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## **‘In the Real World...’ Listening to ‘Practitioner-Lecturer’ Perspectives of the Relevance in the Business School Curriculum**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with eliciting the perspectives of ‘practitioner-lecturers’ on the delivery of the employability curriculum within a Business School. The term ‘practitioner-lecturer’ is taken to mean those who have entered academia following an earlier career in industry, the public services or a commercial environment. Given their past experiences and organisational socialisation, it may be that these academics hold different views on the nature of the employability debate. Hitherto, much of the discourse on employability has revolved around an instrumentalist debate concerning how to implement an idealised skill-set that is meant to encapsulate the learning of students enrolled on a course. In this sense, students are re-defined in terms of the set of skills they accrue and develop. This reductionist approach has led to calls for a more holistic conception of employability education- a viewpoint that may echo with practitioner-lecturers with their wider experience of work beyond the ivory tower. This paper sought to address central research question: How do practitioner-lecturers view the relevance of the Business School curriculum, given their professional insights? The findings suggest that the views of practitioner-lecturers could be incorporated into the design of the future curriculum.

**Keywords:** Employability frameworks; practitioner-lecturer; Business and Management degree

### **Introduction**

According to Cashian, Clarke and Richardson (2016, 1-3):

The continuing work [on employability] and debate... has become sterile and repetitive.... What is missing from this largely instrumentalist approach is both a consideration of what ‘employability’ really means and whether the focus on skills and attributes is actually correct.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the basis of this critique and respond. In doing so, this discussion will identify the prevailing priorities that exist within British Business Schools, and then offer an instance of best practice to show how far undergraduate management education has progressed and also what are its possible weaknesses. The findings are drawn from research undertaken in highly regarded and successful Business School at a post-1992 university in the north of England. The existing literature on employability includes the views of lecturers (Jamieson, Strudwick, Bond-Taylor and Jones, 2013; Speight, Lackovic and Cooker, 2013; Morrison, 2014), but these are often presented in terms of the discourse between subject specialists/liberal-humanist values and managerialism/economic instrumentalism (Yorke, 2010). There is relatively little research that elicits the views of ‘second-career’ academics- that is those lecturers who now work in Business Schools, but have made a transition

from an earlier career in industry, commerce or the wider public sector. In having a dual perspective of practitioner and academic, these lecturers may be able to inform the future direction of the employability debate constructively. The conclusions drawn from the research echo some of the concerns raised by Cashian, Clarke and Richardson (2016) but also raise more fundamental questions about employability as a project.

## **Literature Review**

### *The policy context*

Business Schools now compete in a globalised market for students and their focus is conditioned by the demands placed upon them by a variety of stakeholders (Speight, Lackovic and Cooker, 2013). In particular, governments across the globe see education as key to the development of human capital and competitiveness in an increasing globalised and interconnected world economy. There has been a fundamental transformation in stakeholders' views and expectations of Higher Education since the 1970s in two respects (Yorke, 2010). Firstly, universities are now seen as vehicles for local and regional economic growth acting as knowledge-hubs for the transfer of expertise and innovation, as well as retaining their interest in teaching and research. Secondly, universities are viewed as central to the process of human capital formation particularly in management education. Furthermore, universities are now ranked in terms of employability and their position in various league tables is determined by the destination of their students after six months of graduation. For Cashian, Clarke and Richardson (2016, 4), this method of evaluating the performance of Higher Education has led to a distorted view of graduates as simply outputs from a productive process as 'many institutions focus on employability skills within their curriculum as a means of boosting their ... figures'. This output approach typifies the policy trajectory of the United Kingdom (UK) over a number of decades (Holmes, 2013). The British Government has encouraged and coerced Higher Education to promote skills acquisition and development through its employability agenda since the 1970s, initially tentatively, but more recently with clear accountability and funding mechanisms. Initially, Government policy was defined in terms of a competence-based approach for a limited range of vocationally-based disciplines such as science, but then extended through policy initiatives outlined in the White Papers of 1987 and 2011, the Browne Report (2010) as well as numerous circulars issued by Government executives agencies (BIS, 2009; HEFEC, 2010). This conventionalised preoccupation with competence measured in terms of skills acquisition has continued to the present with the Green Paper from the Conservative Government in November 2015 that highlighted a commitment to the established conception of promoting graduate employability.

