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Employability for the workers – what does this mean?

Abstract

Purpose: UK government strategies for higher education (HE) continue to emphasise the promotion and enhancement of students' employability skills and subsequent graduate opportunities. The article explores what this means for those HE learners already in work.

Design: The paper presents the findings of a national study on the impact of Foundation degrees (Fds) on students and the workplace, in the light of government's plans for the continuing expansion of HE, and discussions about employability.

Findings: The study found that the majority of Fd students cited increased confidence as the main gain from their studies; such confidence was expressed in terms of how students' enhanced knowledge and understandings informed their workplace activities and tasks but these expressions did not necessarily fit neatly into narrow skills' definitions. Also the findings hint at some students' facing difficulties in using their enhanced 'skills' in the workplace.

Research limitations/implications: Though based on a relatively small number of Fd programmes, the student voices represent a powerful message of the value of linking studies to their workplace practices and of the multi-dimensional nature of 'confidence' based on personal experiences and trajectories.

Practical and social implications: Whilst the term 'employability skills' is regularly used in the discourse of graduates' trajectories in to the labour market, more nuanced understandings are needed in relation to HE learners already in the workplace.

Originality/value: Given government's expectation that the next phase of expansion of UK HE will embrace an increase in part-time study and work-based learning, the article represents a timely exploration of work-based students' perceptions of the development of employability skills and how they are able to deploy these in the workplace.

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Key words: higher education; part-time study; work-based learning; skills development; employability

Introduction

In November 2009, the UK government set out its strategy for sustaining the strength of higher education in England in an increasingly competitive and demanding environment. Its 'Higher Ambitions' publication stressed the important role that higher education institutions will play in securing the country's economic recovery and maintaining the progress made in higher education over the last decade (DBIS, 2009). Government envisaged that the next phase of higher education expansion would be based around more flexible routes in to higher education, more part-time study, more work-based learning, more vocationally-based foundation degrees which would increase opportunities for different types of people to experience higher education in a wider range of ways. The same publication also exhorted businesses to work closely with universities to communicate the skills they need and for universities to publish statements detailing how they will promote and enhance students' employability 'setting out what they are doing to prepare students for the labour market' (ibid., p 51). So whilst one overriding message within this strategy was for expansion of higher education through part-time study and including work-based learning, arguably the references to employability focussed on 'preparing' the next generation of graduates to meet the increasing demands that businesses are making of their 'new entrants'.

But what of the employability of those already in the workplace? The earlier government-sponsored wide-ranging review of the UK's skills base, the Leitch Review of Skills explicitly focussed on adult skills because the vast majority of the 2020 working population (70 per cent) have already left compulsory education, and the flow of young people is reducing (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006). That review stressed the need to raise the proportion of people with higher level skills across the labour force through workforce development, and recommended (among other things) that the future expansion of higher education be based on programmes offering specific job-related skills, such as foundation degrees.

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Government's response to the Leitch Review set-out an ambitious programme to make the UK become a world leader in skills by 2020, including the aim of having over a third of adults qualified to level 4 and above (level 4 being defined as being equivalent to a certificate in higher education, foundation degree or honours degree) by 2014 (DIUS, 2007). Government wanted employers to increase their investment in skills, training and qualifications at all levels; wanted employers to be more demanding and clearly articulate what their skills needs and priorities were to support business development; and wanted employers to influence the development of higher education programmes to meet their needs. Government, in looking to employers to articulate their priorities for high level skills and influence the development of HE programmes, acknowledged that foundation degrees 'already provide an excellent example of collaborative working between universities, further education colleges, employers and sector skills councils' and encouraged the extension of such collaborations (ibid., p 42).

Foundation degrees were a specific government initiative launched in 2000 with the aim of meeting a perceived shortfall in the numbers of people with intermediate higher technical skills and associate professional skills, and increasing and widening participation in higher education by providing a new and accessible route in to higher education (HEFCE, 2007). By 2007/2008 some 72,000 students were enrolled on foundation degrees, 43 per cent on a part-time basis, and the three most common subjects studied were education, business and art and design (HEFCE, 2008). A key design feature of such programmes was the integration of academic and work-based learning (QAA, 2004). Thus we can see that foundation degrees seem to fit rather well with government's current vision for the continued expansion of higher education, and as such could be seen as one route towards a new/different generation of higher education students.

