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NEW REALITIES: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

ABSTRACT. The paper addresses one aspect of the 'New Realities' of higher education: the employer-higher education interface. It explores the development of the 'employability' agenda in higher education, examines the nature and implication of organisational change for graduates and assesses what attributes graduates will need in the next decade. Flexible organisations need flexible, and increasingly empowered employees; that in turn calls for transformative and empowering learning. The way that higher education might address this, particularly in the context of lifelong learning, is explored.

INTRODUCTION

To address the relationship between the academy and employment is to risk, at least in some quarters of academia, being seen as an apologist for anti-intellectualism, for the erosion of academic freedom and as proposing that higher education should be about training graduates for jobs rather than improving their minds. However, the 'New Realities' facing higher education are about responsiveness – not 'downgrading' higher education to training. On the contrary, in a rapidly changing world, graduates need to be lifelong *learners*. The primary role of higher education is increasingly to transform students by *enhancing* their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while simultaneously *empowering* them as lifelong critical, reflective learners.

The analysis of the transformational[1] role of higher education is discussed in detail elsewhere (Harvey & Knight 1996), but contingent on a shift of emphasis to empowering the learner are two propositions:

- that higher education will need to be transformed to achieve this purpose;
- transformed (enhanced and empowered) graduates play a key role as transformative agents in society.

The 'New Realities', that encourage a closer look at the relationship between employment and higher education, should not, then, be conceived as a nexus in isolation of a far more fundamental review of higher edu-

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cation. The higher education-employment interface should not be seen as an 'add-on' to academic study. Conversely, the 'employability' of graduates should not be seen as the primary focus of higher education. Rather, employability is a subset of, and fundamentally contingent on, transformative lifelong learning.

EMPLOYABILITY ON THE AGENDA

In many countries, since the 1980s, there has been increasing pressure on higher education to contribute directly to national economic regeneration and growth. Increasingly, national and international assessments of the role and purposes of education indicate a need for higher education to contribute significantly to 'meeting the needs of the economy', not least to ensure future competitiveness (Ball 1990; EC 1991; IRDAC 1990).

This view was, for example, recently endorsed by an Expert Group appointed by the Irish Government: "A highly skilled and motivated work force is essential to remaining globally competitive" (EG 1998). At the heart of the UK's National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Lord Dearing (NCIHE 1997) is the assertion that the primary purpose of higher education is to prepare students for the world of work. Drawing on research (Harvey et al. 1997), the Committee emphasised the effectiveness of work experience. Following Dearing, there has been growing pressure from government and government agencies to ensure better links between higher education and employers (CVCP/DfEE/HEQE 1998a). A range of government-backed initiatives including the University for Industry and the *Graduate Apprenticeship Framework* (DfEE 1997) are all designed to make graduates 'work-ready':

> The Government has endorsed the view of the Dearing Committee of Inquiry 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' July 1997, that enhancing the employability of graduates is a key task for higher education.
>
> (DfEE 1999, p. 40)

Government policy to enhance employability of graduates is part of a wider strategy to extend the skill base in the UK. In early 1998, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment appointed a *Skills Task Force* (STF 1998) to advise on the development of a *National Skills Agenda*. This presumes current skills shortages and gaps in the labour force.

In anticipation of an expanding employability agenda, and in the wake of the assessment of skill shortages in Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW 1999) recently undertook a pilot audit of

all its higher education institutions to discover the nature and extent of the employability-skills development offered by Welsh institutions.

The Final Report of the Graduate Standards Programme (HEQC 1997) undertaken by the Higher Education Quality Council, a body owned by the universities, also encouraged higher education to put in place programmes that develop skills and qualities as well as ensuring a sound understanding of subject matter.

However, many academics are suspicious of closer links to business. While not often articulated in print, there are reservations within the academy that enhanced employability links will infringe academic autonomy, undermine critique and result in 'training' rather than 'education' (Bates 1999, p. 116).

