

RESEARCH

From Employment to Employability: Uzbekistan and the Higher Education Skills Agenda

Richard Paterson

University of Westminster, GB
r.paterson@westminster.ac.uk

This article outlines the origins of employability as a concept related to higher education, and its impact on Uzbek higher education policy. By arguing that the recognition of employability arose out of changes in global employment demands, and is aligned to global theories of human capital, it can be asserted that the top-down Uzbek government driven changes in higher education policy have reinforced the employability agenda. Although it is debatable whether a top-down enforced employability agenda is beneficial in terms of pedagogy, many universities are incorporating pedagogy to develop employability in their programmes. It is argued that ideas of pedagogy for employability can be best exploited if linked to the ideas of pre-professional and graduate identity, and even more so if both lecturers and students understand how learning environments can be used to best effect. Also highlighted is the fact that debates surrounding employability have taken place over recent years in primarily Anglo-Saxon contexts, and that there is a need for research in a more diverse range of higher education institutions, particularly in Central Asia.

Keywords: employability; pedagogy for employability; employability models; transnational education; Uzbekistan higher education; human capital

Introduction

The pressure on higher education institutions (HEIs) in all parts of the world to produce graduates ready to enter national or international labour markets with the requisite transferable skills to perform graduate level jobs has never been greater. Just as the global economic downturn of 2008 had a pronounced effect on the way both employers and potential employees view the role of the higher education sector, so different approaches to higher education funding and strategy have been implemented across the globe. Notwithstanding changes and innovations in the development of courses that are geared towards providing the labour markets with suitable qualified graduates, HEIs, including those in Uzbekistan, have found themselves under increasing criticism from governments, policymakers and employers regarding the work-readiness of graduates.

In order to understand the reasons for the current situation in Uzbekistan, it is necessary to first take a few steps backwards. This article takes an historic look at concepts relating to employability in higher education, and then discusses how these largely Anglo-centric understandings have shaped current Uzbek higher education policy. The first part of this article describes how the employability agenda has come to dominate global higher education policy, while the second part discusses how policymakers in Uzbek higher education have embraced the employability agenda, with varying degrees of success.

1. A Brief History of Employability

The notion of graduate employability is situated within the idea of a knowledge economy, where economic growth is dependent on the quantity, quality and accessibility of knowledge and information rather than the means of production. According to Powell and Snellman (2004), production and services in the knowledge economy derive from knowledge intensive activities that accelerate technological and scientific advances, which themselves may become rapidly obsolete. This implies that the driving force behind a sustainable knowledge economy is intellectual capability rather than physical or natural resources. The World Bank (2013) identifies four pillars of a knowledge economy: education and training, information infrastructure, economic incentive and institutional regime, and innovation systems. The role of higher education in supporting the knowledge economy is key, particularly with respect to the first and last of these pillars; countries need a highly educated and skilled population to both use and disseminate knowledge, and research centres such as universities are vital in the creation of new knowledge and the adaptation of existing knowledge to suit both local, national and international demands. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) noted that higher education and knowledge are at the same time local, national and international, with higher education policy guided by national governments and their economic, social and cultural ideals. As there are differences in these ideals, there are also differences in how education policy is geared towards fulfilling national economic objectives.

There are, however, counter arguments to the employability agenda. Cranmer (2006) put forward the case that many highly specific skills can only be developed in genuine work situations. It is also unclear how or whether the explicit teaching of employability skills improves performance in the workplace. Allais (2012) has criticised education policy that promotes economic imperialism, especially where responsibility for employment and employability is shifted primarily to individuals. The promotion of the employability agenda could be seen as eroding more traditional roles of higher education, including providing opportunities for individual betterment and the promotion of cultural understanding, liberal views, diversity and open-mindedness.

The Concept of Employability

Employability as a concept linked to higher education outcomes first came to prominence, in the UK, with the publication of the Robbins report in 1963. The main outcome of the report was that HEIs were advised to pay attention to the teaching of the skills needed in the general division of labour (Robbins, 1963). At the time of the Robbins report there were 31 universities in the UK, although in the decade following publication a further 15 universities were established, eight of which were former Colleges of Advanced Technology. This is notable because these new university status institutions provided more vocationally focused courses than the traditional research based universities, and subsequently resulted in a rapid increase in participation in higher education in the UK. In the early 1960s around 6% of school leavers attended HEIs, rising to 14% by 1970, steadily rising to 20% in the late 1980s, before a more rapid increase to 33% by 2001 (Blanden and Machin, 2004). Government policy decisions

encouraged HEIs to increase their income by recruiting larger numbers of students, and students were willing to invest in higher education as changes in the economy shifted demand from manufacturing towards more service industry based employment.

These changes in employment patterns at the end of the 20th century significantly contributed to the employability debate. Previously, employment and career paths of individuals were largely built on long-term contracts, where hard work and loyalty would be rewarded with career progress on a well established hierarchical ladder. This progression was based on the old psychological contract where 'individual beliefs [are] shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization' (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). In these terms, employment was associated with notions of paternalism and mutual trust (Baruch, 2001). However, as a result of economic pressures such as increased competition from globalisation, a new psychological contract has emerged where employment is dependent on whether an organisation requires 'specific, short-term, and monetizable obligations entailing limited involvement of the parties' (Morrison and Robinson, 1997, p. 229). Critics see this as the first steps in higher education being colonised by economic policy (Ball, 2007), and the marketisation of education to fulfil the needs of the global economy.

In order to engage with the new psychological contract, the 'Dearing Report' (NCIHE, 1997) was among the first to formally identify the skills that should be taught on undergraduate degree courses, as well as acknowledging the importance of work experience for skills application. The more recent surge in interest in employability can also be attributed to a shift in UK government policy from the year 2000, when all UK HEIs were required to measure employability by accounting for the destination of recent graduates for national performance indicator purposes. With the subsequent availability of these data for public and media scrutiny, and the publication of university league tables based on the employability of graduates, prospective university students became more likely to make decisions of what and where to study based on an institution's employability record. The measuring of employability by graduate work destination in this way has been criticised by many as not being a true indicator of graduates' ability to perform in graduate level jobs (Harvey, 2001; Tymon, 2013). Despite this, graduate destination surveys and the publication of results in the form of league tables is still the favoured way of measuring employability.