In this article I will explore what employability means to those already in work who have been studying on programmes leading to a foundation degree. I will draw primarily on a study undertaken during 2007 for foundation degree forward (fdf) – the body initially charged with promoting the development of foundation degrees - by the Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information and the Learning and Skills Network (Greenwood and Little et al., 2008). I will also refer to the findings of other recent empirical studies of foundation degrees.

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The fdf-commissioned study aimed to explore the impact of foundation degrees on students and on the workplace, and a major objective of the study was to focus on the nature and extent of employer involvement in the programmes leading to a foundation degree. A further aim of the study was to build capacity among (mainly) staff in further education colleges delivering these programmes through the involvement of foundation degree practitioners in the study. As such, it was agreed with the commissioning agent that the study would focus on a limited number of programmes, from which at least one cohort of students had graduated and through which links with employers, current students and foundation degree graduates could be made.

After preliminary analysis of available statistics on foundation degree provision, and discussion with fdf staff, twenty foundation degree programmes covering five broad employment sectors (creative design/media; business and management; early years/teaching and learning support; engineering/materials; uniformed/public services) were selected for detailed study. Of the 20 programmes, the majority (13) were designed for people already working in the relevant employment sector (primarily in business and management; and early years/teaching and learning support). The study involved focus groups with students nearing the end of their first year of study (some 120 students in total); telephone interviews with people who had now completed their foundation degree (27 in total); a survey of students who had recently commenced their studies (300 completed questionnaires from 19 programmes); telephone interviews with 37 employers; and the production of reflective case studies prepared by foundation degree practitioners.

Whilst the numbers (of students and of foundation degree programmes) involved in the study - arising from a purposive sample of a small number of programmes - make it difficult to generalise the findings, the nature of the focus groups with current students and interviews with students who had now graduated allowed researchers to explore more fully with a number of students engaged in work-based learning their views on skills being developed through the programmes. As such the findings do prompt some further questions about the nature of employability skills and how such skills are used in the workplace, which might have wider implications for debates about skills enhancement and deployment in the workplace. The findings reported

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below are drawn from focus groups and interviews with foundation degree students who were already working in the relevant employment sector (some 90 students in all) – as such their skills were in theory readily available for use in the workplace (as distinct from students presenting a 'skills set' to prospective employers as part of a selection procedure).

Employability skills

Much of the literature on the relationship between higher education and work has concentrated on higher education's contribution to pre-entry preparation for work. As such it supports notions of higher education being more about selection than about training. But arguably (and as noted above) we can now discern, especially in the UK policy literatures some shifts towards greater emphasis being placed on the relationship between higher education and the development and enhancement of the existing workforce, which could re-inforce ideas of higher education being about training (as well as selection). But discussions about employability skills still tend to focus on the former type of relationship rather than the latter.

Kogan and Brennan, writing in the early 1990s, on how higher education curricula were being modified to meet perceived employment needs noted that the spectrum of skills that academics were concerned about promoting included 'generic study skills, intellectual skills, experimental and technical skills, and general and work skills. Within this range, there was 'increasing interest in identifying and promoting transferable skills' (Kogan and Brennan, 1993, p19). During the mid-1990s the large-scale government-sponsored Enterprise in Higher Education initiative aimed to improve the quality of *preparation* [emphasis added] of students for working life in association with employer partners. Whilst institutions were expected to demonstrate a broad understanding of what enterprise in higher education would mean, some central definitions were suggested by government, including 'transferable skills' taken to mean generic capabilities which allow people to succeed in wide range of different tasks and jobs (Training Agency, 1990). Some suggest that complacency about the employability of graduates began to be systematically challenged and the rapid shift between 1989 and 1994 to mass enrolment in UK higher education 'contributed most to public interest in graduate employability issues' (see for example, Mason, Williams, Cranmer and Guile, 2003, p3).

