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EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH A PHILOSOPHICAL LENS –

A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

by

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the primary importance placed on skills as a panacea for economic growth is a misplaced emphasis, situated within an employability and skills narrative that has so far failed to deliver on its claims. Furthermore, the failure to acknowledge and give equal weighting to notions of personal formation and human flourishing, in other than financial terms, has resulted in a one-dimensional dominant political discourse that depicts a reductionist view of higher education and impoverishes the concept of employability.

The government-commissioned reviews and reports examined for this study chart the changing nature of this discourse over a fifty year period (1963-2013), as it moves away from the holistic vision for higher education set out in the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963), towards a dominant discourse of 'economically valuable skills' (Leitch, 2006, p.44) and the assertion that universities 'should assume an explicit responsibility for facilitating economic growth.' (Witty, 2013, p.6). The philosophical lens through which the concept of employability is examined focuses primarily on the work of David Carr, whose thinking on moral and virtue education serves as the central voice around which other voices and perspectives can be identified and heard, and to show how a virtue ethical approach can form the basis of a credible, alternative employability and skills narrative.

By bringing a case study approach into the conceptual analysis of employability, I have been able to interrogate how a particular university perceives and engages with the concept and this has provided unique insights into how universities, through key stakeholders, engage with employability in ways that are complex and negotiated. The term 'nostalgic pragmatism' has been coined in an attempt to convey what I have found to be a sense of yearning for the pre-expansion period of higher education, balanced by recognition of the relative importance of the concept of employability in an era of mass participation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

During the fifty-year period between the publication of the Robbins Report on Higher Education in 1963 and the Witty Review of Universities and Growth in 2013, the Higher Education sector witnessed a seismic shift from pre-war elitism to a post-war need for mass participation and equality of opportunity.   This study examines government-commissioned reviews and reports that chart the increasing emphasis on skills as a panacea for economic growth and the emergence and increasing dominance of the notion of employability. The reports Robbins (1963); Dearing (1997); Lambert (2003); Leitch (2006); Sainsbury (2007); Heseltine (2012); Wilson (2012); Witty (2013), represent a chronological articulation, over a fifty year period, of government discourse related to employability, skills and the associated role of universities. By incorporating a case study approach into the conceptual analysis of employability, I have been able to interrogate how a particular university perceives and engages with the concept and to examine how these perceptions relate to the dominant political discourse, the employability literature and notions of personal formation and human flourishing.

The arguments

This thesis challenges the dominant political employability and skills narrative and argues that:

1. The primary importance placed on skills over the fifty-year period is a misplaced emphasis, resulting in a skills-defined model of the self which has 'no truck with the *ideas* about what higher education is for' (Ransome, 2011, p.216).
2. Employability is a deficit model that has emerged from the failure of labour market policies to secure full employment (Finn, 2000; McQuaid et al, 2005; Chertskovskaya et al, 2013).
3. There is a disconnect between political perceptions of employability and those held by universities and businesses. (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011).
4. Higher education is regulated not in accordance with any philosophically or morally enlightened view of the purpose of education,

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but rather in accordance with a narrative of 'economically valuable skills' (Leitch, 2006).

5. The dominant discourse depicts employability as a deficit model within a narrative that presents a reductionist view of higher education and that this has significant implications for the sector.

6. The examination of employability through the philosophical lens of David Carr's work on moral and virtue education, shows that virtue ethics can provide a theoretical foundation upon which a credible alternative employability and skills narrative could be established.

The context

Through use of authoritative language, underpinned by credible statistics and compelling case studies, the dominant employability and skills narrative presents a seemingly convincing case for skills being a fundamental component of employability and a critical driver of economic growth. The potential benefits to the individual and society are expressed predominantly in financial terms and the political case being made for skills is articulated in terms of increased productivity, with the assertion that there is a 'direct correlation between skills, productivity and employment' (Leitch, 2006, p.1). Consequently, there has been significant financial investment (ibid, p.72) in providing: 'employment opportunities for all' (HMT, 2000). Similarly, investment in human capital is considered to be crucial to improving employability and is invariably couched in terms of skills, productivity and economic growth (HMT, 2000; OECD, 1998; EC, 2015). Yet, despite these claims and arguments and the tens of millions of pounds that have been, and continue to be, poured into government initiatives, training programmes and 'a plethora of advisory, strategic and planning bodies' (Leitch, 2006, p.72), it still remains that:

> Too many organisations find it hard to recruit the skilled people they need; this poses serious risks to the competitiveness, financial health and even survival of many businesses. Surveys by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) reveal a sharp rise in skills shortages. Such deficiencies are longstanding in some sectors, preventing us from rebalancing the economy and underlining the need for decisive action. (DBIS, 2015a, p11)

While the above suggests that little has changed over the years, the idea of skills as a remedy to Leitch's extreme vision of a 'lingering decline' (Leitch, 2006, p.4) is drip-fed consistently and persuasively throughout the suite of documents. All the narratives make a seemingly convincing case for skills being an essential and pivotal component of employability and, thereby, economic growth - particularly when set against the quasi dystopian scenario imagined by Leitch should society fail to realise the potential of its 'skills base' (ibid, p.2).

The emphasis on skills has an historical basis, having been brought to prominence in the influential Robbins Report on Higher Education in 1963:

> We begin with instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour. We put this first, not because we regard it as the most important, but because we think that it is sometimes ignored or undervalued…And it must be recognised that in our own times, progress - and particularly the maintenance of a competitive position- depends to a much greater extent than ever before on skills. (Robbins, 1963, p.6)

Lord Robbins' committee was tasked with reviewing 'the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain and in the light of national needs and resources to advise Her Majesty's Government on what principles its long-term development should be based.' (ibid, p4). It was the first time such a comprehensive review had been commissioned and it was not until nearly twenty-five years later that that the second substantial government-commissioned review was carried out, led by Lord Dearing (Dearing, 1997). This was five years after the expansion of the sector in 1992 when 'the number of universities almost doubled overnight' (Collini, 2012, p.31). The committee was asked to 'make recommendations on how higher education…should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research.' (Dearing, 1997, p3). Although both reviews can be seen to clearly link skills to the economic imperatives of progress and competitiveness, there

is also a broader discussion around the role and purpose of higher education, with the Dearing Report stating that 'we do not accept a purely instrumental approach to higher education' (ibid, p51).

The next influential review to be undertaken was led by Lord Lambert in 2003, with a remit to look more closely at how universities and businesses collaborate towards regional economic development and how the collaborations might operate more effectively in this context. Following on from this, Lord Leitch, in 2006 and Lord Sainsbury in 2007 had a narrower focus on Science and Innovation and STEM skills (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths, respectively) which served to reinforce the view that these skills are of prime importance to the economy. The notion of competition is emphasised, as evidenced by the title of the Sainsbury Review: 'The Race to the Top', and the focus is mainly on innovation, research and development in a global context and from primarily high-level, systemic and strategic perspectives. In 2012, almost ten years on from the influential Lambert Review, Professor Tim Wilson's Review of Business-University Collaboration argued for the pre-eminence of skills in the context of contributing to economic growth, justified by his assertion that 'much of the UK Higher Education (HE) system was founded in the context of supplying graduates with the skills needed by employers.' (Wilson, 2012, p.20). The final Review looked at in this study is Sir Andrew Witty's 2013 Review of Universities and Growth. The content of this report is, again, expressed in economic terms with Witty asserting that 'effective economic engagement is central to many universities [and they] should assume an explicit responsibility for facilitating economic growth…' (Witty, 2013, p.6).

These reviews will be looked at in more detail in chapter two.

The Questions

Despite historical and contemporary counter claims and empirical evidence that, as I will show, suggest otherwise, the notion of employability and skills as a panacea for the UK's economic prosperity and global competitiveness persists. Aside from the immediately obvious question about whether or not skills can secure the scale of economic growth that the rhetoric would have us believe, there is another, more fundamental question to pose, namely: what exactly is meant by the terms 'employability' and 'skills'? Particularly, as I will show in chapter 2 (2.2), that businesses appear to find it difficult to clearly articulate, or be consistent about, their skills needs (Pegg et al, 2012; Robinson, 2005; Yorke, 2006; Maxwell et al, 2009; Valenzuela, 2013).

I have formulated six key questions to facilitate my interrogation of the dominant employability and skills narrative and help substantiate my arguments.

1. What is meant by the terms 'employability' and 'skills'?
2. Is the argument for skills as a panacea for economic growth, as articulated within the dominant political discourse, justified?
3. Is the political perception of, and approach to, employability shared by universities and businesses?
4. Is the instrumentally and financially focused discourse contributing to the perception that 'higher education institutions are there primarily to improve the "employability" of young adults' (Ransome, 2011, p.207)?
5. To what extent have we moved away from the more holistic view of higher education that was communicated in the early government commissioned reports (Robbins, 1963; Dearing 1997)?
6. What are the implications for the higher education sector of a, largely unchallenged, one-dimensional employability and skills narrative that is positioned as 'self-evident common sense' (Arora, 2015)?

The approach

This study is based on the premise that the notion of employability should be used to inform and stimulate the debate about the fundamental purpose of education – not to dominate it. The methodology and methods are elaborated upon in more detail in chapters three and four

respectively and the following quote represents both a counterpoint to Leitch's emphasis on 'economically valuable skills' and the guiding principle that underpins this study.

> Education is, at base, a moral enterprise. Education is ultimately about the formation of persons. It is about developing and contributing to the good life of individuals and society. Even though we may disagree about the specifics of what constitutes the educated person and the good life, it is toward these high moral ends that the human enterprise of education in a democratic society is negotiated and directed. We lose our moral direction when this ultimate end is forgotten in the pursuit of more immediate and pressing ends...' (Soltis, 1989, p.124).

I am using an analytical philosophical approach that focuses on the work of contemporary educational philosopher David Carr, whose research is primarily in the field of moral and virtue education. His work serves as a principal source of reference and represents the philosophical lens through which the concept of employability is examined. Carr is an advocate of the Aristotelian notion of 'human flourishing', integral to which is the idea of 'personhood' which is premised on the idea that 'education concerns the initiation of human agents into the rational capacities, values and virtues that warrant our ascription to them of the status of *persons*.' (Carr, 2003a, p.4). I draw, primarily, from his work on moral education in the context of personal formation and human flourishing - particularly with regard to virtue ethics, which provides a theoretical underpinning to this study, (see chapter five). By focusing in on particular ideas and texts, rather than attempt to move my lens loosely across the plethora of theories that abound in the field of moral educational philosophy, I have been able to think and reflect more deeply and consider what it is I am asking of them in the context of my inquiry. Carr's views are not used as a benchmark against which to measure or reinforce my own, but as the central voice around which other voices and perspectives can be identified and heard - and to show that a virtue ethical approach has the potential to provide the foundations upon which a credible alternative employability and skills narrative could be established.

The chapters

In order to set the scene and provide a contextual background, chapter two sets out and explores five key aspects of employability which represent dominant themes in the literature, as well as having both professional relevance and personal interest. The chapter also takes a broad brush approach to the subject of educational philosophy, by way of an introduction to the work of David Carr and to notions of personal formation and human flourishing, and begins to identify and examine ideas that might provide a different perspective to that communicated through the dominant, instrumentally and financially focused discourse, and to explore reasons for its dominance. Chapter three serves as an explanation of, and rationale for, a conceptual analysis approach that enables me to take a neutral position and 'hold [my own] values at bay while search[ing] into the logical features of educational ideas' (Soltis, 1968, p.68). In chapter four I bring a case study approach into the conceptual analysis of employability, by interviewing, primarily, the most senior staff at Canterbury Christ Church University, where I worked for 18 years. The chapter, which conveys the collected responses in narrative form, provides insights into how employability is perceived and engaged with. Chapter five sets out the key findings and analysis of these insights and perceptions in relation to the dominant discourse, employability literature and university policies - drawing on virtue ethics theory to inform the discussion and substantiate my arguments. Chapter six is comprised of the conclusion and suggestions for further research.

This introduction concludes with a brief history of the genesis and evolution of universities. The intention is to provide the historical and contextual backdrop against which the contemporary discussion is set and to show that universities have always:

> transited between transmitting a body of knowledge for the core professions,
> fostering scientific enquiry for furthering the interests of the nation-state,

serving diverse societal interests – community, industry, government – and driving economic growth through human capital formation and technological innovation. (McCowan, 2015, p.280)

Universities and their antecedents

Contemporary universities have their roots in medieval Europe. Guilds of students and teachers emerged in response to, typically mature, individuals seeking and willing to pay for training that could help them access, or advance in, the legal or medical professions. It is widely believed that the first university to be established in this way was Bologna in 1088. In Northern Europe, however, it was teachers who established universities, primarily for younger students and with less emphasis on the vocational. The universities of Paris and Oxford both emerged in the twelfth century. (McCowan, 2015; Willetts, 2017). Tensions between town and gown often resulted in institutions moving locations and, to avoid the demands and hostility of locals and secular authorities, universities would look to the Church for support in ensuring their legal autonomy. It was this 'dynamic of secession and migration [that] drove the second wave of new universities in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Cambridge was founded after such a secession from Oxford in 1209.' (Willetts, 2017, p.14). Political and religious controversies contributed to the continued centrality of universities to intellectual life and it is widely understood that 'these early universities [helped] shape Western culture' (ibid, p.16). By the early part of the seventeenth century there were seventy three universities in Europe. Yet, while Scotland saw the emergence of four universities during this time, no new universities appeared in England after the establishment of Cambridge in 1209, until University College London (UCL) emerged in 1829. This was not due to a lack of demand but because 'Oxford and Cambridge imposed

a bar on their graduates teaching elsewhere in the country to stop the creation of new universities.' (ibid, p.17).

The expansion of universities was followed by a decline in the 1700s, as universities struggled to adapt to the social and scientific developments of the Enlightenment (McCowan, 2015), which saw a move away from faith based epistemologies towards empirical methodologies as a means of providing the answers to societal problems. It was not until the nineteenth century that the situation changed. This period saw significant reforms that resulted in universities in France being replaced by the Grandes Écoles which specialised in training in the practical skills, like engineering, that could help Napoleon's empire grow and prosper. In Germany a new type of university was established in 1810 by Wilhelm von Humboldt which focused on research and aspired to the advancements being made in Britain at the time in the context of the Industrial Revolution. While in Britain itself the long-standing influence and control of Oxford and Cambridge universities was dismantled by 'English Radicals, led by Jeremy Bentham, [who] set up [UCL] as a secular, fee-based college as a joint stock company' (Willetts, 2015, p.21). As UCL did not have university status, the government intervened and UCL became the University of London in 1836.

The next period of expansion came in the Victorian era, which saw the development of a diversity of establishments such as teacher training colleges, institutes of mechanics and technical colleges. At the turn of the twentieth century a number of civic ('Redbrick') universities were established, while in the early 1960's eight new universities ('Plateglass') emerged. The 1960s also saw the publication of the influential Robbins Report on Higher Education. Although Lord Robbins recognised the need for, and importance of, specialist

technical institutions, his vision was for a network of universities and asserted that 'the massive expansion we have proposed for higher education as a whole will facilitate the building up of larger institutions and faculties' (Robbins, 1963, p.128). The report was endorsed by the then (new) Prime Minister, Alex Douglas-Home and the leader of the opposition, Harold Wilson. However, when the Labour government took office shortly afterwards, in 1964, it was at:

> the high point of national planning and scares over skill shortages [and] the Robbins model of forecasting future student numbers with [its] sublime disregard for supposed economic needs for specific skills was very frustrating for the incoming government. [Consequently], Tony Crosland announced a binary divide in higher education with public sector polytechnics alongside the autonomous universities. (Willetts, 2017, p.54)

The creation of polytechnics can be seen as an attempt by government to protect vocational higher education outside of universities, even though universities have always been engaged, to a lesser or greater extent, in professional or vocational training (McGowan, 2015; Collini, 2012; Willetts, 2017). According to Willetts: 'this competitive challenge actually led universities to engage in "reverse" academic drift" and deliver more vocational education themselves' (ibid, p.231). This model was eventually abandoned in 1992 when the polytechnics attained university status and 'the number of universities almost doubled overnight [and] since 2000 more than thirty other institutions, usually former higher education colleges, have gained their university charter' (Collini, 2012, p.31).

This brief history of the genesis and evolution of universities suggests that it is not necessarily what universities do (i.e. teaching, research, scholarship, professional/vocational training) that has significantly changed over the years, rather it is the ways universities are perceived, administered and regulated that have changed. Collini asserts that:

Public debate overwhelmingly concentrates on these latter aspects, partly just because they are readily intelligible and discussable in ways that the central intellectual activities are not. We need, then, to move on to consider, first, the character of those central intellectual activities, since it is they, afterall, that define universities and make them so distinctive; and second, the validity of the various assertions about the functions of these institutions that currently dominate public discussions. We may then be in a position to understand how it is that the ever rising tide of political and media discussion of this topic gives us so little insight into what universities are *for*. (Collini, 2012, p.38).

This short exposition serves not only as the backdrop against which our contemporary discussion is set but also as a preamble to the following chapters which endeavour to provide some of the insights that are perceived to be lacking.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter seeks to inform our understanding of the concept of employability through:

active engagement with writing and other academic and professional artefacts in order to gain a sense of the landscape in which we are working, and figure out where we stand in this landscape, and, importantly, a clear sense of the other individuals and groups standing alongside us. (Brown, 2010, p.176).

The chapter is arranged under the two headings and seven sub-headings below:

Aspects of employability

2.1 Employability and the purpose of higher education

2.2 Employability and skills

2.3 Employability and the labour market

2.4 Employability and identity

2.5 Employability: theories, metrics and models

Employability through a philosophical lens

2.5 The good life: anachronism or aspiration?

2.6 Why does the dominant discourse prevail?

These headings have been chosen because they are most relevant to my examination of the

dominant employability and skills narrative, in the context of the research questions set out

in the introduction to this thesis. They are also central themes of the literature review, which

I have integrated into the sections so as to produce a well-informed, robust and coherent

chapter and improve narrative flow. In addition, the sub headings resonate strongly in terms

of professional relevance and personal interest. The dominant political employability and

skills discourse is represented primarily by the key source documents: Robbins, (1963);

Dearing, (1997); Lambert, (2003); Leitch, (2006); Sainsbury, (2007); Heseltine, (2012); Wilson, (2012); Witty, (2013), which are examined in detail in the first two sections and serve as points of reference throughout. These documents serve to frame the study within a fifty year period and to show the evolution of the employability and skills narrative over that period. They also communicate a consistent and unequivocal message about the importance of skills acquisition for economic growth and chart the associated expectations and responsibilities of higher education.