The recognition of employability as a necessary outcome of higher education has been described as an acceptance of human capital theories (Becker, 1975), where economic performance is driven by innovation in a knowledge economy. Governments therefore try to create conditions where human capital is not only valued, but encouraged to develop (Yorke, 2006), and it is government driven changes in higher education policy that reinforce the employability agenda (Jackson, 1999; Knight and Yorke, 2002). Critics of the employability agenda (Peters and Roberts, 2010; Morley, 2001; Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Neave and Feingold, 2013) are concerned that HEIs are becoming tools of government economic policy. Nóvoa (2002, p. 14) became concerned that the concept of employability had been 'reinvented as a way to link employment and education, or to see unemployment as a problem of uneducated people'. A further criticism of the employability agenda was that it legitimised a shift of responsibility to the individual.

The convergence of HEIs, government and businesses in the desire for graduates who are fit for purpose in the labour market has two corollaries. Firstly, it will result in graduates being mere technicians rather than intellectuals (Morley, 2001), and secondly, HEIs themselves risk becoming factories that produce willing participants in the global workforce. Boden and Nedeva (2010) see this level of state intervention as incompatible with a higher education system that wishes to promote social justice and increased equality of opportunity.

Definitions of Employability

Employability is not an easy concept to define, and despite increased attention over the past 20 years there are no universally accepted definitions beyond those that are found in business dictionaries or on university web pages, e.g. the skills and abilities that allow you to be employed (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Harvey, 2001; Yorke, 2006). This lack of consensus has resulted in not only different definitions, but also different approaches to the concept. Philpott (1999) went as far as to describe employability as nothing more than a buzzword that was frequently used but rarely understood. That a single agreed upon definition does not exist is hardly surprising given the number of stakeholders involved; employers from private and public sectors, prospective employees, educators and policymakers. For example, the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) highlighted a quite limited set of 'key skills' related to employability; these being communication, numeracy, use of information technology and learning how to learn. Arguments then arose that the limited selection of key skills, essentially a narrow definition, may have restricted subsequent discussions of employability related concepts (Yorke, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2002).

Post Dearing, a comprehensive report from the then named Department for Education and Employment in 1998 (DfEE) was important in that it recognised that employability was a collective responsibility. This report (Hillage and Pollard, 1998) produced broad definitions that entailed getting a job: ensuring that key skills and an understanding about the world of work are embedded in the education system; keeping a job: maintaining employment and making transitions between roles; and getting a better job: being independent in the labour market by managing employment transitions between and within organisations. The report recognised important differences; notably that government policy was not always in accordance with the requirements of individuals. An important distinction that Hillage and Pollard (1998) highlighted was that government policy was directed more towards the individual supply side rather than the employers' demand side. For example, government policy was more concerned with the accreditation of knowledge and vocational skills than the development of soft skills or personal attitudes. It also paid more attention to those individuals joining the labour market from education rather than those already in the labour market; possessing the relevant knowledge and skills was not sufficient for individuals to successfully negotiate their way in an increasingly more complex and competitive labour market. The key development from this was that to fully exploit their potential, prospective employees needed to consider how to best demonstrate, market, and sell their employability. In essence, there was a shift in responsibility from the demand to the supply side.

As previously stated, narrow definitions of employability limited the discussion around employability. Critics argued that a narrow definition, focusing on skills and attributes, would only play into the hands of government policies that addressed perceived problems primarily on the supply side. In a counter measure to this, a broader framework of employability was suggested (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). This included individual factors (including competencies, skills and qualifications); personal circumstances (including responsibilities, beliefs around work culture and access to resources); and demand factors (including local and regional labour markets, macroeconomic stability and employment policies). A broader definition such as the comprehensive ones detailed by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) and Thijssen et al. (2008), recognised the varying perspectives of stakeholders, with particular importance on the personal factors of individuals. As an example, a perfectly capable job seeker with all the necessary transferable skills to perform a job may be unable to take up a position due to personal or external factors. These could include being unable to find affordable childcare, or living in an area without good public transport. Problems such as these negatively affect the prospective employee's chances of taking up a job that they are otherwise perfectly capable

of doing; they could be less likely to find a job commensurate with their skills as a combination of individual personal circumstances and societal issues beyond their control. In most cases there are enabling support factors that need to be in place before an individual can commit to a contract of work.

A shift away from the supply-side versus demand-side debate raises pertinent issues regarding the difference between labour market inclusion and societal exclusion. A broad approach to employability is more likely to factor in all the contributing elements to an individual finding a job, without placing all the emphasis on the requisite skills that may be seen as the bare minimum when considering applicants. The role of context in definitions of employability entails that there cannot be any single static definition; the competitive nature of individuals and companies within the job market, whether or local, national or international, means that employability is 'a condition that can never be fulfilled' (Cremin, 2010, p. 131). Levels of employment, and specific demands within the labour market, are subject to fluctuations, with employers or job-seekers having increased bargaining power depending on capital demand. In their comprehensive systematic review of the understandings of employability related concepts, Williams et al. (2016) recommend the combining of various elements to better understand employability; these are elements related to capital, signalling, identity, career management and labour market demand.

It is clear that the many definitions of employability offered by researchers and stakeholders converge in that all suggest that entrants to the job market should have some key skills, knowledge and personal attributes. They should also have an understanding of how to position themselves in the job market and full awareness of the extent of their skills and attributes so as to be able to promote themselves to prospective employers. In addition, graduates entering the job market must be able to both obtain employment and progress in the chosen vocation. The conditions that need to be satisfied in order to be employed seem to be less a definition and more a general description of a construct with the potential for more bolt-on terms to be added, as and when required.