Employability is a concept that has historically been situated in a politico-economic and ideological context, and continues to be so. When first coined during the inter-war period, employability was conceived in terms of addressing the lack of demand for manual labour. Since the 1970s, however, employability has more generally been associated with concerns over the supply of labour in the economy. This shift in how employability is conceived is indicative of an ideological shift in policymaking from Keynesian demand management theory to supply-side economics and, in particular, neo-liberal economics. Hillage and Pollard (1998, 1) provide a succinct definition of employability as 'having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain

employment and obtain new employment if required'. Hall (1976) has provided a view of the postmodern employee as the 'protean worker' that is preoccupied with upgrading their skillset and adaptability to meet the ever changing demands of the labour market. As Savicks, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Esbroeck and van Vianen (2009) allude to, the postmodern conception of employment is very different to the modernist understanding of work where an individual's work life cycle was often predictable. According to Savicks et al. (2009), workers can no longer think in terms of long-term career progression, but in 'life trajectories' that are responsive to the prevailing economic climate. Indeed, Savicks et al. (2009) suggest that we move away from the idea of a career development and a work life cycle to one that is aligned with 'life designing', in which the vulnerability of the protean worker is recognised in a new understanding of life and work.

The 'protean worker' is profoundly vulnerable given the uncertainties of the globalised postmodern economy, the liberalisation of labour legislation, and the decline in the bargaining power of trade unions. Unemployment has become individuated; in doing so, the responsibility to find employment has shifted from Central Government to individuals. The changing nature of the British economy, with the decline of the industry and the rise of the low-wage service sector, has transformed organisations and what they ask of their workforce. As Savicks et al. (2009) note organisations are increasingly defining employees in terms of peripheral and marginalised roles that are vulnerable to outsourcing, and their core staff are expected to be responsive to the dynamics of the market in their job role. These changing expectations are accentuated by the introduction of new forms of technology that require workers to upskill, especially in the use of information technology. For Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth (2004, 14), 'an individual's employability subsumes a host of person-centred constructs need to deal with ... the changes occurring in today's economy.... Employability represents a form of work (pro)active adaptability that consists of three dimensions-career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital.' Prevailing notions of employability then are focussed on the responsiveness of the individual to a dynamic labour market, and as such reflect the dominance of neo-liberal values in the contemporary setting.

The nature of the employability debate is all too often myopic and narrowly focussed on the acquisition of suitable attitudes and competence skills. A report from the British Chartered Institute of Management (CMI) published in 2016 is representative of much of the discourse presented in the literature generated by professional associations in that it tends to offer a deficit model of human capital in the UK. For example, CMI (2016) report that not only are 20 per cent of managers are under-qualified, but that 43% of managers feel that they are ineffective in their work, and that the UK needs to recruit and train 1.9 million new managers by 2024. This perspective is, of course, a self-interested and parochial and such 'research' should be read within its context. However, this view that the British lack management skills is one that pervades public policy and the professions. It is also a starting point for the curriculum model of much of the management education in Higher Education in the UK.

Hitherto much of the debate on employability has been dominated by an instrumentalist and reductionist approach to management development, and in

particular skills. For Cashian, Clarke and Richardson (2016, 1) this debate has revolved around three core themes:

1. The outlining of lists of employability 'skills' from work undertaken with, or by, employers or professional bodies....
2. Research around the factors influencing employability....
3. The development of a number of employability frameworks'.

In addition, Cashian, Clarke and Richardson (2016, 2) notes that British Business Schools have tended to design their curriculum model of management education on a set or presumed desired skills that have been described in a range of Government and professional publications, such as that outlined by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in its 2009 Report 'Future fit: Preparing graduates for the world of work' that specified the following skills as fundamental to effective management education: Team working; business and customer awareness; problem-solving; as well as communication and literacy, numeracy, and information technology skills. This list has provided a convenient if somewhat limited interpretation of what is required in order to prepare young people for the complexities of management.

