

Authentic Assessment in the Curriculum: Employability & Contemporary Issues within Higher Education Business Schools

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ABSTRACT

Employability is a key component within the curriculum of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with the recently introduced Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) reforms focusing on employability as well as government benchmarking with an emphasis on graduate salary outcomes and value for money. This can potentially have major implications for university business schools as they will face competitive challenges from peer universities and by employers recruiting school and college leavers. Greater use of authentic assessment using reports, business plans, etc. could address the issue. This study will conduct a literature review of authentic assessment in the context of a millennial workforce and employers that are moving away from degree classification as their primary graduate recruitment filtering criterion.

Keywords: Employability, Authentic Assessment, Higher Education, Learning & Teaching,

INTRODUCTION

Employability is now recognised as an important constituent part of good teaching rather than a peripheral activity provided by Careers departments within HEIs. The 2016 UK government higher education white paper posits that students have two major decisions to make when considering higher education study. The first relates to what course they choose to study and the second is the choice of institution for their studies. Such choices can greatly influence future career success and perceived value for money from the course fees incurred in the students' study (Higher Education White Paper, 2016). The white paper concluded with the recommendation of the implementation of the Teaching Evaluation Framework (TEF) in 2017 which awards HEIs a bronze, silver or gold rating.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employability according to UK research can be defined as "the potential a graduate has for obtaining, and succeeding in, graduate level positions" (Yorke and Knight, 2004, p4). Some academics such as Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) believe it encompasses the acquisition of a set of technical and non-technical skills plus embedded career management and work integrated learning. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) build on earlier studies by proposing four strands of graduate identity, namely Values, which incorporates personal ethics, trust, social values and organisational values; Intellect, related to the ability to think critically, to reflect and to possess intellectual curiosity; Performance, related to the ability to learn quickly, their written and verbal communication, to recognise and to deliver results. Finally, Engagement meaning having a wider perspective, a fully rounded person rather than a bookish graduate and possessing a can-do attitude. Australian research into employability has developed an alternative concept of Graduate Attributes which is explained in further detail in the next section.

Graduate Attributes & Work Based Learning

Graduate Attribute theory has been developed and extended by Australian academics such as Barrie (2007) and Jackson (2015) evolving into a framework encompassing competencies favoured by employers. The graduate attribute approach to employability has been replicated by many universities in the UK across the full spectrum of higher education. A study by Cranmer (2006, p182) found “that structured work experience and employer involvement in degree course design, delivery and assessment was found to have positive effects on graduates’ outcomes, in their ability to find graduate-level jobs within six months of graduation”.

Assessment in the Curriculum.

There are two categories of assessment within the curriculum. The first is known as formative assessment and this involves either informal or practice assessment that does not contribute to module or course mark. The second is summative assessment, which does contribute to the final mark, measures or certifies learning at the end of an assessment event (Earl, 2003). There is a grey area between the two forms of assessment as “in course” assessment serves a dual role of providing feed forward and yet contributing towards the overall mark (Yorke, 2003). Informal formative assessment such as students receiving support from their tutor in developing their assessment after submitting a draft can lead to student overconfidence and it becomes harder to determine whether the student has developed sufficiently to deal with similar work without the support of the academic (Yorke, 2003). The two types of assessment are not mutually exclusive, and curricula will usually be a blend of both formative and summative assessment.

Authentic assessment is a form of assessment that seeks to emphasise the practical application of tasks in real-world settings (Fook and Sidhu (2010). Their research found that it can be considered time consuming by the students in the study and they also suggested that summative assessment should not cause too much anxiety for the students. Mueller (2005) defines it as direct measures of students’ acquired knowledge and skills through formal education to perform authentic

tasks. James and Cassidy (2016, p1) define it as *“tasks that measure and test the skills and practice that they will need in their future careers – tasks that mirror professional practice and test more than just rote memorisation”*. By conducting authentic assessment in a formative context, research has shown that it promotes the improvement in instructional practices and plugging gaps in the curriculum which has resulted in increased student performance (Dunn and Mulvenon, 2009). James and Cassidy (2016) have found that authentic assessment is favoured by students that are career orientated.