Recently in the literature, definitions of employability skills have reflected its multi-faceted nature. Smith et al. (2014, p. 6) described it as a construct which 'grows by accretion with the addition of new sub-constructs'. With no single body having control over the construct, it is subject to varying interpretations from stakeholders, namely, government policymakers, employers, educators and students. Sin and Neave (2016, p. 1) affirm that 'as a concept, employability commands little consensus. Rather it is interpreted in the light of each interest group's concerns [...] as a floating signifier'. It could be argued that the search for an all-encompassing definition is almost certainly over, although Yorke (2006), and Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) remain the ones most referred to in UK policy documentation.

Employability and Evidenced Based Pedagogy

In recent years there has been considerable modelling of graduate employability, mainly at the behest of policymakers hoping to bridge the perceived gap between the abilities of new graduates and the skills that employers want graduates to have. The development of employability models has been a direct result of increased pressure, since the late 1980s, for HEIs to configure programmes that contribute to economic growth. The implementation of an employability focused agenda as part of government higher education policy, and not exclusively in developed countries, is arguably the most significant cultural shift in recent higher education development.

In the UK, in 2009, the CBI published their Future Fit study, which had recommendations for every HEI to undertake reflection and consultation to consider their current activities. The report advised 'that universities and businesses need to maintain and increase their activity in

developing employability skills in all students' (CBI and UUK, 2009, p. 6). With the large scale politicisation of the employability agenda, especially in the UK sector, exacerbated by the economic downturn in 2008, policy has focused on demand led initiatives that address the needs of employers. Despite initiatives to embed employability skills in national education curricula and HE courses, there is, however, an argument that employability skills development should be concentrated more on areas where it has been shown to have greater impact; among low achievers and disadvantaged groups (Belt et al., 2010). An important caveat to this is the lack of evidenced based information that demonstrates the long term success of any employability skills initiatives. While studies may show trends in employment, these are not indicative of any impact on employability (Bivand et al., 2010). This is especially relevant to research on graduates, where the focus has been primarily on the number of graduates securing employment, rather than how they are actually performing in jobs. Again, there is a lack of evidence that links the attainment of employability skills with career progression (Belt et al., 2010).

The implementation of the Bologna process in 1999, aimed at assuring quality and standards of higher education in signature countries, was seen as pivotal as it formalised HE qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. This included assurances of the specific knowledge and skills required for a particular degree, and also gave supra-national significance to the role of higher education in supporting regional economic needs (Tomusk, 2004). Although it has been argued that HEIs always previously adhered to their social and economic responsibilities, neoliberal policies in the era of globalisation have relabelled such responsibilities as employability (Sin and Neave, 2016). More widespread access to higher education, and increased competition and a drive for efficiency in the private sector, meant that graduates found the jobs market to be more challenging than in previous generations (Clarke, 2008). Employability and the role of HEIs has never been mutually exclusive, but the employability agenda was encouraged as it served the dual purpose of meeting the demands of the economy in terms of producing job-ready graduates, and strengthening the role of HEIs in a new globalised context.

Since the economic downturn of 2008 increasing pressure has been placed on HEIs to meet the demands of employers in terms of the type of graduates who can operate successfully in the labour market. Although the call for change has largely been top-down, researchers have also noted the importance of the link between higher education and economic development. Even before the 2008 economic downturn, Yorke and Knight (2007) were calling to attention concerns around the contribution that HEIs could make to national economic growth. Employability was becoming a matter of international relevance, as policymakers endeavoured to effect change in the economies of their countries by developing human capital through higher education learning outcomes. Such ideas inevitably placed pressure on higher education stakeholders, even though the links between higher education, employability and human capital theory are not conclusive (Marginson, 2015). Students, in particular, bore the brunt of further marketisation of higher education, especially in the UK, with a lifting of the cap on fees that had been introduced on recommendation of The Dearing Report (1997) in 1998. UK universities, from September 2012, could charge up to £9,000 per year in tuition fees. With this increase in fees it is understandable that students should want to see a significant return on their investment (CBI/NUS, 2011), especially in terms of employment prospects that all but guarantee a salary to pay off the likely substantial debts accrued in the years of full time higher education.

In an unstable economic climate it has also been noted that HEIs are obliged to demonstrate to students that they offer not only good value for money, but also a distinctiveness that sets them apart from their immediate competitors. These incentives play a major part in the marketing of HEIs, all of whom are competing for the fee-paying students. The idea of

a university having a unique selling point not only vindicates the marketisation of HEIs, but also raises the question of whether distinctiveness is a realistic goal, given that the virtually all UK universities have the same goal of developing employable graduates (Paterson, 2016). Browne (2010) put forward recommendations that enticed HEIs to convince prospective students of the value of a degree; 'There will be more investment available for the HEIs that are able to convince students that it is worthwhile' (Browne, 2010, p. 8). The emphasis was, therefore, on HEIs to deliver more as students were paying more. These new challenges have reignited the argument about the exact purpose of a university education; whether the primary object should be to foster academic inquiry and develop well rounded liberal thinking individuals, or develop work-ready and willing participants in the global knowledge economy.

Critics of the employability agenda have outlined the negative implications for universities' pedagogical practices (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Universities are the perfect breeding grounds for both the creation of new knowledge that underpins economic growth, and the formation of compliant workers and consumers that drive the economy. With learning outcomes being driven by the employability agenda, the power to decide on what or how to teach is less in the hands of the academics and more in the hands of the policymakers and employers. Employability is now largely considered to be a performativity function of universities, but those responsible for its delivery have, in theory at least, lost control of the content. In addition, students who see a degree as means to an end may not fully engage with university life beyond completing the necessary assessments. This could, ironically, be detrimental to the employability agenda as it is widely held that improving personal levels of employability is not a product, but a process of learning (Harvey, 2005).

As a result of universities committing to the employability agenda, a wide range of strategies and curriculum enhancements have appeared, all aimed at developing the employability skills of graduates (Cranmer, 2006). These include the introduction of new courses, making changes to existing courses, or adding practical work based experience. A key argument in the debate is whether the teaching of employability skills should be embedded in the curriculum, or rather added as bolt-on or optional extras. The bolt-on approach to enhancing student employability, where the teaching of employability related skills may be added to a course as something extra, is also subject to dispute.

