

Reconsidering Graduate Employability: Beyond Possessive-Instrumentalism

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Introduction: the importance of graduate employability

Like other advanced industrial nations, the United Kingdom has over recent years placed greater emphasis on raising educational levels of its populace, particularly in terms of increasing the proportion of young persons in the workforce who are university graduates. Within an increasingly competitive globalised economy, the basis of any nation's strategies for sustainable prosperity relies ever more upon human capital and thus the forms of work that its economically-active citizens are able to undertake (Reich, 1992). Recognition of this, and a concern for equity in opportunity for social and economic advancement *within* the population, has informed recent UK Government policy on higher education, which itself is framed within a commitment to fiscal prudence (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997; Department for Education and Skills, 2003). At the same time, individuals are encouraged to undertake higher education because, in part, there is a significant earnings premium that graduates gain, on average, over their working lifetime (Steel and Sausman, 1997). Recognition of the limited call that can be made on public funds, from general taxation revenues, has led to new financing regime for the expansion of higher education premised on the principle that graduates should contribute to the costs incurred in their higher education, through a repayment scheme based on post-graduation earnings. The state, as the major funder of higher education, out of taxation income, has a significant interest in issues concerning how higher education can, indeed, promote the likelihood that students emerging from higher education gain desirable forms of post-graduation employment, contributing to national prosperity. Those students/ graduate also have a significant interest in gaining such employment, to fund the repayment of part of the costs of their education and for personal prosperity. Whilst, in a market economy, no graduate can be guaranteed employment, there is general consensus amongst policy-makers and a general expectation amongst entrants to and participants in higher education, that such education can and should promote graduate *employability*.

Increasingly over the past two decades, various agencies and institutions of higher education have engaged in initiatives intended to promote graduate employability (CVCP/DfEE/HEQE, 1998). The translation of such broad policy into action at the level of such agencies and institutions of higher education has mainly taken the form of the skills and attributes approach (O'Reilly et al., 1999; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Bennett et al., 2000; Holmes, 2001). That is, it is assumed that employability is a characteristic of individuals, comprised of or evidenced by, a set of identifiable skills and attributes (see also Payne, 2000). Various research projects have been undertaken to identify such skills and attributes; various initiatives have been undertaken, at national and institutional levels, to attempt to ensure that students 'acquire' the requisite skills and develop the desired attributes. Several millions of pounds of public funding have been provided to institutions of higher education to develop curriculum-based and extra-curricular approaches based on such an understanding of the nature of graduate employability. The skills and attributes approach, here abbreviated, with deliberate provocation, to 'SKATTY', dominates both the current practice and the research agendas.

This paper will challenge this dominant agenda. It will examine the underlying paradigmatic assumption of SKATTY, arguing that it takes the form of possessive-individualism (Sampson, 1988; Shotter, 1989) coupled with a conceptualisation of skills and attributes as tools-like, ie instrumental in performance. This 'possessive-instrumentalist' perspective will be shown to have severe flaws. What is currently presented as 'research' based on such an approach will be shown to be methodologically flawed and conceptually unsound. Following such a critique of the SKATTY approach, it will be argued that there is a cogent alternative approach, based within a relational constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1994; Hosking et al., 1995; Hosking and McNamee, 2006), that of the 'graduate identity approach' (Holmes, 2001; Holmes, 2002).

Researching graduate employability: faulty methodology?

Much of the institutionally-based initiatives to promote graduate employability appears to have little or no direct evidence base. In many cases, a framework or, perhaps more properly, list is produced of the purported skills and qualities that students supposedly gain from the higher education at the institution concerned. Yet usually no indication is given of any robust process by which such a framework/ list has been developed in relation to the empirical realm of graduate employment. They generally tend to be the outcome of some under-explained process of brainstorming, or amalgamation of 'folk' terms used about what would be expected of a ('good') graduate. For the present discussion, these can be put on one side, although we shall return to them later as they indicate an important issue, but one that is different from what they are purported to indicate.

We may note, however, that there has been, in the UK, a number of investigative projects concerned with graduate employability (eg Smith et al., 1989; Harvey et al., 1992; Harvey et al., 1997; Yorke, 1999; Buchanan et al., 2004; Nabi and Bagley, 1998). Murphy and Otter (1999) assert that there has been 'intensive research and development in the field'. However, whether or not these investigative projects could properly be said to be 'research' is questionable. The most favoured method of investigation is that of survey: 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. Normally, only the most modest of descriptive statistical methods are applied, with no attempt to apply inferential statistical techniques.