#### *The Business School and the position of practitioner-lecturers*

Although there are a variety of isomorphic pressures engendered by market forces, internal quality assurance regimes and public policy that appear to be pushing Business Schools towards similar curricular models, the British HE system is far from uniform. The Higher Education system is a collection of different histories, mission statements and strategic conceptions of what a university should aim to be. This pluralist nature of the HE sector has meant that each university has tended to interpret Government policies in its own way. Cranmer (2006) reported on differing responses, with post-1992 HEIs being more inclined to promote employability. For many post-1992 universities, vocationally-relevant education and training are part of their history, and employability is at the heart of its *raison d'être*. For some pre-1992 universities, employability has not yet supplanted research as their main concern. For HEIs in the British Russell Group of 'research-intensive' universities, their global reputation and revenue streams are primarily based on their standing as research-oriented institutions. There is clearly a cultural struggle being played out in universities as they seek to mediate an understanding of employability. The variations in practice within HE reflect the competing interests that lobby for and against various models of employability. Employability continues to be debated within Business Schools both as an idea, and in practice.

Myers (n.d., 41) points out 'modern universities, with an increasing focus on delivering quality work-relevant knowledge alongside an academic education, may have a particular need to recruit experienced practitioners to contribute to teaching and research'. In particular, with indices of employability being used to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of institutions, universities are cognisant of the benefits of employing industry-conversant staff who are capable of imparting practical knowledge. Moreover, given that Business Schools have been criticised for being isolated from the real world and preoccupied with their own abstract research, Gates and Green (2013) suggest that practitioner-lecturers are well-placed to bridge this gap.

According to Wood, Farmer and Goodall (2016, 229):

The transition from one career to another is characterised by changes in work practices, operational structures and work place cultures.... [this] also requires adaptation to value systems that are rarely made explicit and that may conflict with those associated with the previous career.

Much of the literature relating to those who make the transition into Higher Education from another profession refers to the notion that individuals embark of a journey of change that is completed with the adoption of a new professional identity and self-image (van Maanen and Schien, 1979; Ibarra, 1999). This concept of organisational socialisation was developed further by Shreeve (2010) and Goulay (2011) in their research into professional identities in Higher Education. Shreeve (2010) offers a typology of identities for those practitioner-oriented lecturers: 'dropping in', where a lecturer's identity still resides in professional practice; 'moving across', where teaching assumes a greater priority than practice; 'two camps', where an equilibrium between teaching and practices established by the lecturer; 'balancing', which is described as continual reconciliation between teaching and practice; 'integrating', where identities are drawn together into one new work identity. For Bartunek and Rynes (2014), it is almost impossible for practitioners to make a full transition to the new identity as an academic, as some residual identity as a practitioner remains.

Lave and Wenger (1991) and Handley, Study, Fincham and Clark (2006) argue that being part of a community of practice induces personal and professional changes that ultimately reconstitute the individual as an integrated member of that community. Wood et al. (2016, 232) challenge this transitional model of organisational socialisation (Ibarra, 1999), and the idea that this involves a 'fundamental restructuring of personal and professional values'. However, Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark, and Warne (2002, 109) argue that lecturers' 'professional self and its disparate allegiances [amount to] a series of contradictions and dilemmas. In particular, Gourlay (2011) challenges the underlying premise in the model of socialisation through a community of academic practice. In particular, Gourlay (2011) rejects the view that practitioner-lecturers adopt a new repertoire of practice as they become socialised into the norms of academe. In short, a number of researchers contend that many practitioners do not fully integrate into the academic community of practice, and as such possess a differing worldview compared with those lecturers who have not worked outside Higher Education (Boyd and Harris, 2010; Gourlay, 2011).

Much of the literature relating to employability focusses on the suitability of a curriculum framework within which to locate employability. The typology suggested by Cranmer (2006) can be simplified into three distinct approaches: the embedding of employability within the curriculum delivery, to be provided as a bolt-on to the existing curriculum, and as devolved to the careers department to implement. A number of curriculum frameworks have been proposed and have offered some progress in how we conceptualise employability in delivery, and 'is useful to teachers if it can help them organise learning objectives and make them more precise' (Jollands, 2015, 2). Perhaps the most commonly reported framework is the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team Model (ESECT) of 'USEM' that identified understanding, skilful practices in context, personal efficacy and metacognition as key to developing a future