Cranmer (2006), as previously discussed, argued that employability skills teaching in universities had a limited effect on graduate employment outcomes, and that HEIs would be better advised spending resources on employment-based work experience or greater employer involvement in courses. Other researchers, notably Rae (2007); and Speight et al. (2013), took a less critical view of employability pedagogy, maintaining that both academic learning and employability skills can be taught successfully. In a specific study of the subject of criminology, Jameson et al. (2012) stress that a balance can be struck between professional and theoretical or academic learning. Furthermore, by undertaking a more creative use of practitioner discourses, students can be empowered, especially in their career management skills. A warning is also delivered in that ignoring the potential contribution from the demand side could marginalise any academic input.

There is, however, no one-size-fits-all approach that develops employability skills, or much indication about how programmes can be formatted to enhance employability focused learning outcomes (Sin and Neave, 2016). Those sceptical to the inclusion of employability as a learning outcome (Cranmer, 2006) advocate real-world work experience and increased employer involvement in course design, while proponents (Barrie, 2007; Rae, 2007; Schaeper, 2009) argue that isolating employability from the curriculum is counterproductive, and a more integrated approach is required. On the contrary, Speight et al. (2013) argue, according to stakeholders, that embedding employability in the curriculum negatively affects

disciplinary learning. Despite these seemingly polar opinions, there does seem to be consensus in much of the research that higher education does have a role to play in addressing graduate employment and underemployment.

There are many ways that HEIs can contribute to the development of students' employability, both directly and indirectly. Direct methods are those that the institutions themselves have more leverage over, such as learning and teaching practice, including methods of assessment. Indirect methods focus more on providing students with opportunities to develop their employability in contexts such as work-related learning experience through placement and internships. HEIs can also create environments where employability and its purpose are communicated explicitly to students, although this may require some changes to institutional cultures. Pegg et al. (2012) make a distinction between employment as a graduate outcome in higher education and pedagogy for employability. The former is something that is measurable in the shape of university published data on graduate destinations, while the latter 'relates to the teaching and learning of a wide range of knowledge, skills and attributes to support continued learning and career developments' (Pegg et al., 2012, p. 7). The authors themselves recognise that this is a broad definition, and that graduates are involved in a number of different employment environments that contribute to their development. The employability gains derived from higher education are not, however, evenly distributed, and a variety of other factors contribute to graduate employability. Pegg et al. (2012) cite a number of examples, specifically in the UK context, where initial graduate employment is influenced by factors such as the reputation of the university, gender, ethnicity, and the socio-economic background of the graduates or the graduates' parents. With disparities in these areas it is not feasible to link specific aspects of pedagogical innovation with definite employment outcomes. It is also pointed out that treating students without mitigation of these factors might, in fact, further disadvantage those who need more assistance in successfully negotiating the labour market. What can be done, however, is to develop a pedagogy that gives the full range of graduates' potential to enhance their employment prospects.

Pegg et al. (2012) in their analysis of UK higher education curricula and employability discuss areas related to learning and teaching practice, assessment, and work-based and work-related learning. Yorke and Knight (2006) separated their analysis into the following areas; employability in the core curriculum, work-based or work-related learning interspersed within the curriculum, employability-related modules within the curriculum, and work-based or work-related learning in parallel with the curriculum.

What is clear is that HEIs post Dearing, and specifically since the introduction of QAA guidelines in 2001 and updated in 2009, have incorporated personal development planning (PDP) in a number of guises to 'populate the employability hinterland' (Pond and Harrington, 2011, p. 5). The use of PDP as a tool for keeping track of progress, often in the form of a student collated portfolio of evidence, has had mixed success. Pond and Harrington (2011) in their case study of ten UK HEIs found that PDPs are not universally adopted, and completion rates for those that are provided is largely dependent on whether they are made compulsory as part of a credit-bearing module. Previous empirical research (Mason et al., 2009) found that although structured work experience was effective in helping graduates obtain graduate level employment, there was no clear evidence that the teaching or assessment of employability skills had a positive effect on employability outcomes. This brings into question the amount of resources that HEIs are investing in employability related pedagogy. Cranmer (2006) goes as far to say that resources would be better utilised in improving employment-based training opportunities, or involving employers more directly in undergraduate courses.

Empirical research such as those mentioned here, however, do not necessarily specify how or where employability related skills have been honed. The empirical data, not surprisingly,

shows that employers by and large favour graduates who have some previous work experience in a relevant sector. An important note here is that any studies that take place over a long period of time might have a significant gap between data collection and publication of results. For example, Mason et al. (2009) used data collected in 1999–2000, so although the results do provide useful insights, intermediate changes in the labour market, national economies, or education policy can be a disruptive influence on graduate employment outcomes.

While the debate about where, when and how employability can be successfully built into university courses continues, a question that is not often asked is the role that individual lecturers play. Policies to promote or teach employability may be instigated at national, university, faculty or course level, but it is ultimately the individuals in the classroom who bear responsibility for successful implementation. On vocational courses it might be expected that lecturers are also practitioners with a comparable level of expertise, but they may not have sufficient teaching skills to engage or instruct students effectively. The effective teaching of employability or the successful implementation of employability pedagogy in courses is, as previously highlighted, difficult to quantify due to the problem of there not being any clear definitions of what to actually measure. Where successful pedagogical approaches are reported, they are often linked to experiential learning environments where soft skills can be developed. This is not to say, however, that more traditional lecture based teaching is entirely ineffective. There is some evidence that such methods are important in developing contextual knowledge and theory of concepts related to employability, such as the wider economy or labour market conditions (UKCES, 2008).

