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Employability in higher education: a review of key stakeholders' perspectives

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Abstract

Purpose – Employability is a key concept in higher education. Graduate employment rate is often used to assess the quality of university provision, despite that employability and employment are two different concepts. This paper will increase the understandings of graduate employability through interpreting its meaning and whose responsibility for graduate employability from the perspectives of four key stakeholders: higher education institutions, students, government and employers.

Design/methodology/approach – There are two stages to this literature review which was undertaken across bibliographic databases. The first stage builds a conceptual understanding of employability, relating to definition and how employability can be achieved and enhanced from the perspective of stakeholders. A structured search employing Boolean searches was conducted using a range of terms associated with key stakeholders. The second round of review drew on documentary analysis of official statements, declarations, documents, reports and position papers issued by key stakeholders in the UK, available online.

Findings – It reveals that responsibility for employability has been transferred by the UK government to higher education institutions, despite clear evidence that it needs to be shared by all the key stakeholders to be effective. In addition, there is a gap between employers' expectation for employability and the government's employability agenda.

Originality/value – This article highlights that solely using employment rate statistics as a key indicator for employability will encourage the practice of putting employers' needs above knowledge creation and the development of academic disciplines, with the consequence that higher education will become increasingly vocation driven.

Keywords Employability, Higher education, Marketisation, Stakeholder, Perspectives

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Employability has become a key concept in higher education worldwide. In the UK for example, the Dearing and Garrick (1997) discussed employability. More recently employability was central to the Teaching Excellence Framework (DBIS, 2016). It has become a common practice for higher education institutions (HEIs) to embed employability expectations and to enhance student learning outcomes especially at undergraduate level (Fallows and Steven, 2000).

The upsurge of interest in employability can be traced to a number of factors, including a concern that graduates are less likely to secure public-sector employment due to the massification of higher education (Sin and Neave, 2016). The downsizing and re-structuring of private organisations due to neoliberal policies places further strain on graduate work availability (Peck and Tickell, 2002). A focus on employability is a pragmatic response (Clarke, 2008) to these conditions in order to strengthen the vocational mission of higher education (Harvey, 2000). In other words, the role of HEIs goes beyond ensuring that students are knowledgeable in an academic discipline to ensuring that they are prepared for the labour market (Yorke, 2006).

In the classic work of Newman (1852, p. ix), university is described as "a place of teaching universal knowledge." Oakeshott (2017, p. 9) depicts a university as "a home of learning, a place where a tradition of learning is preserved and extended, and where the necessary apparatus for the pursuit of learning has been gathered together". Such views echo liberal-humanist perspectives of higher education as more than the acquisition of skills and behaviours (Stoten, 2018). It is to enable people to live the "'good life' rather than simply for 'good living'" (Hickox and Moore, 1995, p. 49). There are intrinsic and subjective motivations for going to university apart from its potential economic advantage to the graduate (Kromydas, 2017). However, with globalisation, internationalisation and a dramatic rise in for-profit institutions, the role of higher education is being redefined. Universities are expected to prepare their students for a complex society that demands employees have diverse skills and capacities (Chan, 2016).

Some scholars are weary of this new-found responsibility of HEIs in employability. For example, Kalfa and Taksa (2015) warn against HEIs being used as a panacea. They argue that employability should be considered in the context of volatility of the job market, attendant job insecurity and scarce fulltime employment. Likewise, Frankham (2017) question government imperatives concerning employability on the grounds that they risk higher education becoming a tool in the hands of market-based forces with different priorities and interests to the sector.

Despite these concerns, the general consensus in the literature has been that employability is core to higher education (Mawson and Haworth, 2018; Oliver, 2015; Wilks *et al.*, 2017). The term employability has been used to mean different things (Yorke, 2006). It has become a "floating signifier" reflecting its varied understandings across key stakeholders of higher education (Sin and Neave, 2016). This has created a lack of coherence about what is meant by employability and its subsequent measurement (Tymon, 2013). As a result, there has been a call for "an agreed definition of employability, to allow HEIs, employers and policy-makers to work towards similar goals and outcomes" (Small *et al.*, 2018, p. 16).

