

# Producing New Workers: quality, equality and employability in higher education

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**ABSTRACT** *This article addresses employability as a performance indicator in higher education. Questions are raised about the values behind seemingly neutral indicators of value, and whether the same employability attributes have similar economic and professional values for different social groups. A central argument is that employability is a socially decontextualised signifier in so far as it overlooks how social structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with labour market opportunities. The article also interrogates hegemonic assumptions behind the concept of key or core skills in higher education.*

## **Performance Anxiety**

The central legitimating idea of higher education in Britain is changing. Increasingly, it is being viewed as sub-system of the economy. Higher education is being repositioned as an industry, rather than as a social institution (Gumport, 2000). The academy is engulfed in a process of commodification. Production metaphors, borrowed from industry, are now central to higher education discourse. The rise of academic management, together with the rise of consumerism and political concerns with the exchange and use value of higher education, have produced new organisational cultures and professional priorities. Higher education institutions both mediate and manage government policy. Boundaries between the academy, government and business have loosened and been reformulated. Corporate interests play a more powerful role in determining the purposes of higher education. There is a more explicit concern with universities producing new workers and the values of the consumer society are now embedded in educational relationships.

One way in which macro policies translate into micro practices is in the identification of performance indicators. These represent an encodement of values and priorities. While purporting to provide consumers with a basis for selection, performance indicators also provide powerful managerial imperatives. Performance indicators and taxonomies of effectiveness are often little more than socially-constructed floating signifiers (Ball, 1999; Morley & Rassool, 1999) as priorities shift geographically and historically. Laurillard (1980, p. 187) observed that performance indicators 'reduce a complexity of subjective judgements to a single objective measure'. They reflect panics, prejudices and fears at any one particular political and historic moment but they carry no reliable analysis of the causes of the anxieties. For example, the current policy driver for employability could relate to the high graduate unemployment of the 1990s (Connor, 1999), the drive towards economic competition between 'developed' nations, and the desire for society to get an economic return from the investment in higher education.

Arguably, employability is a decontextualised signifier in so far as it overlooks how social structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with labour market opportunities. Within the context of quality assurance responsibility for employment potential is seen as an organisational and pedagogical responsibility. It is not linked to the socio-economic context. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) argued that social factors permeate every aspect of students' experiences. Yet in the employability discourse, aspects of students' lives such as gender, ethnicity, social class tend to be disregarded. There are complex areas of higher education that are difficult to measure, quantify and capture, for example, processes, identity formation, aesthetics, the affective domain, attitudes and values. However, the sociology of student experience is not considered (James, 1995). This has caused concerns about the reductive definition of the purpose of higher education. Has utilitarianism eclipsed intellectualism in UK universities? Do universities exist simply to meet the needs of modern capitalism and are students being constructed solely as future workers, rather than fully rounded citizens? Leonard (2000, p. 182) observed that:

Education has been redefined as primarily a means of skilling more and more young workers, and of providing professional and in-service courses in life-long (re)learning; rather than about expanding the minds and developing the capacities of citizens.

A further question is whether quality assurance in general, and the emphasis on employability in particular, might promote equity and social inclusion by making procedures, practices and inequalities more transparent and calculable (Luke, 1997; Morley, 2000). Ideally, the employability imperative would help to ensure that students receive a tangible return on their investment, although the following sections suggest that employability discourses, like quality discourses before them, tend to confirm, rather than challenge, patterns of disadvantage.

### **The Political Economy of Higher Education**

Human capital is the stock of individual skills, competencies and qualifications. Recently, human capital theory has been more overtly applied to higher education (NCIHE, 1997). Yet it is controversial. Hughes and Tight (1998, p. 184) argue that there is little evidence to support its view that the total quantity of training is closely correlated to a country's economic performance, nor is there a necessary connection between stocks of skilled labour and productivity. Yet, within the context of the changing relations between the state and universities, there is now an input-output mindset. Education is being Japanised, with values and approaches to leadership coming directly from industrial processes (Morley & Rassool, 1999). In its concern with graduate employability, the UK government is applying a supply-side strategy in an attempt to restructure the UK labour market by means of individual and collective skill development at graduate level. There is a rationalist, modernist certainty embedded in these employability discourses that might, ironically, be out of step with the turbulence of the market forces that employability is supposed to serve.

