Does All Work and No Play Make a Dull Graduate? Perceptions of Extra-curricular Activities and Employability

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that there is a prima facie case as to why extra-curricular activities should be thought to contribute to graduate outcomes, yet few studies have examined student activities beyond the classroom and their role in student experience and graduate outcomes. This study collected data via a questionnaire survey (n=852) and a series of focus groups with students (n=95) to examine undergraduate perceptions of the role that extra-curricular activities play in developing employability skills. It was found that extracurricular activities were significantly correlated with other employability related aspects of student experience and viewed favourably by students in terms of CV building and enhancing employability. Yet students also reported that it was often difficult to participate in activities outside of their academic work and paid employment. It is concluded that the value of extra-curricular activities is widely recognised and universities should support students who wish to engage in them. Furthermore, future programmes aimed at harnessing the capacity of extra-curricular activities to develop student employability need to give due consideration to strategies for enhancing inclusion and diverse participation.

Keywords: extra-curricular activities, employability, undergraduate, students

Background

Governments internationally look to higher education to deliver employable graduates and to increase the quality of human capital that is deemed necessary for economic effectiveness and competitiveness in modern knowledge-based economies. In an unsettled economic and political climate, the issue of graduate employability has gained increased currency and UK universities are specifically tasked with making explicit how they will help their students to develop the relevant skills and experiences for future employment, (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). Despite the burgeoning research on employability and the availability of a wide range of models purporting to explain it, employability itself remains a contentious concept open to a "plethora of micro-interpretations" (Harvey, 2003). The issue of how 'employability' is actually defined is a complex one, however it has been widely understood as:

> "A set of achievements – skills, understanding and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy."
> (Yorke, 2006, p.23)

In this definition it is important to note that employability implies something about the skills and capacity of the graduate to function in a job, and is not to be confused with the acquisition of a job, whether a 'graduate job' or otherwise (Yorke, 2006). In order to meet the challenge of enhancing student employability, many universities have developed strategies to embed employability across the whole curriculum, including the development of employability and work related modules, employability 'strands' across programmes, problem based and work related learning, skills identification and curriculum audits (Watson, 2011). However, by placing such an emphasis on the embedding of employability skills within the curriculum, it has been argued that universities may be missing the opportunity to draw on the rich experience of learning which occurs outside the curriculum which may also contribute towards a student's employability (Watson, 2011).

In an increasingly competitive employment market, engaging in extra-curricular activities such as sport, the arts and volunteering can offer students the opportunity to mark themselves out from their peer group (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). Yet although there may be a prima facie case as to why extra-curricular activities should be thought to contribute to graduate outcomes (Clegg, Stevenson, & Willott, 2008) very few studies have examined student activities beyond the classroom and their role in student experience and subsequent outcome for graduates (Little, 2006). Additionally, it has been found that students themselves may not always perceive the value of extra-curricular activities and may downplay the possible contribution of these to their future employability in comparison to activities which were embedded within the university curriculum (Watson, 2011). In not recognising how their personal interests and achievements may enhance their employability, students may not document the contribution these make to developing and demonstrating their skills. Nevertheless, there is some research evidence that engagement in extracurricular activities while at university is particularly valuable in enabling students to feel a part of the university and in developing personal confidence

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and effective communication skills (Stuart, Lido, Morgan, & May, 2008). Furthermore, extra-curricular experience has been found to enable access to better occupational status and enable graduates' effective transition to work (Tchibozo, 2007). It has also been suggested that involvement in extra-curricular activities is related to successful employment outcomes (Blasko, 2002) with one large UK study (n=5242) finding that 51% of employed graduates felt that their experiences of volunteering helped them to find work (Brewis, Russell, & Holdsworth, 2010). There would appear to be a developing case for the recognition of the value of extra-curricular activities in order to support the development of employability in students (Watson, 2011). This viewpoint is wholly in accord with the concept of 'life-long learning' inclusively defined as "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective" (European Commission, 2001, p.9).