A key assumption in each of such studies is that the *meaning* of the words and phrases for the purported skills and attributes are unequivocal and the same for all respondents. However, the actual wording differs between the studies and the list/ frameworks devised. A report in 1998 by consultants PriceWaterhouse Coopers to (then) national forum for heads of institutions of higher education CVCP (CVCP/DfEE/HEQE, 1998) claimed that "there are many lists of skills being produced but considerable similarity between them". However, in her report on progress by 10 UK universities in implementing key skills across whole institutions, Otter (a key 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" (Otter, 1997). Such a view fits with the conclusions reached by Hirsh and Bevan from their study of 'managerial skills language':

"...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)

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" that Harvey and Green (1994) had devised. Yet Harvey and Green themselves provide no explanation of how the items in their list were derived, nor why these can and should be regarded as having singular meaning. If the meaning of the concept of skill, as the skills agenda seeks to use it, cannot be shown to be robust, no confidence can be placed in the purported findings of the various projects.

Although proponents of SKATTY tend to assert that they are reporting what employers say, there are doubts about whether employers do, in fact, use the language of skills and attributes in the manner claimed. The issue of graduate employability first came to national policy concern in the UK during the early 1980s. In a joint statement by the University Grants Committee (UGC) and the National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education (NAB) the contribution of higher education to the economy and society was expressed in terms of the abilities gained by students:

"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."
(National Advisory Board for Public Sector Education/ University Grants Committee (NAB/ UGC), 1984)

Yet a research project that was being undertaken more-or-less at the same time, concerned with what employers' expectations were of graduates, does not mention the word 'skill' or equivalents in a key chapter with the title 'A degree and what else?' (Roizen and Jepson, 1985). This strongly suggests that the use of the language of skills, abilities, attributes and so on has been introduced by those engaged in higher education policy matters, rather than emerging from employers themselves. Of course, over the past two decades employers may have taken up the use of such language. However, research report in 1997 presents a set of quotations selected from transcripts of interviews with employers, in a subsection headed 'self-skills'. These 'self-skills' were said to "include self-regulatory skills, self-motivation and self-assurance" (Harvey et al., 1997: 66). Yet in not one of the five quotations presented does the word 'skill' appear: the authors have *interpreted* the employers' as *meaning* such terms, a wholly unwarranted interpretation, contrary to accepted principles of qualitative research. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that employers *do*, in fact, use the language of skills and attributes in the way that proponents of SKATTY assume and claim.

The conceptualisation of skills: empirical or explanatory?

On the basis of the conclusion, above, that the various terms used in lists of skills and attributes cannot be regarded as having singular, unequivocal meaning, it is pertinent to ask a more fundamental question: what *kind* of concept is being used in the SKATTY approach? The assumption in most appears to be that the various terms used *refer* to skills and attributes as *separate empirical phenomena*. Thus, on such an assumption, it is deemed sensible to seek to ‘identify’ *which* of the various possible skills and attributes are important (in varying degrees) for graduate employment, as *perceived* by employers and/or graduates. Moreover, these empirical phenomena are treated as capable of being *acquired* and *possessed* by individuals. The language used typically speaks of students needing to ‘acquire’ appropriate skills and attributes, and of the extent to which graduates do, or do not, ‘have’ such skills and attributes. Although sometimes the phrase ‘skills *development*’ may be used, in a report reviewing ‘skills development’ in higher education published by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP/DfEE/HEQE, 1998), one chapter even has the *title* “the arguments for skills acquisition”. The SKATTY approach is clearly an example of possessive-individualism, the view that each individual human being is the “proprietor” of their “own person and capacities, owing nothing to society for them” (Macpherson, 1962, p. 3; cf also Shotter, 1989; Shotter, 1993b). A further assumption is that such empirical phenomena are related to performance in various social arenas (including the educational context and the context of employment) in terms of their *instrumentality*. That is, graduates are said to ‘use’ the various ‘skills’ in the jobs; and they and their employers can legitimately be asked what skills they use. Such assumptions about the nature of the concepts may be said to constitute the “*possessive-instrumentalist*” paradigm.