There is a delicate balance between state regulation and market forces. For example, three decades ago, Schumpeter (1976) warned that the expansion of higher education proceeds faster than the development of the labour market's capacities to absorb the graduates so produced, leading to unemployment or underemployment and potential

political instability. (Underemployment is a notoriously difficult concept to capture as it incorporates a reference to the affective domain, such as self-esteem, identity and motivation.) Employability discourses are prone to overlook the possibility that many employers will continue to want a significant proportion of their workforce to occupy low skilled jobs (Keep, 1997). So, it is questionable whose interests are being served by employability discourses. Political decisions to expand higher education in the early 1990s in Britain suggested that it was in everybody's interests. At that time, the labour market was also suffering from a shortage of graduates and graduate unemployment was falling. Yet, there was major underemployment at that time and in 1986 almost one in three 1980 graduates were in jobs for which a degree was neither required nor useful. Graduate unemployment has been slowly coming down since 1992, from a high of 12% to 8% of newly qualified graduates in 1996 (Connor, 1999).

Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the fact that these ways of seeing employability might not be appropriate to postgraduate education, where the majority of students are already in employment—often at quite senior levels. In this case, employability could better be understood as a concern with continuous professional development and flexibility than initial recruitment.

Nor is employability just about students making deposits in a bank of skills. It is also about dispositions, with flexibility being heavily promoted within post-Fordist employment regimes. Forrester (1999, p. 110) constructs employability as 'being available for every kind of change, for the whims of fate, in this case the employers'. If there are uncertainties about the means by which higher education might promote skills, they are multiplied when it comes to imagining what might be done to promote certain dispositions.

### Equity and Employment

The demographics are changing in higher education. However, Modood (1993) points out how ethnic minority students remain concentrated in certain post-1992 universities, predominantly those located in London and the Midlands. Changes relating to social class are also slow. Even with the necessary entry qualifications, people from backgrounds in the lower three of the five socio-economic groups are only 70% as likely to enter universities and colleges as people from the top two social groups (Reay, 1998). It could be argued, therefore, that universities, particularly the élite, are already selecting the most 'employable' sections of the community and so employability indicators, in the form of graduate employment figures, are misleading.

Although the percentage of female undergraduates in the UK has doubled since the publication of the Robbins Report in 1963 (Brooks, 1997), the employability discourse ignores the sex discrimination that pervades the labour market. A first glance at the statistics seem to imply a success story for women's general employability. Women's participation in paid employment has steadily increased over the past 40 years. In 1959 women comprised 34% of those economically active. In 1971, 38%. In 1991, 43%. In 1998, 44%. Nearly half of the women in employment are working part-time; 47% in 1995, compared to 34% in 1971. According to Walby (1999), women's increased participation in the labour market is a result of increasing levels of educational attainment by younger women, the introduction of equity legislation and changing family or household structures. However, employability is not the end of the struggle, as extensive occupational segregation remains. The 'wages gap' still remains, with women who work full-time

earning 81% of men's hourly rates. Those working part-time earn 59% of men's hourly rates. On average, women graduates earn less than male graduates (Hogarth *et al.*, 1997). According to research undertaken by Connor (1999, p. 96), 'Male graduates are more likely than females to be in professional or managerial occupations; while female graduates are more likely than males to be in secretarial/clerical occupations'.

Furthermore, British women earn less as a percentage of men's pay than women in any other European Union country. Employability is, thus, not just a question of gaining employment. It is important to recognise that the same qualifications and skills have different exchange values for different social groups in the labour market.

### Managing Risk

In a period of rapid technological and social change, the world has become a riskier place (Beck, 1992). The risks are unequally distributed across different social groups. Skill requirements are constantly in flux and employment stability has been reduced. Gregg and Wadsworth (1995) used Labour Force Survey data to examine how job tenure for the average worker has fallen from 7 to 4 years in the last two decades. In a rapidly changing context, just-in-time, or disposable skills and knowledges are seen as more appropriate than in-depth disciplinary knowledge. Disposable workers are also seen as highly desirable and so making any choice of skills to be developed is taking a risk. Employers also seem to see the employment of graduates as a risk.