In order to support the development of students as lifewide learners and support this process of enhancing student potential, a record of student achievement, the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) document (Burgess, 2012), has been adopted by a number of higher education institutions across the UK. Section 6.1 of this document aims to capture the totality of the student's performance whilst at university by providing formal recognition of activities that are both co-curricular and extra-curricular, thus representing a wider range of achievements to employers and postgraduate tutors.

At a national level, Higher Education (HE) institutions can opt out of providing their students with a HEAR. However within Northern Ireland the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) proposed that all third level HE institutions within the region utilise the HEAR, thereby:

> *"Equipping individuals with the distinctive range and quality of skills and attributes needed for an increasingly competitive international workplace".* (Department for Employment and Learning, 2015)

The first cohort of full-time Ulster University undergraduate students graduated with their HEAR in July 2014

Co-curricular awards also can provide a 'gateway' to a range of experiences, and can ensure that students recognise even apparently insignificant experiences as potentially useful in an occupational context (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, 2012). Academic performance is often noted as not being the most important factor with most employers as they place "motivation and interest, organisation fit, skills and work experience higher up their list of desirable criteria" (Pennington, Mosley, & Sinclair 2013, p.9). Therefore student engagement in extra-curricular activities is a way of developing these desirable skills and attributes.

Ulster's employability award, the Ulster EDGE Award, provides formal institutional recognition of these employability enhancing extra-curricular activities. Its aim is to encourage students not only to participate in such activities but also to recognise their value, thus adding to the wider student experience at Ulster and embracing the concept of lifewide education (Milner, 2014). Many other universities have also recognised the value of extra-curricular activities and are accrediting the development of employability skills alongside the subject specific and transferrable skills associated with a degree. Currently, there are over 67 institutions that formally accredit employability skills within an award scheme (AGCAS Award Task Group, 2011). Increasingly these awards are being seen as a way of supporting graduate employability (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, 2012; AGCAS, 2012) and form part of the material recorded in section 6.1 of the HEAR.

Aim

In the context of a wider study into employability development (Milner, 2009) this paper aims to present quantitative and qualitative data on student perceptions of the role that extra-curricular activities may play in developing employability skills.

Methodology

This study used mixed-methods in order to flexibly approach the complex phenomena of 'employability' and 'extra-curricular activities' with both quantitative and qualitative data collection strategies in order to allow for the triangulation, complementation and expansion of the issues (Johnstone, 2004). This mixed-methods approach has been recognised as a key way for educators to conduct research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) for when researchers bring together both quantitative and qualitative research, the strengths of both approaches are combined resulting in a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Cresswell & Garrett, 2008).

Over a two year period Ulster University carried out an Employability Development Opportunities Review across all faculties with 13 Schools/Departments participating, representing 20 undergraduate and postgraduate programmes from across the university. Students were surveyed regarding the employability development opportunities on their course through the use of a questionnaire examining nine areas of student experience: curriculum development; learning from work; personal development planning; enterprise; innovation and creativity; transferring learning between contexts; real world activities engagement; graduate employment; career development learning/career development centre engagement and extra-curricular activity. Three questions were asked directly pertaining to extra-curricular activities and these loaded directly onto a total score for extra-curricular activity. A four point Likert scale was used with 1= the most negative opinion and 4= the most positive opinion. To maximise response, questionnaires were completed by students in class or online and a total of 605 responses were received. No personally identifying data was collected

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and participant anonymity was assured. Data was stored and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. In order to collect qualitative data on student experiences and their perceptions of employability, a series of 14 focus groups were also carried out with 95 students taking part. Within these focus groups an open ended question about experience of extra-curricular activities was asked to solicit student opinions and experiences. This was then audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and content analysed for emerging themes.

