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*Abstract for Working Paper submission: Employer Perceptions of the Value of an
Undergraduate HR Degree & Implications for HR Curriculum*

Research Stream: Learning and Teaching and HRD

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Page 2: Abstract

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive UK graduate labour market (GLM) the value of degree credentials has shifted, thus it is vital to recognise key stakeholder perspectives on the continued value of such credentials for a graduate's employability. This is especially the case for graduates of HR undergraduate (UG) programmes, a discipline which is seeing increasing numbers of graduates entering the profession, characterised by Elias and Purcell (2004) as a 'new graduate occupation'. This study focuses on qualitative inquiry into the 'demand' side of the GLM - perceptions of graduate employers. This paper aims to provide key insights, drawing from these employer perceptions, into the value of a HR UG degree for graduates hoping to pursue a HR career and expectations of HE providers in regard to HR curriculum. Findings hold implications for both theory and practice, particularly for HR academics responsible for the design and delivery of UG HR programmes.

Review of literature

An increase in the number of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which have attained university status since the 1980s (Storen and Aamodt, 2010), combined with a policy-level drive to increase participation in Higher Education (HE), has resulted in a surge in supply of graduates entering the UK employment market (Rae, 2007, Wilton, 2011). As a result, it can be argued that the increase in graduate 'supply' has overtaken the level of 'demand'.

Shifts in the composition of the job market have also affected the relationship between HE credentials and their returns in the GLM (Tomlinson, 2015). Due to increasing numbers of GLM entrants, graduates can no longer claim an advantageous position based on HE credentials alone. Instead, it is claimed that matching graduates to jobs based on their degree credentials is detached from the actual skills and requirements of graduate level roles (Mason et al, 2009; Chillas, 2010). It is also clear that degree credentials are not the only criterion of interest for employers (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006), with empirical studies highlighting the significance of aspects such as 'soft skills' from an employer's perspective (Hurrell, 2015). Though, Harvey (2001) and Rae (2007) maintain that a person (such as a graduate) is not simply the carrier of a set of skills and knowledge. Their own unique background, personality and motivation can be argued as going beyond skills and knowledge acquired through UG study.

In order to gain insight into employers' perceptions of the value of an UG HR degree, twenty two qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with line managers of HR graduates working in graduate-level HR jobs. Participants were sought from a range of UK organisations, including large organisations offering a formal HR graduate development programme and SMEs. The research participants represent five different industries; Public Sector; Manufacturing; Fuel & Utilities; Finance & Banking; and Retail/B2C. Interview data was analysed using open and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Findings

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study is that, actually, graduate employers do not perceive an UG HR degree to be essential for securing a graduate-level HR role. Although positive comments were made around benefits of such credentials, such as acquisition of

basic HR knowledge, the employers prioritised aspects such as graduate potential, attitude and a genuine interest in a HR career over a HR related degree. In some cases, participants placed more value on the process of studying at university rather than the discipline studied, perceiving HE experiences to demonstrate drive and capacity to take on further learning.

Overall, there is a strong perception that undertaking work experience alongside study, such as a one year work placement, can increase the value of an UG HR degree to employers. Participants also called for increased interaction and collaboration between HR academics and employers, and greater emphasis on group work and development of practical HR skills within UG HR programmes.

Implications for practice

For HR academics, this study prompts further requirement to promote work experience opportunities to our students. In response to a diminishing emphasis on UG HR degree credentials, there is also a need for greater focus on development of 'soft skills' within HR UG curriculum. There are also professional body implications, namely for the CIPD and links with their professional standards for early career HR professionals and accredited HR programmes.

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