Organisational Change and Graduate Attributes

At an organisational level, employers have been, for some time, proclaiming the need for highly educated and skilled people if their businesses are to be successful in a rapidly evolving, global economy (DTI/CIHE 1990; Brown & Lauder 1992).

Furthermore, most organisations in which graduates are employed have undergone significant change in the last decade and expect internal organisational structure and strategic objectives to continue to change. These changes will be prompted by the continuing information revolution, by a growing awareness of the need to be responsive to customers, clients and other stakeholders, and by the need to adopt an international perspective. The main changes include:

- downsizing, which has been a feature of the last decade and many organisations, large and small alike, believe that they have become 'leaner' and 'fitter';
- delayering, which involves a combination of removing 'unnecessary' layers of middle managers and giving managers a broader portfolio;
- flexible contractual arrangements, including part-time and short-term contracts, outsourcing and home working.

All of this has impacted on the graduate in four ways: a less clear graduate job, the need to be more flexible, the ability to work in project teams and a lack of a clear career progression. As we approach the 21st Century, there is a lack of clarity in some countries as to what constitutes a 'graduate job'. The Association of Graduate Recruiters in the UK now defines a graduate job as any job that a graduate does. This is not a fatuous response to a changing situation but one that reflects the diversity of graduate employment.

It is also indicative of a growing tendency for graduates 'to grow jobs' within the organisation structures, beyond fairly narrowly designated sets of tasks, to entirely new roles that respond to, or anticipate, the constant changes in the world of work.

In this context, it is thus irrelevant to ask whether there is an over-supply of graduates. What is important is the general upskilling of the work force in Europe and, with it, the broadening of opportunity. This requires that graduates are better informed about opportunities but also are made aware of the limitations and changing nature of graduate careers. Christian Fisher (1998), for example, suggested that Danish graduates are not as aware as they ought to be of the demands of the world of work. Students, in general, are not really aware of the need for transferable skills, and tend to work for money without considering skills development.

Although downsizing and delayering result in fewer jobs overall, especially in large organisations, it is less clear that they result in fewer potential graduate jobs. Traditional 'fast-track' graduate recruitment may be declining but the shifting nature of work, with an evident shift towards more ownership of the work process, opens up considerable potential for graduates, provided they step outside traditional preconceptions of a graduate career. There is, for example, growing demand for graduates from smaller companies. Changing structures, associated with downsizing and delayering, increasingly emphasise empowerment, which in turn is seen to benefit from, or even require, a more educated work force.

More and more graduates, for their first job, are likely to be in 'non-traditional' areas of work that may not even be 'graduate level'. Graduate expectations of their prospects need to be realistic but positive. Much of their initial work may provide only a low-level challenge. In which case graduates need to 'grow the job' and there is encouraging evidence that many do so.

> You could do it without a degree but whether you would develop it into something more I don't know. My counterparts in other factories don't have degrees. I don't think it affects the job that they do. It probably affects how they develop that job, whether they go looking to add responsibility to what they have already got.
>
> (recent graduate, buyer, medium-sized health product manufacturer)[2]

All of this means that the graduate job is unlikely to involve an extensive period of integration and in-house training. On the contrary, more and more graduates have to 'hit the deck running'.

GRADUATE SKILLS

A degree may once have been a passport into graduate employment: it was indicative of a level of knowledge and intellectual ability. However, as a result of organisational changes and the expansion in the numbers of graduates, this is no longer the case. Although graduate jobs are expanding, so is the supply of graduates. In addition, many employers are also looking for various types of experience. Hence a degree is no guarantee of a job, let alone a career, and should only be seen as reaching 'first-base' in the recruitment process:

> . . . the fact that they have that degree basically confirms they are people who think in a certain way and have certain abilities, so the next stage is a number of key competencies.
>
> (personnel manager, multi-national food manufacturer)

Increasingly, 'graduate attributes' are more important in the recruitment process than the graduates' degree subject. United Kingdom employers are at the forefront of 'any discipline' recruitment. That is, the majority of vacancies filled by graduates do not require someone from a specific discipline. On the contrary, employers recruiting in the UK often positively seek out graduates from disciplines other than that which would appear to be relevant. For example, many large accountancy and management-consultant firms seek history, classics, social science or physics graduates rather than accountants. Software firms are not looking for computing specialists they need IT-literate people who can communicate and work in teams.