There is a growing body of knowledge on the increasing expectations of employers on university graduates and the perception that university education does not adequately prepare them for the world of graduate employment (Cranmer 2006; Dacre-Pool and Sewell 2007; James and Cassidy 2016). Theoretical assessment without work based learning does not necessarily constitute inauthentic assessment as this form of assessment can still promote the development of graduate attributes such as critical thinking skills and academic excellence. Notwithstanding, HEIs should not simply assume that the curriculum will automatically prepare graduates for the world of work. Jackson (2015) believes that HEIs could do more and recommends greater participation in work based learning. MacLean (2016) highlights additional concerns by academics of both formative and authentic assessment with respect to an increased workload. To overcome this perception, it may require more innovative approaches in the curriculum in order to apply authentic assessment as it is recognised that the increasing pressures on academics mean that they are called upon to do more with less time (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Nevertheless, MacLean’s findings reveal that the increased workload can be offset by the increased personal reward from the high quality work that students have produced which inspires them to continue with their approach.

The Rationale for Authentic Assessment in the Curriculum

As UK students face tuition fees of up to £27k plus additional living expenses, prospective students are beginning to look at alternative routes to securing a successful career. Major employers

now offer a dual college leaver and graduate leaver programme. Both routes can end up on the same career trajectory, but one will have an accelerated path. This could mean that 18 year olds may choose the college leaver route offered by organisations instead of attending university (Top Employers for School and College Leavers, 2017). This recent development is potentially troubling for universities as it could provide an existential crisis for some universities if their perceived role is to equip their graduates with high paying employment opportunities. To compound this problem, recent legislative changes in April 2017 have resulted in the Apprenticeship Levy which means that organisations with a greater than £3m per annum wage bill may have to forfeit 0.5% of their turnover if they do not provide apprenticeships for their workforce (Apprenticeship levy, 2017). This change in legislation has provided opportunities and threats in the higher education market place and some universities are now beginning to offer Degree Apprenticeships following their introduction in 2015 (Degree Apprenticeships, 2015).

Perceived Grade Inflation

In recent years there have been calls for universities to reform degree classifications as it masks considerable variation in attainment. This has been identified in the UK press where the former University Minister of the UK Government has argued that there has been a 23% percentage point spike in 2:1 classified degrees in the last two decades and he believes this allows some students to coast and still attain the grade (Weale, 2015). This view is supported by Bachan (2015) who concurs that grade inflation has been on the increase since the mid 2000's. The issue of grade inflation is not new and was first discussed in the academic literature more than thirty years ago (Kolevzon, 1981). Stroebe (2016, p 813) argued that "using teaching evaluations for important decisions such as salary increases (for academics), tenure decisions, promotions, or the appointment of new faculty members is a contributing factor of grade inflation". Another study by Chen, Wang & Yang (2017) in South East Asia supported the tendency to raise grades to secure higher teaching evaluation scores. Nevertheless, they add that teachers may still receive unfavourable scores even with grade inflation and that students' feedback will also be influenced by what the students apparently value such as teacher personalities, the extent of effort that students have had to invest into the module and their

preferred teaching methods. There is a counterargument that grade inflation is the product of more efficient and effective teaching strategies in higher education. However, the research by Bachan (2015) acknowledges that employers concerns about the UK degree classifications may not be misplaced.

The justification for not specifying degree classifications for employers is a sensitive area and therefore employers may not attribute their rationale to perceived grade inflation and instead cite the more politically acceptable reason of widening opportunity and social mobility (Social Mobility, 2017) which projects an image of good corporate social responsibility. An alternative selection process entails graduate candidates completing a rigorous psychometric test in lieu of a specified degree classification. Research has shown that recruiters use psychometric testing extensively with 80% of US Fortune 500 organisations and 75% of UK Times 100 employers using psychometric testing to filter out unsuitable candidates (Psychometric-Success.com, 2019).