I will show that the dominant political discourse depicts employability as a deficit model which I argue has emerged from the failure of labour market policies to secure full employment and that there has been a consequential, gradual but significant shift, through policy and practice, in the role of universities. I will also show that government discourse consistently articulates the value of higher education predominantly in economic and skills focused terms, with no apparent acknowledgement of the context-dependent nature of employability or the labour market and other variables over which higher education has little control; nor the fact that employers think beyond the skills discourse in terms of graduate identity (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011). I argue that all of this is contributing to a perception that higher education exists primarily to improve the employability of graduates and that this is creating a skills-defined model of the self. This is a model which is based on a conception of prosperity and human flourishing that is articulated predominantly in terms of wealth generation and has little do with 'the *ideas* about what higher education and learning is *for'* (Ransome, 2011, p.217). Some of these ideas are explored below and in the following chapters.

Aspects of employability

2.1 Employability and the purpose of higher education

This section takes as its point of departure the Robbins Report on Higher Education (Robbins, 1963). The report was in response to the government's request to:

> Review the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain and in the light of national needs and resources to advise Her Majesty's Government on what principles its long term development should be based. (Robbins, 1963, p.1)

The review was set against a backdrop of growing student demand for higher education that was stimulated by the end of Conscription in 1960, the post war 'baby boom' and the introduction of Rab Butler's Education Act in 1944 which provided universal access to secondary education (Ministry of Education, 1944). Robbins remarked that 'every increase of educational opportunity at one level leads almost at once to a demand for more opportunity at a higher level' (Robbins, 1963, p.101). In order to accommodate the predicted increase in student numbers, a rapid expansion in infrastructure was necessary and this led to the emergence in the 1960s of the eight new universities mentioned earlier. One of the key principles that emerged from the Robbins Report was that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (ibid, p.8). The increase in the number of post 16 year old students staying in full-time education in order to obtain the qualifications that would enable them to attend university also 'drove a big cumulative increase in Robbins' forecast demand for university places.' (Willetts, 2017, p.45). In 1964, the newly elected Labour government, under Harold Wilson, faced with national skills shortages and the 'sublime disregard' (ibid, p.54) by the Robbin's committee of future skills needs, announced an

expansion of the sector by introducing a binary divide in higher education between public sector polytechnics and the universities. (Willetts, 2017, p.54).

It was not until almost twenty-five years later, that the next significant report on higher education was commissioned, when Lord Dearing was asked to lead a committee that was tasked with making 'recommendations on how higher education…should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research.' (Dearing, 1997, p.3).   The title of the report 'Higher Education in a Learning Society', reflected the fact that the UK economy was now operating and competing in a knowledge based global economy, wherein employment is 'characterised by increasing demand for more highly-skilled workers' (OECD, 1996, p.3).

Although both the Robbins report and the Dearing report linked skills to the economic imperatives of progress and competitiveness, there was also broader discussion within each about the role and purpose of higher education. The latter report opened with the assertion that the 'purpose of education is life-enhancing: it contributes to the whole quality of life' (Dearing, 1997). Echoing Lord Robbins' views that education should not just be about skills acquisition but also 'the advancement of learning [and the] search for truth' (Robbins, 1963, p.7), it went on to state that '[higher education's] distinctive character must lie in the independent pursuit of knowledge and understanding. But higher education has [also] become central to the economic wellbeing of nations and individuals' (Dearing, 1997, p.51). Appearing just five years after the abandonment of the polytechnic model of higher education when 'the number of universities almost doubled overnight' (Collini, 2012, p.31), the Dearing report acknowledged that 'powerful world economic forces inescapably tie the United Kingdom (UK) more fully into the world economy [and that] there is international

consensus that higher level skills are crucial to future economic competitiveness.' (Dearing, 1997 p.88).

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), 1992) which heralded the creation of the new universities (Richards, 1997) mentioned above, also led to the widening of university disciplines and programmes to incorporate subject areas such as nursing, teaching and social work (McCowan, 2015). This chapter explores the widely held view that mass participation has had a significant impact on perceptions of the purpose of education, resulting in 'a revived form of economic instrumentalism…driven by the idea that higher education institutions are there primarily to improve the "employability" of young adults' (Ransome, 2011, p.207). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) states that a primary purpose of Higher Education is to 'serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy' (HEFCE: 2008, p.6). The notion of obligation, in this regard, is raised numerous times in the literature with regard to universities' associated responsibilities (Yorke, 2006; Bloom, 2013; Arora, 2015) and is couched primarily in terms of 'government steer' (Yorke, 2006, p.4). There is a sense that 'universities and higher education systems 'are strongly tied into the logic and functioning of the changing contemporary political economy' (McCowan, 2015, p.269). Ransome goes further by suggesting that 'in supplying the graduate labour market, the higher education sector proves its usefulness to employers, to students and the wider economy [which] one might suggest [is] a condition for receiving public funds' (Ransome, 2011, p.207). This is reinforced by the assertion that:

> The Government has recognised the need to couple policy change with organisational reform and the introduction of its new programmes is linked with radical changes in the bureaucracies and institutions charged with delivering and administering the existing systems. (Finn, 2000, p.388)

Discussions about the purpose of higher education range from ideal-typical notions associated with the pre-expansion, minority participation period to the post-expansion, mass participation era. The former is perceived to be concomitant with, among other aspects, freedom of enquiry, challenging conventional wisdom, critical engagement and general intellectual capabilities, (Ransome, 2011; Wingate, 2007; Watson, 2014). A view posited by Collini suggests that the primary purpose 'involves extending human understanding through open-ended enquiry' (Collini, 2012, p.92). Watson, however, is critical of Collini for his inability 'to "get" the democratization of higher education' (Watson, 2014, p.101), referring to his 2012 book: *What are Universities for?* as a 'potboiler' (ibid, p.100). Yet, the post-expansion period is widely considered to be associated with an 'instrumental-performative rationale' (Ransome, 2011, p.219) linked to broader economic considerations (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). The view that 'employability has become central to education policies and practice' (Chertskovskaya, 2013, p.706) reflects a concern that assimilation of employability could compromise:

> the university's other functions in a qualitative sense. According to this argument, orientation of course content to the needs of current employers might encourage a change in relationship to knowledge among students (and possibly academic staff), towards a valuing of learning only in so far as it can provide an immediate, tangible and most probably economic benefit. Furthermore, the applied and concrete may come to squeeze out the theoretical and abstract, in order to attend to the perceived needs of employers (McCowan, 2015, p.280)

Some commentators suggest that employability is 'an empty concept' (Yorke, 2006; Cremin, 2010; McCowan, 2015; Moore, 2010) and have challenged the assumptions made about universities' obligation, willingness and ability to 'deliver' employability (Atkins, 1999, Ransome, 2011). Others assert that the sector's responsibility for employability is framed in such a way as to provide a justification for the significant cost to the public purse that implementing the employability agenda represents. (McCowan, 2015).

While ideas about, and understanding of, employability and higher education are complex and contested, there is a view that the purpose of universities has:

> transited between transmitting a body of knowledge for the core professions, fostering scientific enquiry for furthering the interests of the nation-state, serving diverse societal interests – community, industry, government – and driving economic growth through human capital formation and technological innovation. Given this diversity of purposes and functions, we cannot, therefore, read off from history what the aims of a university should be. (McCowan, 2015, p.274)

Nonetheless, there is a suggestion that 'the higher education community runs the risk of jeopardising its credibility by failing to give a clear and incisive explanation of what higher education and teaching are for' (Ransome,2011, p.216). In order to do this it is necessary to explore further the notion of employability, beginning with a shared view (Pegg, 2012; Robinson, 2005; Yorke, 2006; Valenzuela, 2013) that 'for all the topicality and importance of employability as a concept, it remains stubbornly challenging to articulate' (Maxwell, 2009, p.3).

2.2 Employability and skills

While the Robbins Report insisted on a holistic vision for higher education that would enable 'citizens to become not merely good producers but also good men and women.' (Robbins, 1963, p.7), it also recognised the importance of skills and explicitly linked them to the economic imperatives of progress and competitiveness:

> We begin with instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour. We put this first, not because we regard it as the most important, but because we think that it is sometimes ignored or undervalued…And it must be recognised that in our own times, progress - and particularly the maintenance of a competitive position - depends to a much greater extent than ever before on skills. (Robbins, 1963, p.6)

Appearing almost twenty-five years later in 1997, the Dearing report referenced the influential Robbins report, stating that:

> The Robbins Committee saw two distinct strands to the work of higher education in developing individuals: imparting employment skills and developing the general powers of the mind. Both are important objectives for higher education, but we do not find it helpful to make a clear-cut distinction between them (Dearing, 1997, p.73)

The report picked up on the notion of breadth which featured in the Robbins report, and emphasised the need for students to have:

> …a breadth of knowledge and understanding. Apart from responding to the inclination of the student, such education responds to the need in society, and work, for people who have a breadth of understanding and an educational basis from which they can build in a range of directions as life develops. (Dearing 1997, p.75)

In the first five chapters of the report, which are situated primarily in the past and present, there is largely equal weight given to the non-economic value, and values, of higher education and the economic value. However, the emphasis changes when he goes on to discuss, in more depth, the future of higher education, where he talks about 'economic factors' (ibid, p87) and the 'intensive use of human capital [and] powerful world economic forces' (ibid, p88). This is reflective of the changing labour market and associated economic policy aspirations of the New Labour government, under Tony Blair (see next section). The final chapters of the Dearing report focus on both the economic benefits to be gained by individuals from a university education and future skills needs.

Subsequent government-commissioned reviews had much narrower terms of reference than those of the Robbins and the Dearing reviews, both of which insisted on a holistic vision for higher education, with the latter asserting that 'we do not accept a purely instrumental approach to higher education' (Dearing, 1997, p.51). The first of the more recently

commissioned reviews was led by Lord Lambert who was tasked by the government, as part

of the 'major political effort to engage employers and the business community' (Finn, 2000,

p.389), to look specifically at how university-business collaborations might operate more

effectively. The terms of reference included the following:

- Identify the benefits to business of greater interaction with higher education, how this can be promoted and how any barriers holding back business demand for universities' knowledge and skills outputs can be addressed.
- Examine the national, regional and local economic impacts of business-university interactions, including how Regional Development Agencies and Sector Skills Councils can best support such interactions.
- Analyse how business employers can better communicate their skills requirements to a responsive university sector and how they can improve the attractiveness of career paths to graduates and postgraduates, especially in technology. (Lambert, 2003, p117)

Echoing the view expressed by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) that 'the

involvement of universities and colleges in regional, social and economic development

is critical' (DfES, 2003, p.44) and Dearing's reference to 'the growing realisation of the

importance of higher education to the locality of which it is part' (Dearing, 1997, p.197),

Lambert made it clear that university-business collaborations will 'strengthen the role of

universities in their regional economies' (Robbins, 2003, p.65). He goes on to

acknowledge that '…the role of universities is to educate students, rather than to train

them for the specific needs of businesses' (ibid, p.107) but he emphasises, in the same

sentence, that 'it is important for the UK economy that students leave universities with

skills that are relevant to employers'.

While the Robbins and Dearing Reviews considered skills as part of a broader discussion

around the role and purpose of Higher Education, and the Lambert Review looked at the

university-business collaboration, Lord Leitch was commissioned by Tony Blair's

government to look at skills, with the aim of considering 'what the UK's long-term ambition

should be for developing skills in order to maximise economic prosperity, productivity and to improve social justice' (Leitch, 2006, p.1). The title of the work emphasised its aspirations: 'Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills.' The economic hyperbole within the review serves to build momentum for the argument which is couched in phrases such as 'the prize for our country will be enormous – higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice.' (ibid). This 'prize' is quantified in terms of a 'possible net benefit of at least £80 billion over 30 years' (ibid, p.4) and these claims are positioned against a bleak alternative, namely that 'without increased skills, we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all.'(ibid).

The Dearing report (1997) and the Leitch report (2003) were published during the period of Tony Blair's New Labour Governments, during which time the language of employability began to emerge in the context of education (see 2.3), notably within the Department for Employment and Education's strategy *Learning and Working Together for the Future* (DfEE, 1997). The political decision to move the discourse from one of 'employment' to 'employment opportunities' and 'employability' (Finn, 2000) marked:

> a conceptual and very practical shift, from education as an intrinsically valuable, shared resource which the state owes to its citizens, to a consumer product or an investment for which individuals who reap the rewards of being educated…must take first responsibility. This conceptual shift changes fundamentally the relationship between citizen and state and what it means for a society to educate its citizens (Ball, 2010, p.160).

Both reports represent a move away from the more holistic guiding principles for Higher Education advocated by Lord Robbins (Robbins, 1963) towards a neo-liberal 'interpretation of students as consumers of higher education [which] has emerged to become a significant part of the discourse about higher education in England' (Ingleby, 2017, p1). Ingleby goes

on to assert that certain policy documents are based on 'neoliberal encouragement of regulating higher education through market forces' (Ingleby, 2017, p2). This resonates with Carr's view that policy makers are intervening in order to turn Higher Education into a market with 'consumer interests and concerns [demanding] final authority on what is educationally worthwhile' (Carr, 2003, p242).

The neoliberal trajectory continued with the publication of a review into the government's Science and Innovation policies, led by Lord Sainsbury, which followed on from the Leitch Report and aimed to establish how the UK could increase competitiveness and avoid this potentially bleak future. Gordon Brown, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, instructed Lord Sainsbury as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, to 'look in particular at the role that science and innovation can play in enabling the country to compete against low-wage, emerging economies such as China and India' (Sainsbury, 2007, p.1). Reporting to the Chancellor, as well as the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry and Education and Skills, Lord Sainsbury was also tasked with 'taking stock, in the context of globalisation, of the overall impact and balance of Government interventions, at national and regional levels' (ibid, p.175). Two of the seven areas reviewed were:

- Knowledge exchange between universities and business, including examining progress made since the Lambert Review
- The supply of skilled people

The emphasis was on competition, as evidenced by the title of the report: 'The Race to the Top.' Like Leitch, Sainsbury talks about world class skills and, although the difficulty of predicting economic conditions in an uncertain future was acknowledged, he was 'sure that the demand for skills will grow inexorably' (ibid, 2007, p.95). His view was that the best way for the UK to compete, in a global economy would be to 'move into high-value goods,

services and industries [and an] effective science and innovation system is vital to achieve this objective' (Sainsbury, 2007, p.3). In this regard, he expressed particular concern about the 'lack of information on the supply and demand of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Technology) skills' (ibid, p.169). Five years later, in 2012, the Coalition government wanted 'universities to look again at how they work with business across their teaching and research activities, to promote better teaching, employer sponsorship, innovation and enterprise' (DBIS, 2011, p.6). Professor Sir Tim Wilson, former vice-chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire, was asked to lead a review which would consider how to 'make the UK the best place in the world for university-industry collaboration' (ibid). Wilson opened by stating that, since the earlier Lambert Review, there had been a 'huge change in both the quantum and the quality of business-university collaboration.' (ibid, p.1). His argument for the pre-eminence of skills in the relation to economic growth was predicated on his assertion that 'much of the UK Higher Education (HE) system was founded in the context of supplying graduates with the skills needed by employers.' (ibid, p.20). He justified this statement by reminding us of the part played by the first universities in providing graduates for professions such as medicine and law, along with a reference to the former polytechnics and their traditional links with business. He emphasised the importance of skills, stating that there is 'a growing realisation, within both business and universities, of the central role of universities in providing high-level skills…' (ibid, p.1). The Wilson report also recommended that 'strategies to ensure the development and recording of students' employability, enterprise and entrepreneurial skills should be implemented by universities in the context of the university's mission…' (ibid, p.2). Another report was published in 2012, this time by Lord Heseltine who had been given a broader remit to explore 'how we might more effectively create wealth in the UK' (Heseltine, 2012, p,4). The 'No Stone Unturned: in pursuit of growth' report acknowledged and

endorsed the views expressed by Wilson in relation to skills and the associated role and potential of universities (ibid, 2012, p.176). For its part, the Government, in its response to the Heseltine Review, further reinforced the message about skills, stating that 'the Government is forging links between employers and education providers to ensure students develop essential skills for the work-place.' (HMT, 2014, p.7).

The Final review being examined is Sir Andrew Witty's 2013 Review of Universities and Growth, which was asked to take into account the previous Wilson and Heseltine reviews when considering:

> how universities can drive growth in their areas and for the benefit of the wider UK and to disseminate knowledge and best practice. [Furthermore] it should explore the range of ways that universities contribute to their local economies [and] take into account the ways in which university collaboration with both large businesses and SMEs can contribute to their local economies. (Witty, 2013, p.1)

This review is, once again, expressed in economic terms, using language that moves from competition to revolution. The review claimed that 'effective economic engagement is central to many universities [and they] should assume an explicit responsibility for facilitating economic growth…' (Witty, 2013 p.6). In the same way as it endorsed the Wilson and Heseltine Reviews, the Government, in its response to Witty (Witty, 2014, p.14) made its position clear, stating that '…universities should make facilitating economic growth a core strategic goal.' As far as skills are concerned, they are hardly mentioned at all in the review but, when they are, it is mainly in the context of skills as a disembodied commodity that can be provided or supplied to industry. This apparent divorcing of skills from any sense of individual agency or benefit is most apparent when Witty refers to students and graduates in product and income generating terms, using phrases which imply

they are vessels for the 'provision of skills' (Witty, 2013, p.15) and the 'supply of skills'(ibid, p44).

The post-Robbins policy documents examined above are representative of the neo-liberal zeitgeist that continues to shape education in the UK, wherein 'the historical complexities of the English university system are not acknowledged and the creation of a marketplace of providers and consumers is equated with quality teaching and best practice' (Ingleby, 2015, p527). They also serve to support my argument that the primary importance placed on skills over the fifty-year period is a misplaced emphasis which has 'no truck with the *ideas* about what higher education is for' (Ransome, 2011, p.216).

With regard to skills, aside from the immediately obvious question about whether or not they can secure the scale of economic growth that the rhetoric would have us believe, I pose a more fundamental question, namely: what is meant by the terms 'employability and skills'? This is explored below.