Subject-specific knowledge is not the primary determinant of suitability for employment in most graduate recruitment, the main exceptions being medicine and engineering. Graduate recruiters want a raft of other skills in addition to a first degree and these override the degree specialism in many areas (CBI 1994, 1995; AGR 1995; CIHE 1996). Similarly, Fisher (1998), commenting on Denmark, noted that employers are also becoming less concerned about the field of study. What they want are bright graduates and they tend to use grades, rather than subject area, as a first filter. More and more employers are taking 'exotics' – those graduates with degree subjects not apparently linked to the core business.

> We have done some research and, in the long-term, non-lawyers are more successful than lawyers. We take about a third non-law and two-thirds law because, for a whole variety of reasons, we have to train non-lawyers for a year more, so it costs us significantly more. We don't care where they come from or what their discipline is as long as they are the best.
>
> (head of personnel, large law firm)

The skills needed: Employers and their representatives consistently say that, to succeed at work, most people in future must develop a range of

personal and intellectual attributes beyond those traditionally made explicit in programmes of study in higher education institutions.

> We do look for communication skills. We look for someone who is a team player. We look for someone who has got the ability to put forward ideas persuasively. We like to recruit people who have good social skills, they are able to relate to other people well. Linked in with that is personality and also the ability to cope with stress.
>
> (partner, large law firm)

At root, employers want *interactive* and *personal* attributes.[3] The core interactive attributes are communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills. These are necessary to communicate, formally and informally, with a wide range of people both internal and external to the organisation; to relate to, and feel comfortable with, people at all levels in the organisation as well as a range of external stakeholders, to be able to make and maintain relationships as circumstances change; work effectively in teams, often more than one team at once, and to be able to re-adjust roles from one project situation to another in an ever-shifting work situation.

Personal attributes are attitudes and abilities including intellect, knowledge (in some cases) willingness and ability to learn and continue learning, ability to find things out, willingness to take risks and show initiative, flexibility and adaptability to respond, pre-empt and ultimately lead change and 'self-skills' such as self-motivation, self-confidence, self-management and self-promotion. These personal attributes are important to allow graduates to fit into the work culture, do the job, develop ideas, take initiative and responsibility and ultimately help organisations deal with change (Harvey et al. 1997).

On one level the set of specified skills has not changed greatly for a quarter of a century: communication skills, numeracy, self-confidence and self-discipline, problem-solving, analysis and interpersonal skills featured alongside knowledge and intelligence in organisational graduate specifications in the 1970s (Kelsall et al. 1972).

Technological and organisational changes over 25 years have added ICT skills, teamworking, flexibility, adaptability. Furthermore, 'problem solving' has become 'creative problem-solving' and risk taking has become a key attribute. On the other hand, there is much less emphasis on knowledge and far more on willingness to continue learning.

LEARNING

The employer-higher education interface is thus a complex nexus that needs to address organisational structures and missions on the one hand

and graduate attributes on the other. However, it is further complicated by a third dimension: the purpose of learning.

Instrumentalism: Currently, higher education is heavily characterised by *instrumental* learning, which takes two forms that are pulling in different, and increasingly opposite, directions. On the one hand is the instrumentalism of the *discipline apprenticeship*, which, for many academics, is what drives the higher education experience for them as scholars, teachers and researchers. It is an immersion in a subject discipline, an absorption of the morays and nuances of an academic world (Becher 1989; Evans 1999). Engaging directly with the world of work is seen, at best, as tangential to the principal concern of education and, at worst, as anathema to it.