In answer to the question of how students develop employability skills, UKCES (2008) concluded the main methods were; 'reflection and integration, experiential action learning and work experience' (UKCES, 2008, p. 32). Of these, the latter can only really be acquired in genuine work situations, while the generic skills can be developed through established pedagogies such as collaborative project work, case study analysis or a variety of assessment tasks. The role of HEIs is to not only ensure that graduates make the most of their formal learning environment, but also help students to develop the ability to describe the skills and achievements they have acquired (Paterson, 2017). This is best facilitated if teaching staff are aware of the importance that learning environments have in skills development, and if the staff have the necessary pedagogic skills themselves to effectively support the learning process. An important note here is the level of engagement of the individual student, in both the learning experience and contextualisation of self-reflection, which is discussed in the next section.

Individual Learning Trajectories and Pre-Professional Identity

As argued previously, categorising employability in terms of a skills-based agenda is far too narrow. In addition, while the application of more broadly defined employability models by HEIs may be of some value in certain contexts, they are often criticised for not capturing the full complexity of what it means to be work ready, and often fail to provide sufficient evidence for their successful application. Furthermore, it is not always clear how these models relate to each individual's unique experience of higher education. In an improvement on previous models, Tomlinson (2017) highlighted identity capital as one his graduate capitals, whereby graduates formed work identities and employability narratives that they could sell to potential employers. The notion of identity formation is not a new idea in theories of career management, and in the employability literature it is considered important by some researchers who recognise that individuals build identities in line with their specific career aspirations (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2013). Reid et al. (2008), in their study of Swedish and Australian HEIs, argued that students' development of professional identities is closely related to their chosen degree course.

In some cases, notably in Law, students' experience of pedagogy contributed directly to their professional identity development (Reid et al., 2008). In turn, the students' perception of professionalism within their chosen career also affected the way students engaged with their learning communities. Perhaps the most pertinent finding from the study was how some students 'used their pedagogical experience to develop a sense of their ability to express themselves, essentially by transforming the discipline specific material they have studied,' (Reid et al., 2008 p. 739). These findings can be linked to ideas underpinning Wenger's (1999) theories of communities of practice. Reid et al. (2008) went on to link this to the development of discipline-specific practices, and that if there was a strong notion of professional identity, then pedagogy could be exploited to develop professional skills. As a recommendation the authors suggested students are helped to define their own professional identities, enabling them to become work-ready, and as a corollary, become more engaged in their studies. An interesting point to note about this study is that the authors did not refer to employability at all, preferring to relate the findings in terms of professional identity development. In line with this, Jackson (2016) argues for a redefining of graduate employability in line with professional identity development. She advocates relabelling it as pre-professional identity; 'an understanding of and connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of a student's intended profession,' (Jackson, 2016, p. 2). This, again, is closely related to the communities of practice model, more specifically the updated Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2014) notion of landscape of practice, which acknowledges the complex interaction of groups that an HE student may come into contact with. Such groups include professional organisations, student associations and academic groups or support services provided by the university. Pre-professional identity can, therefore, be described as a less mature version of professional identity, and students form this 'through their membership, engagement, non-engagement and boundary and peripheral interactions with different communities' (Jackson, 2016, p. 3). Each student determines their own learning landscape, having different levels of interaction with the communities they encounter, depending on their level of engagement. These interactions lead to the construction of identities which are constantly evolving.

Trade et al. (2012), in their comprehensive review of the professional identity literature, noted that although the university's role in professional development is frequently mentioned, it is not considered the primary actor. According to the review, the role of the university in professional development was mainly to ensure participation and engagement, as well as accommodating personal and professional values. In addition, a difference was noted between academic and professional development, and that once the conditions for learning were established, and a connection with the workplace was established, the universities played a weak role in professional development. Despite this, the review recommended that universities did have a significant role to play in helping students develop a constantly changing professional identity, and become adaptable to fluid working environments. This is in accordance with recommendations from Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011), who made an explicit connection between identity and employability, asserting that 'universities and government would be better employed promoting student employability indirectly through the promotion of graduate identity and well-being [...] rather than directly through employability skills,' (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011, p. 582). Graduate identity, in this instance, can be equated with Jackson's (2016) promotion of pre-professional identity, and also marks the shift in HEIs strategy from focusing on the development of narrowly focused employability skills towards 'emphasising the higher order intellectual capabilities involved in adaptable expertise' (Gibbs, 2010, p. 42). Critics of the employability skills agenda would no doubt welcome this as a return to the traditional Humboldtian model of HE.

The Limited Context of Pedagogy for Employability Research

As is evident from the literature discussed in the previous sections, debates around employability have largely been concentrated in Anglo-Saxon countries and the developed countries in the global north, in particular the UK and Australia. The instigation of the Bologna process has been a driver for ensuring education policy in much of Europe is aligned towards economic policy and the employability skills agenda has subsequently been accepted as a factor in determining HE curricula. Evidence for the impact of employability led initiatives has also been primarily restricted to Anglo-Saxon countries, despite the fact that many of the international students enrolled on degree courses may be seeking graduate employment in countries outside the sphere of influence of the Bologna ideals, or on the other side of the global north-south divide. There have, however, been a small number of initiatives to examine employability pedagogy in the context of developing countries. For example, Gereffi et al. (2011), promoted the development of a global demand-driven workforce to ensure economic prosperity in developing countries. Policy initiatives such as this, however, irrespective of whether they buy in to the dominant skills agenda, mainly recommend compliance with national skills certifications based on global industry needs. Advice on how this is done includes; 'develop or enhance formal channels of communication with the private sector regarding the skills to be incorporated into the curriculum' (Gereffi et al., 2011, p. 15). The research, which examined the role of workforce development in several key global industries, noted that local educational institutions in the developing countries studied were not prepared enough to upskill individuals in line with global industry needs. Particularly lacking was the facility to future proof the workforce; although the need for training in soft-skills and lifelong learning strategies had been widely accepted, many educational institutions were unable to adapt their programmes or teaching approach to deliver the necessary training. Where educational institutions fail to address the skills gap, new actors such as industry associations, private companies, NGOs or specialised government programmes have helped to provide more specific training.