employability curriculum (Jollands, 2015; Yorke, 2015; Cashian, Clarke and Richardson, 2016). In differentiating between knowledge acquisition and the unique nature of the self, the model recognised the importance of the personal dimension to learning. However, as Jollands (2015, 9) notes, '[a framework] must be coherent, systematic, detailed, comprehensive and specific. No employability frameworks have all these characteristics.... [and] they do not identify stakeholders' depth of understanding of employability issues. Their categories are not taxonomic, that is, they have no sequential hierarchy'. So, although curriculum frameworks are capable of providing a rudimentary reference point for curriculum development, they are somewhat blinkered in their view of personal development and are therefore of limited application. The challenge that now exists for those involved in developing the employability curriculum is how to agree with interested stakeholders on what are deemed to be the necessary and desired attributes- whilst taking into account the need to personalise the curriculum delivery and meet the needs of the individual student.

This case study focusses on the example of embedding employability into the highly regarded undergraduate degree in Business Leadership and Corporate Management at a post-1992 university in the north of England that recruits 30 students per year, and in which more than 80 per cent of students achieve a first or upper second honours degree. This degree programme is relatively unique, with only one other similar course in the UK. The distinctiveness of this degree can be traced to its emphasis on workplace experience with only four weeks in the second and third year spent at the university in formal intensive study. Students are placed at a full range of businesses, from independent family enterprises to international firms such as Nissan and Nestle (Northumbria University, 2015), and are supported by a personal tutor who visits the business twice-annually to verify progress. The degree echoes the call from the Dean of Michigan's Business School, Scott deRue, for 'experience-driven' education (Elmes, 2016).

The Business Leadership and Corporate Management degree corresponds to an explicitly-embedded model (Cranmer, 2006) of employability as not only is most of the degree is spent at the work placement but much of the assessment is based on work-based reports, reflective accounts of progress as well as written assignments that are required to demonstrate the application of theory to the student's own context. A central feature of the curriculum framework is its focus on the development of employability and leadership attributes, although some aspects such as commercial and self-awareness. The framework is structured on the basis of three levels of professional development: capable individuals, emerging leaders, and strategic leaders, each of which should approximate to the three years of the degree. Within each of the three levels, a set of seven leadership attributes\* are identified for assessment as outlined below in Table 1.

<b>Set direction*</b>
<i>Commercial awareness; Customer and Stakeholder focus; Strategic thinking; Medium term planning</i>
<b>Learn*</b>
<i>Self-awareness; Continuous learning; Developing others</i>

<b>Act with integrity*</b>
<i>Honesty and fairness; Professional standards; Resilience; Corporate social responsibility</i>
<b>Engage*</b>
<i>Communicating and influencing; Creating impact; Inspiring others</i>
<b>Drive*</b>
<i>Motivating self and others; Achieving results; Making decisions; Solving problems</i>
<b>Collaborate*</b>
<i>Working with others; Cross team / Organisational collaboration; networking</i>
<b>Innovate*</b>
<i>Creative thinking; Driving improvement; Managing change; Adaptability</i>

**Table 1. Leadership attributes identified within the degree framework.**

Although the degree documentation asserts that ‘the employability and leadership attributes describe the key skills, knowledge and behaviours required by an effective leader’ (Stalker, 2015), there is a counter view to consider. A number of observers have considered the move towards the marketisation of Higher Education (Lawrence and Sharma, 2002; Lambert, Parker and Neary, 2007; Naidoo, Shankar and Ekant, 2011) and how this development has redefined students as consumers of the academic labour of their lecturers. There is, however, a second dimension to this commodification, in that students are themselves commodified into an idealised form of management graduate ‘oven ready’ for the workplace through the creation of employability framework such as the one described above. As described above, the aim of this research was to explore whether practitioner-lecturers thought that this type of employability framework was relevant to their students’ future careers.