University League Tables

Over the last three decades university league tables have become an increasing part of working life within the curriculum. Rankings have provided an opportunity for comparison of HEIs and schools via a number of metrics which can affect the reputation of a HEI and its influence and the ability to attract funding (Pusser and Marginson, 2013). This tends to lead to a degree of homogeneity or isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), i.e. the tendency for HEIs to normalise and become similar. Some universities focus their efforts predominantly on the domestic league tables while the more research-intensive universities focus on the global rankings. The UK league tables tend to lend more weight to student evaluation which is collected annually via the NSS (National Student Survey, 2016) and the domestic league tables feature this metric in their league table calculator (Gibbons, Neumayer & Perkins, 2015). With the increased emphasis on graduate employability, a report into graduate employability published by The Economist in August 2017 (Economist, 2017) devised a measure of teaching impact by looking at graduate earnings. The article concluded with a league table which measures graduate earning potential that can be filtered by HEI

and provides further granularity by subject area. This report also factored in geographical differences and prior educational achievement to increase the validity of its findings. More recently graduate employability is also reported in salary data based on five year longitudinal educational outcome (LEO) data drawn from payroll records from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (Graduate Outcomes, 2018).

The Millennial and Generation Z Factor

The rise of student power has intensified as the Millennial generation of students graduating after 2000 (Maxwell and Broadbridge, 2016) and Generation Z students born after 2000 (Ozkan and Solmaz, 2015). The Millennials and Generation Z have different traits and behaviours to past generations. Their traits include being technologically savvy, possessing the ability to multi task and tending to be more career agile i.e. they change jobs more frequently (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). They also require more support through regular "check ins" with their line managers. This generation has received a lot of positive affirmation and protection from their parents and this has led to the charge that it has resulted in extended adolescence which means that their emotional intelligence may be less developed than what employers' desire. Further research has also highlighted that this generation has a high level of self-entitlement and narcissism (Twenge and Foster, 2010) with the power to influence university league table position via the NSS survey, HEIs understandably go to great lengths to accommodate the student community. Unfortunately, there is a perception that this has spilled over to assessment and grade average. A lower mean grade average may lead to lower scores in student evaluation and there has been academic research to support the accusation of grade inflation within HEIs (Stroebe, 2016)

According to research by CBI/Pearson (Telegraph, 2017) a third of employers surveyed identified graduates from this generation lacking self-management and resilience. As this graduating generation are now entering the workplace in greater numbers, there has been the emergence of a two tier recruiting strategy of university graduates and school and college leavers. This potentially

spells danger for weaker students within the HEIs as they may be competing with their peers as well as with applicants from the previous cohort year that were unable to find a job. Research by Maxwell and Broadbridge (2016) into Generation Y behaviours recommended that HEIs could do more to promote work based learning to manage the expectations of the students and to bridge the gap between the expectations of employers.

CONCLUSION

Authentic assessment entails setting assessment tasks that “mirror professional practice and test more than just rote memorisation” (James and Cassidy, 2016, p1). The author believes it should be an important component of the curriculum of HEI degrees because of several major pervading trends influencing employability and full time degree programmes. Those trends include: the perception of grade inflation (Bachan, 2015) within higher education which is arguably motivating calls to abandon the degree classification as a recruitment criterion in favour of psychometric testing. The second trend is the emergence of a school/college leaver route adopted by major employers where 18 year old entrants join the organisation and work their way up the promotional ladder without the need for a degree (Top Employers for School and College Leavers, 2017). Finally, apprenticeship degrees also offer to students an opportunity to study for a degree while in work. The opportunity to “earn while you learn” will be a compelling offer for some students and HEIs that either ignore this threat or do not offer such degrees could be in a vulnerable position. The author believes that embedding authentic assessment within the curriculum offers HEIs the ability to respond to the potential environmental threats.

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