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Not all in higher education embraced the term 'skills' since it was seen as denoting routine activities and repetition of pre-set known tasks and hence more appropriate to more narrowly-defined vocational education and training. The notion of *transferable* skills also gave rise to questions about the nature of the process of learning at higher education levels and further discussion about the appropriateness of describing the outcomes of higher education in terms of learning objectives and competences (for a short overview of the contemporary debates, see Brennan and Little, 1996 pp 37-57). One suggestion was to move beyond describing, categorising and giving a 'level' to a particular set of skills and put more emphasis on discussion on the personal and intellectual capabilities which individuals can use to cope with new and challenging situations, and deal intelligently with change (Harrison, 1996). Following research commissioned by the Association of Graduate Recruiters to examine the qualities needed by UK university graduates in the 21st century, Hawkins and Winters explored notions of the 'self-reliant' graduate. Such a graduate would be aware of the changing world of work, take responsibility for their own career and personal development and be able to manage the relationship with work and with learning throughout all stages of life (Hawkins and Winter, 1995). Some ten years later, in 2005, the national co-ordination team for enhancing student employability, ESECT (funded for a three-year period by the English higher education funding council with the aim of supporting the HE sector in developing highly skilled, employable graduates) re-iterated similar notions in their own working definition of employability, namely 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Yorke, 2004). Such a definition was seen as trying to move away from a simplistic idea of key skills towards a sense of the application of a 'mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience' (ibid., p 11).

Mason et al note that by the mid-1990s the term 'graduateness' came to denote 'an apparent consensus about the value of generic skills (of all kinds) and expressed at a high level of generalisation, for graduates' future chances of securing relevant employment (Mason, et al., 2003, p 4). The national committee of enquiry into the future of higher education (the Dearing Report) endorsed such economic arguments

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for developing students' employability skills and defined such skills as communication, numeracy, IT and learning how to learn at a higher level. But Mason et al also note that graduates' transitions into employment can be more influenced by employers' perceptions of the quality of graduates from certain universities than by whether graduates have undertaken employability skills courses. Drawing on work by Brown and Scase (1994) and Hesketh (2001), they suggest that UK employers' recruitment practices help perpetuate the idea of a graduate elite possessing broader forms of social and cultural capital than graduates from universities with non-traditional entrants that have specifically tried to develop employability skills (ibid., p 5). Similarly, the independent panel set-up to advise government and the UK professions on how professional careers can be 'open to as wide a pool of talent as possible' (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p 5) refer to the work of Goldthorpe and note that as educational qualifications become more widely held in the workforce, the more employers give greater attention to other indicators in making employment decisions, and many of the softer skills required by employers (eg social and people skills, personal style, adaptability) may be correlated with social class background rather than formal educational attainment (ibid., p 32).

Yet again, the above critiques tend to place the discourse of employability in terms of new (graduate) entrants to the labour market - though admittedly Hawkins and Winter and the ESECT definitions also infer some notions of continuing employment. It is to the question of employability of those *already* in the workplace that I now turn.

Learners' views of employability

The students studying foundation degrees on a part-time basis who chose to take part in the focus groups, and those who had completed their foundation degree and agreed to be interviewed were all 'mature' students (ie over 21 years of age on entry to the programme), and were already working in a setting relevant to the programme. All were looking to build on existing lower-level qualifications (many obtained several years before) and on relevant work experiences (which in some cases was very substantial). For some students, particularly those studying early years/teaching and learning support, the foundation degree was highly related to their current work roles; for others, the programme, though relevant in a generic sense, was less closely aligned to current work tasks and settings in each and every respect. Regardless of

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the extent of alignment of the foundation degree study programme to the students' current work roles, many of the coursework assignments were based on current work practices, and for some students, involved analysing such work practices, identifying aspects where business improvements could be made, and suggesting well-founded and well-researched recommendations for change.

During the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, participants were asked what they considered were the main benefits and what they were gaining, and/or what they had gained from their foundation degree studies. Rather than directing participants' answers in particular directions (for example, 'did you develop your communication skills?') this more open-ended approach encouraged participants to talk about the 'main' gains in their own terms. This style of questioning also allowed participants and interviewees to explain 'how' and 'why' such benefits were important to them and such explanations more often than not were located in the context of their concurrent experiences of work.

The overwhelming response to questioning about main gains was 'increased confidence'. This is similar to other studies of part-time students generally, and part-time students on Fds in particular (see for example, Yorke and Longden, 2010). But what did this mean? What was it that the learners considered was giving them this sense of increased confidence? Through analysis of fieldwork notes and interview transcripts it seems that such increased confidence was most likely to be expressed in terms of workplace activities centring around communication and solving problems, and also in terms of individual's personal development and self-esteem. The following selection of quotes is not intended to be representative of the Fd students participating in the focus groups and graduates who were interviewed. Rather they are reproduced below to illustrate the ways in which those Fd students/graduates expressed increases in confidence, especially in relation to their ongoing 'day jobs'.