According to the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) in order for a business to grow, 'it needs to possess the right skills to meet its business objectives' (Jaffa, 2011, p.21). In a similar vein, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the self-defined 'voice of business', claims that skills, in the context of graduate employability, are 'essential building blocks' (CBI 2011, p.8) and articulates its understanding of employability as:

> a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy (ibid, p.12)

However, businesses themselves find it difficult to clearly articulate, or be consistent about, their skills needs (Robbins, 2003, p.109; Pegg, 2012, p.20; CBI, 2011a, p.23) and to predict future skills needs (Sainsbury, 2007, p.95; Docherty, 2014, p.7). In addition, although it is widely recognised that skills are an integral component of employability and that employers are 'a critical stakeholder group' (Maxwell, 2009, p.1), there is confusion about the word 'skills' itself. (Pegg, 2012, p20; Pool and Sewell, 2007). This is partly due to the inconsistent terminology associated with employability skills, with terms such as 'core skills', 'key skills', 'generic skills' and 'transferable skills' being 'used rather loosely, often interchangeably' (Bridges, 1993, p.4). Employability 'skills' can also include a variety of terms such as 'attributes', 'knowledge', and 'competencies'. These general categorisations are typically further broken down into inconsistent listings of skills and attributes, with the number on the lists ranging from eight to eighty, (Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), 2008; CBI, 2011a; Maxwell, 2009; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Wolf, 2012). There is also an inherent difficulty associated with terminology, lists and taxonomies in general, in that they are likely to vary depending on the source material, who is compiling them, and for what reason or audience. Lists also lend themselves to gap analyses and the temptation is to focus on what is not on the list rather than create a list that all interested parties can agree on. The inconsistent and interchangeable nature of the terminology supports the assertion that 'there is no agreement in the employment and employability sectors about the notions of definition of "skills."'(Pegg, 201, p.:20). This confusion about skills (Atkins, 1999; Bridges, 1993; Watson, 2014), in turn, contributes to the difficulty in establishing a definition of employability and has the potential to impact negatively on a range of interested parties. It can result in the potential skewing of government policy, can make curriculum design difficult and the articulation of needs unnecessarily complicated. It can also cause confusion amongst the student population. In a survey carried out by the

CBI and the National Union of Students 51% of students were unclear about employer requirements. (CBI, 2011b, p.12).

There are two other ubiquitous terms that are also considered to be part of the conversation concerning employability skills; these are 'enterprise' and 'entrepreneurship'. Once again there is no consensus or consistency about what is, or should be, on the enterprise skills list but those that commonly feature, taken from a range of sources, include, commercial awareness, creative and innovative thinking, prioritisation and time management, problem solving, communication, negotiation and persuasiveness skills, collaboration, risk taking, innovation, willing to learn, resilience, opportunity recognition and self-management (Target Jobs, 2017; 2014; Pegg, 2012; Pool and Sewell,2007; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2012). The terms 'enterprise' and 'entrepreneurship' are often used interchangeably and inconsistently. Lambert refers to 'entrepreneurship skills' (Lambert, 2003, p.63), while Sainsbury (Sainsbury, 2007, p.143) uses the term entrepreneurship in relation to university spin-out companies and incubators. For his part, Wilson talks about a 'thriving culture of entrepreneurship' (2012, preface). Once again, there is evident potential for confusion. However, the following quote (QAA, 2012, p.7) goes some way to helping us understand their interpretation of the distinctions:

- Enterprise - is defined here as the application of creative ideas and innovations to practical situations…this definition is distinct from the generic use of the word in reference to a project or business venture.
- Enterprise Education - aims to produce graduates with the mind-set and skills to come up with original ideas in response to identified needs and shortfalls, and the ability to act on them.
- Entrepreneurship - is defined as the application of enterprise skills specifically to creating and growing organisations in order to identify and build on opportunities.
- Entrepreneurship education - focuses on the development and application of an enterprising mind-set and skills in the specific contexts of setting up a new venture, developing and growing an existing business, or designing an entrepreneurial organisation.

These definitions, however, represent an oasis of clarity in a desert of complexity and confusion. The Leitch report admitted that previous unsuccessful attempts to address skills issues, based on asking employers to articulate their future skills requirements, resulted in the prevailing supply driven model that has, as a consequence, had 'a historically weak track record' (Leitch, 2006, p.72). In other words, because businesses are unable to clearly articulate their needs, universities are perceived to be supplying programmes that they – the universities - want to deliver, rather than develop programmes in response to market demand. This has led to a lack of confidence by the business community in the training on offer and a consequent reluctance by employers to contribute to the cost of it (ibid, p. 48). The report adds that the confusion is further compounded by 'the plethora of advisory, strategic and planning bodies' (ibid, p.72) acting as delivery agencies for education and skills in England. Although some of them have now changed their title, many still exist in other guises. The Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), for example, have now been replaced by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) which have financial and operational responsibility for delivering against Local and National Strategic Plans. These plans include skills and, once again, the ambition and aspirations are crystal clear: 'our support for skills needs to be effectively integrated with our support for business growth' (Jones, 2014, p.37). Higher Education features prominently as a key contributor towards these goals, as the South East LEP's Plan states that 'we will develop strong partnerships between Higher Education and businesses within key sectors to facilitate the provision of higher level skills' (ibid, p.11).

In the same way as a services sector has grown up around the target and profit driven needs of the private sector, the momentum that has built up over the past 50 years around the skills

agenda has also generated an associated skills industry, which is a constituent part of the Tony Blair's 'employment opportunities for all' aspirations (see chapter 2(2.3)). It could be argued that it is, in itself, a job creation scheme. However, according to the dominant political discourse, the investment and stakes are so high that there would appear to be no alternative but to drive the agenda forward (Leitch, 2006, p.72). This investment takes numerous forms. One example is the abundance of national, regional and sub-regional agencies involved in education and skills delivery. Many are made up of numerous organisations, such as the Sector Skills Councils (SSC). At the time of writing, the SSC comprises 18 Councils and 4 Boards which are overseen by the Federation for Industry Skills and Standards (FISSS) and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). Another example of significant investment is the billions of pounds of national, local and European funding that has been poured into initiatives, over the years, to stimulate skills development and University-Business collaboration. The most recent and significant funding stream to be announced is the European Social Fund (ESF) programme which has ring-fenced €1,305m for allocation to England under 'Thematic Objective 10: Skills', for the period 2014-20 (Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), 2014, p.19)

While aims and aspirations with regard to employability and associated skills may appear to be convincingly articulated in strategic reviews and policy documents, there is a view that their 'emphasis is less on "employ" and more on "ability" (Harvey, 2005, p.13). This splitting of the word into two parts reflects the nature of the some of the contemporary discussions, in that 'employ' encompasses aspects and issues connected with the labour market and the rate of graduate employment, while 'ability' is more to do with fitness for graduate employment (Harvey, 2005) and embodies such terms as values, engagement and intellectual rigour, (Yorke, 2006; Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011). This duality is also

articulated in terms of the 'absolute' and 'relative' dimensions of employability (Brown, 2003), where the absolute is to do with students having 'the appropriate skills, knowledge, commitment or business acumen to do the job in question [while] the relative…depends on the laws of supply and demand within the market for jobs' (ibid, p.110). Policies related to employability focus primarily on the absolute (Harvey, 2005) and, as the government commissioned reviews we have looked at demonstrate, there is an emphasis 'on skills-based solutions to economic competition' (Hillage and Pollard, 1998, p.4; HEFCE 2015). While 'Higher Education can contribute significantly to the "absolute" dimension of graduate employability…its contribution to the "relative dimension" is necessarily indirect' (Yorke, 2006, p.10). This is an important distinction which shows that, while government discourse persists in articulating the notion of employability and skills in macro terms, evoking quasi-idealistic representations of a fully functioning labour market and consequent economic growth, the literature perceives it in more micro terms, rooting it in a context that is driven by external agendas and influences over which it has little control,(Hesketh, 2000; Yorke, 2006; Dacre and Pool, 2007; McCowan, 2015; Watson, 2014).

Nonetheless, there remains a perception, as reported by Universities UK (UUK), that 'students are studying the 'wrong' subjects and leaving higher education bereft of the skills required in the world of work' (UUK), 2015, p.3). However, this view is challenged by UUK itself (ibid, 2015) and by Atkins, who suggests that the expectation of a consensus among employers around a perceived skills gap is unrealistic and 'may be part of the current myth-making about employability.' (Atkins, 1999, p.271) Similarly, there is an assertion that:

> it is quite wrong to attribute any shortfall in these areas necessarily to a failing of the university. Unfortunately, the simple fact that the university comes chronologically before the primary phase of full-time employment

leads people to the belief that it is the major or even the only influence on employability (McCowan, 2015, p.278)

There is also evidence, based on an empirical study of employers, that:

> Much has been made of the apparent 'skills gap' in the labour force. Yet even this long-standing axiom is in need of re-evaluation. The continued complaints made by employers that they are unable to find the graduates with the requisite skills they require cannot be solely attributed to an 'under-supply' of graduates. There are a number of externalities that colour the supply and demand relationship. (Hesketh, 2000, p.268)

The idea of the importance of external influencing factors to the discussion about employability and the purpose of higher education is a recurring theme within the literature, manifesting primarily in terms of the labour market and associated government policies. It is this aspect that will be examined in the following section.

2.3. Employability and the labour market

The concept of employability pre-dates contemporary definitions, linking back to the 'Third Way' policies of New Labour in the late 1990s, when there was a marked move in government discourse away from 'employment' to 'employment opportunities' and 'employability'(Finn, 2000). Tony Blair's New Labour Government shifted the emphasis away from historical aspirations of securing full employment, promulgating instead the idea of 'employment opportunity for all – the modern definition of full employment for the 21st Century' (HMT, 2000). The idea was first developed by the Shadow Labour Government which, following significant election defeats in 1987 and 1992, rethought its commitment to the aim of full employment. The concept of employment opportunities, rather than full employment *per se,* became central to the New Labour Government strategy 'for

modernising the country and building a nation which is both socially cohesive and economically competitive.' (Finn, 2000, p.384). This economic strategy was also a response to the significant social and economic changes that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, most notably with regard to the changes in employer demand as a result of a move away from 'traditional jobs taken by male, full-time manual workers' (Finn, 2000, p.385), towards 'knowledge work requiring higher level skills and qualifications [and] a shift towards part-time and more flexible work practices' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, p.204). The following quotation taken from the OECD's 1996 publication 'The Knowledge Economy', serves as an example of the broader context within which the UK government was operating:

> Employment in the knowledge-based economy is characterised by increasing demand for more highly-skilled workers. The knowledge-intensive and high-technology parts of OECD economies tend to be the most dynamic in terms of output and employment growth. Changes in technology, and particularly the advent of information technologies, are making educated and skilled labour more valuable, and unskilled labour less so. Government policies will need more stress on upgrading human capital through promoting access to a range of skills, and especially the capacity to learn; enhancing the knowledge distribution power of the economy through collaborative networks and the diffusion of technology; and providing the enabling conditions for organisational change at the firm level to maximise the benefits of technology for productivity. (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 1996, p.7)

It is around this time that the notion and language of employability, with its origins firmly rooted in a labour market context and aimed at getting those classed as unemployed into the workforce, begins to appear in an education context. The Department for Employment and Education reported on its aim to 'build security through employability' in its 1997 strategy: *Learning and Working Together for the Future*. There were three key elements to the strategy:

    i.   a drive to raise basic standards of education from pre-school provision through to universities*,*

ii. create a culture of lifelong learning so that the workforce can "fulfil their own aspirations

iii. meet the challenges of a constantly and rapidly changing world" [and] the "welfare to work strategy"'. (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1997).

Through this strategy, universities became explicitly linked to the notion of employability and the concept of employability has since become a central component of labour market policies (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Subsequently, through policy and practice, there has been a gradual but significant shift in the role of universities, from contributing to economic growth to assuming 'an explicit responsibility' for it (Witty, 2013, p.6).

Employability is closely connected with the move away from interventionist strategies and policies, based on Keynsian economics, towards the current free market system where the government is repositioned as provider rather than regulator and where there is now significant private sector involvement. (McCowan, 2015). There is a view that employability could be considered 'a buzzword for welfare to work strategies' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, p.215). This is echoed by Finn who states that 'the [Tony Blair] government made clear its intention to create a new welfare state geared towards getting people into work…by providing the jobs, training and support that they need' (Finn, 2000, p.388). However, not only does this system provide no guarantee of employment (Chertskovskaya, 2013, p.704), it also positions the individual as being responsible for his or her own employment, with little emphasis placed on structural inequalities and other problems in the labour market (Chertskovskaya, 2013; Fejes, 2010:90; McCowan, 2015). The idea that the notion of employability has been instrumental in a repositioning of the individual within the job market, a repositioning that is perceived to be disadvantageous, even damaging (Chertskovskaya, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013), permeates the literature (Finn, 2000; McQuaid and Lindsey, 2005; Fejes, 2010; Bloom, 2013; Brown, 2003; McCowan,

2015). There is a view that the state, at the same time as presenting employability as 'an attractive right' (Bloom, 2013, p.800), is placing an obligation on individuals to ensure their own employment (McCowan, 2015) and, as a consequence,' being unemployed is seen as the result of not trying hard enough' (Chertskovskaya, 2013, p.705). The notion of employability, therefore, is promoted as a rhetoric of the 'employable self' which, rather than reduce the inequalities associated with class, race, ethnicity, gender etc., may perpetuate them by virtue of the increasing demands being placed on individuals and the potential for them to 'conceal the characteristics that do not fit into what is deemed to be employable' (ibid, p.706). There is a view that 'the dream of becoming "master" of our employment selves is impossible to realize' (Bloom, 2013, p.800) and that employability, therefore, may arguably be little more than an 'ideology of anxious self-improvement' (Valenzuela, 2013, p.863). Today, in an era of student as fee-paying customer and where universities are expected, irrespective of labour market and other variables, to ensure their graduates secure employment commensurate to their qualification, I would argue that the baton of associated responsibility in this regard has been passed on to universities.

According to the Higher Education Academy (HEA), employability, within a higher education context, is to do with 'the teaching and learning of a wide range of knowledge, skills and attributes to support continued learning and career development [whilst] employment [is] a graduate outcome' (Pegg, 2012, p.7). However, although 'the curricular process may *facilitate* the pre requisites appropriate to employment [it] does not guarantee it' (Pool, 2007:7). Put simply, even if an individual possesses the highest level, in-demand skills and superlative personal attributes, and is thereby perceived to be eminently employable, there can still be no guarantee of a job. Furthermore, even if employers were able to articulate their needs and were thus able to find the seemingly 'perfect' candidate

who has the relevant skills, qualifications and attributes, that combination can only ever tell the employer about what the individual has done in the past. Ultimately, 'employers can only assess *potential* [and] have to figure out, on the basis of what is before them, how the graduate will perform in the future' (Hinchcliffe, 2011, p.565). The term 'job' in the context of higher education and for the purposes of this discussion is considered to be graduate-level employment.

Historically, the idea of graduate-level employment has meant a job in traditionally recognised professions such as the medical and legal professions, for which a degree was the necessary entry level qualification. However, the higher education sector's move from 'elite to mass participation' (Ransome, 2011, p.209) has resulted in the widening of employment areas that require degree level qualifications. Furthermore, with the rapid expansion of new technologies and the resultant emergence of associated occupations, it has been necessary to create a new Standard Occupational Classification (SOC), namely 'SOC (HE)'. This enables change in the labour market to be monitored around four categories of graduate employment. Jobs that do not come within the categories below are considered to be non-graduate occupations:

- 'traditional graduate occupations' relate to the established professions;
- 'modern graduate occupations' refer to new professional fields such as IT, software programming, journalism and primary school teaching
- 'new graduate occupations' concern rapidly expanding areas of employment, such as marketing, management and accounting
- 'niche graduate occupations' may not need graduate-level qualifications but contain specialist niches, such as nursing, retail managers, electrical engineers and designers. (Prospects on-line, 2013).

However, although it may be helpful to know which jobs are considered to be graduate-level, it does not follow that there are vacancies within those sectors. There are a number of

reasons why businesses may be unable to take on new recruits, such as: a direct result of the economic climate; an indirect result of the economic climate (e.g. as a cautionary measure, which is likely to be related to a lack of confidence in the market), improved retention rates and a lower strategic focus on graduate recruitment.

Another factor to be considered in connection with the labour market is the employer demographic. According to the Federation of Small Business, at the start of 2016 Small businesses (>10 and <50 employees) accounted for 99.3% of all private sector businesses and 99.9% were small or medium sized (>10 and <249). Total employment in SMEs was 15.7 million which represented 60% of all private sector employment in the UK. (Federation of Small Businesses, 2016). The reality is, therefore, that many graduates in many regions of the UK are more likely to work in small or medium sized enterprises rather than in the corporates and blue chip companies that are most often used as case studies in government reviews and reports (Lambert, 2003; Wilson, 2012; Witty, 2013). Similarly, case study examples of business-university collaborations often feature universities such as Oxford and Cambridge or others that form part of the Russell Group which, according to their website, 'comprise 24 world class, research-intensive universities whose combined economic output is £32 billion per year' (Russell Group, 2017). These are some of the many variables that influence the acquisition of graduate level jobs which are noticeable by their absence in the dominant political discourse on employability.

Although it seems that 'employability implies something about the capacity of the individual to function in a job, and is not to be confused with the acquisition of a job' (Yorke, 2006, p.7), government discourse continues to articulate the value of higher education almost wholly in economic terms with no apparent acknowledgement of the context-dependent nature of employability or the heterogeneity of the student population (Yorke,

2006; Pegg, 2012). Implicit in Yorke's assertion is the notion of individual identity and this aspect is explored in the following section.

2.4 Employability and identity

The notion of identity is primarily portrayed as being a succession of identities, or selves. There is, as mentioned above, the 'very particular ideal notion of "self"…the employable self' as expressed by Chertskovskaya ,(2013, p.701), with the 'attempt to convert people into "employable selves" now entering individuals' lives long before they enter the labour market' (ibid, p.706). Schools have long had work placement and interview technique initiatives and there are now numerous organisations working with schools towards improving employability, such as Amazing Brains and the Prince's Trust. With regard to higher education, there is the student identity which is followed by the graduate identity (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011). If student and graduate identity are considered to be component parts of the eventual employable self, then there is some validity in the assertion that 'employability is a (multi-faceted) characteristic of the individual [because it is] the individual whose suitability for a post is appraised' (Yorke, 2006, p.8).

There is evidence that employers think beyond the skills discourse in terms of graduate identity, often articulating their needs in relation to the features widely referred to as 'graduate attributes' (Hesketh, 2000; Harvey, 2005; CBI, 2011b; Pegg, 2012; QAA, 2014; McCowan, 2015; Jackson, 2016). These attributes are numerous and have been summarised by Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011, p.575) in terms of 'values, intellect, performance and engagement', as follows:

- Values include personal ethics, social values (such as diversity and cultural awareness) and organisational values.