Training national labour forces for the demands of industry, essentially a top-down implementation of HE curricula, has drawn a variety of responses from other stakeholders, but again, these studies have been mostly limited to Anglo-Saxon countries, as detailed in the previous sections. Studies that explore stakeholder perceptions of employability in global-south contexts are rare; research in a transnational Central Asian setting indicated that students were lacking in their ability to describe their own employability narratives, possibly impinging on their ability to move from education to work environments (Paterson, 2017). Koloba (2017), in a quantitative study of South African university students, maintains that while there is a strong link between perceived employability and the employability skills of students, enhanced employability is also largely determined by the state of the local labour market. Rooney et al. (2006), in their study of international understandings of employability, found that different countries and institutions were at vastly different stages of devolvement regarding employability pedagogy. Although limited to the discipline of geography, the study acknowledged the importance of local and cultural contexts. In a more recent study, Bailey and Ingimundardottir (2015) examined stakeholder attitudes towards employability at the Malaysia campus of a British university. What is interesting about this qualitative study is the finding that conceptions of employability in Malaysia are not the same as in the UK; employability is a culturally based concept and academic staff should pay attention to this. Furthermore, the research highlighted the fact that universities with a multinational student body may need to 'develop multiple employability curricula' (Bailey and Ingimundardottir, 2015, p. 44).

Studies of employability related concepts in Uzbekistan and neighbouring Central Asian countries have come to light only very recently. New policy frameworks have been drawn up that invite closer links between vocational higher education and the local labour markets (OECD, 2012; Ajwad et al., 2014; CAEP, 2014). These policies and how they affect approaches to higher education in Uzbekistan are discussed in detail in the following section.

2. Current Issues in Uzbek Higher Education

Shortly after independence in 1991, Uzbekistan was regarded as having a rural economy, with agriculture accounting for 36% of the country's GDP and 40% of the country's labour force. Manufacturing, mining, energy and construction made up 35%, trade and transport 10%, and financial and other services 19% (Ruziev and Burkhanov, 2018). The main shifts that occurred after independence were a 50% fall in agriculture to 17% of GDP in 2012, employing 13% of the labour force, while at the same time services increased to 50% of GDP and 60% of the labour force. This growth of the services sector was not surprising, as it had been severely underdeveloped during the Soviet planned economy era. According to the World Bank (2014) this increase in demand is expected to continue, with the vast majority of new jobs created over the next 25 years being in the services sector. It is also expected that these new jobs will require higher order cognitive skills that are expected to be developed in higher education.

Participation in HE in 1989 was relatively low when compared to other Soviet republics, with only around 15% of those aged 18–23 studying at HE institutions (Mirkurbanov et al., 2009). The 43 HEIs in Uzbekistan at the time comprised 40 specialised institutes and three comprehensive universities, totalling approximately 310,000 students. Despite an adult literacy rate of 99%, demonstrating an acceptable level of general education, there was still considerable underfunding in HE, and this was reflected in a demand for HE that could not be met. The average number of applicants per university place was 3.42, compared to a 2.2 average for the USSR in total, (Balzer, 1992). It has been noted that in the pre-independence era there was a concentration of HEIs in the capital, Tashkent, which accommodated nearly half of the republic's HEIs and 60% of the students (Ruziev and Burkhanov, 2018). This was attributed to factors such as the location of most manufacturing industries in and around the capital, and also to Tashkent's position as the largest regional city in Central Asia.

In pre-colonial times, religious schools had been primarily responsible for educating the elite, these being largely superseded by Russian language institutes during the Soviet era. The breakdown of the communist system, however, saw the disintegration of specialist Communist party schools which had previously been the path to positions of power and influence. The new Uzbek government recognised that these institutions had to be replaced with new universities, while the older institutions that remained were given greater prominence (Majidov et al., 2010). In the immediate years after independence the Uzbek government paid considerable attention to the HE sector, although changes were only introduced gradually. The first important step was the passing of the Law on Education in July 1992, which put in place the principles that emphasised the break from Soviet control; a new secular and ideology-free education system reflecting the demands of a new economic system (Ruziev and Burkhanov, 2018). The first immediate step was the creation of 15 new HEIs by 1996, 12 of which were dedicated to business studies, engineering, law and medicine, and two specialised in foreign languages. At this time the Uzbek government was reticent to allow private HEIs to enter the picture, and several private universities failed to gain a foothold. The reason given by the lawmakers was that unregulated universities would lead to sub-standard HE programmes, so as a precaution no further licenses were granted, and existing ones were revoked. While this investment in HE might have been seen as cautious, it is to be noted that

during the transition years up to 2004, government expenditure on education remained relatively high, at around 10% of GDP. This was higher than other countries in the region, and higher than other developing countries at the time (Ruziev et al., 2007).

The way students paid for tuition also underwent some changes, with the phasing out of the Soviet-era universally free HE for successful applicants. A new two-tier system was introduced in 1994, where some students would be publicly funded with grants and others would be privately funded, with the number of grants being determined yearly by the demand for HE courses and the current market conditions (World Bank, 2014). Exam results determined which students were eligible for grants, and this merit based system is still in place today. It has been noted, however, that this is not a completely transparent process, and although students who receive grants are expected to work for at least two years in the government sector there is no guarantee of placement upon graduation (Ruziev and Burkhanov, 2018).

In the early years after independence Uzbekistan made significant advances to becoming a market-based economy. Entrepreneurs were active in the economy for the first time, and over 4,500 joint-stock companies and a further 100,000 small private enterprises were registered (Asian Development Bank, 2004). This led to an increase in the number of workers in the non-state sector to over 70% of the total workforce by 1997. Fulfilling the demands of the new economic system required an overhaul of the education system, and this came in the shape of the National Programme for Personnel Training (NPPT) which became law in August 1997. The rationale for the programme was to create an education system that upheld national values, allowed for individual development, and produced highly qualified specialists. Despite these ideals, it has been clear that the NPPT was still top-down in its implementation, with the government led reforms not permitting HEIs to design new courses or control their finances (Ruziev and Burkhanov, 2018).