To some extent, the employability framework offered within the Business Leadership and Corporate Management degree is a progressive step forwards in terms of its emphasis on people management skills. However, there is potential to develop the programme further. Firstly, we need to design degree programmes that are increasingly personalised, with greater choice and flexibility. For example, students could be given some choice in which skills they wish to focus on more than others. The logistical and financial constraints that impinge on Faculty mean that this idealised goal of a personalised curriculum may be remote. Although a survey in 2011 reported that 86% of British students would like to be involved in the development of the curriculum, 71% had not been offered the opportunity to become involved (Havergal, 2015). Nevertheless, although there are tensions in such enterprises, as reported by Bovill, Morss and Bulley (2009), universities are engaging with students to redesign the curriculum. The University of Lincoln has, for example, a ‘student as producer’ project in which ‘Undergraduate students will work alongside staff in the design and delivery of their teaching and learning programmes, and in the production of work of academic content and value. Students are supported by student services and professional staff so they can take greater responsibility not only for their own teaching and learning’ (University of Lincoln, 2016). Another example is offered by the University of Southampton in which students act as ‘champions to help embed issues such as employability and digital literacy into curricula’ (Havergal, 2015, 32). If we are to move



forward, HE must engage purposefully with students and design programmes that meet their expectations as well as responding to Central Government directives.

### **Research Methodology**

The exploration of practitioner-lecturers' views involved two phases. The first involved the use of a semi-structured questionnaire as a pilot, to enable participants to indicate a response on a five-point scale, ranging from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly', as well as an open response area for written comments. The questionnaire was distributed to 24 staff who were involved in the delivery of modules related to business and management, and who were conversant with the employability agenda. All these lecturers were practitioner-lecturers in the sense that they had entered academia after a career in industry, teaching, and the wider commercial sector. The 10 statements on the questionnaire referred to a range of issues, from philosophical conceptions of learning and the role of universities such as: 'I believe that the main purpose of attending University is to obtain a well-paid job /... to pursue a passion in learning /...to prepare students for the world of work / ... to encourage the development of critical citizens'. Other statements referred to the nature of the employability curriculum: 'I believe that students should have employability skills built into the assessment of their degree / ... should be offered support on developing their Employability skills by the University's Careers Service / ... it is the responsibility of academics to promote employability at every opportunity'. This questionnaire served as a pilot for the development of further exploratory questioning during the interview phase of the research.

The themes generated by the open-response comments in the pilot questionnaire were supplemented by issues derived from the literature review in order to inform the research conversation. In this second phase of the research, five practitioner-lecturers who had not participated in the earlier questionnaire-based phase of the research were asked to participate. As a consequence, the total number of participants involved in the research amounted to half the entire department. The participants were purposively drawn from a range of professional backgrounds to provide some representativeness of employment contexts and their respective demands. The foci for exploration related to three key emergent themes: the purpose of studying at university; progress on delivering on the employability agenda within the curriculum; the future direction of curriculum innovation particularly with reference to employability frameworks. The lines of discussion that were generated from the conversations led to further desk research that focussed on how universities have responded to the demands from stakeholders, particularly Central Government executive agencies.

The research is predicated on the criteria suggested by Smith and Deemer (2003), in which plausibility, credibility and descriptive validity are offered as alternatives to conventional positivist criteria such as validity, reliability and transferability. In this respect, the utility of the 'research-conversation' approach is to be found in the deeper insight obtained from those involved, as well as the new lines of enquiry it can generate.

## Findings

The numerical data generated by the questionnaire is detailed below.

Statements	Agree strongly	Agree	No response	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>1. I believe that the main purpose of attending University is to obtain a well-paid job. Ranking: 9<sup>th</sup> in terms of agreement</i>	2	12	1	7	2
<i>2. I believe that the main purpose of attending University is to pursue a passion in learning Ranking: 2<sup>nd</sup> in terms of agreement</i>	7	13	2	2	0
<i>3. I believe the main purpose of University is to prepare students for the world of work Ranking: 8<sup>th</sup> in terms of agreement</i>	5	10	2	6	1
<i>4. I believe that the main purpose of University is to encourage the development</i>	4	13	0	6	1

<i>of critical citizens. Ranking: 6<sup>th</sup> in terms of agreement</i>					
<i>5. I believe that students should have employability skills built into the assessment of their degree Ranking: 4<sup>th</sup> in terms of agreement</i>	10	7	4	2	1
<i>6. I believe that students should have employability skills offered to them as an optional enrichment exercise Ranking: 5<sup>th</sup> in terms of agreement</i>	6	11	1	3	3
<i>7. I believe that students should be offered support on developing their employability skills by the University's Careers Service. Ranking: 1<sup>st</sup> in terms of agreement</i>	10	11	2	1	0
<i>8. I believe that it is the responsibility</i>	8	4	6	5	1

