Between policy and practice on graduate employability: lost in translation?

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Presented at Annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education, Liverpool, December2008

Introduction

Graduate employability seems set to continue to be a key theme espoused in public policy on higher education. The dominant public policy discourse is primarily framed in terms of the 'imperative' of the wider 'the skills agenda' (Leitch, 2006), ie human capital development in a globalised and competitive economic environment. The contribution of higher education to meeting the demand for such skills was one of the (five) 'possible performance measures of quality' that the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Denham, 2008). At the level of institutional policy and of curricula, the emphasis is on notions of skills and attributes deemed to be important for success in the graduate labour market. Through the common terminology of 'skills', it might be assumed that there is a simple process of 'translation' between national economic desiderata, the employment practices of the myriad organisations recruiting graduates, and the educational processes by and through which individuals become graduates entering the labour market.

This paper will contest the assumption of such simple process of 'translation' (Law, 1994), arguing for recognition of different 'levels' and different 'types' of discourse. It will argue that the meaning of the terms 'employability' and 'skills' cannot be assumed to unitary, and will sketch, within the limitations of space in a discussion paper, how attention to differences in meaning, in different texts, may indicate problems with the assumption of simple translation.

The meanings of employability

The theme of employability plays a key part in the shift from demand-side to supply-side interventions by governments (H M Treasury, 1997; CBI (Confederation of British Industry), 1999; Hillage and Pollard, 1999; McQuaid et al., 2005; Zimmermann, 2004). Under changing economic and therefore labour market conditions, it is argued, neither governments nor employers can provide any form of employment security, and so employees themselves need to take greater responsibility for ensuring that they can continue to retain their jobs or gain another job. The Leitch Review (Leitch, 2006) presents the claim succinctly

> "Increasingly, skills are a key determinant of employment." (p.31)

Within higher education, a commonly-cited definition is that of ESECT: employability is

> "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes –
> that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful
> in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce,
> the community and the economy."
> (Yorke, 2004, p.8)

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Such similarity of definitions can, however, be misleading. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) draw upon Gazier's (2001) analysis of the historical antecedents, with seven *different* operational versions traced.over the past century. There is, according to Gazier, an emerging consensus around this concept of 'interactive employability' in which individual initiative is emphasised, *but this is taken alongside* recognition that individual employability is relative to that of others and that there is a key role for the state in addressing issues of unequal opportunity and structural factors in labour market functioning. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) argue that, in reality, these other aspects are often under-emphasised in current labour market policy with its emphasis upon supply-side aspects, and that the concept "has been 'hollowed out' in many current theoretical and policy discussions" (p. 205). This raises concerns about how the concept is used in debates regarding the relationship between higher education and post-graduation employment. The starting point here is to consider more generally issues of meanings.

Meanings, meanings

The notion that a single term may not have singular meaning is certainly not new. Within philosophy, there as been longstanding recognition that a word may "possess connotations which are partly identical and partly different..." (Austin, 1961). The issue can also be recognised in the notion of a *category mistake* (Ryle, 1949) , of *systematic ambiguity* (Flew, 1979), and of the view that "constant batle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (Wittgenstein, 1953).
We may also take notice of the different logic that applies to discourse that is
   a. primarily *descriptive (*subject to empirical observation) *or explanatory* (judged in terms of its relation to empirical facts); or
   b. primarily *evaluative (*inviting judgements made on some set of values) *or normative* (imposing such values and value-based judgements, particularly in respect of proscribing, permitting, or prescribing certain forms of action).
Confusion between, on the one hand a form of discourse that is descriptive and/or explanatory and on the other, discourse that is evaluative and/ or normative, will result in logical error.

Within the broad field of discourse theory, we can see similar and related notions:
* the meaning *sign* is given with the structure of the text (Sausurre, 1974);
* the notion of *intertextuality*, {Kristeva, 1986 #499
* that 'objects' of discourse are *constituted by 'orders of discourse'* {Foucault, 1973 #506}.
Similarly, and not unrelated, within sociology there is a longstanding recognition of issues concerning how meaning is constructed, distributed and reproduced *socially*, within modes of symbolic communication and interaction. For example:
* 'facts' (eg whether a particular sudden death was suicide) are *produced* through the practical, situated work following a set of methods agreed among 'cultural colleagues'. (Garfinkel, 1967)
* the importance of the 'definition of the situation' (Thomas, 1931), central to symbolic interactionism
* how particular 'bodies of knowledge', exhibited in practices and embedded in material objects (tools etc) arise through the formation of 'networks' of relationships between actors (Callon, 1986).

Contexts of employability discourse

We may start by first considering the different contexts within the discourse of which graduate employability is a key term. These may usefully be categorised, we suggest, at varying 'levels', ie macro-, meso- and micro-levels. By 'macro-level' we are referring to those arenas that are concerned with broad, overarching issues of the socio-political governance of higher education and its relationship with the economy and civil society (Rhodes, 1997; Salter and Tapper, 2000; Kooiman, 2003). At the other end of the spectrum, as it were, a variety of actors are engaged with students/ graduates as *individuals*, including teaching staff, careers advisors, recruitment and selection staff working for employers, and, of course, the students/ graduates themselves. Between these two levels, there is the meso-level, ie the broad arena in which there is debate and action concerning matters such as the composition of the curriculum, broadly constituted pedagogic approaches, how particular subject disciplines may promote employability, the role that careers advisory services may play, and so on. Research may be, and is, undertaken at each level. Moreover, research may be undertaken on graduate *employment*, which may or may not be explicitly related to the issue of employability.