This paper argues that for such a definition to be possible, a clear understanding of how different stakeholders interpret employability must be found. In addition, stakeholders' own definition of their part in achieving "employability" must be clarified. This is because most of the differences go beyond the definition of the term, to debates on how employability *can* be developed, how it *should* be developed and the responsibility of various stakeholders in its provision (Tymon, 2013). If not addressed, the lack of clarity of the meaning of employability and how much of a role HEIs should play in achieving it will continue to produce confusion of accountability and measurement within the sector.

This paper explores the meaning of employability through reviewing the literature on the understandings of employability held by four key stakeholders: HEIs, student, government and employer in the UK. It is developed from the author's two conference abstracts (Cheng, 2019a, b). The paper does not aim to provide a definition of employability, but seeks to explore how each stakeholder understands the concept of employability, who is responsible for graduate employability, and how to achieve and enhance that in the higher education sector.

Methodology

There are two stages to this literature review. The first stage aims to build a conceptual understanding of employability, relating to definition, responsibility and how employability can be achieved and enhanced, from the perspective of stakeholders. Fields in which the topic of employability is frequently discussed were reviewed such as higher education studies, vocational education, sociology and education economics.

Literature searches were undertaken across bibliographic databases (Google Scholar, EBSCO and Science Direct). The search focused on literatures published from 2010 to 2021. A structured search employing Boolean searches was conducted using a range of terms associated with key stakeholders (students or teaching staff or higher education institutions or employers or policymakers) and employability. Examples of string and terms searched included stakeholders and (student* or employee*) and (employability) and (universit* or institution* or higher education institutio*). The main focus was on undergraduate employability in the UK.

The second round of review drew on documentary analysis of official statements, declarations, documents, reports and position papers issued by key stakeholders in the UK, available online. The review covered materials (printed and electronic) published after 2010. Documentary analysis was used because it is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Document analysis has been applied to qualitative studies to produce rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organisation or program (Stake, 1995). It can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding and discover insights relevant to the research problem' (Merriam, 1988, p. 118).

Using search terms associated with employability and the four key stakeholders on the Google search engine, relevant materials reporting opinions of these stakeholders were identified and selected for further review. This review identified key stakeholders' interpretation of employability, and their perspective on responsibility for employability and how to achieve and enhance employability.

What is employability?

Broadly speaking, existing definitions of employability can be categorised into three main groups. The first group emphasises the capabilities of individuals (De Vos *et al.*, 2011; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Hogan *et al.*, 2013; Sanders and Grip, 2004; Yorke, 2006). These definitions resonate with the idea that employability of an individual depends upon personal assets or intrinsic characteristics. While Hillage and Pollard (1998) refer to it as capability, Yorke (2006) terms it a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes, and for De Vos *et al.* (2011) these are capabilities and willingness. These definitions emphasise the absolute dimensions of employability which relate to whether individuals possess the appropriate capabilities, skills and attitudes that employers need (Morrison, 2012).

The second group's definition drew attention to the relative dimensions of employability. They often critique definitions based on individual capacity as ignoring the fact that employability is primarily determined by the labour market (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Sin and Amaral, 2017). For example, Brown *et al.* (2003, p. 114) interpret employability as the "relative chances of finding and maintaining different kinds of employment". Employability can be influenced by broader external factors such as social, institutional and economic factors (Sin and Amaral, 2017).

Emphasis on the relative dimensions of employability has not received great attention in literature. Some conceptualisations of employability often overlook how social structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with labour market opportunities (McGinn and Oh, 2017). However, the relative dimensions can be very

important. For example, ethnicity could affect employability, as some employers discriminate on job applications. In the UK whilst 53.3% of white university leavers were in fulltime paid employment six months after leaving university, only 42% of minority ethnic leavers were in the same position (Davies, 2014). This suggests that we will need to understand relevant political, social and economic contexts, as well as how these factors intersect with one another in order to fully understand the concept of employability (Speight *et al.*, 2012).

The third group of definitions emphasise the "duality of employability" (Brown *et al.*, 2003, p. 110): the need to understand both absolute and relative dimensions of employability. For example, Small *et al.* (2018, p. 4) interpret employability as "capacity to be self-reliant in navigating the labour market, utilising knowledge, individual skills and attributes, and adapting them to the employment context, showcasing them to employers, while taking into account external and other constraints". Part of this duality is the interplay of disciplinal training and application of subject-specific skills in a job. As industries and career paths change, graduates are expected to possess attributes that are not only discipline-specific but also transferrable to a broader range of jobs and careers (König and Ribarić, 2019; Williams *et al.*, 2019).