<i>of academics to promote employability at every opportunity Ranking: 10<sup>th</sup> in terms of agreement</i>					
<i>9. I believe that it Universities should be judged in terms of how they deliver employability Ranking: 7<sup>th</sup> in terms of agreement</i>	5	11	3	4	1
<i>10. I believe in the necessity of delivering employability skills as part of my job as an academic Ranking: 3<sup>rd</sup> in terms of agreement</i>	8	11	1	3	1

Table 2. Numerical data generated by the questionnaire

The statistical data derived from the pilot questionnaire indicates a general acceptance that students should benefit from the delivery of Employability skills and awareness as part of the Business School curriculum. Statement 7 on the questionnaire generated the highest level of agreement from respondents and indicates that the university careers service is viewed as the main agency for raising awareness of the jobs market and employability skills. Importantly, however, a significant number of respondents believed that employability skills should be embedded within the assessment of students' work, as evidenced in the data derived from statement 5, and that they should also be offered enrichment opportunities to support the employability agenda as indicated in statement 6.

In terms of allocating responsibility for the delivery of employability skills, the statistical data infers that practitioner-lecturers do accept a role in the provision of employability awareness, as indicated by the data generated by statement 10. They do, however, view the delivery of employability skills in a wider institutional context and subordinate this role to being a subject teacher foremost, as indicated by the data

generated by statement 10. Moreover, the responses to statements 3 and 9 suggest that practitioner-lecturers possess a broader understanding of their role as educationalists that extends beyond the provision of employability. In an echo of liberal-humanist thought, statement 2 points to practitioner-lecturers' passion for their subject area and the idea of learning for its own sake as the main reason to attend university.

*Comments from the questionnaire:*

Smith and Boyd (2012, 66) describe how in their qualitative data was 'analysed using a thematic approach whereby an initial coding index based on the analytical framework developed from the literature'. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) describe how this approach when used iteratively leads to the refinement of data into a number of core themes. There were a number of comments that stressed the need for young people to develop employability skills, but other important issues were raised, such as the need to develop critical thinkers who are life-long learners, the desirability of leaving each discipline to find its own path in dealing with employability, and the shared nature of responsibility in the delivery of employability between the careers service, academics and the wider university.

'As a lecturer who has delivered employability and worked collaboratively with the Job Centre a module with employability is essential'.... Every student should embark on employability skills exercises.... It should be embedded on each and every course.... I can't see a negative in implementing such measures'

And,

'I believe that the main purpose of attending university is to learn and to develop a range of skills that can be applied in the workplace but which have a broader and deeper application'.

However, there were a number of comments that expected university to deliver more than skills and employability:

'.... Broadening your mind and your life experiences and developing your intellect'.

And,

'It is about developing critical thinking, the ability to research, challenge, question and develop knowledge on a broader front than work specific knowledge'. [employability] is not the main purpose of university'.

And,

'I believe that a passion for learning is something with which you should leave university. You should learn how to learn at university'.

Importantly, a significant number made a distinction between degree discipline and the value of employability skills. This comment is typical of the comments made:

'Some subjects are more associated with a vocational areas and it would therefore be remiss not to include an employability focus. Some subjects may

have an academic focus and therefore it may be more of a contrivance to build in employability skills’.

The issue of responsibility for the delivery of the employability curriculum generated some contrasting views:

‘This is part of Careers [Department’s work]’.

And,

‘Academics need to be aware of the opportunities to promote the value of learning in employability- but it is not solely their responsibility’.

And,

[Academics] ‘if delivering on a vocational/work based programme’

And,

‘I believe that academics should be fully involved in development of students so this might be to signpost, e.g. to careers service and to have employability in mind.

*Findings from the research conversations:*

*S. Aged over 60, male and a former senior engineer and manager with several car manufacturers:*

*The purpose of University:*

‘To help develop young people for jobs and careers in the future. To help them take knowledge interpret and critically evaluate it. To become independent in their learning. To make them ready to go into the workplace. It does not have to be structured- you could go to the workplace or the University’.