- Intellect means critical thinking and analytical capabilities and the ability to reflect and to challenge the status quo.
- Performance means applying skills and intellect in an employment context
  Engagement relates to a willingness to meet and overcome personal and employment challenges, to be outward looking and to take pride in one's work. (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011).

However, employability is also context dependent and there are multiple stakeholders (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Arora, 2015; Williams, 2015), all with potentially different perceptions that are influenced by their own motivations, interests and relative position within the employability-education eco system. Consequently, although 'a repertoire of attributes and achievements may have a general value' (Pegg, 2012, p.8), that value may be perceived differently by different stakeholders, depending on the 'domains of action in which they work' (Williams, 2015, p.878). This can be seen as an area of tension, or conflict within universities. For example, those who are employed to help enhance the employability of students and graduates may, through their practice, be perceived to be justifying and perpetuating the employability agenda (Chertskovskaya, 2013). Also, although it is reported that diversity awareness is valued by employers, the value placed on this attribute has been shown to be as much to do with business-driven motives as it has with considerations such as respect for others and political correctness. Employers consider diversity aware graduates to be less likely to miss business opportunities and more likely to improve customer/client relationships (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011). Likewise, 'performance' as described above, is ultimately valued primarily in the context of achieving profit focused results. It is important, therefore, 'that students are well informed of [the] nuances of the graduate labour market.' Watson (2014, p.74). Furthermore, individuals will need to reflect on their own perceptions and understandings of the terms 'value', 'intellect', 'performance' and 'engagement' (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.575). As their successive 'selves' move through the various stages, from pupil to student to graduate to employee,

individuals will also need to understand and be able to reconcile the numerous and diverse

cultures, interdependencies, values and expectations of different environments and contexts

at different times. In terms of higher education, and specifically graduate employability,

there is a suggestion that rather than thinking in terms of skills and performance 'we should

think more in terms of practice and identity' (ibid, p.564).

For Ransome ideas about 'self' are inextricably linked to the 'life-transforming' potential

of qualitative pedagogy,

> in the sense that it affects the whole person and not just part of them [and
> can] bring about fundamental changes in self-awareness and sense of self.
> It shapes and filters the ways in which personality is expressed [and] the
> changes that take place tend to be irreversible. The person cannot remain
> untouched by the learning process because this process is one of self-
> enlargement [thus] the object of transformation is the person and not simply
> the extent of their factual or technical knowledge…It increases confidence
> in a person's underlying capacity for critical evaluation as distinct from the
> passive acquisition of descriptive information. (Ransome, 2013, p. 214)

Taking the argument forward, Ransome suggests the development of 'intellectual-moral

criteria for debating…what is worth knowing and is capable of being known'. (ibid), while

McCowan asserts that the capacity to gain employment should not subordinate itself to 'the

graduate's other roles as a citizen of a polity or as a human being…' (McCowan, 2015,

p.281)

Another view regarding the notion of 'self' is put forward by Bloom who, drawing on the

work of French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan to inform his argument,

asserts that employability is framed around the individual's desire for self-mastery which,

in turn, is centred on materially profiting from his or her own life (Bloom, 2013).

Consequently, attempts to help individuals enhance their employability do not contribute to

an 'eradication of exploitation, but rather [to] their right to "self-exploitation"' (ibid, p.787). Employability, therefore, becomes a possible means of achieving self-mastery. He draws on the notion of 'selves' to frame employability as a 'cultural fantasy that organizes identity around the desire to shape, exploit and ultimately profit from an employable self' (ibid, p.785), ultimately concluding, as previously mentioned, that 'the dream of becoming "master" of our employment selves is impossible to realize' (ibid, p.800). In a similar vein, there is a warning of the possibility that individuals may 'use the logic of employability to explain their failures in the labour market' (Chertskovskaya, 2013, p708). There is also a suggestion that 'employability is currently used as an explanation, and to some extent, a legitimization of unemployment.' (Fejes, 2010, p90).

I have shown that the component parts and different 'selves' that contribute to the notion of individual identity and the 'employable self' can be perceived differently by a variety of numerous stakeholders, all of whom may have different expectations that are influenced by their own motivations and interests. What has emerged from the discussion so far is that, while there are differing views about what 'graduate attributes' might include, 'graduate identity' is seen to be part of a dynamic process that is time and context dependent, informed by both previous and contemporary experiences and shaped by external drivers and influences. Consequently, 'it cannot be something that is merely a series of attributes that can be enumerated and ticked off.' (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, p.564). The idea of dynamism, or forward movement, serves as a reminder that the notion of employability is, fundamentally, a human endeavour.

This idea of human endeavour resonates with the notion of 'personhood' which, as mentioned earlier in this study, is premised on the idea that 'education concerns the initiation of human agents into the rational capacities, values and virtues that warrant our ascription

to them of the status of *persons*.' (Carr, 2003a, p.4). This view is central to one of the key arguments put forward in the introduction, namely that the dominant political employability discourse is leading to a skills-defined model of the self. This is a model based on a conception of prosperity and human flourishing that is articulated predominantly in terms of wealth generation. However, it has already been shown that employability is multi-faceted, that skills make up just one of its component parts and that 'employers do indeed think beyond conventional skills discourse' (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.575).   These ideas are further explored in 2.5 below and the notions of personal formation and human flourishing are examined in some depth later in the chapter.

2.5 Employability: theories, metrics and models

Theories

The dominant political discourse on employability is articulated almost entirely in economic terms and is 'based on the assumption that the economic welfare of individuals and the competitive advantage of nations have come to depend on the knowledge, skills and entrepreneurial zeal of the workforce' (Brown, 2003, p.122). This assumption is also evident in European directives and policies (OECD, 1998, p.3; EC, 201, p.11) which, in turn, influence national states' labour market policies. Acceptance of this assumption is associated with what is referred to as 'consensus theory' (Brown, 2003, p.112) which sees the move towards a knowledge economy as an evolutionary stage of capitalist economies and has, as its primary concern, the improvement of skills and prospects for knowledge workers. Consensus theorists assert that employability represents the 'democratisation of capitalism' (ibid, p.113) in that it represents a different power dynamic between employer and employee, with the latter now having more autonomy and control (ibid, 2003). However, there are opposing views which assert that the employability assumptions upon

which employability and labour market policies are based are leading to a disadvantageous positioning of the individual within society, (McQuaid, 2005; Chertskovskaya, 2013; Fejes, 2010; Bloom, 2013; Arora, 2015). As a consequence, rather than being regarded as 'the democratisation of capitalism', employability could be seen to represent 'the democratisation of insecurity' (Brown, 2003, p.108) whereby 'a conforming identity is actually framed so as to appear empowering' (Bloom, 2013, p.802).

The perception of employability as a narrative of common sense, as articulated by Arora (2015), emerges from her consideration of the work of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and leads her to hypothesise that 'the employability agenda [is] an example of an educational priority that has been widely accepted and, yet, directly serves the interests of the hegemony [and] acceptance is, arguably, a form of manufactured consent' (Arora, 2015, p.639). Bloom, too, asserts that 'employability stands as a hegemonic discourse' (Bloom, 2013, p.801). Views such as these are bound up in what is referred to as 'conflict theory…which represents an attempt to legitimate unequal opportunities in education and the labour market at a time of growing income inequalities…and reflect[s] the transformation of capitalism on a global scale' (Brown, 2003, p.114). There is also the assertion that 'knowledge-driven capitalism is…little more than wishful thinking' (ibid).

Investment in human capital is seen to be crucial to improving employability and is couched in terms of skills, productivity and economic growth (HMT, 2000; OECD, 1998; EC, 2015). This broad theory is typically broken down into component parts (Brown, 2003) or 'dimensions' (Williams, 2016) which are identified as: social capital, cultural capital, psychological capital and personal capital, with 'the unifying dimension of capital…broadly defined…as anything an individual possesses that can be seen as leading to an increased

probability of positive economic outcomes, or other personal outcomes relating to the area of work' (ibid, p.887). Brown extends the notion of capital to include institutional and reputational capital as this is perceived to be an important consideration, given the 'application of market principles within public sector organisations, along with a shift towards global benchmarking [which] has made positional competition part-and-parcel of everyday life in schools, colleges and universities' (Brown, 2003, p.121).

Taking into account that the primary purpose of the government commissioned reviews and policy documents is to ultimately influence, or direct, action and behaviour towards political goals, then it is not surprising that the notion of employability as articulated within those reviews are primarily associated with skills that are considered to be economically valuable and 'crucial to future economic competitiveness.' (DfES), 1997, p.88).

Metrics

It is unsurprising that higher education is looked upon to play a role in driving economic growth by ensuring graduates have the appropriate skills for the workforce - assuming there can be some common understanding of what employability skills and the needs of the workforce are. Yet, the research around employability shows that there are many other aspects to higher education and to employability that currently have scant mention within the dominant discourse but which are worthy of consideration and inclusion. For example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) four main purposes for higher education reflect a more holistic view of the aspirations of higher education:

- to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well-equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment

- to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society
- to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels
- to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society (HEFCE, 2008, p.6),

However, quantifying the broader benefits of higher education is perceived to be very difficult. HEFCE acknowledges this difficulty but admits to having no solution: '…we do not have methods presently to measure all these non-monetised benefits.' (HEFCE, 2011, p.20). Similarly, the New Economics Framework Report on the ways that universities benefit society states that:

> marginalization of the broader outcomes from HE stem from difficulties in measurement and monetary valuation and typifies the common focus on economic rather than social and environmental outcomes that are just as important for building a well-functioning and happy society (New Economics Foundation (NEF), 2011, p.4)

The suggestion is that the focus on quantitative metrics of employability is due in part to skills and other instrumentally focused measurements being easier to identify, capture and report. This aligns with an argument put forward by Ransome which links to the audit culture within universities. He states that:

> In the current era of mass participation in higher education … a revived form of economic instrumentalism has emerged, driven by the idea that higher education institutions are there primarily to improve the 'employability' of young adults. (Ransome, 2011, p.207)

He goes on to assert that a consequence of this is that universities are forced to apply:

> the principles of audit and surveillance to the practice of programme delivery [which offer] a relatively direct and simple solution to the problem… *without* waiting for the emergence of a new philosophy of educational purpose.' (ibid, 2011, p.216)

Universities' performance is widely measured against employability criteria, often with funding contingent upon results (Chertskovskaya, 2013). A vast array of tools and methods have been developed to enable students and universities to achieve the employability outcomes required by government, such as personal profiling and personal development planning. There are also the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE) and Key Information Sets (KIS), completion of which is an externally imposed requirement (Pegg, 2012, p.27). Since 2010 universities have been obliged to produce 'employability statements' for prospective students which provide information about the support offered to students towards their employability. This reflects the coalition Government's:

> intent to publish more information about the costs, graduate earnings and student satisfaction of different university courses [as] Graduate employability has been highlighted as a key priority for business by the Confederation of British Industry, and for students by the National Student Forum (HEFCE, 2010a)

Similarly, the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) was introduced in an attempt to capture, not just students' wider learning experiences, but also specific activities that have been engaged in that will contribute to their employability, such as work placements, volunteering, field trips, study trips abroad, charity work etc. These types of activity are considered to be examples of the 'added value' that employers are looking for. In addition, Personal Development Planning (PDP) is widely used across the sector to help students to plan and take responsibility for their personal, academic and career development. PDPs themselves comprise a vast range of tools, including skills auditing, personal profiling learning portfolios, reflective logs etc. (Pegg, 2012, p.27). All of these are becoming increasingly important in terms of metrics. However, once again there is no consistency across the sector in terms of definitions of employability or adoption of tools and methodologies (Pegg, 2012, p.28). Where there is a formal obligation to respond, such as

with employability statements and key information sets, the returns are based on individual institutions' interpretations and circumstances, which makes systematic and meaningful monitoring of data problematic. This serves to reinforce the assertion that 'these practices offer a technical solution at the level of organisation and administration and as such have no truck with the *ideas* about what higher education and learning is *for'* (Ransome, 2011, p.217) – taking us back to the audit culture argument discussed earlier, namely that:

> the more detailed the measurement and the more regularly it is made, the more legitimate it becomes as a mode of institutional activity. Institution-wide, and subsequently higher education sector-wide, meta-analysis of aggregated statistical data is the holy grail of higher education audit culture' (Ransome, 2011, p.218)

Consequently, institutions are more likely to apply the 'logic of audit and surveillance' (Ransome, 2011, p.216) rather than consider any underlying pedagogic principles because it is convenient in terms of administration and is relatively easy to adhere to prevailing, externally imposed, audit regimes. (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Ransome, 2011; Taylor, 2013). In Ransome's opinion, this is another example of conflict, or tension, within universities, in that it represents the perceived divide between:

> those who see higher education as a process of personal development using the academic techniques of qualitative pedagogy, and those who see higher education as meeting the instrumental economic need for employment. The difficulty for institutions is that, in order to meet the needs of both academically oriented and instrumentally oriented students, it is not possible to support one approach to the exclusion of the other. (Ransome: 2011, p.220)

Ransome takes the 'instrumental-performative' versus the 'qualitative pedagogy' argument into the domain of the operational functioning of universities, positioning the 'academic side' against the 'managerial-administrative side', stating that, although a compromise between the two positions would be the best outcome, this would be administratively unfeasible, (Ransome, 2011, p.216). The employability literature largely refutes this

argument, however, by providing much discussion about the potential for, and evidence of, frameworks and models for graduate employability that recognise, and attempt to reconcile, this perceived divide. (Harvey, 2005; Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Pegg, 2012).

Models

While emphasising that universities are not there to respond to every demand that is brought to them by individuals, society, government or employers (Chertskovskaya, 2013; McCowan, 2015), the majority of the discussions revolve around the preference for holistic models which 'places the learner at the centre of our thinking and our approach to developing employability…' (Pegg, 2012, p.5). Looking at graduate identity in terms of the notion of the 'employable self' mentioned earlier, McQuaid and Lindsay suggest that if employability is about the 'character or quality of being employable there clearly must be a role for individual characteristics, personal circumstances, labour market and other external factors' (McQuaid, 2005, p.206). Consequently, their proposed model of employability is informed by, and predicated upon, these interrelated components. Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011) refer to Amartya Sen's notion of capability (Sen, 1993), which they consider to be 'central to human well-being and so, for us, the development of [a] graduate capability set is central to graduate well-being [and living] a satisfactory life' (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.582). Finally, for Robinson (2005, p.14), employability should be set within an ethical framework which incorporates ethical reflection, autonomy (to develop a personal framework), holistic thinking (where the ethical framework and ethical content are not separate) and the development of responsibility.

Despite the apparent inability of government discourse to acknowledge that employability is about much more than skills, tools, models, policies, metrics and money, the literature

shows that there remains a pragmatic determination, regardless of the difficulties with definitions, to address the issues in terms of the development of frameworks and models that enhance employability, without compromising the underlying qualitative pedagogy that is perceived to be fundamental to the notion of the purpose of education (Knight and Yorke, 2003; Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011:582; Ransome, 2011; Pegg, 2012). For the purposes of their discussion, Knight and Yorke (2003, p.5) define employability as 'a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.' However, Yorke, in his role as editor of the HEA's 2006 publication 'Employability in higher education: what it is and what it is not', which forms part of their 'Learning and Employability' suite of publications, refines this earlier definition to become:

> A set of achievements – skills, understandings 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.8)

This is immediately identified as a 'working definition' and is used to discuss a number of associated issues. The first is that the definition itself 'is probabilistic' (sic), (ibid, p.8).

The problem with this, and all definitions, is that it is impossible, in a few words, to succinctly capture or communicate the assumptions and the lived reality behind the terminology because '*true total meaning* [can] never [be] encapsulated in the operational definition' (Jaeger, 1988, p.142). Any definition, therefore, can only ever be a working definition whose sole meaningful purpose is as a point of departure for examining and questioning theories and assumptions. Thus, it can perhaps be argued that, in Yorke's definition above, an assumption has been made to the effect that the mere acquisition of skills and understanding, combined with the possession of agreeable personal attributes will probably: 'convert employability into employment' (Knight and Yorke, 2003, p.5). It might

be further argued that an underlying assumption behind the narrow 'skills and personal attributes' view of employability is that prevailing socio-economic factors are of no consequence. However, both these perceived assumptions run counter to what we have already observed, which is that 'there is so much more to employability than gaining employment.' (Pool, 2007, p.278). Yorke goes on to say:

> Employability goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills, and is evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience [as well as the] ability to operate in situations of complexity and ambiguity. (Yorke, 2006, p.13)

Bridges expands on this, referring to what he calls 'meta skills [which are] the second order skills, which enable one to select, adapt, adjust and apply one's other skills to different situations, across different social contexts and perhaps similarly across different cognitive domains' (Bridges, 199, p.45). The views put forward by Yorke and Bridges resonate with the more sophisticated, intellectual capacities normally associated with professional behaviour and acknowledge the individual as being at the heart of any employment endeavour.

I have shown that the dominant political discourse mentions skills primarily in terms of disembodied commodities that industry needs and graduates will deliver. However, a skill can only be identified as a skill when it has been transformed by a person into an effective action in appropriate contexts and situations. This idea of changing contexts reinforces the observation made earlier that graduate identity, along with skills acquisition and practical application - constituent elements of employability - are part of a dynamic process where continual movement and change, along with reflection and constant re-evaluation form what Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.2) refer to as 'sustainable employment.'

If employability is about the self, then it follows that there are numerous, key core elements which, as suggested by the 'CareerEDGE' model of employability (Pool, 2007, p.280), could also be included within in any definition or model, such as such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-confidence and emotional intelligence (Pool, 2007, p.283). This model of employability is shown below (fig. i).