These two latter groups of definitions not only recognise the importance of personal characteristics which make a graduate more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations but also emphasise the influence of external factors on the opportunities for employability. While the individual and their skills and competencies are positioned within a particular social context in these definitions (Holmes, 2013; Vuksanovic *et al.*, 2014), skills and competencies are essential and must be acquired.

Measuring employability

The lack of one agreed definition of employability has evidently given rise to various approaches offered to measure it. For example, the European Council adopts a benchmark which conceives employability as the per cent of graduates employed between 20 and 34 years old three years after graduation, at 82% or above (Christelle and Margarida, 2014). Similarly, in the UK, HEIs are often judged against targets of the per cent of their graduates who have gained employment (DBIS, 2015). Such measurement is crude and faulty on four fronts.

Firstly, it tasks HEIs on developing citizens' knowledge and skills (referred to as "employability") without recourse to the external factors that may shape a person's employability and ignores the relative and dual dimensions of employability. External factors are critical not only in terms of local employment but also in the context of internationalisation. The international or context-specific dimensions of employability (Crossman and Clarke, 2010; Speight *et al.*, 2012) such as different local socio-cultural and political factors could also influence a student's employability. It is therefore crucial to understand both the host context and the international context in order to support students to develop successful careers in their home and beyond.

Secondly, student employment rate has been used as a mere proxy for employability (Yorke, 2006). However, employment is different from employability. Employment statistics only measure actual job acquisition. Employability goes beyond that and measures a graduate's potential to obtain and function in a job. It is more than just a set of personal attributes and a destination, but a changing process (Taylor, 2016), to be continually enhanced in order to be relevant in the labour market. Employability should not simply be regarded as the end goal; rather, it is the relationship between a student seeking a job and the myriad of actors in the employment sector, and the actions undertaken in the world of work (Holmes, 2013).

Thirdly, the focus on student employment rates assumes that attending higher education will increase their job opportunities. This contradicts the findings of a recent study in England that those with degrees were less likely to be in work than those who left school to enter employment at 18 (Hoskins *et al.*, 2018). This suggests that a degree programme could have minimal effect on a graduate obtaining a job but a large effect on the graduate doing the job (Støren and Aamodt, 2010). As Wilton (2011, p. 87) argues, "it is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed". Perception (how graduates perceive a job as fitting their status), compensation (salary, benefits, bonus, working conditions, training support and career paths within a company) and geography (restrictions on migration to other cities or provinces to work) could dictate a graduate's employment status (Davies *et al.*, 2012).

Fourthly, although employability has become a main reason for students to pursue higher education (Sin and Amaral, 2017), there is little clarity who is responsible for student employability. The concept of graduate employability reveals an intrinsic assumption that higher education should produce individuals fit for the labour market. However, ensuring employability clearly goes beyond the remit of what universities alone can achieve, so understanding the roles of the key stakeholders (higher education institutions, students, government and employers) is vital.

Views from higher education institutions

The analysis of institutional documents and strategies suggests that there are increasing number of UK institutions which develop or have employability strategies. For example, the University of Bradford (2014, p. 1) clearly states that its "employability strategy has been developed within the context of key internal and external drivers shaping graduate employability". This suggests that HEIs' employability strategies can be seen as a response to government policies which highlight the need for students to develop skills to meet the needs of employers (Frankham, 2017).

Despite that employability is included in most institutions' stated vision, UK HEIs' definition of employability is either entirely lacking or fuzzy. Some of these definitions include:

> the integration of subject specific knowledge, skills and attributes with the skills of personal and professional development, lifelong learning and career management, to enable graduates to become employees of choice and effective in professional level work to the benefit of themselves, their employer, and the wider community (University of Bradford, 2014, p. 3).