*The relevance of employability frameworks and specific leadership attributes:*

‘I think smart young people make their own way. In the past employers took people on as apprenticeships and developed them. Many organisations want the finished articles and that universities will produce. The framework probably helps the less capable student and academic where they have to work through and pick up skills. The best Business Schools are in touch with employers and are influenced by employers’.

*Future developments of the curriculum:*

‘Can employers lead on the curriculum? The question is whether there enough employers in the UK to do so? - The answer is no. We have to embrace in other ways through giving students some others step forward to employability’.

*N. Aged over 50, female and a former chief executive in a regional Government funding agency for education and training:*

*The purpose of university:*



'It is about getting them to a developed level of their study in which they are passionate. I think people choose to study because they think it will improve their chances of getting a job'.

*The relevance of employability frameworks and specific leadership attributes:*

'Giving my previous role in 25 years of experience, I know that employers look for graduates with some understanding of business. I think there is an expectation that a Business Studies graduate comes with certain skills. My preference is that skills should be embedded'.

*Future developments of the curriculum:*

'I would like to see work -based assignments that are based on experience. If you can take the theory, and then apply it in a work-based situation then that is what we should do. We have increasingly good links with employers, and this is important for a Business School.

To have credibility you have to be able to study intellectually and that comes with the ability to study a body of knowledge. I don't think it should be an either/or academic versus vocational. If it were only an academic programme, I think that it quite difficult to sell to employers'.

*D. Aged over 40, female with a background in building design and construction*

*The purpose of university:*

'Well, it depends on what course you are doing... when I taught building surveying, I probably thought of it more than training as opposed to than education. Over the years, as I have made a move from practitioner to more of an academic, it is more about education. It is not just about getting a job but how they then progress'.

*Employability and differing subject disciplines:*

'I think employability will have more emphasis for some subjects like Business Studies... but the aim has to be to get a job. Some programmes of study, where perhaps they're going onto a PhD there may be less emphasis on employability. But in an ever changing world, I think it's important on all programmes'.

*The relevance of employability frameworks and specific leadership attributes:*

'I don't think there should be specific terms as every job role and every person is different. So it is not just a ticky-box exercise. Too many people focus on the acquisition of life-long skills to get their initial job.... Take the example of lacking confidence, people develop over time and gain confidence. I don't believe in a pre-defined list'.

*Future developments of the curriculum:*

'There needs to be more emphasis on graduate identity and not on the initial graduate but on how they progress. The emphasis on skills and attributes is becoming quite dated'.

*B. Aged over 40, female with a career in education and training, and work force development:*

*The purpose of university:*

'It depends if you ask me as an educator or as a parent. University is more about a life experience, a really transitional phase in their lives where they are able to develop a certain independent.... where there are opportunities to think, challenge and explore. I don't see them as consumers – the university is a relational experience with an opportunity for transformation. I want them to be passionate learners. I think that I don't believe that education is a private commodity but a public good and that universities are part of civil society. I see it more as a collective community in which we relate to each other. I see employers as part of that society but not a dominant part of that'.

*The curriculum and personal beliefs – Tensions as an academic:*

'Absolutely- I want them to pursue their passion.... You have to think what you want to do afterwards- the most important think I have learnt is that you find out what their motivator is.

I have been in leadership and management roles inside organisations and my primary motive has been to develop others' development. My duty is to these young people is top these young people and to help them to think through the challenge of what they want to do and help them understand the rules of the game. I see them first as a personality and an individual'.

*J. Aged under 35, male with a career in accountancy:*

'In Accountancy, you have bachelors, masters and professional qualifications, and even if you have a doctorate it's not going to count for anything professionally. A master's in Accounting still will not exempt you from professional and advanced level exams anyway.... I find that students from certain universities have generally not had the basic technological skills in order to progress. Graduates from pre-1992 universities have not had those skills because they have focussed on academic work, like writing essays which are not needed in a professional context.... I found that students had a basic lack of skills around the use of Excel and often infantile in their approach which was a disappointment'.

### **Discussion**

Although some of the discussion centred upon improvement in the delivery of employability, a significant amount of the discussion revolved around conceptions of education. Wood et al. (2016) discuss how practitioner-lecturers tend to describe themselves as being involved in preparing students for practice or acting as a practitioner working in Higher Education. Such a bifurcation of role and self-conception as an academic is indicative of the complexity that practitioner-lecturers negotiate on a daily basis. It is evident that practitioner-lecturers do accept that they have some responsibility for inculcating ideas related to employability as part of their role. There is the recognition that for those who do not teach in a Business School, or similar work-based context, there should not be the same level of expectation and that the delivery of employability is tied to subject disciplines, or the careers department.