Results

A total of 852 students responded to the questionnaire survey. A total of 27.8% of these respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that my degree course "encouraged me to record my extra-curricular activity and responsibilities". Slightly less than a third of respondents (32.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that their course "emphasised the importance of taking part in extra-curricular activity for my CV and skills development" and 25.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their course encouraged them "to take part in voluntary work". Statistical analysis showed that the overall total score for extra-curricular activity, consisting of the combined scores for these three questions, was significantly positively correlated with high scores on each of the other eight areas of aspects of employability development as measured by the student experience questionnaire.

Pearson's r correlation	Extra- Curricular Activities	
	r	P<
Curriculum	0.373	0.01
Learning for work	0.276	0.01
Personal Development Planning (PDP)	0.397	0.01
Enterprise	0.336	0.01
Transfer Learning	0.391	0.01
Real world Activities Engagement	0.474	0.01
Graduate Employment	0.455	0.01
Career Development Centre Engagement	0.554	0.01

Table 1: Extra-curricular activity correlated with other aspects of employability development as measured by the Employability Development Review Questionnaire

In the series of focus groups students also spoke positively about the importance of extra-curricular activities and it was notable that all of the students who commented felt that these were important. The first theme to emerge from the focus group comments was the *value* participants placed on extra-curricular activities, particularly with regard to building a CV and impressing potential employers.

> *"With wanting to do PGCE I have been encouraged to partake in extracurricular activities to build up my CV."*
> [Sports Student]

> *"Lecturers are saying it's all about the extra free stuff that you do with kids that counts on your CV."*
> [Journalism Student]

> *"It [extracurricular activity] would look good on your CV and gives you something to talk about in interviews."*
> [Accountancy Student]

The second theme to emerge from the discussions was the stated belief that using extra-curricular activities to enhance future employability was something that students tended to do under their own *initiative* or through the encouragement of careers staff rather than something embedded within a course curriculum.

> *"Not everyone is willing to do extra stuff to put on your CV… that's their own fault. We know through careers and stuff that you need to do extra to help with getting a job."* [Sports and Exercise Science student]

> *"We all know that extra-curricular activity is good for CV but we weren't explicitly told or encouraged to engage in it … I know when I was in America one of the employers says that when he gets a CV he flips to the personal stuff first 'cause it tells you about a person's personality."* [Art and Design student]

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"For counselling I have recently taken on another course on peer mentoring, have to as employers won't take anyone without voluntary work behind them and you have to do that on your own initiative in order to gain a job in counselling but we are not told this through our degree" [Psychology student]

Yet despite the value placed on extra-curricular activities, a third theme emerged with students noting that it was often *difficult* to participate in activities outside of their academic work and paid employment.

"Well as far as I was concerned I took it upon my own back to do things you know, community work and things 'cause no real School support given to engage with it." [Ceramics student]

"what employers are saying … live at home, work your ass off, work for free when you are young and then it would come together for you having built up your experience on your CV." [Communications student]

"Most volunteer work lasts six weeks and most of your time has to be spent doing work so you don't actually have any free time to voluntary give to someone." [Computing and Intelligence Systems student]

Participation in extra-curricular activities was reported to be especially difficult if support for this was not provided by academic departments and if personal finances were an issue. While extra-curricular activities were seen as valuable for developing employability and with students reporting they took an initiative to participate in activities outside of their academic work, nevertheless the issue was not unproblematic with focus group participants reporting some conflicts due to time and money issues. However those students who had recently graduated with the Ulster EDGE Award were complementary regarding the skills that they gained from participating in the activities within the Award scheme:

"Completing the EDGE Award has given me more confidence going forward. I have gained an experience that I have learned a lot from and a certificate to prove it, it really does feel like I've got an edge and can compete with other graduates for employment" [Psychology graduate]