> To be employable, you need to acquire the experience and develop the skills and attributes that employers will value. You can develop your employability skills through the full range of activities which you engage in at university... (University of Gloucestershire, 2016, p. 1)

> Ensuring that our students and graduates develop the necessary work-related skills and personal attributes that will allow them to compete successfully in the graduate labour market. (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2015, p. 1)

These definitions clearly resonate with government commissioned reports (Hillage and Pollard, 1998) in focusing on building student's capacity (skills, understanding and personal attributes) seen as useful in making students employable. This suggests that the perceptions of HEIs on employability are implicitly influenced by the line set by the government. Through prescribing what or who is employable, the government yields control over HEIs by using employability as a measure of a university's performance (Boden and Nedeva, 2010).

The type and status of the universities could also affect how they interpret and frame government agenda on employability. For example, post-1992 universities, with their roots in technical and vocational education, may be more concerned with employability than pre-1992 universities (Ingleby, 2015; Stoten, 2018). Broad-based knowledge and cultural capital are the currencies that University of Oxford students acquire; while delivering the employability

agenda could be crucial for a post-1992 university in order to increase student numbers (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). These different and local interpretations of employability further contribute to vague and mixed understandings of employability in the sector.

Sin and Neave (2016) argue that HEIs are starting to recognise the influence of external factors on employability such as economic and labour market conditions, age, gender and discipline. However, there is no clear evidence of that in this review. There are four main implications of this silence of HEIs on the external dimensions of employability.

Firstly, the lack of emphasis on external dimensions does not give students a full perspective of their chosen field and how to prepare for a successful career, which might leave them in a vulnerable position after graduation.

Secondly, a one-sided narrative of employability will make HEIs miss opportunities to better prepare their students. It is common for UK HEIs to use graduate employment rate as a key indicator for employability, which encourages the view that employability is a space of competition among HEIs. This is evidenced in that the word "compete" is often used within the employability statement provided by the HEIs. For example, the Employability Strategy of University of Kent states that:

> The University of Kent is committed to enhancing the employability of all our students, undergraduate and postgraduate, in order to enable them to compete and flourish in a competitive, fast-moving knowledge-based economy (University of Kent, 2013, p. 1).

Some HEIs have linked employability with the wider priorities of their universities. For example, King's College London relates its employability strategy to student recruitment, student satisfaction and employment outcomes, employer relations and community engagement. This resonates with Tymon's (2013) argument that HEIs see the links between league tables and student numbers, which in turn affects funding. Thus, despite the difference between employability and employment rate, HEIs still use and promote the use of crude measures such as employment figures, as it can potentially enhance their reputation.

Thirdly, there is increasing call for academic staff to provide training on skills such as analytic thinking, competent reasoning and the ability to structure information and arguments, in order to prepare graduates to meet market needs (De Villiers, 2010; Osmani *et al.*, 2018). This potentially threatens the quality of academic courses, as it implies a surrender to the short-term requests of an unpredictable labour market (Sin and Neave, 2016).

Fourthly, there is strong emphasis on engaging stakeholders in employability, but how HEIs in the UK interpret these stakeholders remains unclear. Most of the stakeholders identified and referred are limited to actors within the university community (staff, students, alumni, etc.) and business. For example, University of Kent (2013, p. 3) states that their employability engagement "undertakes active dialogue with employers in order to inform how it can best equip its students with the necessary skills and qualifications needed for long-term employability". Yet policymakers or government are not generally included as a "stakeholder" within these HEI documents. This suggests that the main responsibility for employability has been transferred by government to HEIs (Frankham, 2017).

Students' views
Review of student unions' documents suggests that there is a wide range of understandings of employability. For example, the National Union of Students (NUS, 2011, p. 12) states that employability is "a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy". This definition suggests that students saw improved job prospects as the most important motivation for undertaking a university degree.

Unlike the national organisation, definitions by other student unions' conceptualisation of employability in the UK are unclear. For example, University of Stirling Students' Union states that:

> Your Students' Union offers a range of ways for you to boost your employability, from training and acquiring useful skills . . . to a full course on leadership, you can find it all here. (University of Stirling Students' Union, 2013)

The University of Nottingham Students' Union points out that developing employability can be a process:

> Being at University and making the most of your Union isn't just about having fun – it's also a really good opportunity to develop yourself both personally and professionally, and improve your employability. (The University of Nottingham Students' Union, 2018)

The framing of employability in these statements lends support to how the NUS (2011, p. 1) describes the role of higher education as giving students "the opportunity to study an absorbing subject, make new friends, try new experiences – and for students to put themselves in pole position for starting work after graduation". This concurs with the findings of Ingleby (2015) that students view higher education as a means to equip them with the right skills for employment. Such perspectives closely align with employers' idea of what university education is for, suggesting a clear view among students that HEIs are responsible for their employability, ignoring the influence of external factors.