A key problem for such an understanding of skills and attributes as empirical phenomena, capable of objective observation, measurement and so on, is that of the multiplicity of lists and frameworks presented, as noted above. If the ‘research’ studies base their empirical studies on different sets of purported entities, how can a meaningful comparison be made between the findings of such studies? As previously indicated, it is difficult to sustain the claim that, although using different terms, the studies are comparable because those different terms do in fact refer to the same phenomena. At the very least, any such claim must be justified rather than merely asserted. Given the policy importance of the issue of graduate employability, we may ask why there has been no serious attempt to determine a definitive framework of the supposed skills and attributes that can sustain robust investigation, such that it can be used as the basis for research.

One reason why there has not been such an attempt to determine a definitive framework of skills and attributes may be that it is difficult to envisage how that might be done. What would count as the empirical observation of a skill or attribute? Where are they supposed to exist? Such questions immediately place in severe doubt the idea that skills and attributes can be considered as empirical phenomena, that is to say, that the *concepts refer to*, or *denote* empirical phenomena. As discussed above, the various ‘research’ projects that have attempted to ‘identify’ the purported skills and attributes that employers seek in (prospective) graduate employees in fact merely identify what employers (and others) *say* they seek, often in response to a list of such purported skills and attributes. That is, at best they access the *linguistic usage* of the respondents rather than the supposed empirical phenomena to which the linguistic terms refer. So if skills and attributes are not empirical concepts, what kind of concepts *could* they be?

It might be argued that skills and attributes are *explanatory* concepts, functioning to provide a theoretical linkage between two sets of empirical phenomena that are observed to be co-related. In this case, presumably, the attempt is made to bridge the explanatory gap between various activities prior to graduation and the later situation of the graduate gaining employment. The various within-curriculum and extra-curricular activities that make up the supposed 'employability'-oriented interventions are, it is assumed, related positively to the employment outcomes of students/ graduates undertaking and/or subjected to those interventions. The concepts of skills and attributes provides, it is assumed, the explanatory framework. But what is the nature of that explanation? Presumably it is that the 'employability' interventions lead to students attaining certain states or conditions, which are then observed by employers such that the employers offer, or withhold offer of, employment. However, this does not explain the nature of such states, nor how those states are observed, nor yet why an employer would act as they do. It merely 'black-boxes' the matters in question.

More significantly, the SKATTY approach does not explain significant differences in employment outcomes between particular demographic groups of graduates. These include those from minority ethnic groups (Connor et al., 2005; Performance and Innovation Unit, 2006) or/ and from working class and other disadvantaged backgrounds (Purcell et al., 1999; Pollard et al., 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). There are no grounds for assuming that such graduates differ in respect of the purported skills and attributes, so the SKATTY approach falls down in a major area of concern, for public policy, for institutions of higher education, and for such graduates themselves. The usual explanation tends to suggest that such employment disadvantage arises from discriminatory practices by employers, usually in the form of structural discrimination. However, there would then be a need to demonstrate how such practices relate to the purported skills and attributes, in explaining differences in employment outcome. This merely increases the number of explanatory elements, contravening Occam's Razor, the principle of parsimony in the assumptions made in any attempt to explain some phenomenon.

Towards reconceptualisation: relational-constructionism

It is clear that the issue of graduate employability requires reconsideration. The concepts of skills and attributes cannot be simply taken as referring to empirical phenomena; nor can they serve as explanatory constructs in a manner adequate to the importance of the matters under consideration. In order to reconsider anew the issue, it is necessary to put the possessive-instrumentalist approach aside and start with an examination of what is taking place when a student moves on to be a graduate and gain, or fail to gain, employment *as* a graduate. It is suggested here that a relational-constructionist perspective offers a cogent alternative to possessive-instrumentalism, and this will now be outlined.

A relational-constructionist perspective (Hosking et al., 1995) is a form of social constructionism, particularly focussing on the social, ie interactional, processes by which the social world is produced and reproduced on a continuous basis. This draws upon a rich set of meta-theoretical social science antecedents, including phenomenological sociology (eg Schutz, 1932/ 1972), symbolic interactionism (eg Mead, 1962; Blumer, 1969), dialogism (eg Bakhtin, 1981) and social constructionist psychology (Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 1993a). It also draws upon the linguistically-oriented philosophical traditions of, for example, Wittgenstein (1953), Austin (1962), and Ryle (1949). Although these traditions cannot be collapsed into a

single set of propositions, the analysis presented here is based on the following key principles (see also Holmes, 2006).