On the other hand is the instrumentalism associated with *employability*, which is evidenced in three ways:

- the attempt to predict and plan for skills gaps (discussed above);
- the preoccupation of some academics to ensure graduates obtain good jobs in appropriate industries or professions;
- the instrumental learning of the mass higher education student.

A clear example of business orientation is provided by Kingston University's fashion programme:

> Kingston University works in very close collaboration with the fashion industry . . . our links with industry are critical to our success . . . we are here to serve industry – for us, it's all about getting graduates into really good jobs – and they do go on to become important figures in the fashion world.
>
> (*Bridge* 1999, p. 1)

Students, in the mass higher education system, are tending to exhibit more overtly instrumental learning. Often, such learning is extremely narrow and intended primarily to secure a qualification or a job rather than reflect an holistic learning experience. This instrumentalism impacts on students' attendance, range of reading, engagement with the course and involvement in group projects. Recent feedback comments from students from all parts of the University of Central England show a growing tendency towards career motivated instrumentalism (Blackwell et al. 1999), for example:

> I do feel that I am not prepared to find a job and be work-ready.
>
> (BA Art and Design)

> Lectures on different subjects need to be based on what actually take place in the work environment.
>
> (BSc Building Surveying)

> Potential career prospects is low due to lack of work experience . . .
>
> (BA English Language and Literature)

Lifelong learning: When the concept of lifelong learning emerged in the 1970s it was principally seen in terms of 'second-chance' education for adults who had not benefited from educational opportunities available during childhood and youth. The 1980s and 1990s have seen a broadening of the concept of lifelong learning to a genuine lifelong endeavour. In January 1996, OECD Ministers of Education adopted a resolution on lifelong learning that:

> . . . embraced 'individual and social development of all kinds and in all settings – formally in schools, vocational, tertiary and adult education institutions and non-formally, at home, at work and in the community. The system-wide approach focuses on standards of knowledge and skills needed by all, regardless of age.
>
> (Alexander 1997, p. 167)

Not only is the recent approach to lifelong learning much more than second chance education, it also goes beyond a single focus on an educated work force for economic competitiveness. It sees a well-educated and trained population as necessary for future economic prosperity, promotion of innovation, productivity and economic growth, cultivation of community life, social and political cohesion and the achievement of genuinely democratic societies with full participation.

Despite more clarity about the underlying philosophy of lifelong learning, there is still a degree of ambiguity about what lifelong learning involves for higher education in practice. In many institutions, lifelong learning is linked to all those areas of work other than undergraduate and postgraduate research degrees. In the main, in the higher education sphere, these tend to be linked to continuing professional or vocational education (CVE). CVE develops employer-related knowledge, skills and understanding via short and long training programmes (some of which have accreditation options). CVE is a significant means by which higher education institutions "contribute to the wider needs of the economy" (Thomas et al., p. 8).

This focus tends to tie lifelong learning, in practice, to the employability agenda. The wider, democratic, philosophy of lifelong learning does not appear at the forefront of development. Indeed, these approaches to lifelong learning also appear to be rather remote from the philosophy of integrated learning. They are not closely linked to the 'mainstream' education of the university (undergraduate degrees and postgraduate research) nor is there any suggestion that the focus of the university should fundamentally change. In effect, there are two universities – the 'proper one' and the lifelong learning university.

The 'New Reality' is to merge these institutions. The university of the future needs to be an integrated lifelong learning university (or omni-

versity) not a fortress of academic impregnability. The 'omniversity' is a loosely coupled network of academic, community and employment organisations on a regional basis (Harvey 1988).[4]

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

So what should higher education institutions do to ensure they produce transformative lifelong learning? There are various suggestions in the literature about explicitly addressing employability skills in higher education (Roberts & Maycock 1995; Anderson & Gubbay 1997; Atlay 1998) including the provision of skills modules, the revision of curricula to identify skills elements, the assessment of non-cognitive skills, the incorporation of work experience and the use of 'live projects', in which students work closely with employers to address a 'real-life' concern.