An interesting contrast can be seen in a report of the European Students' Union which defines employability as "competences which enable graduates to successfully take up and pursue a profession/employment and empower their life-long learning" (Vuksanovic *et al.*, 2014, p. 15). This definition also describes employability as "being able to create/start new businesses, and being able to develop and succeed in their occupations" (p. 15). The reference to life-long learning, entrepreneurship and success in one's occupation, imply a holistic, humanistic and socially centred outlook towards employability beyond employment or having a job.

These views translate to students' call for HEIs to redesign degrees with more focus on skills and attributes associated with graduate employability (Sin and Neave, 2016). The key attributes include self-management, team work, business and customer awareness, problem solving, communication, and application of numeracy and information skills (NUS, 2011). Other commonly mentioned attributes include flexibility, adaptability, hardworking, commitment and dedication (Tymon, 2013). This suggests that students are aware that employability requires skills to be linked to the needs of employers and that personal attributes are an inherent part of employability.

However, for students in the creative arts, possessing these attributes is not enough. Higdon (2016) found that creative arts students consider social capital as a key to employment success. Having access to network and contacts that offer work opportunities is crucial. This again points to the overlooked external dimensions of employability.

Students' understanding of employability could vary with their year of study. For example, whereas final year students tend to relate employability to ensuring future employment, first and second year students often link qualifications/grades with employability (Brown *et al.*, 2003). As students move to their final years, they start to see employability from an insider perspective, attaching it to the idea of cultivating work experiences and gaining a good understanding of the industry they see themselves working in (Gedye and Beaumont, 2018). The transformation in students' views could be the result of increased exposure to disciplinal know-how, and career and employment support offered to them during their study (Gedye and Beaumont, 2018; Thirunavukarasu *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the strong emphasis on getting a job, students also related employability with career building. For example, the NUS (2011) uses the term "effectiveness" in their definition of employability, whilst leadership and professionalism are central to the conceptualisation of employability by University of Stirling Students' Union (2013). This contrasts with the argument of Tymon (2013) that students focus on getting a job, any job, as opposed to employability in its wider sense.

It is worth noting that the emphasis on career development is still intertwined with students' awareness that their career is dependent on their ability to gain the skills needed by their employer. This is because while some form of paid work may be relatively accessible, finding a job with a career pathway in an occupation of choice and with long-term security is far less easy (Hoskins *et al.*, 2018). In this sense, the attention to attributes and skills to be acquired and the various pathways through which these are made available in universities remain to be explored.

Government's views

The UK government sees improving graduate employability as an important task for higher education institutions. Its report "Fulfilling our potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice" emphasises four overarching objectives:

> Its core aims are to raise teaching standards, provide greater focus on graduate employability, widen participation in higher education, and open up the sector to new high-quality entrants (DBIS, 2015, p. 7).

There is no direct definition of employability within this report. However, a popularly referenced government definition was provided by HM Treasury (1997, p. 1) which interprets employability as:

> the development of skills and adaptable workforces in which all those capable of work are encouraged to develop the skills, knowledge, technology and adaptability to enable them to enter and remain in employment throughout their working lives.

This definition prioritises the development and accreditation of knowledge and vocational skills, echoing the government view that enhancing the skills needed by employers will ultimately increase the number of graduates in employment. However, studies reveal that employers are more interested in "softer" skills and attitudes (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Wharton and Horrocks, 2015; Yorke, 2004, 2006). These different expectations suggest a gap between what government aims to promote for employability and what employers actually need. The report Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice rightly points out that:

> While employers report strong demand for graduate talent, they continue to raise concerns about the skills and job readiness of too many in the graduate labour pool (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015, p. 8).

> Demand continues to be strong for employees with high level skills (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015, p. 10).