Figure i: The essential components of employability
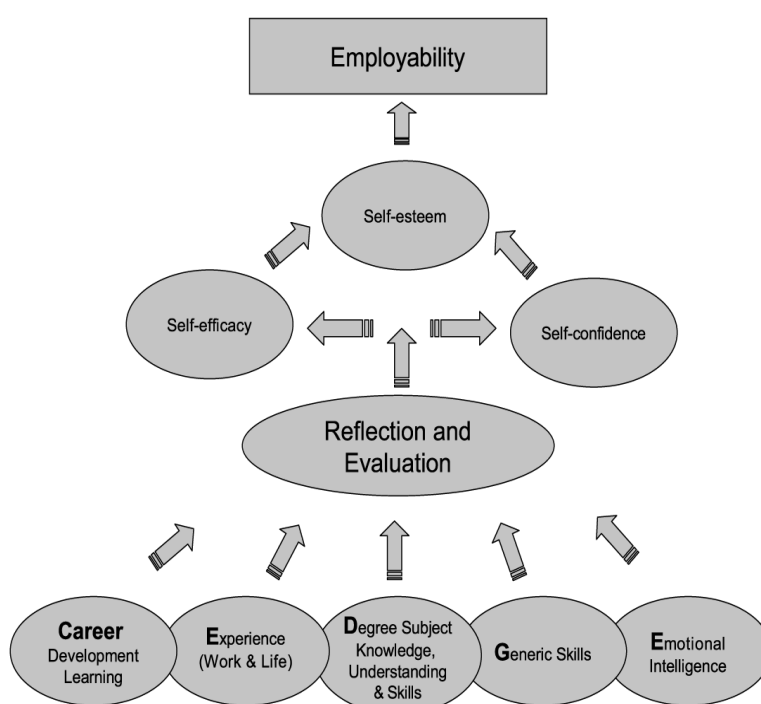
The model, by privileging the idea of 'self', reinforces the primary importance of the person as being at the heart of the notion of employability which is, essentially, to do with human endeavour. The central focus on reflection and evaluation stresses the fundamental importance of individual to the process of converting the component parts of employability into employment, while the flow of arrows emphasises the continual movement and change necessary to 'move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment' (Yorke, 2006, p.9). The model also represents an alternative viewpoint to that of the dominant discourse which places significant emphasis on the prime

importance of economically valuable skills in driving growth. Although I have shown that 'the continued foregrounding of skills to access and describe employability endures, as it is a quick and relatively easy way to engage employers, curricula and student' (Pegg, 2012, p.20), the CareerEDGE model of employability suggests that 'universities and government would be better employed promoting student employability   through the promotion of graduate identity and wellbeing…rather than directly through employability skills.' (ibid, p.20).

Employability through a philosophical lens

The aim of this section of the literature review is to identify and explore alternative perceptions of the purpose of education with a view to identifying and justifying counter arguments to the primarily instrumentalist and financially focused perspective communicated through government discourse. This is a perspective that appears to regard students and universities primarily as means to an end, namely mechanisms for introducing skills into the workforce and growing the economy. The incremental emphasis on skills over this short period is evidenced by the fact that the word 'skills' appears 75 times in the Lambert Review (2003) and 244 times in the Wilson Report (2012). In the Robbins Report (1963) the word appears eight times.

Having demonstrated that employers think beyond conventional skills discourse' (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.575) and that 'personal ethical qualities of honesty, integrity and trust are expected on appointment, ahead of any other skill or competence.' (ibid, p.570), this chapter considers some reasons why the dominant, economic and skills focused discourse prevails. It also explores what is meant by the phrase 'good men and women' that was used by Lord Robbins in the context of his vision for higher education (1963, p.7), and

argues for a view of education that is to do with 'the promotion of human well-being or flourishing' (Carr, 2003a, p.33).

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the notion of employability is primarily associated with economic objectives which reflect 'British-market led educational trends [that have contributed to] the cruder, more instrumental conceptions of schooling that mostly incline to reduce educational quality to productivity and commodity' (Carr, 2003a, p.242). However, the employability literature which informs the preceding chapters indicates that education and employability are not mutually exclusive, being as much to do with the development of the person as with economic development. This could be summarised as follows:

> Education is clearly both more and less than equipping young people with the knowledge, understanding and skills that may be useful (vocationally, healthfully or therapeutically) to them in adult life: it is *more* because young people could come to master and exercise such skills without ever valuing them for their own sake, and it is *less* because some of the subjects and activities that are acquired for their instrumental value have few or no non-instrumental person-constitutive features. (Carr, 2003a, p.12)

If we accept the argument that 'such forms of knowledge, understanding or skill are more constitutive features of personhood than contingent or disposable commodities of individual and social consumerism' (Carr, 2003a, p.12), then we can begin to move the debate about the meaning or purpose of education away from a dominant political discourse that depicts human flourishing in terms of wealth generation, towards a discussion that situates the person and moral purpose at the centre of conceptions of education. 'Personhood' is premised on the idea that 'education concerns the initiation of human agents into the rational capacities, values and virtues that warrant our ascription to them of the status of *persons*.' (Carr, 2003a, p.4). By definition, therefore, 'it actually concerns *personal* formation [and

it] is hard to see how it can avoid the transmission of values, or of substantial views of the good life that go beyond mere cultivation of attitudes of disinterested tolerance and respect for others' (ibid, p.80).

The chronology of the employability and skills narrative, as articulated in the dominant political discourse over the fifty year period under review, charts the gradual move away from consideration of the non-instrumental value of education towards an ever increasing emphasis on an 'instrumentalist logic [which] requires us to say what a subject is *for*… than to any real sense and sensible appreciation of the human value of [it]' (Carr, 2003a, p.9). Although Carr takes issue with the word 'for' in relation to discussions about the purpose of education, asserting that the word 'for' is, in itself, problematic: 'particularly the failure to appreciate that there is a significant non-instrumental use of "for"' (Carr, 2003a, p.10), I would argue that the nature of the contribution education makes to personal formation leads necessarily to questions about what exactly education is preparing individuals for. Is it for a 'good' or 'worthwhile' life? (Frankena 1970; Peters, 1963; Carr, 1998, 1999, 2003a) or is it about developing 'good' citizens? (Robbins, 1963).

2.6 The good life – anachronism or aspiration?

This section seeks to understand what is meant by the phrase 'good men and women' that was used by Lord Robbins in the context of his vision for higher education (Robbins, 1963, p.7) and argues for a view of education that is to do with 'the promotion of human well-being or flourishing' (Carr, 2003a, p.3).

The idea of human flourishing as the *raison d'être* of education, and its central importance in relation to how we ought to live our lives, originates from Greek philosophy. In *Georgias*, Plato (1960) recounts an occasion when the philosopher Socrates, his teacher, criticises the

skilled rhetoricians, or orators, of the day for what he considers to be their wrongly held –

and publicly shared - view that the notions of 'good' and 'right' and 'better' are synonymous

with the privileged, and powerful, ruling minority who hold and wield power over what his

opponent in the argument, Callicles, refers to as the 'half-witted' majority.   Such was the

skilfulness and influence of these paid orators, or Sophists, that the idea of what constitutes

a good life came to be consistent with the pursuit of personal advantage and the

accumulation of power and wealth, facilitated by the rhetorical and influencing skills

acquired from established Sophists such as Callicles.   Socrates makes clear his

disapprobation of the orators and, through accomplished argument, asserts that the

accumulation of power and wealth is not, in and of itself, constitutive of the good life. He

asserts that the life of a tyrannical despot, for example, who is enslaved by his own relentless

pursuit of power and lack of concern for others, cannot be considered good in its own terms

because conduct needs to be regulated by the knowledge of what is right and good. He

concludes that:

> …the supreme object of a man's efforts in public and in private life, must
> be the reality rather than the appearance of goodness [and that] oratory is
> to be employed only in the service of right…' (Plato, 1960, p.148)

Carr picks up on this idea of the knowledge of the good, linking it to the Socratic notion of

the virtuous life, as embodied in:

> the four cardinal (Hellenic) virtues of courage, temperance, justice and
> prudence (or wisdom)…Since it is just this knowledge that it is the business
> of education in general and moral education in particular to impart [and]
> only those with some real insight into that knowledge are well placed to put
> others on the right track to the good life. Correspondingly, those who have
> not engaged in serious enquiry into the good life, via disciplined pursuit of
> knowledge and truth are not fit to advise on the proper conduct of
> education' (Carr, 2003a, p.76)

A contemporary interpretation of this could be that interest groups, in the context of market driven perceptions of the purpose of education, do not necessarily know best. The view remains, however, that:

it is arguably the key problem of market conceptions of educational provision that any concomitant commodification of education or schooling must give consumer interest and concerns final authority on what is educationally worthwhile: educational quality and value must ultimately turn on its being so regarded by that interest group' (ibid, p.242)

Consequently, and to take the Socratic argument to a logical conclusion, 'educators might well find themselves deeply at odds with prevailing social attitudes and values.' (ibid, p.76). The educator is largely overlooked in the discourse around employability, yet the role is integral to the formation of the person with inherent obligations to instil positive values and attitudes which, by implication, extend beyond teaching and training to encompass the idea of improving individuals. The idea of improvement is not just bound up in any normative understanding of, or adherence to, the prevailing moral codes or being aware of which virtues might assist in leading a good life but in an understanding of ourselves and our human condition. Carr asserts that:

...education as opposed to training in pre-specified skills is nothing less than a collaborative exploration of the key conditions of human wellbeing or flourishing – of precisely the search for the good life – good teachers cannot be less implicated than students in this search. (Carr, 2006b, p.178)

The idea of education as a collaboration between student and educator is emphasised here and is expressed in terms of a 'genuine interpersonal moral association [which] necessarily involves some affective or empathetic sensitivity to the needs of others in their particular circumstances' (Carr, 2003a, p.65). The interpersonal moral association approach, with its equal emphasis on the affective and the cognitive domains, is more representative of the holistic view of education articulated by Robbins, who describes the need for both 'instruction in skills [and] general powers of the mind' (Robbins, 1963, p.7) and Dearing,

who advocates 'the development of the general powers of the mind [which] underpins the development of many of the other generic skills so valued by employers, and of importance throughout working life' (Dearing, 1997, p.73). Unlike the skills-driven model of education, which is essentially transactional in nature and homogeneous in design, these earlier government-commissioned reports take into account what Edward Said, albeit in a different context, refers to as the 'complicating humanity' (Said, 2003, p.150) that underpins any human enterprise.

There is a view that skills are 'mere appendices to our humanity and not continuous with and constitutive of it' (Hart, 1978, p.215). The idea that skills are peripheral to what Carr refers to as 'personhood' (2003a, p.30) resonates with Aristotle's distinction between moral wisdom (*phronesis*) and productive or technical reason (*techne*). Whilst the latter is primarily concerned with effective means to achieving prescribed ends, the former is also concerned with 'reflection on the moral worth as such of those ends as goals of human flourishing' (Carr, 2006b, p.172). Aristotle's distinction between the two is pertinent in the context of the discussion about the emphasis on skills within the government discourse. We have already seen that Universities are increasingly being measured on the employability of their graduates and that employability skills are consequently becoming embedded in the curriculum and feature prominently in prospectuses. Industry links are a component of league tables and fee-paying students are increasingly likely to choose their university on the basis of their likelihood of acquiring industry relevant skills and graduate level jobs. Whilst these are understandable aspirations, it could be argued that the economic growth goals that underpin the skills agenda, with little or no apparent counterbalance in terms of *phronesis* is likely to result in a skills-defined model of the individual, whereby, 'it isn't just skills that are means: those who acquire them become means as well' (Johnson, 1998,

p.204). In other words, graduates are seen predominantly as vessels for injecting skills into the economy, as emphasised in the current prevailing discourse which privileges the financial return on investment that education can bring to the economy and the individual, rather than the broader benefits implicit in the idea of 'human flourishing'.

Whether ideas of the good life are expressed in terms of having the best life one is capable of (Frankena, 1970), a flourishing life (Carr), or engaging in worth-while activities (Peters, 1973), implicit in all of them is the notion of personal formation or personhood. Whilst acknowledging the relative importance of different forms of knowledge, Carr asserts that that 'any of them might be valued *other than* educationally' (Carr, 2003a, p.12). He stresses that: '…any educational appreciation of such forms of knowledge or activity would be a matter of relating them in ways not entirely reducible to considerations of practical utility. (ibid). Meanwhile, Frankena asserts that educating for the good life must necessarily involve fostering: 'the dispositions whose actualization in conscious, waking life will issue in the person's concerned having the best life he is capable of at least if he so wishes and fortune is willing'(Frankena,1970, p.22). Frankena positions his arguments in terms of means-dispositions and end-dispositions. The former refers to engagement in activity that is instrumentally but not intrinsically good, whilst the latter relates to 'an experience or an action that is worthwhile in itself and finds its place in the good life primarily for that reason' (ibid, p.24).

This section of the discussion has focused on the person as being at the heart of what education is about and has begun to suggest a counterpoint, or counterbalance, to the dominant, skills-focused discourse expressed in terms of human flourishing. It has been shown that it is very difficult to discount in any debate about education what are essentially

inherent, but not necessarily incompatible, dichotomies. It would seem that there are numerous answers to the question 'which of the numerous forms of learning encountered in human culture(s) are to be considered crucial for the personal development of young people?' (Carr, 2003a, p.7). Just as importantly, however, it is essentially 'coming to see that such forms of knowledge, understanding or skill are more constitutive features of personhood than contingent or disposable commodities of individual and social consumerism' (ibid, p.12). According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948)

> Everyone has the right to education [and] education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations…

Carr argues that education, like the health and legal professions, are inherently – and morally – concerned with the promotion of health, justice and freedom, all of which are 'basic pre condition[s] of the flourishing of each and every human being' (ibid, p.38). Furthermore, they are all normative models and are essentially moral practices. It is for these reasons, therefore, that: 'we may reasonably regard health, justice and education as universal human rights in the absence of which any human life stands to be seriously impoverished or diminished' (ibid, p.39). However, he goes on to make a clear distinction between the domains of health and law and that of education, stating that:

> whilst the contribution of medicine and law to civilised flourishing is to some extent remedial or compensatory – we seek medical or legal aid mainly in circumstance where there is deficit of health or justice – education and training are more obviously sought for their own inherently life enhancing benefits (Carr, 2003a, p.49)

The life enhancing nature of education and its contribution to the notion of human flourishing are at the core of this discussion about the purpose of education - what it is

preparing the individual for and the sort of person it is helping to develop. It is a view of education that is communicated in the early government commissioned reports by Robbins and Dearing but one which becomes diluted almost to the point of extinction by the end of the fifty-year period of this study. The dominant discourse becomes one of skills-acquisition and employability, motivated by wealth generation and promoted through language that privileges the potential benefits whilst concealing critically important contributory factors such as labour market conditions and individual circumstances. As mentioned previously, fee-paying students are perceived to be effectively purchasing skills that they believe will secure them something they would not be able to otherwise have, namely a graduate level job. Consequently, it could be argued that education could now be regarded, like medicine and law, as a deficit model. Nonetheless, the perception remains that:

> Educational institutions are one of the spaces straddling the public and the private in which the self is formed and directed, and where institutional and community life is navigated. It is commonly accepted that the right to universal education under girds freedom in the modern world [and] practices of education should protect and contribute to the flourishing of public life (Cardus, 2016, p. 13)

The notion of the good life and the life enhancing benefits of education seem to be in danger of becoming marginalised within the current market-led model of education which associates them almost entirely with economic growth and personal financial return on investment. If, rather than anachronism, we consider as aspirational the view that it is the role of education to help individuals to 'grow in the wisdom and virtue conducive to their living not just skilled or well-informed but also morally worthwhile lives' (Carr, 2003a, p.42), then it is necessary to understand why the dominant discourse prevails, challenge it and seek ways of redressing the balance.

2.7 Why does the dominant discourse prevail?

There are many potential responses to this question, some of which could be linked to issues explored earlier, such as the marketization of Higher Education and the nature and influence of stakeholder groups and these are explored in later chapters. However, the following sections will focus on two areas that have not been looked at in any depth but which might be considered contributory factors. These relate to the ideas that:

- The rhetoric is powerful and persuasive

- There has been a decline in epistemological theorising

The rhetoric is powerful and persuasive

This section starts by picking up on the assertion that education could be seen as a deficit model, whereby students attend university to acquire skills that they don't already possess in order to secure graduate level employment. This idea is consistent with the key message communicated through the majority of the government documents reviewed for this study which appear to be, in the main, 'discourses of deficiency'(Osgood, 2009, p.741). The language used emphasises the bleak consequences if the UK does not deliver the skills the economy needs to compete globally (Leitch 2006, p.4) and the material benefits to be gained if it does (ibid, p.1). Many of the assertions throughout the government commissioned review and reports are backed up by convincing facts, figures, tables and charts. In addition, the statistics and related information provided throughout the documents scrutinised within this study are from perceived knowledgeable and eminent sources and, as such, we are, more likely to believe them to be true (Bridges, 1999). If we accept that: 'a truth claim may be defined as a claim made by a knowledgeable observer in good epistemological conditions; that is to say, someone in a position to "know" what is the case' (Lawson, 2002, p.92), then it follows that much of

what is claimed in government discourse may be true. However, it may equally be the case that it is 'cultivated and carefully crafted to have certain effects [and] make political ambitions and goals…seem logical and necessary.' (Osgood, 2009, p.748).

Osgood's view demonstrates that there are other theoretical perspectives that could be applied to this research area. Osgood adopts a post-structural-feminist/Foucauldian approach and uses critical discourse analysis 'to dismantle existing, but previously unrecognised/unnamed modes of domination…' (ibid, p734). She argues that policy documents 'are cultivated and carefully crafted to have certain effects [and] make political ambitions and goals…seem logical and necessary' (ibid, p748). She is also of the view that policy documents are constructed as narratives of deficit (ibid, p739), whose 'problem solving stance… distorts the totality of human experience by reducing it to those dimensions which are amenable to treatment as mere difficulties to be solved.' (Freire, 1974, ix). A critical discourse analysis is used to explore and challenge dominant, political narratives which, according to Johnstone, represent 'conventional ways of talking that both create and are created by conventional ways of thinking [and] constitute ideologies [that] serve to circulate power in society.' (Johnstone, p3). Furthermore, a feminist theoretical perspective informs Osgood's assertions that policy texts are 'laden with classed and gendered notions [and are] premised on an alleged, evidence-based necessity of meeting targets and improving quality, at the expense of ethical considerations and with the intention of silencing "alternative discourses that might pose a threat,"' (Osgood, 2009, p737). The feminist position challenges 'the authoritative voices of male-centred science and social science' (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p39) and, as such, lends itself to an interrogation of the policy documents examined in this study, the development of which were all led by men and commissioned by male Prime Ministers. For Harding, a

feminist perspective represents 'a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of the "real" world' (Harding, 1993, p51) and, in an attempt to ensure feminists are able to produce valid knowledge, she has developed the notion of 'strong objectivity', arguing that knowledge that is 'strongly objective [is] less partial and distorted' (ibid, p68) than the prevailing, male-centred knowledge. While she recognises that the idea of objectivity can be problematic, Harding asserts that it is 'useful in providing a way to think about the gap that should exist between how any individual or group wants the world to be and how in fact it is.' (ibid, p72). This resonates with a view expressed by David Carr, who states that '…if the world is not as our theories take it to be, then it is not the world but our theories that are mistaken.' (Carr, 2003, p129).