There are number of key themes within the above-mentioned traditions and approaches that inform and underpin the way we may consider the notion of graduate employability and the notions of skills and attributes. First, it is important to recognise that *human* behaviour can only be properly explained in terms of its meaningfulness (to various persons) within social settings. Contrary to the assumptions often made with regard to skills and attributes, human behaviour cannot be merely observed, nor can its meaning be objectively determined. Rather, the meaning of any particular instance of behaviour by a particular person will be subject to interpretation by the various persons for whom the behaviour has significance, ie for whom it may be consequential. Moreover, such interpretations may vary in the extent to which they accord with each other (Holmes, 2000).

Secondly, socially meaningful human behaviour, or 'action', arises in interaction between persons ('social actors'). Their actions take account of the meanings that they anticipate *others* will attribute to them, and of the actions which those others will engage in on the basis of those meanings. Thirdly, following from the foregoing, all meaningful behaviour is communicative action: social actors will seek to create and to maintain a shared interpretation of each other's behaviour. They do this through the use of language and other forms of symbolic interaction. Initially there is not such a shared interpretation, in which case the social actors involved will often interact with each other so as to achieve a more-or-less shared interpretation. That is, they will attempt to persuade others, or to negotiate agreement, or to find a basis for accepting the interpretation made by others.

Fourthly, language and other forms of symbolic interaction are a *shared* resource for communication. They cannot be reduced to the private 'inner world' of individuals (e.g. as 'mental representations'); nor is the shared linguistic resource additional to some private inner language, such that individuals translate between the two (Wittgenstein, 1953). So any attempt to achieve shared interpretation must rely on the linguistic and other symbolic resources *held in common*.

These key principles will form the analysis which follows, as an alternative mode of understanding the key area of the social world with which we are concerned, that of graduate employability.

Selection decisions and conventions of warrant

If we consider what takes place when a graduate gains employment, we may come to a different conclusion about what type of concept skills and attributes are. The process by which a graduate gains entry to a job, and thence to an occupation, may be put quite simply: the graduate presents her/himself to a prospective employer, who then makes a decision to employ that graduate, offers a job to the graduate who then accepts. One key element in this process is that of the prospective employer (or, more properly, one or more particular authorised individuals who act as representatives of the employing organisation) *makes a decision*. Such a decision involves *judgement*, not mere measurement and matching.

Now it is important to recognise that such normative judgement does not take place in a social vacuum, whereby one isolate, monadic individual decides without reference to any

other person or persons. Often there is more than one person making the decision to employ, or decline offer of employment. Where the selection involves a series of interviews and use of other methods, and particularly where panel interviews are used, any decision made 'by the employer' will be the outcome of interactions between these various persons. Those persons act *in relation* to the positions or roles they occupy, their identities within the particular social setting. Moreover, they are already in some form of relationship with each other, and their interactions will have consequences for those relationships, normally in respect of their maintenance but possibly undermining them. The decision to employ a particular graduate will thus be the outcome of interaction between these various parties, who will seek to present themselves as acting rationally, ie that their judgements and decisions may be warranted as rationally based (Draper, 1988). They will do this by drawing upon the jointly shared language whereby selection decisions are conventionally warranted, ie 'conventions of warrant' (Gergen, 1989). To the extent that those involved in graduate selection use the language of skills and attributes, these may be better understood as such conventions of warrant, rather than as referring to some empirical realities (Holmes, 2006).

If we consider what it is that employers are concerned with in their selection decisions, it is clear that they seek to select those candidates whose *future* performance will be as desired. Yet decisions have to be made *in the present*, in the context of uncertainty about the future: performance in the future can only be anticipated, not predicted in the strong sense of that word (ie predicting successfully). A variety of matters may be taken into account when making such anticipation, including previous performance by the candidate. However, performance is not itself unequivocal, objectively observable. Rather, what can objectively be observed is merely inchoate movement (or lack of it), that must be interpreted or construed as *performance of a particular kind* (Holmes, 2000).

Understanding performance: practices and identity

The early adoption within psychology of the empirical-realist emphasis on causal explanations of observable behaviour (Watson, 1924) has left its legacy in later developments, including cognitivism (Secord, 1997). The problem, however, is that socially significant human behaviour is not in and of itself observable; such behaviour is significant and consequential because it is subject to interpretation within a normative frame.