Discussion

This study was not without limitations. It was based within one university and relatively small scale in that it only examined extra-curricular activities in the light of a much wider project. As such, it must be considered exploratory in nature. In particular, more in-depth discussions with students focusing specifically on their experiences and perceptions of extra-curricular activity and employability would yield richer and more complex data. In considering the meanings of 'extra-curricular' we also need to be mindful that the definition of the term is open to debate (Clegg, Stevenson, & Willott, 2008). For some focus group participants it meant sports or arts activity while for others it meant voluntary or community work or even taking additional educational courses. Further research is required to investigate the influence of these differing kinds of 'extra-curricular-activity' on employability and indeed to elucidate what the concept 'employability' itself means to students who are expected to acquire this quality. Yet despite this present ambiguity, extra-curricular activities, defined in their broad sense, did seem to have a resonance with students' perceptions of employability and this study has raised some interesting issues in relation to extra-curricular activities and their role in the development of employability.

It was particularly notable that extracurricular activity was significantly positively correlated with other aspects of employability measured in the Employability Development Opportunities Review questionnaire survey. This finding was further supported by qualitative data from the focus group discussions in which undergraduate students overwhelmingly described extra-curricular activities as valuable pursuits. In spite of this, focus group participants were inclined to believe that participation in extra-curricular activities was dependent on the student's own initiative, rather than something encouraged as part of their academic studies.

With this in mind, it may therefore be important for teaching staff to discuss and promote the links between extra-curricular activities and employability development within each course curriculum in order to raise awareness of the potential value of activities undertaken in students' own time. Formal Institutional recognition of employability enhancing activities, situated beyond the curriculum could encourage students not only to participate in such activities but also to recognise their value. One method of supporting such activities are award schemes such as the Ulster EDGE Award. This is recognised and validated by the University and with the aim of encouraging students to take part in work experience and community activities and thus develop their employability skills outside of the curriculum. This is then recorded on section 6.1 of the HEAR as a further validation. The activities and assessments which form part of such an award can also give the opportunity for students to reflect upon the value of their activities and articulate their employability value to others (Watson, 2011). Yet it is also acknowledged that the assessment central to this kind of award scheme can be resource intense, particularly at a time of financial constraints throughout the higher education sector.

It should also be recognised that high levels of part-time employment, particularly among students from less privileged backgrounds, may have a detrimental impact on student capacity to engage in other employability-enhancing activities. With the increase in e-learning, an increasing number of students are accessing a purely "virtual campus" and some can find this environment challenging and isolating (Kernohan, Cousins, McGowan, Donnelly, & Shannon, 2011). Enabling a greater integration of extra-curricular activities into the learning experience could provide an opportunity for these distance-students to feel supported by their academic institutions, enhancing collegiality as well as employability, however the design of programmes to allow this to happen would need careful thought and appropriate resourcing.

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While this study did not collect data on gender issues these also need to be taken into consideration in future research and policy. Stevenson and Clegg (2012) have found that women frequently undervalue their participation and are more likely to be dismissive of the potential value of extra-curricular activity to their employability than men, as a consequence they argue that higher education institutions need to support women students to recognise the value of their participation. Clearly, future programmes aimed at harnessing the capacity of extra-curricular activities to develop student employability need to give due consideration to strategies for enhancing inclusion and diverse participation. Definitions of "extra-curricular activity" based on the assumption of "a full-time student with the economic, social and cultural capacities to access opportunities, engaged in no or limited outside employment, unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, largely campus based and independent, and discursively entailing the able, fit body" (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012, p2) may be inherently discriminatory.

In has been argued that the ideals of a well-rounded education require attention to students as whole p*eople* who learn in and out of the classroom, always and everywhere (Hersh, 2009). Similarly, the idea of lifewide education is proposed to enable learners to prepare themselves for the unknown complexities and challenges of their future lives (Jackson, 2014). The student participants in the present study, clearly recognise the value of extra-curricular activities within their own lives and for their own futures. In order to adopt an approach that is holistic and integrative enough to support the development of students' full potentials across their entire higher education experience, the increasing recognition by UK universities of the value of these extra-curricular experiences (AGCAS, 2012) is to be welcomed and encouraged.

Biographies

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