Nonetheless, the dominant employability and skills narrative prevails and displays superior rhetorical abilities, fuelled by the urgent necessity of meeting the government's economic aspirations and given the projected dire consequences of failure (Leitch, 2006, p.4). It is also in our collective interest that the UK economy should prosper and grow. Consequently, those who pay tax may be persuaded by the arguments put forward by government reports and policies; those who are in receipt of benefits may be similarly persuaded; industry and society clearly benefit from a strong economy; fee-paying students need to believe the assertions to be true; parents want to see their children secure good jobs and teachers want to play their part in doing all they can to make aspirations a reality. This shows that, by definition, we are all stakeholders and that there is some validity in Carr's assertion that there can be no 'disinterested truth' (Carr, 2003a, p.123).

However, Johnson likens the 'skill-talkers' (Johnson, 1998, p.203) to the Sophists in relation to their ambitions, rhetorical abilities and their plausibility which potentially make 'them more dangerous than those who [are] completely wrong' (ibid, p.202). If we accept the

view that Sophistry is a 'passive acceptance of information with no active searching for truth' (Johnson, 1998, p.205), then we have, indeed, moved away from Lord Robbins's view of the purpose of education and the role of higher education, namely that:

> the search for truth is an essential function of institutions of higher education and the process of education is itself most vital when it partakes of the nature of discovery…the world, not higher education alone, will suffer if ever they cease to regard it as one of their main functions. (Robbins, 1963, p.17)

Although Robbins is speaking here about the search for truth in the context of 'the advancement of learning…research [and] discovery' (ibid), the concept of truth, itself, is important to our further exploration of the reasons why the dominant discourse prevails. We can perhaps understand how the language used within government discourse, articulated by seemingly knowledgeable and influential individuals and underpinned by convincing statistics, might paint a very persuasive picture - but how can we know what is true? Why do we appear to be so willing to believe – or at least accept - the dominant discourse? As a point of departure for addressing these questions, we will examine some phrases used by Lord Leitch in his review: 'Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills', within which he asserts that:

> Without increased skills, we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all…Skills is the most important lever within our control to create wealth and to reduce social deprivation [and] 'economically valuable skills' is our mantra. The prize for the UK is great - a more prosperous and fairer society [and] a possible net benefit of at least £80 billion over 30 years. This would come from a boost in the productivity growth rate of up to 15 per cent and an increase in the employment growth rate by around 10 per cent. Social deprivation, poverty and inequality will diminish. (Leitch, 2006, pp.1-4)

Whilst we cannot, without a great deal of research and probing, know whether these statistics and assertions are true, we can *choose* to believe them. According to David

Bridges: 'a proposition is only true if and only if it corresponds with a fact' (Bridges, 1999, p.601). The phrases taken from the Leitch Review quoted above make many assertions based on purported facts but, according to correspondence theory, we need to check the assertions against the facts and decide if there is a credible correspondence between them. It could be the case, however, that the facts have been misrepresented or taken out of context and could therefore mislead or direct the reader towards a particular interpretation. The following quotation used by Leitch is an example of this:

> The challenge of delivering economically valuable skills has been a longstanding concern for the UK. Even back in 1776, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* suggested that "the greater part of what is taught in schools and universities… does not seem to be the proper preparation for that *of* business" (Leitch, 2006, p.47) (My emphasis).

This would suggest that the conversation and concerns around skills have been around for almost 250 years. However, by inserting the word '*of*' in his version, Leitch has misquoted the original text which is shown below in an extract from the original:

> But though the public schools and universities of Europe were originally intended only for the education of a particular profession, that of churchmen; and though they were not always very diligent in instructing their pupils, even in the sciences which were supposed necessary for that profession; yet they gradually drew to themselves the education of almost all other people, particularly of almost all gentlemen and men of fortune. No better method, it seems, could be fallen upon, of spending, with any advantage, the long interval between infancy and that period of life at which men begin to apply in good earnest to the real business of the world, the business which is to employ them during the remainder of their days. The greater part of what is taught in schools and universities, however, does not seem to be the most proper preparation *for that business*. (Smith, [1776], 2005, p.631) (My emphasis)

Adam Smith does not use the word 'of' in his account. My view is that Leitch's version evokes an image of 'business' as we understand it today in its metonymic sense, rather than what I take to be the intended meaning of preparing mainly 'gentlemen and men of fortune'

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for the roles they will be taking up within society. It is my view that Leitch has produced a potentially misleading interpretation that is anachronistic and serves to support the contemporary dominant discourse. This misquotation could have been a deliberate act or it could have been a typographical error. Nonetheless, if we take the words at face value, in good faith, and make no attempt to corroborate the facts then, by implication, we are accepting that there is a correspondence between the reported facts and the claims made. Particularly, as we have already indicated, that it is in our interests to believe them. Furthermore, according to Bridges (1999) we are also more, or less, inclined to accept or reject a claim based on how coherent it is and how it aligns with our personal beliefs and values. However, whether we ultimately choose to believe or disbelieve Lord Leitch's claims, our choice does not make the claims, or the underlying facts, true (or untrue).

Evoking the broad concept of 'truth' in an attempt to help us explore the persistence of the dominant discourse, has led us to also consider the notion of 'fact' which, in turn, has led us to see how claims can be constructed in certain ways. This has, ultimately, resulted in what appears to be an unhelpful circularity of argument. Nonetheless, for Bridges, the correspondence theory:

> Is the closest of the five [theories of truth] I shall consider to a common sense understanding of what we mean when we claim the truth of a belief. It makes it especially clear why the truth of a belief is independent of the fact that someone believes it. (Bridges, 1999, p.602)

An important observation to be made at this point is that, regardless of what we choose to believe or disbelieve, the ultimate purpose of government commissioned reviews and policy documents is to influence, or direct, action and behaviour. However, it is precisely because claims: 'can be distorted by those who have interest in suppressing or misrepresenting the

truth...that universities must maintain their position as centres designed to limit these distortions' (ibid, p.608).

The reviews and reports looked at for this study employ what Carr refers to as a narrative of 'description and prescription' (2003a, p.57), whereby certain facts and figures, set within a deficit context, are used to substantiate a certain viewpoint in order to encourage or direct certain actions. In this case, the deficit relates to skills and the actions relate to the creation and implementation of numerous mechanisms, tools, and subventions aimed at growing the UK skills base. As Wilson reminds us, 'the enhancement of skills has been a constant target of funding interventions' (Wilson, 2012, p.21).

Carr, however, suggests an alternative viewpoint, proposing that we should look at what *value* can be inferred from facts. It is difficult to argue with empirical facts, such as: 'in OECD comparisons of 30 countries, the UK lies 17th on low skills, 20th on intermediate and 11th on high skills' (Leitch, 2006, p.66). However, whether we agree or disagree with the idea of skills acquisition as a panacea for economic growth and a prime driver of educational policy, it is likely that we can, to some extent, recognise the value of skills in human terms. Many differences of opinion tend to focus on the 'prescription' rather than the 'description' elements and implications of government policy - not just in terms of the how and the what, but the intrinsic versus the extrinsic value of the how and the what. However, if we accept that there is some value in the notion of employability, not least in that it represents a laudable attempt to boost productivity, increase employment and reduce social deprivation, poverty and inequality (Leitch, 2006, p.4), then it may be the case that differences of opinion are, for the most part, not 'disagreements between those who value the one *rather* than the other, but disputes between people who value *both,* but cannot see their way clear to the simultaneous promotion of both' (Carr, 2003a, p.60).

We have already observed that a key purpose of government reviews, and particularly policy documents, is to take a particular position and privilege a particular message. However, Robbins and, to a certain extent Dearing, show that it is possible to advocate certain viewpoints and suggest certain actions in a way that does not compromise a holistic vision for education. Robbins demonstrates an awareness of the implicit human element and an understanding of the value of education, in the broadest possible sense, to humanity – not just to a particular segment of it. This awareness and understanding is not visible in the latter reviews and reports.

There has been a decline in epistemological theorising

Epistemology is 'the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity' (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Across the centuries:

philosophers of education have routinely paid considerable attention to knowledge, truth, justification rationality, and other epistemological notions…for these concepts are closely connected to matters central to educational endeavours' (Siegel, 1998, p.19).

The Robbins Report on Higher Education was published in 1963 when, arguably, philosophy of education was in its prime, with influential thinkers such as Richard Peters and Paul Hirst making significant contributions to the education debate. Since that time, however, there has been 'a deep suspicion of theory unless its relevance to improvement of practice is clear and unmistaken (Pring, 2010, p.24) and a decline in educational theorising, or even interest, which may be:

> related to a loss of philosophical confidence – in the light of "postmodern" critiques of [the] enterprise of systemic knowledge construction nowadays simply referred to as the "enlightenment project" – in any common-sense construal of human knowledge or enquiry as a matter of the discovery of *objective* truths about a mind-independent order of reality' (Carr, 1998, p.xi)

The enlightenment project is described by Reader as: 'an emphasis on the primacy of reason as the correct way of organising knowledge, a concentration on empirical data accessible to

all and a belief that human progress was to be achieved by the application of science and reason (Reader 1997, p.4). It is this idea of the primacy of reason and the superiority of empirical methodologies, of quantitative over qualitative paradigms, that is important to the discussion because the perception persists that there is a lack of philosophical confidence in the field of education. Pring links this to the idea of the 'false dualism' of educational research' (Pring, 2000, p.247) which is often expressed in terms of soft knowledge and hard knowledge. Hard knowledge is generated by those disciplines which operate within quantitative paradigms, such as the natural sciences, where results are quantifiable, provable and replicable. Soft knowledge is primarily associated with outcomes that have an impact on individual and societal wellbeing and are often referred to as such precisely because they are difficult to quantify and measure. Empirical methodologies provide both a language and a means for researchers to communicate the results and value of their work. Conversely, researchers in the field of education, who operate mainly within qualitative paradigms and produce mainly soft knowledge, struggle with problems of 'description and interpretation: how to portray texts or events under study in the absence of clear decision rules and validating methodologies.' (Labaree, 1998, p.5). Other labels attached to research are 'pure' and 'applied', with the former relating to knowledge production that contributes to the construction of theory whilst educational research has an 'applied' focus on practice and policy. The fact that there are no standard or consistent methodologies for interpreting and validating the 'soft' knowledge produced by educational research puts it at a distinct disadvantage when compared to 'hard' knowledge outputs, and leaves researchers unable to articulate the value and impact of their work to internal or external audiences.

These disadvantages are further compounded by the perceived absence of a cumulative body of knowledge in educational research which, has come about as a direct result of the

circumstances mentioned above and which, in itself, attracts criticism (Pring, 2000). This is emphasised by Labaree who states that:

> …the knowledge base of educational researchers leaves them in a position of marginal credibility with the educators and educational policy-makers for whom their research findings should be of greatest utility. (Labaree, 1998, p.8)

While Wellington states that 'educational research can provide illumination of and insight into situations, events, issues policies and practice in education at all levels [and] can show important connections and correlations.' (Wellington, 2000, p.1), there is a view that:

> Educational research is being subject to damaging criticism from both outside and within the research community. The external critics are impatient of research which does not give evidence-based answers to the questions they ask. The internal critics condemn the very research which seeks to provide those answers. These differences are reflected in the rigid distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. (Pring, 2000, p.247)

This notion of a 'rigid distinction between quantitative and qualitative research' is important to the discussion. Educational research, when considered within an epistemological context, straddles the divide of quantitative and qualitative research paradigms; with formal research into education emerging in the early 1900s (Lagemann, 2002; Wellington, 2000), towards the end of Modernism. When Postmodernism emerged around the middle of the 20th century, educational research was, therefore, at a relatively early stage of its development as a field of study and would still have been influenced by empirical methodologies. The emergence of Postmodernism brought with it a questioning and re-evaluation of many of the prevailing hegemonies, assertions and assumptions. Dominant ontologies and epistemologies were challenged and reality and knowledge became subjects for debate in their own right. Enlightenment notions of truth and reality were fundamentally questioned

in the context of understanding social constructs and a there was a perceived need for a different mode of 'educational inquiry that brings together both deductive and interpretive models.' (Hartas, 2010, p.43).

While these aspects are, arguably, some of the contributory factors in what might be perceived to be a decline in epistemological theorising in the field of education, when it comes to discussions about employability in the context of the debate about education more broadly, Jaeger argues that, unlike science disciplines where claims can be shown to be empirical fact, the field of education often deals 'with terms that have a large affective or perceptual component' (Jaeger, 1988, p143).

Conclusion

It has been argued to this point that employability is a contested and complex concept. Some of the complexities have already been articulated and I have shown that, in the same way that there is confusion about what is meant by 'skills', there is no consistent definition or apparent common understanding of 'employability.' This difficulty with reaching a consensus on a definition is evident in HEFCE's guidance on producing employability statements which states that: 'we have not provided a definition of "employability." Universities and Colleges should use a definition that is relevant to their institution's approach'. (HEFCE, 2010b). The difficulty is further explained by the claim that 'employers, potential employees and wider society can and do have fundamentally different perspectives on employability' (McQuaid, 2005, p.214). The individuals who populate these groups, as well as others such as governments, funding bodies, research councils, colleges, universities and, of course, the student body, bring with them a myriad of cultures, beliefs and attitudes that colour perceptions and influence expectations in relation to any subject.

It could be argued, therefore, that any concept will, by default, start from a position of contention and that employability is no exception. However, I have shown that the stakes, the investment and the expectations are very high in this regard and it is important, therefore, to examine some of these differing perceptions and perspectives.

Furthermore, the persuasive power of the financial-economic based narrative of employability, reiterated over the years through a steady stream of reports, reviews and policies, along with a perceived decline in epistemological theorising, has resulted in an uncritical acceptance of the dominant political employability narrative and a tacit acceptance of the importance of, and need for, a skills driven model of education. Moreover, given the apparent absence of any groundswell of serious challenge from the higher education sector, and our apparent willingness as a society to accept the dominant political discourse around employability and skills, the narrative appears to have succeeded in positioning itself as self-evident common sense (Arora, 2015). This study seeks to show the value of using an analytical philosophical approach to exploring and challenging a concept that has not only infiltrated the collective consciousness but has the potential to profoundly influence our views about the fundamental purpose of higher education and to radically change practice.

Finally, if we accept that skills are one component of a healthy and competitive economy and that at least a part of what universities are for is to ensure 'that the graduates emerging from the HE system are ready and able to contribute to future economic growth through the provision of knowledge, skills and creativity in new business environments' (Pegg, 2012, p.6), then a wider understanding of the aspects of employability, in the context of higher education, will help us navigate around the associated complexities, achieve some clarity

and draw some conclusions about notion of employability in Higher Education. The following chapters will further contribute to this wider understanding.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter serves as an explanation of, and rationale for, a conceptual analysis approach that is underpinned by the philosophical notion of human flourishing. It also provides the personal and professional contexts behind the motivation for engaging in this research.

Personal context

I began work at Canterbury Christ Church University in 1999 and held the role of Director of the Research and Enterprise Development Centre from 2004 until I left the institution in 2017. The role involved leading a team that provided a range of professional services across the institution – a function that is not unique to Canterbury Christ Church, with most universities having similar Centres or Departments. Part of my role involved keeping up to date with reports, reviews and policies relating to university and business interaction and collaboration. The first government-commissioned review that I had to scrutinise was the Lambert Review of Business and University Collaboration (Lambert, 2003), in which the term 'employability' appears numerous times. Part of the remit of the Centre, at that time, was student enterprise and entrepreneurship, primarily in the context of providing ideas and support for extra-curricular initiatives relating to self-employment. I remember noticing Lambert's suggestion that: 'Funding Councils should require universities to publish This information [on] graduate and postgraduate employability' (Lambert, 2003, p.108) and feeling vaguely concerned about it. This was due mainly to the fact that I was unclear about what employability actually meant and, assuming a definition could be provided at some stage, what the metrics might look like and whether they could ever realistically be implemented.

Over the next few years, I noticed an increasing emphasis in subsequent reports and reviews on the notion of employability – with an associated, consistent and persuasive message that promoted skills as a panacea for economic growth. I felt uncomfortable with what had now clearly become the dominant discourse and, given the ubiquity of the terms 'skills' and 'employability', I began to feel that they were being privileged at the expense of what I believed education, particularly higher education, should be about. I felt conflicted as my personal beliefs and values were increasingly at odds with my professional role and responsibilities and that, by continuing to ignore my concerns, I was somehow complicit in perpetuating the discourse. However, I enjoyed my job, liked working at Canterbury Christ Church University and continued to subscribe to the values upon which its identity and ethos are claimed to be based, as shown below:

- The development of the whole person, respecting and nurturing the inherent dignity and potential of each individual
- The integration of excellent teaching, research and knowledge exchange
- The power of higher education to enrich individuals, communities and nations
- Our friendly, inclusive and professional community of students and staff, preparing individuals to contribute to a just and sustainable future. (CCCU, 2017d).

My formal education, at a single-sex secondary school, was unremarkable and, apart from the family's move to Scotland for a year when I was 13 years old, largely uneventful. Although I was consistently in the top three in my class in almost every subject and went on to achieve numerous 'O' levels and a couple of 'A' levels, I could not attend university at 18 years old, due to family circumstances. Nonetheless, my relentless curiosity, hunger for knowledge, love of learning and determination to achieve what I aspired to, namely a degree in French, drove me to attain this eventually at the age of 43 years (with a Masters coming ten years later). I was the first person in my family to attend university, having done so whilst simultaneously bringing up a family, working part-time and studying for a

teaching qualification. I went to university not with a career in mind but to study a subject that I remain passionate about. However, in common with many people, my educational experience transformed me both personally and professionally.

Reflecting on why all of this was so important to me, I came to realise that my perceptions of, and belief in, the life-enhancing and transformative power of education – both on a personal and societal level – have been largely influenced by my parents who lived through the Second World War and who, like most parents, wanted their children to have better lives and opportunities than they were able to have. Although baptised into the Church of England as a baby, I am not a practicing Christian and neither was my English mother (unbaptised) nor my Scottish father (who referred to himself as a 'lapsed Catholic'). My values have come out of my working class background, where education was seen as a way to better oneself and one's circumstances. For my father in particular, the idea of honouring (or, more exactly, not dishonouring) the family name was very important. Consequently, associated values of honesty, integrity, compassion, respect and tolerance were instilled in me, along with a strong work ethic. I believe the latter came partly from the example set by my father who was determined to be neither defined nor constrained by his disability, following an industrial accident at the age of 39 years (I was five years old), which left him with serious, and permanent, damage to his left leg. Although my values and beliefs emanate from a different source than those of Canterbury Christ Church, the University's statement of values reproduced above, influenced by the Christian principles of its Church foundation, accords with what I consider to be important.