Confidence - communication

'..I've got much more knowledge now and feel I can converse and sound more knowledgeable to the clients' [male Fd graduate; Logistics]

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'..I didn't have an academic background...I'd only got one 'O' level ...but everything I learnt gave me more grounding for my workplace practices ...I can now pull things together and link what's happening in certain work situations with the theoryI've learnt the vocabulary in the (special needs) area and learnt how to engage with the issue better ...and so I feel more confident about speaking out and being a public speaker' [female Fd graduate; Teaching and Learning Support]

'..I've definitely learnt how to speak..how to write...if you've come up through the ranks (like I have) you don't have this...now I'm more apt to use words like 'perceived' and 'hierarchy'...all the top management have been to university , so in day-to-day meetings you'd think they were pompous prats (the words they'd use) but through the Fd I can see that you need to marry-up experience and the knowledge' [female Fd graduate; Business and Management]

'...back at work I find I can make quite complicated issues, like ones relating to policy much more readable to the parents' [female Fd student; Early years education]

'..I'm much more confident in my own abilities now..like when I have to do reports for my boss [male Fd student; Business and Management]

'..in our jobs we often have to write reports, but now we think we're producing more critically aware reports' [Fd students; Contact Centre Management]

'..I'm more likely to look at the bigger picture, take things in a wider perspective ..like before responding in meetings. ...I'm more confident with written work and making presentations in meetingsand am able to hold my own with Directors in meetings ...I'm more confident in my own ability (subconsciously)....was asked by MD of the company to accompany him to a local conference, and he put me on the spot to speak to 200 people!...I would never have been able to do that prior to doing the Fd.' [male Fd graduate: Business and Management]

Confidence - problem solving within a broader and critical perspective

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'I got a much better understanding of logistics in the wider sense...I can now appreciate how some of the theories can be applied to solve practical problems...and I've got a wider perspective and can see there's more than one way of doing something ..I've got the confidence to say if I think the old established way might no longer be the best option.' [male Fd graduate; Logistics]

'..we can see the bigger picture ..and have developed good research skills and more critical skills which help us look at our companies' procedures and practices more critically' [Fd students; Contact Centre Management]

'..because we're expected to read around certain topics and learn new theories and share and reflect on our working experiences with others ...that's really valuable ..it gets us out of our comfort zone ... we're much more reflective ..and can bring fresh ideas and broader perspectives to our work ...even though sometimes our suggestions aren't well received (at work) [female Fd students; Early years education]

'...I'm much more confident now to have an input at work ...like commenting critically on a new project and am more confident with dealing with the children.....but this hasn't gone down well with the classroom teacher..she seems to see me as a threat' [female Fd student; Early years education]

Confidence –self-esteem

'..the Fd has spurred me on to do a full degree...even though my employer said that as a single mum I was not capable of doing and achieving a degree [female Fd graduate; Logistics]

'...it's good to do something for yourself...it gives you another dimension since you're no longer (seen as) 'just' a mum with teenage kids helping out in a local school' [female Fd student; Teaching and Learning Support]

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'...doing this study gave me the confidence to apply for and get promotion at work...I wouldn't have gone for another job, but having done presentations and things..and having put forward your own opinions in group work ..I had the confidence to apply..' [female Fd student; Business and Management]

'..no-one asked me to do extra things (as a result of doing the Fd) ...but we're expected to make more money, so we [my department] now do outside cateringI hadn't done this before because I thought someone in the company would say 'no'...but the course has given me the confidence to try something [new]...and don't assume someone will say 'no' to new ideas ..' [female Fd graduate; Business and Management]

'.. feel nothing's impossible anymore...I have a more positive attitude and am proud of what I've achieved...we've already got the coach booked (to travel to the validating university for graduation day) ...I want my mortar board!at the beginning I thought I wouldn't be able to do it and now feel the sky's the limit..' [male Fd graduate; Business and Management]

'...we feel we have gained self-respect... through discussing issues with others on the course and with the tutors..and completing different assignments we realise we've actually got a lot of work-based knowledge ...even though we can't always express that in academic ways ..' [female Fd students; Early years education]

As we see from the above quotes, students spoke positively about the ways in which they were using their knowledge and skills in the workplace. But there were also some hints that not all workplaces (and/or work colleagues) necessarily welcomed such usage. The report of the study noted that particularly for students in early years education/teaching and learning support, there was some ambivalence about the desirability of students bringing new /fresh ideas into the workplace. The report acknowledged such issues could well reflect broader issues of workforce development, and contemporary government initiatives to upskill and professionalise the workforce within certain employment sectors.