The NPPT was structured in three stages. Stage 1, 1997 to 2001, mainly involved creating the necessary infrastructure, which involved changing the legal status of some HEIs and further development of specialist vocational institutes (college) and academic institutes (lyceums). Since only 10% of school graduates went on to higher education, the new structure was seen as a way of ensuring basic technical and vocational training for all (Majidiv et al., 2010). Stage 2, 2001 to 2005, included a review of teaching content, with a focus on updating existing materials and developing electronic and online resources. In addition, there was a restructuring of the then 5-year degree courses into a 4-year undergraduate course, a 2-year post graduate course, and PhD programmes that were more inline with European models that followed the 1999 Bologna Protocol. All the post-Soviet continental European states have joined the Bologna Protocol, while four Central Asian countries (Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) remain outside. Kazakhstan joined the Bologna Process in 2010 (Ruziev and Burkhanov, 2018). Stage 3 of the NPPT, initiated in 2005, functioned as a review period of previous implementations. An additional programme was added in 2011 with the vague aim of improving human and physical resources and further updating information technology capabilities. It is worth noting that the NPPT reforms did not alter the structure of junior secondary education, which remained at four years of primary education and five years of lower secondary education, covering the ages of 6–14.

Under the Soviet system education was seen more as way of controlling the population, and learning was largely rote memorisation of facts. Even though the variety of subjects covered in the universal curriculum was broad, critical and analytical thinking was not encouraged in schools, which in turn led to difficulties for students as they entered higher education (Yakhyaeva, 2013). An acceptance of authoritarian dogma has undoubtedly been a part of both pre and post-Soviet education. Brunner and Tillet (2007, p. 18) note that these ideals are still evident in post-Soviet republics' HE, where the dominant approach to HE 'may hint at

pluralism but seeks conformity'. Brunner and Tillet (2007) cite the example of a Kazakhstan education official who stated:

The first aim is that (the) higher education system should be considered as a basic mechanism translating historically cultural, social, scientific, educational values of folk, society and the State; the second aim is preparing specialists for the State system of management and national economy (Brunner and Tillet, 2007, p. 18).

Reforms in post-Soviet Central Asian HE are characterised by efforts to 'align higher education systems with the goals of new nation building;' (Huisman et al., 2018, p. 3), which included reinstating national languages and introducing courses in national history and culture in HE courses. In this sense, the development of Uzbek HE in the post-Soviet era followed the dominant philosophy put forward by the President, Islam Karimov, with the goal of legitimising authoritarian rule and acting as a practical tool for regulating, controlling and ultimately suppressing dissent within the educated elite (Rasanayagam, 2011). With a strong sense of re-establishing its cultural history, Karimov's administration set out on a course of re-inventing HE by creating 'a brand of its own higher education system by blending of history, philosophy, ideology, religion and spirituality,' (Mostafa, 2009, p. 100). The ideology was built on the premise of a return to Uzbekistan's golden heritage, but it has been observed that this was merely a tool by which to further suppress the populace:

Cultural authenticity [...] has produced a state of existential insecurity and vulnerability, where the actions and performance of citizens might be characterised as culturally inauthentic and therefore potentially subject to the intervention of the state security apparatuses. (Rasanayagam, 2011, p. 690).

Despite the fundamental changes in the ideological basis of Uzbek HE, many of the current issues and challenges are related to limited freedoms that can be traced back to the Soviet era. In many cases, however, the shortcomings have been exacerbated by a top-down approach lacking in transparency and with limited involvement of key stakeholders (Weidman and Yoder, 2010).

Perceptions of Employability in Uzbekistan

Research into employability skills and employability related concepts is a relatively new area in Uzbekistan and the whole of the Central Asian region, and literature only began to emerge in the past 15 years. This section takes a chronological look at how employability has come to play an ever more important role in Uzbek education policy.

As outlined previously, the reforms of the NPPT initiated in 1997 involved a radical reorganisation of the structure and content of the country's education system. The objectives and priorities were to align educational strategies to the social and economic demands of the country. At the turn of the century, as the first reforms began to take shape, it was noted that the education and training programmes were not sufficiently aligned to the needs of the labour market. The demand for specialists was such that in 1999, over 26,000 jobs in specialist areas remained vacant. At the same time, although 73% of surveyed graduates from vocational institutions were employed, only 60% of those were working within their specialisation (Asian Development Bank, 2004). The mismatch between graduate skills and employment opportunities was becoming evident. At this stage it was recommended that 'a range of measures need to be implemented to strengthen education, training, and employment linkages,' (Asian Development Bank, 2004, p. 105). While the NPPT provided the legal basis for

educational reforms, in its early years the rapid economic and social reforms were outpacing the changes in HE provision.

One reason put forward for the mismatch between supply and demand was the increasing number of people working in the informal sector of the economy, that is, those workers without a contract or employer paid social security. Data from the IMF (2005) suggested that 29% of the total number of employed were in the informal sector. The report also highlighted that due to low salaries in the vacant positions, those working in the informal sector had little motivation to seek official positions, and furthermore there was a 'mismatch between the qualifications and skills of the unemployed and employed in the informal sector with those skills required for the vacancies,' (IMF, 2005, p. 14). The root causes of this were a lack of flexibility in the educational and training sector, insufficient analysis of the needs of the labour market, and weak liaison between employers, vocational schools and HEIs. This had also been previously noted in the Asian Development Bank (2004) report. Nevertheless, in the period from independence until 2005, Uzbekistan, unlike several other Central Asian republics, showed low unemployment and steady employment growth (Brunner and Tillet, 2007). In a comparison of Uzbek and Mongolian education reform in the post-Soviet years, Weidman and Yoder (2010) also concluded that links between employers and educators were weak, but also added that the mismatch of graduates to jobs was due to 'too many students studying business, accounting, finance, law, computing, and foreign languages,' (Weidman and Yoder, 2010, p. 66).

