-4-X-3-X-4-X.

#### **Graduate Identity Approach applied to the curriculum**

The above discussion has sought to show that the Graduate Identity Approach provides a sound and useful approach to undertaking research on graduates’ employment trajectories after completing their studies. To be of wider application, however, the approach should provide some guidelines for intervention *prior* to graduation, providing implications for development and delivery of the curriculum. This does, of course, presume that there is open-mindedness here too.

One key area for the application of the approach is, in fact, already in place. This is the use of work placements as part of degree programmes. The traditional approach would tend to see placements as opportunities for acquiring and developing competencies, which are then transferred into new situations. An alternative view, based on the Graduate Identity Approach, is that work placements provide the setting in which the student can rehearse the aspired-to identity, *and gain (tentative) affirmation* in that identity, moving from zone 1 to zone X in the model shown in figure 1 (Holmes, 2001). Moreover, the work undertaken in the placement requires *serial rehearsal of relevant practices*, over an extended time period. Mason et al. (2006) found that

“structured work experience has clear positive effects on the ability of graduates, firstly, to find employment within six months of graduation and, secondly, to secure employment in graduate-level jobs.”  
(p.24)

The Graduate Identity Approach can explain this without recourse to the perceived need to devise highly questionable lists of purported competencies.

In general terms, the Graduate Identity Approach would suggest that the curriculum should provide rich opportunities for identity rehearsal and for serial rehearsal of practices, along with the practising of making warranting claims. These opportunities would necessarily vary between subjects studied, but the principle is capable of being adopted in various ways. The language of competencies, skills, attributes will form part of that process, but in a general manner, not limited to a restricted and defined set of terms. After all, students will go on to various social arenas in which it is most unlikely that they will encounter exactly the same vocabulary items. They will, rather, have to engage with others who may use the terminology of competencies etc, but using such terms as *untechnical* concepts.

#### **Conclusion**

The discussion in this paper has sought to argue a number of points. The underlying assumption has been that the issues of educational outcomes broadly covered by notions of graduate competencies,

graduate employability, skills and attributes, etc, *are* worthy of considered and extended reasoning. Moreover, such reasoning should not start from premature assumptions about how we should understand the key notions. Consideration of three different modes of examining the issues of concern may then be conducted in an even-handed manner. This differs from the currently-dominant approach to such examination, whereby the vocabulary of competency is allowed to close down prematurely the analysis that is necessary to ensure clear thinking and sound, appropriate empirical investigation.

By opening up, rather than closing down, the analysis, we can see that the possessive-instrumentalist approach to graduate competencies has major flaws. One alternative, that based on notions of social positioning, provides little clear and positive guidance on how we might intervene at the level of the curriculum. The third approach, it has been argued, avoids the problems with the other two approaches. It can claim to be conceptually and theoretically robust, to be empirically supported, and to provide a basis for curriculum intervention. An open-minded approach would take the approach as a serious and useful contribution to what is undoubtedly an issue of major concern.

**Table 1 Examples of skills/ competencies frameworks: institutional frameworks**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Skills/ Competencies</b>
National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report)	communication skills, numeracy, the use of information technology, learning how to learn
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority	communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance, problem solving
Bangor (University of Wales, Bangor)	communicating, analytical thinking interpersonal skills, managerial skills, maths and information technology, creativity, enquiry and research
Huddersfield, & Lincolnshire and Humberside Universities	communication, application of number, IT, problem solving, working with others, improving own performance
Luton University	information retrieval and handling, communication and presentation, planning and problem solving, social development and interaction
University of Northumbria at Newcastle	managing and applying intellect, self management, working with others, effective communication, information technology, use and application of mathematics
Sheffield University	communication, teamwork, problem solving, managing and organising
Teeside University	use of IT, research skills, critical thinking, problem solving, information gathering, decision making, communication/ presentation, public speaking, group skills, negotiating, influencing, persuading, interviewing, consulting, leading discussions, intellectual skills
Wolverhampton University	communicate effectively, organise, gather information, use IT, act independently, work in teams, numeracy

source: Key Skill Dissemination Project, Nottingham University  
 (from website: <http://www.keyskillsnet.org.uk> - accessed 20 April 2000; no longer available)