The relevance of a passion for learning was evident in the data both in terms of the questionnaire and the research conversations. This may, of course, reflect the individuals involved but it also suggests a desire to support young people of a journey that is both stimulating and rewarding. There is also a sense that some practitioner-lecturers do not accept the reductionism of skills-based education to employability entirely, although they do accept the need to prepare young people for the highly competitive work environment. Ideas on learning for learning's sake and supporting individuals to develop their potential rather than viewing them simply as the next tranche of workers echoes elements within liberal-humanist conceptions of education. As such, we could suggest that some practitioner-lecturers interpret the curriculum frameworks as they currently exist as an inadequate representation of what studying at university should be. In order to meet the needs of students, we need to develop a more personalised curriculum in which students exercise greater control over their learning and the focus of their learning. In doing so, we need to develop a holistic interpretation of a student's experience of 'learning how to be a manager' which will involve wider skills such as micro-political awareness or negotiating skills, or indeed empathy for others.

It may well be that employability frameworks fulfilled a function whilst the employability curriculum was being developed during the past two decades in the UK. It is now time to make a step change and review not only how we deliver the employability agenda and what we want from the Business School curriculum. Hitherto, the emphasis on the acquisition of specific skills and attributes has been the driving force behind the design of the management curriculum. All too often this agenda has been driven by Central Government, with the uncertain but implicit support from the business community. Business Schools need to anticipate the demands of the future and develop a curriculum that is holistic and meets the needs of individuals and in particular their ability to relate to others as individuals. The curriculum must work towards the realisation that being a manager is not simply being menu-driven but people-centred.

### **Conclusion**

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this exploration of employability in a Business School. Firstly, that an employability framework represents a simplistic approach to defining 'graduateness'. Participants readily acknowledged that universities are tasked with meeting the needs to various stakeholders, but felt that this was a complicated and uncertain endeavour. In practice, there are four principal categories of stakeholders: lecturers, students, employers and Central Government. Although Government bodies produce policy initiatives, such as the Green Paper on Higher Education and Employability in November 2015, and claim to represent the interests of employers and students, this is an imperfect position to adopt as there are multifarious interests and expectations on play within the employability discourse. In simple terms, there is no single employer position and no idealised set of skills that are universally applicable across all sectors of the economy. Indeed, there exist tensions within the expectations both between and within stakeholders. The resolution of the issue of definition and a subsequent coalescence of opinion, around a set of attributes, skills and learning outcomes remains elusive.

A second conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that practitioner-lecturers are able to provide a perspective that is grounded in experience rather than theory. In doing so, some are able to provide a critique of the curriculum from an experiential viewpoint. The finding that a significant gap in knowledge and expertise exists between some Accountancy graduates and a professional Accountant is important as it points to a need to review how effective particular universities prepare their students for professional qualifications and practice. Within this critique of the university curriculum is the concern that theory takes a disproportionate role in the composition of many degrees, particularly when these are purporting to offer some form of vocational preparation, such as Business Management. This call for a re-orientation towards a more practice-centred approach is not in itself a validation of employability frameworks but rather for students to be able to gain some relevant work experience prior to graduation, and for HE to engage more with professional bodies. Such a recommendation reinforces the perceived benefits of 'sandwich' degrees that combine a work placement with study.

The third outcome from this research is the finding that university is seen by a significant proportion of participating practitioner-lecturers as providing essential life skills for young people. Many students still prefer to move away from their local area to another part of the UK to study and this was viewed as an important development step by young people that could not be encapsulated within an employability framework. As such, the research reported highlighted the need to meet the needs of individuals rather than engage in the discourse of workforce competencies as Government policy documentation often accentuates. If the employability curriculum is to develop further and meet the needs of individual students, it should become more personalised and constructed around the personal aspirations of students. In addition to moving the curriculum towards a more personalised model, we should also aim to take more holistic approach to management education and development. Such an approach would recognise the importance of humanity and an understanding of others that underpins effective management irrespective of context.

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