In November 2008 the OECD launched the Central Asia Initiative, with the goal of contributing to economic growth in seven countries in the region. A 'Policy Handbook' (OECD, 2011) provided conclusions related to human capital development, and advice for policymakers on 'implementing vocational education and training (VET) systems in order to better equip graduates with skills they need to get jobs,' (OECD, 2011 p. 3). The specific recommendations for Uzbekistan included; increased involvement of small and private businesses in the policy shaping mechanisms; strengthening of information databases through use of analytical tools such as tracer studies to better match employer and graduate needs; and the development of a binding National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to standardised vocational secondary occupational education. The report noted the Uzbek government of the time had no plans to develop a binding NQF, and this is still the case. While the NPPT has gone some way to standardising general education along internationally recognised frameworks, the lack of an NQF for vocational qualifications could be seen as a barrier to further international cooperation.

One of the first empirical research papers that directly addressed the ways the Uzbek education system could become more aligned to the demands of the labour market was conducted by Kasimova (2011). This study differed from previous research in Uzbek HE in that it specifically surveyed how students selected their university and degree, the skills they learned, and the skills they thought they needed in the labour market. Those questioned were recent graduates and new university entrants. The main findings were the lack of practical skills taught on degree courses which negatively affected performance in the workplace. There was also disparity between the skills that students acquired, and those that they thought prospective employers valued. In addition, students were unaware of the employment opportunities that their chosen degree would favour. The sample size of this study was not insignificant (342 respondents to the 17-question survey), and provided some confirmation of the need for closer links between stakeholders, as previously recommended by OECD (2011).

In 2013 the World Bank carried out detailed surveys of worker skills in three Central Asian countries; Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The surveys used data from a variety of sources, including skills-measurement instruments and previous World Bank data sets. *The Skills Road: Skills for Employability in Uzbekistan* (Ajwad et al., 2014) was:

[...] a large scale assessment of cognitive and non-cognitive skills of workers in both the formal and informal sectors, of job seekers, and of those who are inactive by testing and interviewing respondents (Ajwad et al., 2014, p. 1).

The report, which survey around 1500 households, evaluated the demand for skills, and assessed whether the systems of education and training met the needs of the current and future labour market and economic goals. The main findings confirmed the previous concerns, and reported that skills gaps were in fact hindering employment outcomes. Aside from encouraging aspects that higher skilled workers generally attained higher wages, many employers reported that there was a deficit of suitably skilled workers. Another issue that was highlighted was the fact that women were underrepresented in the employment figures. The uniqueness of this research was in how it measured the use of cognitive (logical and critical thinking, problem solving, verbal ability, numeracy) and non-cognitive skills (social and behavioural). The report made several detailed recommendations, with one in particular relating to HE:

Encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation by increasing quality tertiary education access for motivated students, which can ensure that higher education graduates possess market-valued skills and that investments in higher education pay off. (Ajwad et al., 2014 p. 3).

Research projects such as this on previously understudied environments are important, as there is 'a limited understanding of the differences in industry requirements and skill development processes between developed and developing economies,' (Jackson, 2014, p. 3). *The Skills Road* reports on employability skills in the Central Asian region are to be commended for their thoroughness, and also for raising the awareness of the skills deficit in one the world's fastest developing economic areas.

Perhaps the biggest concern for the domestic Uzbek labour market is the large number of graduates seeking employment abroad. Figures from the World Bank (2014) estimated that up to 4 million people, comprising 23% of the working age population were working abroad, mainly in other former Soviet Republics. The reason for this was given as poor salaries and the lack of job opportunities for both skilled and unskilled workers. The estimated 1 million Uzbeks with degrees choosing to seek employment abroad are evidence that the domestic labour market is not sufficient to meet their demands and the resulting brain drain could have further implications for the economy. At the same time, it was noted that there are not nearly enough graduates to meet the demand of the domestic labour market, highlighting the mismatch between graduate skills and graduate jobs.

The most recent reports and policy documents reflected the same concerns, but there are measures in place to address the issues. A European Commission review of the Uzbek Higher education system (EACEA, 2017) provides a positive review of the current situation, noting that all HEIs have a marketing department to provide information and guidance on employment seminars, job fairs, and internships. Further changes to the state education standards (SES) include allowing universities to take more control of their programmes, allowing for a degree of flexibility in teaching and assessments (Krouglov, 2017). A new internationally funded project Internationalization and Modernization of Education and Processes in the Higher Education of Uzbekistan (2015–2018), builds on previous initiatives from the British Council, and is set to establish new approaches to HE staff development and standardisation in teaching. These include improvement in course content, with a greater focus on language development and continuous self-study, increased development of Guidelines for Employer engagement, and enhancement of engagement of students and employers in teaching and learning (UWED, 2019)

Conclusion

While it is recognised that employability as a concept arose out of changes in global employment demands, top-down government driven changes in higher education policy in Uzbekistan have reinforced the employability agenda. Historic definitions of employability can contribute to our understanding of how employability relates to graduate education, but there are significant limitations to the extent to which definitions and employability models connect to current pedagogical practices. Additionally, there are risks to an uncritical acceptance of the Uzbek government driven employability skills agendas; the main one being pedagogical control effectively outsourced to policymakers and employers. Pedagogy to develop employability, however, does have a part to play in current HE settings, and can be exploited if linked to the ideas of pre-professional and graduate identity, and even more so if both lecturers and students understand how learning environments can be used to best effect. Finally, it is evident that discussion surrounding employability is rich in Anglo-Saxon centric contexts, but there is a real need for further research in both the global south and in Central Asian settings.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Richard Paterson has an MA in Linguistics from UCL, London, and is currently completing an EdD at the Institute of Education, London. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and has further qualifications in English Language Teaching (DELTA) and Social Science Research Methods. Richard has a wide range of experience in many different educational settings, both in the UK and overseas. He taught English in Egypt and Italy, and spent 5 years in Argentina as Director of Studies of International House in Buenos Aires. Richard is now a Senior Lecturer at the University of Westminster in London, where he is module leader for the range of Academic English modules and core modules on the MA TESOL. Richard has been a frequent visitor to Uzbekistan over the past number of years, delivering training sessions to academic staff, and speaking at conferences. His current research interest is in the area of pedagogy for employability in transnational education, where he has published in international journals.

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