Performance indicators such as that of employability purport to reduce risk and provide information for purchasers of the higher education product to make so-called informed choices. Power (1997) argues that quality assurance is about seeking comfort and certainties. Everybody seems to need reassurance. The higher education system in Britain is now the most audited in the world but the regulation and surveillance (by means of employability measures, for example) is on a scale that is becoming increasingly unacceptable to British academics (Coate *et al.*, 2000). Cowen (1996, p. 251) argues that:

in the British case ... the state has created a double market: external and internal. Double surveillance is occurring. The universities have to link with agencies outside of the university (such as industry, business and research councils) to supplement their income and the state has created, through its national evaluation system ... mechanisms within which universities compete with each other, for extra financial rewards from the state for good performance.

A tactic used throughout the UK public services to justify reform, such as institutional employability measures, has been to depict the object of reform as wasteful, inefficient, irrelevant or incompetent. Cowen (1996, p. 246) indicated that the university reform movement in Britain and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s centred around making university systems more 'efficient and relevant'. So, subjectivities and organisational priorities have to be reworked to align with the needs of a capitalist economy (Avis, 2000) and individuals' aspirations, desires, hopes, expectations are remoulded in order to avoid the perils of social antagonism.

Whether the product is initial or continuing educational development, higher education is now being measured against the commodity value of some of its more easily-measured outputs.

## The Core of the Matter

There have been calls, in Britain, from industry, the government, employers and, to a certain extent, from higher education itself, for key, core, transferable and employability skills to be more centrally located in students' learning experience (Atkins, 1999). In a knowledge economy the emphasis is now on knowledge management, rather than just knowledge acquisition. While there has been some consensus, elsewhere in the education system, on what 'core skills' comprise (IT, numeracy, communication and learning how to learn), there has been no such agreement in the higher education sector. Furthermore, there has been considerable confusion over nomenclature. Dunne (1997) points out that 'transferable skills' meets Adorno's criterion of an unfulfilled concept insofar as it is not sufficiently coherent in the abstract to be fully realisable in practice.

Furthermore, there has also been only a limited critical debate about the role that power, hegemony and ideologies play in determining what is 'core' at a particular political and economic moment. Discussion tends to focus on the purpose of university education with questions raised about the stampede towards utilitarianism and the enterprise agenda and whether higher education should exist merely to meet the needs of capitalist modes of production, or whether it should provide individuals with a liberal education linked to in-depth study of a discipline. Ozga (1998) argues that knowledge is being commodified and reduced to information, subject to constant change. Regimes of teaching, learning and assessment are constellating around skills and competencies rather than knowledge and understanding. This emphasis on core skills suggests a preoccupation with 'knowing how', rather than simply 'knowing that'. Cameron (2000, p. 127) sees this as a move towards curriculum development that begins by specifying 'outcomes, the skills or "competencies" a student should be able to demonstrate at the end of the course' and away from the more traditional curriculum development that starts with identifying a body of knowledge to be learned.

One justification for the introduction of core skills has been the notion of a skills gap between what employers need and what universities are producing. Cameron (2000, p. 19) noted how a survey reported by *People Management* in 1997 found that oral communication was cited by 91% of respondents as the most important 'soft' skill for new graduates, and that only 32% believed that it was present amongst them. It is unclear how those judgements were reached and whether, indeed, they remained uncontaminated by prejudices, impressions and subjective notions of worth. Once again, there seems to be some hostility to new graduates and the organisations that produced them and a desire to bring them all 'down to earth'.

An area that has been excluded from the discussion relates to the affective domain. In the employability discourse, the world of work is represented in a highly sanitised and rational way. Graduates are hardly thought to require emotional intelligence, political skills, or self-care in the face of occupational stress. Organisations are socially complex, often with nebulous and quixotic micropolitical relays of power (Morley, 1999). For example, it is questionable whether communication skills enable graduates to understand and deal with the subterranean world of organisations. Task-related skills can be embedded in a cauldron of competition, harassment, manipulation, bullying, and exclusions. Terms such as 'communication' mask issues of power relations, and hierarchy in employment regimes. If being skilful in the workplace is so complex and contingent, then what notion of employability could capture those qualities? It is hard to feel confident that figures for the number of new graduates in some form of full-time employment meet the bill.