I was becoming increasingly concerned that these values could potentially be compromised by a seemingly unquestioning acceptance of the political dominant discourse around

employability. Furthermore, I was beginning to feel as though the inner conflict I was experiencing in my role was compromising, if not my ability to do my job, then my motivation to do it. I felt it was important for me, therefore, to challenge the dominant discourse and find out if my concerns had any basis in fact. The Professional Doctorate in Education gave me the opportunity to engage with my professional role and confront and question these perceived personal-professional tensions.

The quote by Jonas Soltis that appears in the introduction to this study, which conveys his view that: 'education is, at base, a moral enterprise [concerned] ultimately about the formation of persons' (Soltis, 1989, p.124), succinctly captures my view about education and led me to further reading. This culminated in my decision to focus on the work of contemporary educational philosopher, David Carr, whose field is, primarily, moral and virtue education. I felt that using Carr's work as a lens through which to examine the concept of employability, in the context of a renewed discussion about the nature and purpose of education, particularly higher education, would enable me to bring employability into the centre of the debate. It would also enable me to interrogate my view that ideas of employability and skills, linked firmly with economic growth and wealth generation, seem to be disproportionately emphasised over the aspects of education that I consider to be important, such as personal development and attributes (which Carr refers to, *qua* Aristotle, as 'human flourishing' and 'personhood').

I know from the numerous reports that I dealt with every day, along with my roles and responsibilities in relation to European and other Funding Bodies, that millions of pounds worth of financial interventions as well as countless initiatives and Non-Governmental Associations (NGAs) have been invested into the skills agenda over many years – yet still industry is claiming that there are skills gaps and that graduates are not 'work-ready'. This

leads me to question the seemingly dominant position accorded to employability and skills and to suggest that, over the years, we appear to have moved away from a more holistic view of the nature and purpose of higher education and should consider identifying and perhaps reinstating some of the elements associated with human flourishing that may have been lost along the way.

This thesis enables me to pose questions, challenge dominant discourses, and investigate perceptions and understandings (including my own) of the concepts of education and employability, through the lens of an educational philosophy to which I am pre-disposed.

Approach

Studying for a doctorate, while carrying out a demanding, full-time job as Director of the Research and Enterprise Development Centre, necessitated an approach to the research and methodology that was manageable and able to accommodate family commitments and demands. My starting point was the need to understand the concept of employability, how it is perceived outside of the dominant political discourse, including within Canterbury Christ Church University itself. Working at the University provided me with an opportunity to bring a case study approach to the conceptual analysis which involved interviewing, primarily, a number of the most senior staff in the University. Full details of the methods used and the data captured can be found in chapter four.

It is important, at this point, to reflect on my position as an insider researcher (Anderson, 2010). The insider researcher's position is 'all about delving deeply into areas and sites in which they are already involved [and] undertaking deliberate, systematic enquiry to generate understanding based on evidence. Their tacit knowledge of the site may be how an issue or study is chosen initially, but the collection of data is expected to challenge

these previous understandings, deepening them in unexpected ways.' (Anderson, 2010, p313). Just as importantly, it is about recognising that the 'resistance, conformity and struggle that [we face] are threaded through our historical narrative into the fabric of our lives; shaping [us] and the lens through which we look when exploring our lives.' (Duckworth, 2013, p5)

My insider positioning meant that I was operating across what Soltis refers to as 'the personal, the professional and the public perspectives.' (Soltis, 1989, p125). I would also add another perspective, which is 'female'. Although I hold my own views about the purpose of education, as mentioned earlier, my chosen approach aligns with the view that 'one of the strengths of the neutral stance of analysis is its potential to provide a methodological means to hold our own values at bay while we search into the logical features of educational ideas' (Soltis, 1968, p.68). However, I acknowledge that 'all human attributes are brought into the research situation by researchers' (Stanley, 1983, p48), and that feminist methodology, in particular, 'is grounded in women's experience [and] logically…cannot be independent of the ontology, epistemology, subjectivity, politics, ethics and social situation of the researcher.' (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p16). On this basis, feminism can be understood as constituting 'a distinct set of values within the research situation.' (Stanley, 1983, p49). Stanley and Wise argue that:

> it is impossible both to experience and not to experience, to do research and not to do research through the medium of one's own consciousness [and] that the researcher's own experiences are an integral part of the research and should therefore be described as such. The kind of person we are, and how we experience the research, all have a crucial impact on what we see, what we do, and how we interpret and construct what is going on. It should not be taken-for-granted as its backcloth…but instead [be] absolutely and totally [the] central feature of the research process and made a central part of the research report, not hidden from view and disguised through claims of "objectivity"' (ibid, pp48-50).

Faced with the definitional, ontological and epistemological challenges associated with the notion of objectivity – described as 'the term that men have given to their own subjectivity' (ibid, p49) – Harding 'in order to escape having to choose between subjective knowledge and objective knowledge' (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p50) has developed the notion of 'strong objectivity' (Harding, 1993, p68). She argues that knowledge that is 'strongly objective [is] less partial and distorted than the prevailing, male-centred knowledge.' (ibid). Strong objectivity means 'treating the researcher and the subjects of knowledge as embodied and visible, and also as socially heterogeneous, [and asserts that] feminist knowledge is located within an explicit, historically specific, political and epistemic community of women.' (ibid, p51).

The rationale for my chosen methodology can be articulated against each of the four perspectives mentioned above, and globally in terms of the virtue ethical theoretical framework within which my thesis is situated. This rationale is articulated below.

Personal: I consider myself to be acting as a moral agent with regard to respecting promises of confidentiality and in relation to 'dealing not with "subjects" in research, but with real people who deserve respect as persons, who require me to recognise their claims for ethical treatment. I also may wrestle with my internally developed ethical codes as I try to navigate the world of persons in face to face situations.' (Soltis, 1989, p125)

Professional: There is a change in focus when moving from the personal to the professional which is characterised by 'the "I" of the personal becom[ing] the "we" of the professional perspective [which recognises that] membership in a professional community carries with it binding collective obligations [and where] group norms and sanctions become relevant to

one's decision making and conduct as a practitioner in a way not experienced by non-practitioners.' (ibid)

Public: Soltis asserts that 'as persons and professionals, we also operate in the public domain' (ibid, p126). Taking a public perspective means acknowledging that a 'broader community exists beyond our own community of practice [and] as educators and researchers…rais[ing] ethical questions of how we advance or diminish the rights or wrongs of our society by means of our work within it.' (ibid).

Female: I acknowledge that my role of insider researcher, informed by my personal and professional views and experiences and shaped by my lived experience as a female, would lend itself to a 'strong objectivity' approach that would situate my 'distinct set of values [as the] central feature of the research process.' (Stanley, 1983, p49). However, while my work is informed by the four perspectives articulated above, I have chosen a conceptual analysis methodology because this approach has enabled me to take a neutral position and 'hold [my own] values at bay while search[ing] into the logical features of educational ideas' (Soltis, 1968, p.68). Furthermore, this methodological approach has allowed me to 'illuminate the connections between concepts within a particular discourse' (Katz, 2010) and to show how this has resulted in a deeper understanding of the concept itself. Most importantly, it has enabled me to position employability as the central feature of the research so that it can inform the debate about higher education, rather than dominate it.

Finally, I have focused on the work of David Carr because I find his commitment to interrogating the complex nature of the relationships between education and what it means to be human both laudable and important; and his arguments for moral purpose in education persuasive. It is primarily because of his cogent insistence on the central

importance of the person and moral purpose to conceptions of education that I use his

work as the philosophical lens through which to analyse the concept of employability.

Conceptual Analysis

A concept can be described as:

> an idea or mental image which corresponds to some distinct entity or class
> of entities, or to its essential features, or determines the application of a
> term, and thus plays a part in the use of reason or language
> (oxforddictionairies.com)

It is difficult to understand or explain a concept without recourse to analogy and context.

The concept of time, for example, conjures a number of mental images that can relate to a

variety of contexts, ranging from telling the time to time travel. This suggests that 'concepts

are *mind-made*, and *applied* to human experience rather than abstracted from it' (Carr,

2003a, p.110) and that, in order to have some understanding of a concept it is necessary to

have a 'meaningful contextualisation' (ibid). With regard to the concept of employability,

the context is predominantly provided by the government and communicated primarily

through the dominant discourse in terms of the acquisition of a range of skills that

individuals need to acquire in order to secure a job, generate personal wealth and grow the

national economy. However, although the context is dominant, it does not follow that it is

meaningful. Bringing a case study approach to the conceptual analysis helps to 'force

abstract and vague ideas into concrete and more meaningful contexts' (Soltis, 1968, p.67).

Use of a semi-structured questionnaire to interview, primarily, the most senior staff in a

single university was chosen to help facilitate understanding of how employability is

perceived and practiced within the institution, from the perspective of those individuals with

whom the primary responsibility and accountability for its interpretation and

implementation rests. The responses (the data) are conveyed in narrative form in chapter

four, where fuller details of the methods appear; and are analysed in chapter five, in relation to the employability literature and the university's policies.

A consequence of the dominant employability context, as articulated within the dominant political discourse, is the need to generate definitions and criteria in order that the acquisition of skills and the securing of jobs can be evidenced, or measured. These are referred to as 'operational definitions' by Jaeger (Jaeger, 1988, p.136) who states that 'the operationalist approach maintains that all concepts should be defined in terms of the measurements (operations) that will be used to determine their presence and magnitude.' Jaeger also refers to: 'linguistic arbitrariness', where 'definitions are *essentially* arbitrary [and the definition] is thoughtfully proposed and appears reasonable to the proposer' (ibid). He also refers to this as 'the Fallacy of Definitional Irresponsibility – the idea that one can define concepts in any way that seems appropriate or convenient.' (ibid, p.135).

Soltis, (1968, p3), after Scheffler, talks about the idea of a 'stipulative definition', which is one that has been invented and put forward by the proposer as the defined term that will serve as the stipulated meaning for the purposes of the discussion or argument – regardless of other meanings, or interpretations. This differs from a 'descriptive definition [which] purports to adequately *describe* what is being defined or the way in which the term is used' (ibid, p.3). However, it does not follow that, having stipulated a definition, other definitions (stipulated or descriptive) are being denied or discounted, as: 'stipulation of this sort is merely a device or convention of keeping things straight [and] the objective description of anything is but an attempt to be true to what is in the public domain' (ibid, p.5). Finally, there is the 'programmatic definition' which is explained as: 'a definition which tells us overtly or implicitly that this is the way things should be. To say what something should be

is quite different from trying to say what it actually is or merely saying, "I'll use this to mean it for now"' (ibid).

While the dominant discourse around employability and the role of higher education seemingly provides a programmatic definition that is articulated in primarily economic terms, Lord Robbins's view that education should also be about producing 'good men and women' (Robbins, 1963, p.7) aligns with a definition suggested by Soltis, where education is 'the means by which a society attempts to develop in its young the capacity to recognize the good and worthwhile life' (Soltis, 1998, p.5). These ideas serve to flag a fundamental issue that is central to ideas about education which is that implicit in these - and most - definitions of education is 'the prescription or normative statement: "Education *ought* to develop in people the capacity to recognize the good and worthwhile in life"' (ibid). These ideas are explored further in subsequent chapters.

Philosophy of Education

Education emerged as a branch of philosophy during the period following the publication of the Robbins Report in 1963 (Robbins, 1963). According to the philosopher R.S.Peters, whose educational theory 'is arguably the most sustained attempt to address the question of the meaning of education of the last half-century' (Carr, 2003b, p.197) the philosophy of education is distinct from established branches 'such as epistemology, ethics and philosophy of the mind [in that] it draws on [them] and brings them together in ways which are relevant to educational issues.' (Peters, 1973, p.2).

The 1960s saw the introduction of the Bachelor of Education degree and the establishment of Philosophy of Education positions within educational institutions (Pring, 2010, p.22),

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along with a change in title from Training Colleges to Colleges of Education and a transition in terminology, such as Teacher Training to Teacher Education and Physical Training to Physical Education (Peters, 1973, p.54). For Peters, the difference between 'training' and 'education' and the intrinsic versus extrinsic value of education are central tenets of his philosophy, (Peters, 1973). Carr articulates his fellow philosopher's viewpoint as follows: 'for Peters, intrinsically worthwhile knowledge is the truth-focused knowledge of cognitive understanding rather than (say) the (instrumental) knowledge of practical skill.' (Carr, 2003b, p.198). While this study will show that forms of knowledge, intrinsic versus extrinsic and instrumental versus non-instrumental continue to be debated within higher education and across the employability literature, the philosophy of education as conceived in the 1960s and the worldviews of its philosophers have succumbed to subsequent paradigms that set out to question and challenge the prevailing narratives. Similarly, while:

> Philosophy was an essential and much needed component of the education of teachers, now it is no longer regarded as such. Future teachers, more often than not, are prepared for their professional life without any reference to the philosophical thinking about education – its aims and purposes, its content or its links with the wider preoccupations of society – which has been conducted and argued about over the centuries (Pring, 2010, p.21)

With regard the definition of 'philosophy', there are many: ranging from references to the Ancient Greeks' system of beliefs and values and the use of reasoning in understanding the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology), to more informal descriptions, such as: 'broadly speaking, *philosophy* has three concerns: how the world hangs together, how our beliefs can be justified, and how to live'. (Holt, 2009). My understanding is that philosophy is to do with all of these and that philosophers are interested in how concepts or ideas relate to one another, in order to illuminate, clarify and provoke thought. Gingell asserts that 'what makes education interesting, and philosophy of education important, is that here we have an area of life where different concerns interact with one another in

complex and important ways' (Gingell, 2010, p.156). Employability, is one of these 'different concerns' and this study, by exploring the complex interactions, will demonstrate how:

> ideas shape thinking about practice (whether that be the practice of the teacher or the practice of the policy makers) in unacknowledged ways; [and how] philosophy [can] make those ideas explicit, subject them to criticism, and influence practice, not by providing alternative theories or bodies of knowledge for the guidance of practice, but by ensuring that the assumptions behind practice are tenable and coherent.' (Pring, 2010, p.24)

The study takes, as a point of departure, the Robbins Report which was tasked with reporting to the government of the day 'on what principles Higher Education's long-term development should be based' (Robbins, 1963, p.7), and asserted that these principles should include consideration of higher education's role in developing 'not merely good producers but also good men and women' (ibid). As I was interested in exploring the notion of 'good' in the context of employability and education, it was necessary to identify a strand of educational philosophy that could shed some light on what Robbins might mean by 'good' and also on Soltis's view of education as 'a moral enterprise…ultimately about the formation of persons [and] about developing and contributing to the good life of individuals and society.' (Soltis, 1989, p.124). The idea of the person is important to this study and is central to one of the key arguments, namely that the dominant political employability discourse is leading to a skills-defined model of the self, wherein the notions of prosperity and human flourishing are articulated predominantly in terms of wealth generation. David Carr's conception of human flourishing is in stark contrast to this and is based upon the assertion that 'education concerns the initiation of human agents into the rational capacities, values and virtues that warrant our ascription to them of the status of *persons*.' (Carr, 2003a, p.4).

As emphasised in the introduction, Carr's views are not used as a benchmark against which to measure or reinforce my own, but as the central voice around which other voices and perspectives can be identified and heard. It is also important to state that I will not be analysing, *qua* philosopher, David Carr's theories; rather I draw on them to inform our understanding of what we might '*mean* when we say of something that it is "good"' (Norman, 1983, p.2) in the context of a conceptual analysis of employability and higher education. Nor is it the purpose of this study to delve into the deeper philosophical question: 'what kinds of action are good or right?' (ibid, p.2).

Nonetheless, I acknowledge that 'it is difficult to criticize the way things *are* without some sense of how they *ought* to be and that this 'makes the normative/philosophical at some point unavoidable' (Standish, 2010, p.7). I show throughout this study that employability and higher education are perceived as being of value. The methods I have used (see chapter four) to capture and analyse data not only enable me to show this but also to provide some insights into shifts in perception about employability and higher education over the years.

Conclusion

In (2.2) I argue that definitions in themselves are problematic and would therefore seem, ultimately, not to be 'helpful or even accurate accounts of existing concepts they [are] supposed to define' (Jaeger, 1988, p.137). Consequently, the purpose of this study is not to redefine the concept of employability but to analyse the existing concept with a view to gaining an understanding of the concept itself, what it can contribute to the broader debate about education and how it can help address the questions set out in the introduction. This acknowledges that 'complex concepts are…not reducible in any plausible way to simpler replacements, and are too important to be disposable in favour of any such replacements' (Jaeger, 1988, p.144). However, 'concepts have to be mediated. If they are simply adopted

unthinkingly, then they fail to do the conceptual work we ask of them.' (Su et al, 2010, p.86)' Conceptual analysis goes beyond such questions as: 'what is *the* definition of employability?' and explores the ideas behind important educational issues, in order to illuminate, inform discussion and provoke thought. Concepts themselves:

> have a dual role in the internal process of understanding and the external process of communicating those understandings…Concepts have to be mediated. If they are simply adopted unthinkingly then they fail to do the conceptual work we ask of them (and might rightly, therefore, be termed "jargon") (ibid, 2010)

 Although I hold my own views about the purpose of education, as mentioned earlier, my approach aligns with the view that 'one of the strengths of the neutral stance of analysis is its potential to provide a methodological means to hold our own values at bay while we search into the logical features of educational ideas' (Soltis, 1968, p.68)

Chapter 4: Presentation of findings

Introduction

This chapter investigates the way the institution I worked in from 1999 to 2017, Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), perceives and engages with employability. It is largely informed by views captured through recorded, semi-structured interviews with, primarily, staff operating at the most senior level within the university, whose ultimate responsibility it was to consider and implement government policy and deliver against the values based mission of the university. Key strategic documents that reflect institutional thinking and operational practice have also been examined.

Given the potentially vast scope of the subject matter, I decided to frame my study, in terms of time-period and key source material, within the fifty year period from 1963 and Lord Robbins' Report on Higher Education (1963), to 2013 and Sir Andrew Witty's review of Universities and Growth (2013). This period was chosen because it:

- captures the evolution of employability from its political origins to its current dominant position in government discourse
- demonstrates a consistent and unequivocal message about the importance of skills acquisition for economic growth
- charts the increasing role and associated expectations of higher education in delivering the employability and skills agendas

I will show that a sense of nostalgia for the pre-expansion period of higher education is coupled with an emphatic insistence on the relative importance of employability in a period of mass participation, and that there is a similar insistence on the broader, non-economic, 'good' of higher education for the individual and society. The responses are analysed, in chapter five, in relation to the dominant political discourse which is primarily, but not exclusively, represented by the key source material referenced above, the employability

literature that has largely been incorporated into chapter two, and notions of personal formation and human flourishing. The responses capture changing perceptions of employability and higher education over a chronological period of time and expose the complex and multi-faceted nature of employability within higher education.