Alongside these reviews and suggestions, there is a sterile debate about whether 'employability' skills should be embedded in the curriculum or taught in separate units. The core of the debate is that embedded approaches to skill acquisition give employability skills the same status as knowledge and oblige all lecturers to address them. However, 'bolt-on' options ensure that the skills are covered and have competent teachers to teach them (CVCP/DfEE/HEQE 1998b, p. 17; Tait & Godfrey 1999).

The issue, though, is not about the *delivery* of skills training but about integral *learning* within a wider responsive context. Furthermore, it is not about delivering 'employability skills' in some generic sense, rather it is about developing critical lifelong learners – and employability is subsumed as a subset within that.

So the focus needs to be on empowering students to become critical learners. However, there is no easy recipe for this.

Empowering learners: 'Empowering learners' is a phrase that is growing in currency in academic debates about the future of higher education. However, empowering learners means many different things and it is debatable how serious academia is about giving students control over the educational process and their post-educational lives.

There are several processes for learner empowerment, including:

- choice within the curriculum;
- feedback from learners designed to monitor service provision and the learning experience;
- representation of learners on decision-making bodies;
- the development of a critical, transformative approach to learning.

Choice: A wider choice of subject modules is far less empowering for students than it appears. The selection of a curriculum usually means, in practice, choosing which *teaching* programmes to attend and thus which assessment to undertake. While superficially liberating this does not necessarily empower the student. An unstructured collection of small units, which the student selects from a bewildering array of available options, often results in lack of coherence and progression in a programme of study.

Monitoring: Student evaluations of service provision, including the teaching and learning experience, are increasingly evident in higher education institutions. Indeed, many national systems of external quality monitoring require that such systems are in place. Monitoring includes student evaluation of teaching performance via simple questionnaires that ask such things as whether the teacher presents well, is enthusiastic, turns up on time, makes useful comments on assessed work, and so on. This stylised forms of student monitoring of teacher performance is a limited form of empowerment because students are rarely involved in designing the questions, nor is it is an effective means for suggesting how improvements can be made to facilitating learning. Furthermore, learners are rarely ever informed of outcomes.

Broader evaluations of the learning experience, through institution-wide student satisfaction surveys offer a means of ensuring a student voice and a continuous process of monitoring and improving provision in respect of all aspects of the learning experience. However, this is only an effective form of empowerment if learners are involved in the identification of the areas of concern and if there is a clear process of accountability and action that follows the analysis of student views. Such an action cycle requires the involvement of senior management and a procedure for ensuring that appropriate action takes place (Harvey et al. 1997). However, even in such ideal circumstances, this is a limited form of learner empowerment as its focus is on the continuous incremental improvement of the learning context rather than the direct empowerment of the learner.

Representation: Student representation on higher education committees and decision-making bodies provides another potential form of empowerment. In practice, though, students are not only in a tiny minority but are not able to engage effectively because of the infrequency of the meetings, the rapid turnover of students and the lack of opportunity to prepare themselves for the style and content of meetings.

Even when students are listened to, it is often the case that the points they are making are not heard because they lie outside the frame of

reference or taken-for-granteds of the meeting. There is a danger that representation apparently empowers but, in practice, disempowers. In reality, learners need to have equal representation on decision-making bodies if the learner perspective is to be heard.

Critical: While each of the above approaches offers some control over the education process it is debatable how far they go to empowering learners in their post-education careers. The fourth approach attempts to do both. Students, it argues are empowered by developing their critical, reflective and transformative abilities (Harvey & Knight 1996). This requires an approach to teaching and learning that goes beyond requiring students to learn a body of knowledge and be able to apply it analytically. Anne Brockband and Ian McGill (1998, p. 214) argue that facilitation of learning rather than teaching is necessary to "encourage critically reflective learning".