We may observe movements made by another human person, and hear sounds they make (and, perhaps, observe other forms of bodily emissions). However, what makes such movements, sounds etc socially significant and consequential is that they are treated as instances of particular types of meaningful behaviour. We may observe a person's arm moving up, but cannot objectively observe that person waving 'hello' or 'goodbye' to another, hailing a taxi, or seeking permission to speak, for each of the latter behaviours are not explicable solely in terms of what is observable but require construal as a type of behaviour. This distinction has been noted as long back as Aristotle. Hamlyn translates Aristotle's terms *kinesis* and *energeia* as 'movement' and 'activity' (Hamlyn, 1953), and argues that whilst movement may be explained in terms of causes, activity is explicable properly only within a frame that takes account of reasons. In a more thorough-going analysis of social behaviour, Harré and Secord distinguish between movement, action and acts, illustrating the distinction as follows:

"A person makes all sorts of bodily movements in the course of an episode, contracting and relaxing muscles in various sequences. Some of these movements can be seen or heard of felt by others, some are known to others only through their effects. Some of these

movements we wish to treat as actions, and in some of these actions we see acts performed. We watch a man's hand move towards the extended fourth finger of the hand of a woman and slip a gold ring on that finger. If this movement meets certain criteria it is an action in the performing of which, together with certain other actions, a marriage is achieved, that is, an act is performed. A movement is given meaning as an action by being identified as the performance or part of the performance of an act." (Harré and Secord, 1972: 158)

Any consideration of the past or future-anticipated performance of a graduate must, then, address the issue of how observable movement (or, indeed, the absence of movement etc) is construed as (a) intended or deliberate activity, an action, that is (b) socially significant and consequential ie the performance of an act of some type. What conditions are necessary for an instance of situated activity to be taken as performance-of-a-kind? Two components would seem to be critical. First, there is deemed to exist a set of practices appropriate to the situation, such that the activity may be viewed as an instantiation of a practice from that set. Second, the person whose activity is being so construed is deemed to be a certain sort-of-person, to have an identity appropriate to such a performance (Holmes, 2000) (see figure 1). Of course, these elements are not completely self-contained and separate, for (i) the attribution of an identity to someone implicates some understanding of the practices they are likely, or are expected, engage in, and (ii) practices are associated with particular identities.

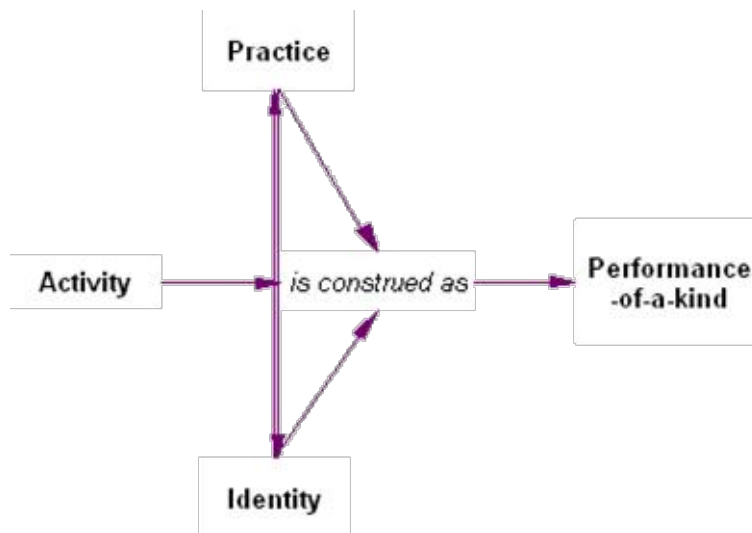


Figure 1: The practices/ emergent identity model of the construal of performance

On this basis, we may examine how recruiters of graduates draw upon generally-shared understandings of the practices that graduates would be expected to engage in, as part of the mode of warranting the judgement about whether they would anticipate that any particular graduate would actually do so. It is such practices that the various ‘skills’ terms seem to relate: graduates would be expected to engage in the practices of problem-solving, communicating, taking initiatives etc. There is no need, and no justification, for postulating that there are separate tool-like entities that are possessed and used in the activities that are construed as instantiations of such practices.

Practices form only part of the conditions for construal of activity as performance of a particular kind: the person so acting must be perceived as the appropriate *kind of person*. The importance of this may be seen in the following example. Suppose you found yourself 'back of the house' in a hotel and see two persons, one of whom says to the other: "You must improve your work otherwise we shall have to dismiss you". How would you understand what is taking place. You might, most probably, see this as a manager reprimanding a subordinate for poor work performance, an example of the practice of discipline within the context of management of employees. But what if you discover that, in fact, the person speaking is the subordinate, the other is the manager? Now you would probably regard this as an instance of insubordination, of misconduct; or perhaps it will remain a puzzle if you are not able to enquire further, even wondering if the two persons were playing a trick on you. Yet nothing has changed in terms of the observable behaviour: it is the switch in the identities of the two persons that leads to the change in the way the behaviour is construed.