Discussion and conclusions

The quotes from Fd students and graduates - all of whom were working in relevant employment contexts whilst studying - clearly demonstrate ways in which they gained confidence through their higher education studies. Their own explanations of learning gains and benefits of study were not couched in the language of skills, nor did they use terms like employability to describe the main gains from study. Clearly their Fd studies had given them the opportunity to gain new and/or enhanced understandings and knowledge. Sometimes studying the Fd also made them more aware that they already possessed much work-based knowledge and this realisation increased their self-esteem. What these quotes also illustrate is how students from a range of Fds were applying such understandings and knowledge, including specific skills and techniques (like financial planning, marketing) to inform their day-to-day workplace practices and in particular to reflect productively on their practices. There is an overarching sense of individuals gaining increased confidence as a result.

Yorke and Longden's study (2010) of part-time Fd students enrolled with more than 30 different HE providers also testifies to the fact that the majority of such students have been able to apply in their workplaces what they have been learning through their Fd studies. However, that study also reports that whilst most employed students said their studies benefited their work, the incidence of employer acknowledgement of such benefits was lower – a quarter of students indicated employers gave little or no acknowledgement, and for a further quarter, employers seemed to be neutral. Though it is not clear from the report whether such (lack of) acknowledgment was more prevalent in certain sectors than others, we might note that the main employment sector covered in their survey was 'Education', accounting for more than 40 per cent of responses. [The next main area was Business which accounted for only 16 per cent of responses.]

While clearly not conclusive, both studies reported above do testify to those learners already in the workplace gaining confidence and developing employability skills through studying part-time Fds –which by design try to combine academic and work-based learning. Such findings are clearly positive and augur well for the government's next phase of planned expansion of HE. But the studies also report

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findings that suggest more needs to be done *within* workplaces to ensure individual's enhanced employability skills are used effectively.

As such, these findings serve to remind us that employability skills (as elaborated in this article) may well in large part account for individual's increased confidence in the workplace. But on their own, they may not be enough to improve an organisation's productivity and performance, and to transform the potential of a skilled workforce into the reality of improved organisational performance needs the effective use of such skills. In the words of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills '...the role of *skills utilisation in the workplace* (emphasis added) is critical...how organisations are managed and led has a major bearing on whether and how skills are used in the workplace' (UKCES, 2009, p 124).

Workforce development has to be more than just *increasing* the range and level of skills within the workforce. It should surely entail organisations reviewing workplace practices and structures to ensure efficient and effective use of employees' skills and knowledge. But what the study described above also shows is that programmes of study like those leading to foundation degrees, which are deliberately designed to blend academic and work-based learning in ways that draw on employees' own knowledge and understanding of workplace practices and of organisations, can be a powerful route to increasing those employees' own sense of self-esteem and confidence. As such, their ongoing employability is arguably enhanced as much by their increased confidence (to suggest changes to work practices, to draw on broader perspectives when seeking solutions to problems) as it is by their gaining discrete new skills sets. And yet, some studies of the impact of the recession on employers' approaches to workforce development suggest that employers may be becoming more selective in targeting their training needs – on the one hand towards senior staff (with responsibility for business survival), and on the other, towards new/young trainees in operational roles (seen as key to future business growth) (see for example, Cox et al., 2009). This same study found employers seeking creative ways to train in-house or take advantage of public subsidies for training; and for training that was cheaper and shorter, delivered in bite-sized chunks against a schedule that accommodated employers and employees' needs. Such 'targeting' may effectively overlook the very employees who could bring rather large potential benefits to the business operations, namely those who have some knowledge of the business'

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workplace practices, and who with increased confidence and access to broader sources of relevant knowledge could well make a difference to workplace practices and their own, and others' skills utilisation. It is also perhaps a moot point whether the sorts of gains in employees' confidence which we saw developed through foundation degrees could be delivered to the same extent through bite-sized chunks of training.

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