Cameron (2000, p. 2) illustrates this by asking what linguistic and social norms define 'good' and 'bad' communication. Core skills are disembodied and ignore gender, social class, ethnicity in so far as different styles of communication are thought appropriate for different social groups. In fact, only certain types of communication skills are validated and there are gaps and silences about exactly what is to be communicated and whose interests are to be represented. For example, a woman may have impeccable communication skills, but if these are applied to challenging harassment or discrimination in the workplace, she may well find herself a lot less employable. Additionally, different social locations will influence how organisational life is experienced and conducted (Nicholson, 1996).

The employability discourse also overlooks material and attitudinal barriers. For example, in his discussion of the Dearing Report in relation to students with disabilities, Hurst (1999) points out that while work experience might make graduates more employable, it can only be accomplished with significant difficulties for students with disabilities as there are issues of transport, physical access to buildings and facilities, safety requirements and attitudinal problems, for example, the social model of disability. All these factors make employment considerably more difficult for graduates with disabilities regardless of their repertoire of employability skills.

Another problem is that it makes age-related assumptions. The idea that students should acquire everything that they need to know in a supermarket sweep of a first degree also works against the current European policy discourse of lifelong learning, the learning society and continuous professional development (DfEE, 1998). Furthermore, underpinning the rhetoric is the notion that students have been insulated from the 'real world' of work and occupy a privileged and abstract cognitive and material space. Many of the mature students now in the UK higher education system will have had considerable employment experience and possess a range of work-based skills. Equally, younger students, especially from less privileged social backgrounds, may have been in various forms of employment from an early age.

It is worth asking why the issue of employability has come on to the policy agenda now, in the context of massification and the abolition, in the UK, of the binary divide in 1992. While the concept of transferability appears rational and linear, it could also be argued that there is an irrational subtext based on prejudice and discrimination. Atkins (1999, p. 272) asks if '... the emphasis on employability skills is more to do with compensating for perceived deficits in social and cultural capital than with anything else'.

The 1997 survey reported in Coopers and Lybrand (1998) noted that higher educational institutions judged by employers to be second rate as far as academic status was concerned were those paying most attention to the new employability agenda. So, it is not the title or content of the degree or the skills training programme but the institution in which it was obtained that carries cachet.

## Conclusion

A socially-decontextualised concept of employability has become a performance indicator in the quality framework in higher education. Whereas many academics in Britain are cynical about the arguments being used to promote the significance of core, transferable or key skills, the majority of higher education institutions in the UK have institutional policies, directives and procedures that assert their commitment to the skills agenda (Drummond *et al.*, 1998). However, fears remain that education is being replaced by instruction and training (Coate *et al.*, 2000), and that intellectuals are being transformed

into technicians, compelled to deliver skills transcontextually. It is worth questioning what the default purpose of the employability skills debate is. Is it about homogenising workers and making them more docile and governmentable? Does communication training, for example, have a goal of reducing or even eliminating variation in spoken discourse performance (Cameron, 2000)?

Globalisation has had an impact on higher educational policy, and Peters and Roberts (2000, p. 135) ask whether this relationship 'represents a capitulation to the strength and influence of transnational corporations'. A criticism of globalisation is that it can be a euphemism for the ideology of standardisation, with the standards of the most powerful groups used as a benchmark. The employability debate could be interpreted as an exercise in norm-making in which the 'core skills' rhetoric disseminates ideas about what it means to be an 'employable' person, thereby providing and prescribing norms, models and values. The skills identified as core produce the type of knowledge and understanding that is required to maintain dominant cultural and political arrangements.

Furthermore, the employability discourse is a one-way gaze with truth claims that problematise the capital of students while leaving the cultural and social capital and employment practices of employers untouched. There is a certain irony involved in the current moral panic over employability in the face of major recruitment and retention crises in many of the UK public services. Highly trained nurses, teachers and others are developing critical voices as possibilities for exit have presented themselves. Over-regulation and surveillance of professional groups, poor pay and employment conditions have meant that many professionally-trained graduates have gone elsewhere in the labour market. Perhaps we should develop the concept of employer-ability to balance out the power relations embedded in the employability discourse of recruitment and retention. The implication is that the education process should also extend to employers. They need to be more sensitised to issues pertaining to differences of gender, race, social class, disability and sexual orientation. Only then will the same employability attributes have similar economic and professional values for different social groups.

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