Macro-level

Examples of macro-level discourse of graduate employability include, of course, the Dearing Report and the more recent Leitch Review but also Ministerial speeches, Government White and enacted legislation. Also included would be documents issued by HEFCE (and appropriate departments in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales), by HESA and by Universities UK, formerly CVCP where these deal with employability and/or employment across the whole sector. Other examples include attempts at advocacy and lobbying by organisations such as the CBI.

The documents from these bodies typically use the discourse of 'skills' in relation to issues of graduate employability, locating the discussion within the wider 'imperative' of maintaining and developing competitiveness in the global economy. However, such discussion treats the concept of skills as a *mass noun* rather than a count noun:

> "In a fast-changing and increasingly competitive world, the role of higher education in equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills, in stimulating innovation and supporting productivity and in enriching the quality of life is central."
> (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p.14)

> "Employers need people with higher skills to compete in a global economy characterised by rapid technological advances and changing work organisation."
> (CBI (Confederation of British Industry), 2008, p.1)

Such texts usually make reference to empirical studies (descriptive-explanatory) but are overwhelmingly replete with evaluative and normative assertions. That is, they seek to persuade a variety of actors about 'what is to be done'. The actors here are either organisations (eg the government, universities) or an undifferentiated category of persons (eg students, academics, employers). The persuasion may be to gain confirmation of existing actions, or to exhort for changes.

In terms of research, a number of survey studies have been concerned with the *employment* of graduates generally, ie not focused on particular institutions, subjects, or regions. Such studies should, if the logic of employability is valid, provide empirical evidence in relation to what 'factors' affect, positively or adversely, "makes graduates more likely to gain employment" (Yorke, 2004). Texts in this area include the annual survey of leavers (eg Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2008), the longitudinal

series of studies by Warwick University's Institute for Employment Research (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996; Purcell and Elias, 2004; Elias et al., 1999), the reports by the Institute of Employment Studies (eg Pearson et al., 2000; Pollard et al., 2004), as well as one-off surveys such as (Purcell et al., 1999; Connor et al., 2005). Where these refer to 'skills', the notion is again undifferentiated. If there are any 'factors' that are related to differentials in employment outcomes, the main studies strongly indicate these to be ethnicity, gender, social class origin, age, and type of institution attended.

There are, of course, a number of studies that utilise lists or frameworks of 'skills' and 'attributes' (eg Smith et al., 1989; Harvey et al., 1992; Harvey et al., 1997). However, these are typically surveys of *opinions* of various parties (eg employers, graduates), and pre-empt the type of response by virtue of the framing of questions in the terminology of skills, thereby 'begging the question'.

Meso level

Texts at the meso-level include policy statements on employability produced by higher education institutions. For example, the University of Southampton has published an 'Employability Statement' (University of Southampton, undated), stating that the University has 'identified' graduate employability as 'one of the key strategic aims for Schools and Professional Groups'. It continues:
> "all the relevant existing strategies and policies should refer to employability and make explicit how graduate employability is being enhanced".

The definition of employability is based on the ESECT definition with the addition of a statement about developing 'interrelationships between the University, its Schools and Services with the labour market and employers'. An action plan sets out 'questions to be asked' at different stages of the 'student life cycle' and who has 'responsibility', the latter specifying various groups and individuals, including teaching staff.

Southampton's statement is presented here as typical of those produced at institutional level. The evaluative-normative character of the text is clear; no indication is provided of any empirical evidence in support of the action plan, and those who have 'responsibility' are cast as merely implementers of the action presented.

Another example of texts at this level is that of the Student Employability Profiles (Rees et al., 2007), presenting profiles for each of over 50 subjects disciplines, each of which "identifies skills that can be developed through the study of [that] particular discipline" (p. 4). Again, the ESECT definition of employability is explicitly adopted. The different profiles presented differ in the number of skills and attributes, but no empirical evidence is presented, and the profiles appear to be no more than semantic elaboration of what might be meant by 'an employable graduate'.

Micro level

The discourse of employability extends 'down' to the level of individual course modules or units. The influence of policies and directives articulated in meso-level texts may be seen in the way such modules/ units are themselves documented, the inclusion of reference to employability being mandatory in order to gain and retain validation. That is, the subject-positions of academic staff at this level proscribes any alternative mode of articulating the curriculum and pedagogy, whilst students themselves have no voice whatsoever in regard to these.

Most research on graduate employment tends to be quantititative, often survey-based. Qualitative studies, particularly narrative-based, with graduates (Holmes et al., 1988) (Smetherham, 2006) (Coughlin, 2008), where these avoid pre-emptive framing in terms of 'skills', generally find little support for the applicability of a such framing to the experiences reported. Seeking, and gaining or not gaining, desired employment is often more of a 'journey' in which an individual's life circumstances, the actions they take, and certain elements of chance combine.

Conclusion

Within the restrictions of space, we have here attempted to show how the discourse of employability (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006) should not be seen as unitary. Rather we should speak of different 'discourses', thereby challenging attempts to impose a simple assumption of translation between these and opening up the research agenda in this troubled arena.

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