Developing a critical approach to learning is about challenging preconceptions, both those of the learner and the teacher. It is about being able to develop opinions and be able to justify them, to be able to think about knowledge as a *process* not some 'thing' they tentatively approach and selectively appropriate. A critical approach ultimately requires students to self assess, to be able to decide what is good-quality work and to be confident when they have achieved it.

Students need to be guided in critical learning and one of the best ways is to make the learning process transparent rather than opaque: to make it so that, for students, it is their learning rather than an initiation into the academic's mysteries. One important element of this is the way that assessment of knowledge and abilities is undertaken. To empower learners it is important to:

- clearly and explicitly specify the range of skills and abilities, as well as knowledge, that should be achieved from a programme of study;
- explicitly assesses, both formatively and summatively, the full range of abilities (not just knowledge and, implicitly, the higher-level intellectual skills of synthesis, analysis and critique);
- provide clear assessment criteria for each piece of assessed work and give clear feedback against these criteria.

In short, empowering learners requires an approach that treats students as *intellectual performers* rather than as compliant audience. It transforms teaching and learning into an active process of coming to understand. It enables students to go beyond the narrow confines of the 'safe' knowledge base of their academic discipline to applying themselves to whatever they encounter in the post-education world.

Increasingly, in a world of change, in which flexibility is a watchword, learners need to be able to help the organisations, in which they work after graduation, to transform in the face of this rapid and continuous change. Graduates will not be able to do that if they are not able to work in teams, communicate well, analyse and synthesise. More importantly the future graduate needs to be self-transformative, which requires reflective and critical abilities.

CONCLUSION

The 'New Realities' that ask searching questions about the relationship between higher education and employment are, incidentally, asking about the purpose and structure of higher education. In particular, emphasising the need for the development of critical, reflective, empowered learners raises fundamental questions about traditional forms of teaching in higher education and the priorities of higher educational institutions and governments. In so doing it asks some difficult questions about 'real' empowerment of learners. This means that the collegium has to ask itself fundamental questions about its role. It means confronting the traditionalist view:

> Does the university have to meet the expectations of students ... or is the idea that the students grow to fit the expectations the university has of them? (Evans 1999, p. 10)

Despite appearances to the contrary, the real challenge of the 'New Realities' is not how to accommodate 'employability' but how to shift the traditional balance of power from the education provider to those participating in the learning experience.

NOTES

[1] Furthermore, the term transformation is becoming widely used in relation to higher education. As usage widens, so too does meaning. Transformation is sometimes used to simply mean 'change', in some cases 'reform' of a system would be a better term. In some usages, such as Scott (1995, p. 157) transformation mean restructuring, and in that sense begins to get closer to the use implied here, that of 'dialectically deconstructed transformation'. Dialectically deconstructed transformation is not just attitudinal change or simply structural rearrangement. Methodically, it involves dissolving traditional values and organisational forms and rebuilding 'inclusive' organisational structures. (Dialectical deconstruction and reconstruction should not be confused with postmodernist deconstruction).

[2] The quotations from employers contained in this article are from the in-depth interviews undertaken from the *Graduates' Work* research (Harvey et al. 1997).

[3] Although employers give clear messages about what they want, there are differences in emphasis both within and between employing organisations. Furthermore, the recruitment process is not always suited to recruiting the kinds of graduates that employers say that they want as it is often overlaid with prejudgement, bureaucratic procedures and personal preference. The situation is further complicated by the need for graduates to be able to 'fit in' to the organisation, to be able to adapt to changing contexts on the one hand but also, when appropriate, to help transform the organisation, that is be able to move up and down the 'enhancement continuum' (see Harvey et al. 1996, for a fuller discussion of the nature of employer needs).

[4] Space constraints preclude discussion of the nature of the regional omniversity.

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