**Table 2 Examples of skills/ competencies frameworks: frameworks from research studies**

source	Skills/ competencies
Smith, et al. (1989)	‘Personal transferable skills’, to do with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem solving (eg ability to learn quickly, specifying personal objectives, critical thinking,...)</li> <li>• Communication (eg communicating your ideas orally, communicating your ideas in writing, listening to others’ views, ..)</li> <li>• Working in a group (eg working in a team, ability to lead, ability to negotiate, ..)</li> </ul>
Harvey et al. (1992) : ‘Someone who can make an impression’	15 ‘qualities’ listed including: Effective communication, team work, ability to solve problems, analytic skills, flexibility and adaptability, self skills (confidence etc), decision making skills, independent judgement ...
Allen (1991): ‘Improving the Personal Skills of Graduates’	8 categories of ‘transferable personal skills’: organising; social and group; communication and linguistic; creative; cognitive; contingency; self-managing; physical
Harvey and Green (1994): ‘Employee Satisfaction Summary’	‘generic or core skills’ willingness to learn, team work, problem solving and a range of personal attributes including commitment, energy, self-motivation, self-management, reliability, co-operation, flexibility and adaptability, analytic ability, logical argument and ability to summarise key issues.
Association of Graduate Recruiters (1995): ‘Skills for Graduates in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century’	Self-reliance skills, or ‘career management skills and effective learning skills’, including: Self-awareness, self-promotion, exploring and creating opportunities, action planning, networking ...
Harvey et al. (1997): Graduates’ Work: organisational change and students’ attributes	‘Attributes of graduates’: personal attributes (knowledge, intellect, willingness to learn, self-skills) interactive attributes (communication, teamworking, interpersonal skills)
Knight and Yorke (2003)	USEM model of employability U - (Subject) Understanding S- ‘Skills’ E- “Efficacy beliefs, students’ self-theories and personal qualities” M – Meta-cognition (“encompassing self-awareness regarding the student’s learning, and the capacity to reflect on, in and for action”)

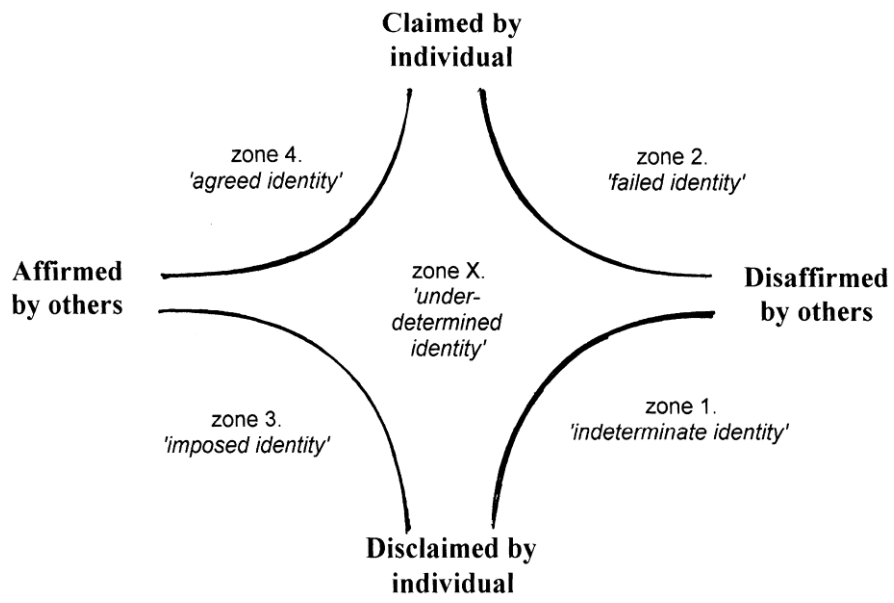


Figure 1: Claim-affirmation model of modalities of emergent identity



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