Emergent identity: claim and affirmation

The term 'identity' is here being used as a 'sensitizing concept' (Strauss, 1997), to enable us to address the issues involved in examining how, in the 'definition of the situation' (Thomas, 1931), the interpretation of activity as performance implicates some understanding of who-a-person-is. Identity is thus to be taken non-essentially, as relational, the emergent outcome of situated social processes of *identification* or, better put, *identifying*. Identity is thus socially constructed and negotiated, always subject to possible contestation, and so fragile. Jenkins refers to 'the internal-external dialectic of identification' (Jenkins, 1996). The term 'emergent identity' may be used to distinguish the concern here from notions of identity as social ascription or of identity as self-concept..

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 2 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 2 presents this in graphical form.

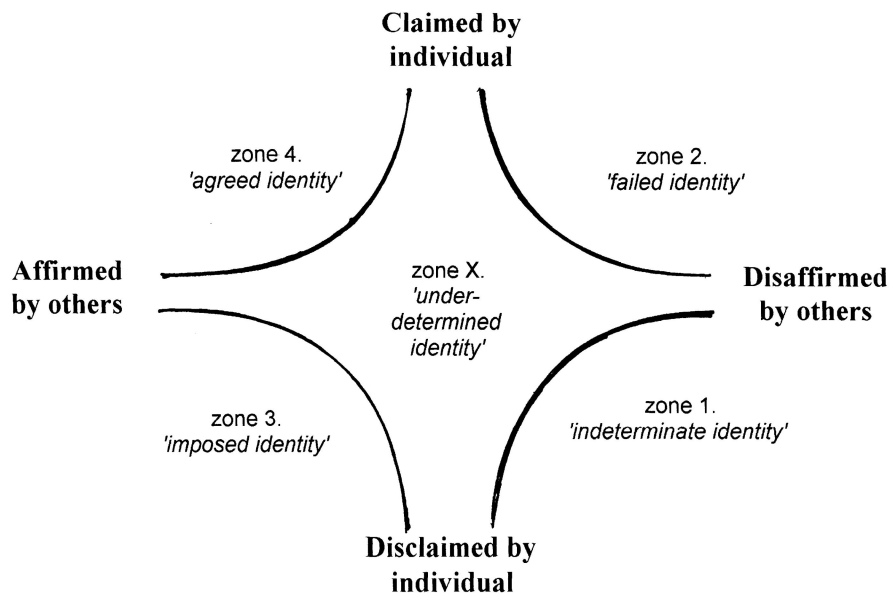


Figure 2: Claim-affirmation model of modalities of emergent identity

From such an analysis, we can begin to construct an alternative approach to graduate employability. Rather than regarding this as a matter of possession and use of certain ‘transferable’ skills and attributes, 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 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’.

This approach, which may be called the ‘Graduate Identity Approach’, and the model, provide for 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 SKATTY approach would just say ‘improve your skills; develop the appropriate attributes’. 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 skills and attributes albeit in a different made from that assumed by proponents of SKATTY.

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

It was argued earlier that there are significant problems with the research on graduate employability based on the skills and attributes approach. It 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. One key way in which it can do so is 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 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.

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.

Conclusion

The argument in this paper has been that the SKATTY approach to graduate employability, currently dominant in institutional practice and in research, is fundamentally flawed. Significant problems have been shown to arise through the use of surveys of employers, students/ graduates, and others, where the questions posed merely seek *opinion*. The problems arise also because of the conceptualisation of skills and attributes as possessions that are used in performance, the possessive-instrumentalist perspective. Taking a relational-constructionist perspective turns our attention to the constructed nature of socially meaningful behaviour, and in turn to the key concepts of warranting, practices, and emergent identity. The claim-affirmation model of emergent identity enables us to consider the various modalities of emergent identity, which affords fruitful lines of enquiry concerning the biographical paths taken by individuals as they move from being students to become graduates in employment, or failing to become employed-graduates.

The arena of graduate employability is, of course, a specific one, and no attempt has been made here to explore employability more generally. However, given that the relational-constructionist perspective has wider application, it seems reasonable to assume that fruitful lines of enquiry may be pursued by the adoption of the key concepts of practices and emergent identity.

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