Although the UK government acknowledges that responsibility for employability belongs to a broad spectrum of stakeholders including education providers, employers and professional bodies, it tends to emphasise the responsibility of the HEIs the most:

> Higher education providers need to provide degrees with lasting value to their recipients. This will mean providers being open to involving employers and learned societies representing professions in curriculum design. It will also mean teaching students the transferrable work readiness skills that businesses need, including collaborative teamwork and the development of a positive work ethic, so

that they can contribute more effectively to our efforts to boost the productivity of the UK economy. (DBIS, 2015, p. 11)

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has been used to "provide better signalling for employers as to which providers they can trust to produce highly skilled graduate" (DBIS, 2015, p. 13). The emphasis on the preeminent role of HEIs in developing employability has raised concerns that government and employers are exempted from such responsibility. For example, Sin and Neave (2016) argue that HEIs are cast in a utilitarian role to equip students with the advanced knowledge, skills and competencies they need through their professional lives. This resonates with the view of Frankham (2017) that the burden of responsibility for government policy in this area is assigned to those who are subject to those policies rather than to those who instigate them.

Literature suggests that the UK government's perspective on employability is different from that in Europe. The external dimension of employability is emphasised within European Policymaking environment, with reference to changing labour markets and the economic crisis and employment uncertainty (European Higher Education Area, 2009), whilst the UK government remains silent. Another difference is that EU policymakers perceive employability as an individual responsibility, with higher education as an operational means to support individuals in their efforts (Sin and Neave, 2016). In contrast, the UK government makes little reference to individuals. These differences could be that the interest of UK government in employability is mainly passive, as what matters to them is mainly employment (Tymon, 2013). It is perhaps time for the government to make a full commitment towards all areas of academic scholarship and learning within the broad definition of employability in order to improve student employability.

Employers' views
According to Mason *et al.* (2009, p. 1), employers often see employability as work readiness: "possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organisational objectives soon after commencing employment". By work readiness, there is consensus that employers tend to emphasise capabilities beyond subject knowledge.

De Weert's (2007) study reveals that employers mostly value candidates with the ability to learn in addition to generic skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, planning, communication skills and taking responsibility. Interpersonal skills are valued far more than any other skills, and that personal ethics, the qualities of honesty, integrity and trust are also expected at appointment (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). Williams *et al.* (2019) found that employers place importance on values and commitment indicators such as interest in the company and shared company values. These indicators suggest that employers' assessment of what and who is employable can be subjective. Employers' emphasis on soft skills also suggest a major area of disconnection among government, HEIs and students' groups who appear to focus on practical and vocational skills (Wharton and Horrocks, 2015; Yorke, 2004, 2006). This means that employability outcomes tend to be defined normatively and measured objectively in universities (Williams *et al.*, 2019), further discounting the contextual nature and relative dimensions of employability.

Although silent on the role of the government, employers hold a view that responsibility for graduate employability needs to be shared between students, HEIs and employers, and that students need to take greater responsibility for their own employability (Sin and Neave, 2016). This proposed shared responsibility suggests that degrees/qualifications are no longer the core criteria for employability. However, for this to function effectively employers will need to increase collaboration with HEIs to make their needs known, to increase student internship opportunities and to provide employees with professional on-the-job learning.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper reveals that HEIs, student, government and employers hold different understandings of graduate employability and who is responsible for it. There is a big gap between what employers need and what is promoted by government as relevant for graduate employability. Whilst the government's definition of employability places priority on the development and accreditation of knowledge and vocational skills, employers stress soft skills and attitudes.

There is a silence from the UK government on its responsibility for graduate employability. HEIs appear to have passively accepted this designated role in developing student employability, but limit their reporting in terms of graduate employment rates. The imposed responsibility on HEIs for employability suggests that the government wants to get rid of their political responsibility for student employability, so it shifts the blame for market failures to the consumers and producers of higher education.

The HEIs' interpretations of employability clearly appear as heavily influenced by government policy. They focus on the absolute dimensions of employability and emphasise the institution's role to support students to become employable, ignoring the external factors that could influence graduate employability such as economic and labour market conditions, age, race, gender and discipline.

The stress on the absolute dimensions of employability is shared by students who perceive HEIs as responsible for enhancing their employability, although students are aware that they are responsible for their own employability. Unlike HEIs who emphasise gaining employment, students interpret employability as not only gaining employment but also building a career.

The focus on the absolute dimensions of employability signifies the value-added interpretation of higher educational provision. It reflects that the UK government demand for a full employment economy, through supplying the labour market with appropriately "skilled" future employees. This in turn will encourage the production and consumption of economically relevant learning and knowledge exchange, and promote employability as an institutional offering which is fundamentally in the interest of employers.

The employer-driven view of employability contradicts the government's goal that students are supported to become investor of their own education and to make good choices. For example, the White Paper notes:

> The two most important decisions for a prospective HE student are what course of study they choose, and at which institution. These decisions are significant factors in determining a student's future life and career (DBIS, 2016, p. 43).

The demand for employability increases consumerism culture and commodification of higher education. It shapes student expectation and value of university education in that economic return becomes the main driver. Students are expected to demonstrate their value through packaging their credentials and experiences as expected by employers, throughout their study. This approach will decrease students' voice in what they want to achieve from university education and will make them lose opportunities to explore their full potential.

It is worth noting that the UK government designates the responsibility for employability as an important task for HEIs, which could potentially make employers become increasingly powerful entities who set the direction for university education. The influential role accorded to employers can be evidenced in the increase of vocational provision and the growing practice for employers to contribute to university's programme design and delivery. This influence can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it enhances student link to the job market and encourages students to engage in work experience and build an employability profile, including extra curricula pursuits and participation in work experiences. On the other

hand, putting employers' need above the purpose of subject knowledge creation and development will change the nature of higher education.

Specifically, there is a discernible shift from the provision of traditional education which is discipline and pedagogy oriented to vocationally focused provision which trains students to demonstrate their instrumental values of knowledge-for-use. For example, it has become a common practice for HEIs, especially teaching-centred ones, to incorporate employability skills development into their programmes (Huang, 2013). However, designing a desirable curriculum to meet the expectations of diverse industries and student cohorts can be challenging, requiring a considerable commitment of staff time and resources (Campbell, 2010; Fitch and Desai, 2012). Furthermore, an emphasis on employability without considering the intrinsic value of universities will produce a narrow view of the utilitarian values of university education (McCowan, 2015). This will turn higher education into a training factory, if ignoring its need to foster innovation and develop subject-specific knowledge.

More importantly, the influence of external factors on employability has been ignored by government in its employability agenda, which will have negative impact on students and HEIs. It does not support students to develop a clear picture of employability and leaves them unsure of how to prepare for a successful career. This clear silence on the external dimensions of employability only serves to perpetuate the dominant agenda that measures employability in terms of employment rate, and the view that HEIs and students are the key actors in increasing these rates. By ignoring the social, political, cultural and personal elements that are key to employment success, the government are absolved of their responsibility to address these externalities in relation to employability. This increases doubts on the purposes of higher education and paints students as subject to the unpredictable changes in the industry (Higdon, 2016).

These external dimensions are certainly overshadowed by the HEI-focussed narrative of employability by the government, thereby blurring the role that institutions could play in supporting students to maximise their chances of success in the labour market (Yorke, 2006). Various commentators have already reiterated that employability should be treated as a dialogue (Boffo, 2019) and a collaboration amongst various stakeholders (Donald et al., 2017; Ferns et al., 2019). Williams et al. (2019) emphasise for instance the compatibility of expectations of employers and educators in terms of skills to be developed and in the assessment of employment outcomes. Highlighting employability as a collaboration that equally engages all key stakeholders can help bring closer attention to the external dimensions that influence employability.

The different understandings among stakeholders suggest that employability is a contested issue. This research is mainly based on literature review and documentary analysis and it serves to catch a snapshot of stakeholders' understandings of employability. It is important to note that stakeholders' perceptions may change or shift due to different institutional and national policies of employability. There is a need to extend this study by conducting empirical research on stakeholders' views and experiences of employability. Empirical research could also explore the issue of visibility (the role of the academic curriculum in employability), and responsibility for student employability within HEIs, employers and policymakers. The long-term impact of the employability agenda on the quality and equity of university education, student empowerment and the development of civic society could also be rich areas for future study.

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