Formulating the interview questions

Thirteen interviews were carried out over the three month period, August – October 2016, with five females and eight males taking part, whose length of service ranged from fewer than 10 years to over 30 years, broken down as follows:

Years' service	Number
<10	1
10-19	4
20-29	3
30-35	5

In order to be clear about what it was I needed know from the respondents, it was necessary to refer back to my research questions, which are reproduced below:

1. What is meant by the terms 'employability' and 'skills'?
2. Is the argument for skills as a panacea for economic growth, as articulated within the dominant political discourse, justified?
3. Is the political perception of, and approach to, employability shared by universities and businesses?
4. Is the instrumentally and financially focused discourse contributing to the perception that 'higher education institutions are there primarily to improve the "employability" of young adults' (Ransome, 2011, p.207)?
5. To what extent have we moved away from the more holistic view of higher education that was communicated in the early government commissioned reports (Robbins, 1963; Dearing, 1997)?
6. What are the implications for the higher education sector of a, largely unchallenged, one-dimensional employability and skills narrative that is positioned as self-evident common sense? (Arora, 2015)

I needed to formulate questions that would not only enable me to produce informed responses to these questions, but also generate a narrative that captured a changing picture over a period of time. Each participant had worked within the higher education sector over a number of years and they all received, and signed, an Information Sheet which stipulated that they must be working in a role that encompassed or included some aspect(s) of employability, be willing to share their perceptions and views and to engage in subsequent discussion, as appropriate. Consequently, I was confident that the terminology, questions and context would be understood.

Taking into account all of the above, I devised the following questions:

1. How would you summarise your understanding of the purpose of education when you entered the [Higher Education] profession?
2. How long have you been working in Education?
3. Do you think perceptions of the purpose of education have changed during this time and, if so, in what ways?

    3a. what differences have these changes made in relation to how the student is positioned within Higher Education

    3b. do you think students' expectations about the difference the university experience will make to their lives have changed?

4. What would you say is the primary responsibility of Higher Education in relation to the student as individual?
5. How would you summarise your understanding of the purpose of education today?
6. Do you ever feel that your personal beliefs and views about the purpose of education are at odds with your professional role and responsibilities?
7. What is your definition of the term 'employability'?

I recorded and transcribed all thirteen interviews and, in order to ensure anonymity, I allocated an identifier to each respondent, namely: R1-R13. None of the participants saw the questions beforehand, as I wanted responses to be considered but not rehearsed.

Researcher and participants

My membership of the Senior Leadership Group, which comprised the majority of the Heads of academic and professional service departments, meant that securing interviews with members of the Senior Membership Team (Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor and Pro Vice Chancellors and other senior executive members) was made easier in terms of access and, possibly, trust. However, my relatively close working relationship with SMT members meant that I was conscious of the need to accurately capture and represent their views, not least because I could potentially be under scrutiny in this regard due to the nature of my role and my professional relationships.

Participants gave freely and willingly of their time, were open and frank and gave serious consideration to each question. Occasionally, particularly at the beginning of the interview process, I felt as though some of the participants were reciting university or government policy. However, as they relaxed into the interviews, I felt that that their responses, often illustrated by anecdotes based on personal and professional experiences, were honest, genuine and influenced by personal, deep-rooted beliefs and values. Guarded responses were very few and mainly in relation to the question about possible conflict between personal beliefs and professional responsibilities. Overall, out of the thirteen interviewed, five said they did sometimes feel conflicted and eight said that they did not. Four out of the five who answered in the affirmative were women (out of five women in total).

Managing the lexicon and an early indication of views

As the concepts of education and employability generate a plethora of opinion and associated terminology, I needed to make some sense of, and manage, this vast lexicon. First of all, I went through each of the transcripts and identified recurring words and phrases, and the frequency of usage, with a view to using the colour coding to see if there were any patterns that might be useful to the discussion. I decided to use two headings, so that I could organise the data in a sensible and relevant manner, and chose 'employability' (yellow) and 'personhood' (orange). See figure ii below.

Fig ii: Frequency with which words associated with employability and with personhood featured in responses

	Frequency of use of words	
	Employability	Personhood
Q1 How would you summarise your understanding of the purpose of education when you entered the [HE] profession?	8	41
Q2 How long have you been working in Education?	n/a	n/a
Q3 Do you think perceptions of the purpose of education have changed during this time and, if so, in what ways	26	10
Q3 a&b What differences have these changes made in relation to how the student is positioned within HE and Do you think students' expectations about the difference the university experience will make to their lives have changed?	31	14
Q4 What would you say is the primary responsibility of HE in relation to the student as individual	9	39
Q5 How would you summarise your understanding of the purpose of education today?	23	20
Q6 Do you ever feel that your personal beliefs and views about the purpose of education are ever at odds with your understanding of the purpose of education today?	n/a	n/a
Q7 What is your definition of the term 'employability'?	31	38

This numerical representation of the frequency of use of words relating to aspects associated with the two headings, suggests that perceptions of the purpose of education in the past were primarily associated with ideas pertaining to the development of the person, with notions associated with employability hardly featuring at all. Dominant perceptions in relation to question one are expressed through words such as: betterment, citizenship, character, contribution, enlightenment, fulfilment, intellectual, knowledge, learning, personal development, valuing. Only a few employability related words were used, including: economic, skills and technical. The following extracts from responses to question one are used by way of illustrative examples:

> development of technical expertise and skills. (R1)
>
> providing opportunities for personal growth, for economic gain…fulfilment, intellectual stimulation, social mobility, contribution to society and community. (R6)
>
> developing the mind and character of the students. It was also about inducting them into a particular academic discipline, a particular way of thinking and valuing. (R8)
>
> When I started, there were models of teaching that centred on personal development and the idea of the betterment of the individual through learning. (R10)
>
> Build[ing] on knowledge, skills attitudes and behaviours that would change both themselves [and] the way in which they perhaps worked in the future. (R12)

A change in perception is starkly shown by responses to question three, where terminology associated with employability becomes more dominant – reflecting a view that, over time, there has been a move away from the person-centred aspects formerly associated with the purpose of education towards a more explicit employment and skills-focused approach. Some of the dominant words used that indicate this change include: careers, competition, consumer, economic, employers, fees, government, graduate premium, investment, market,

targets, return-on-investment, skills, stakeholders and vocational. Some of these can be seen in the following extracts:

> partly because of the competition [for] student places and students as consumers [having] to pay for their education. Students want to get a lot more out of their degree I suppose when I went to university…there wasn't so much of an emphasis on any of that additional stuff that sits around your course - you went to study your subject. (R1)

> I think the power shift has moved more towards the students and the societies that we support. We need to be able to demonstrate the value that we bring to society in a far more explicit way; and the value interpretation is interpreted in a different way by the [various] stakeholders. (R6)

> another key point would be 97/98 when the first up front fees were introduced and then the first decade of the current century when there is a move to the higher level of fees, then to £9k - those are the points at which the talk about getting a return on investment increased. (R11)

The responses to question four give an extremely interesting picture of the dominant view here, in that it almost exactly mirrors the views expressed in response to question one. In other words, there is a sense that the primary purpose of higher education should be to focus on those person-centred characteristics and attributes, rather than the employability focused elements that seem to characterise the perceived changes expressed in response to question three.

Question five, however, appears to reflect a view that, whilst there may be a certain yearning for elements that may have been lost, or diluted, over the years, there is also a pragmatic acknowledgement and acceptance that employability is a component part of developing the whole person (personhood), rather than a separate entity. This is demonstrated by the colour-coding which reflects an almost 50:50 split in terminology usage between employability and personhood.

The responses to question seven reinforce this view as respondents' definitions of employability resulted in an almost equal mix of terms across the two headings, with personhood 'scoring' slightly higher.

While the detailed analysis of participants' responses, in relation to the dominant discourse, university policies and employability literature appears in chapter five, the colour coding technique provided an interesting, at-a-glance indication of views and perceptions over a period of time and an opportunity to make some early observations. However, while this method served the purposes indicated, it was slightly problematic in terms of allocating words to headings. In the main this was straight-forward, as the context was provided by the questions and by the interviewees' responses to them but, ultimately, it was I who had to decide which word went under which heading. This resulted in a raised awareness of the responsibility associated with making these types of decisions - which includes acknowledging that one word can be assigned to more than one heading, dependent on context and/or personal interpretation. An example of this is in relation to the word 'contribution' which appeared in responses to questions 1, 4 and 5. This was coded orange where the respondent was contextualising the meaning in terms of the individual's contribution to society or higher education's contribution to personal development; and yellow when relating to the economy and the individual's 'valuable contribution to the workplace' (R1) in this context. Nonetheless, the colour coding technique provided me with an interesting snapshot of the extent to which characteristics most associated with employability and with personhood featured within the responses to each of the questions.

I also examined the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy (CCCU, 2017a) and the Graduate Attributes Statement (CCCU, 2017b). The former was selected because it articulates how nine underpinning principles aim to inform and shape practice towards the

strategic commitment of 'providing all students with an outstanding higher education experience which equips them for success in personal aspirations and wider contribution to society beyond graduation.' The Graduate Attributes Statement (which will be delivered through the nine principles) sets out seven attributes which aim to develop 'the whole person and their future aspirations'.

Finally, I carried out a literature review which, rather than being included as a stand-alone chapter, has been incorporated into, primarily, chapter two. This made for a more informed, robust and coherent chapter and also improved the narrative flow.

The data

The data comprises lengthy extracts taken from the transcripts of the interviews. I have provided limited analytical commentary throughout, as I wanted participants' voices to be heard in a relatively spontaneous and continuous manner in order to generate an authentic and coherent narrative. A detailed analysis of the responses appears in chapter five.

The data has been organised around the key themes that emerged from the interviews:

1. From elitism to mass participation: changing perceptions of higher education
2. The idea of higher education as a collective good
3. Employability and education: symbiosis and citizenship
4. Educating the whole person: aspirations and adherence to Mission and Values

   1. From elitism to mass participation: changing perceptions of higher education

When starting in higher education over thirty years ago, respondent R13 stated that: 'it was to some extent seen as an intellectual pursuit with intrinsic benefits to the individual and to the wider society.' This reflects the views expressed across the respondents that formerly there was more emphasis than there is now on aspects such as intellectual pursuit and intellectual stimulation, love of subject and knowledge for its own sake. The perception is

that there used to be more of a focus on developing a critical perspective - learning how to think, argue, communicate, weigh evidence and challenge received wisdom, all of which would enable the individual to be well equipped to achieve personal potential and become a member of society. These aspects are considered by respondents to be integral elements pertaining to the notion of citizenship – again, a notion perceived to be more prevalent formerly than it is now. The idea of transformation is also considered to be integral to the idea of education and this relates not only to how subject knowledge might be applied to the resolution of issues facing society, but also to personal transformation. Aspects perceived by participants to be inherent in the notion of transformation include personal development, betterment and cultural understanding.

However, while there is a shared hope that 'we won't lose [these aspects] going forward' (R13), there is also a shared and emphatic view expressed by respondents that higher education has always been about equipping individuals for the professions, career development and economic gain. Universities have always been places 'where professional knowledge was imparted [and] professional skills were assessed and new knowledge for the professions could be developed' (R4). In other words, they are implicitly about 'equipping people for the professional world' (R6). While these views suggest a sense of nostalgia for the pre expansion period of higher education, they also serve as a reminder that universities have always played a part in what is now known as 'employability'

The shared view is that a change in perceptions and practice has been brought about by the mass expansion of the sector, following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (DIUS, 1992), when 'the number of universities almost doubled overnight' (Collini, 2012, p.31). Since that time, the HE landscape has changed dramatically with government targets driving

social mobility and employment agendas through increased participation in higher education. Respondents refer to participation growing dramatically when an increasing number of professions 'suddenly become higher education courses, particularly Health,' (R4). Respondent R13 stated that there are also many more professionally oriented Masters programmes than would have been the case thirty years ago, commenting that:

> whether you are in the Civil Service or whether you are in the policing world or some other walk of life, you find a series of specialsed Masters programmes that universities provide. That's a big shift from post graduate programmes being largely focused on traditional disciplines and largely being about further intellectual discovery.

Linked to this is the issue of degree classification, with respondent R8 stating that 'in 1994 a good 2:2 would have probably been fine for many employers [but] now it's 2:1s or above [and this] is a way of sifting out - particularly [because] with greater participation there are many more graduates looking for employment.' Respondent R2 expressed the view that many employers think that when an individual has acquired that 'piece of paper' they are employable and work ready.

The post 1992 period is also considered by respondents to be the time when assumptions and views about higher education that had previously been implicit became explicit. This is explained by Respondent R11:

> The perceptions have changed and the discourse around those perceptions has changed as well. There has been a much greater emphasis on the economic value of education and issues around a return on investment of education both for the individual and for society as a whole. I just don't think it needed to be said earlier [as] it was assumed that these things would happen. It's the post 92 effect: the massification of higher education's push towards greater participation.

Although it was argued in chapter 2 (2.2) that mass participation has led to a perception that universities' primary function is to 'improve the employability of young adults' (Ransome, 2011, p.207), the respondents stressed that employability has always been an aspect of higher education. According to respondent R11, it is the word that is relatively new, not the idea. For R11 'what's new is the way in which we talk about it. Also, what's new, and I'm absolutely comfortable with this, is that we do talk about that in part in economic terms.' The shift in emphasis is believed by respondents to have been necessary because, formerly, there was an assumption that if students got on with their degree and did well, employment would more or less follow. Now, with significantly higher participation, there is much more of an explicit focus on the notion of employability and employment.

While there are broad and differing views among respondents about the inherent aspects of employability and their implications for universities, there is also agreement that there is a need to emphasise the work-related aspects of higher education.   Respondent R13 articulated this as follows: 'I think my view has evolved over the years in so far as I do see more emphasis being placed by universities, and rightly so, on preparing students for the place of work.'   Yet concerns were expressed about connotations associated with the concept of employability and how they impact on the higher education sector in practice. These concerns echo those expressed in the literature and often relate to tensions around what Ransome (2011, p.219) refers to as the 'instrumental-performative rationale' associated with employability versus the 'qualitative pedagogy' (ibid, p.220) underpinning higher education. This concern was expressed by respondent R9 who stated that:

> there has been a greater focus for both good and ill on employability and I mean by that a much more instructional approach that you take higher education specifically and only to get a better job. That is seen as the only purpose behind entering higher education in government quarters and there has inceasingly been that view since 2001, perhaps even before that.

This view is echoed by respondent R11 who, when asked about his understanding of the term 'instrumentalisation', which he used in the context of employability, stated that:

> It's around turning education into something that had to lead to something else. Its principal purpose is to prepare a job ready graduate. Now, again implicitly that was there but it's become a more explicit part of the discourse that takes us in to that clear articulation of employability as one of the outcomes of education.

Concerns that students' focus is shifting from education to employability (Chertskovskaya, 2013) and that 'the applied and concrete may come to squeeze out the theoretical and the abstract, in order to attend to the perceived needs of the employer' (McCowan, 2015, p.280), were endorsed by a number of respondents. Respondent R6 stated that 'the idea of learning something for the sake of learning has probably been pushed back somewhat', while respondent R13 was of the view that 'the sort of hunger for knowledge and pursuit of knowledge and discovery has been set aside in favour of more immediate skills sets to ensure students, our graduates, are employable in the world of work'. Another view about the relationship between the expansion of the sector and employability was expressed by respondent R3, who said:

> You could say the employability agenda is being being pushed by government because they feel that the country needs to develop particular skills in order to maintain our current standing in the world because we need to drive up the knowledge economy and improve our skills set. Of course the other cynical way to look at it is if you've managed to take a large group of people and keep them somewhere else for another three years, you reduce unemployment.

Some of the respondents situated a noticeable move towards the emergence of an explicit link between university, skills and employment within the period of the New Labour Governments under Tony Blair (1997-2007), who set some ambitious targets for the working population to be university educated. The mass expansion of the higher education sector to the current participation figure of 49% (Gill, 2017, p.5), the professionalization of

more occupations and the welfare to work strategy introduced by Tony Blair's New Labour Government in 1997 (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Finn, 2000) have resulted in significant changes in the job market, including changes to 'the way you find a job, secure a job and how long you spend in that job.' (R1). There is also now much more competition in the job market and a sense that 'many people have been swept along with [the idea] that it is an absolute necessity to go into higher education to get a degree, even though you might not always need it' (R2). Respondent R12 put forward the idea that a perception might be that:

> if you're bringing up children and you're socialised into that expectation, it's almost like you will fail as a parent if your child doesn't go to university [and] it is in some way perceived to be a failure amongst your social group, bearing in mind that I think that the middle-working class group has now got to be the bigget group in society. You want to be acting with the tribe and supporting your children [so if they] don't go to university does that mean you as a parent have in some way failed?

The advent of the New Labour government is perceived by respondents as being the first time that a specific participation target had been set by government and contrasts sharply with earlier perceived conceptions of university education as being for a very restricted market of elite participants, attending a limited number of universities, with almost guaranteed, professional, employment at the end of the period of study. Respondents' views range from those who consider Tony Blair's government as a provider of genuine opportunities for increasing social equality and mobility, where it 'really gave permission for the first time to a wider group in society to really consider the opportunities of higher education' (R4), to making an explicit political-economic link to the purpose of education. Respondent R6 recalled that the emphasis on 'fulfilling economic needs, business needs, industry requirements around productivity, about being able to compete as a nation…was really brought into sharper relief for me at that particular time'. Similarly, respondent R9 stated that: 'there is now a need to explicitly link to the employment context [and] I would

probably date this to the late 1990s. Now [students] have to be told that that's what you're doing and that's what you're acquiring and that's the value of your £9,000.'   While respondent R10 asserted that:

> The government has increasingly seen its role as directly intervening in education and that this intervention has been for a whole range of reasons. One is about the costs of education to the nation and therefore the sense that the government has both right and responsibilities in terms of managing that public money. Secondly, more connections have been made between education and the economy in all kinds of thinking, and that has been reinforced by the need now to do international comparisons with competitors. A third factor is the way our democracy works, operating as it does in a regular four to five year cycle of elections. This means that ministers with responsibilities for universities are seeking to make some kind of impacting change within that 5-year period. Consequently, this is now regarded as the norm for political intervention in this country and leads to accelerated but not necessarily consistent, linear or coherent change.

Along with what respondent R11 referred to as 'the massification' of higher education, the notion of the costs of education to the nation is seen as a primary driver of change, particularly linked to the advent of tuition fees. The view across the respondents is that the loans students take on are inextricably linked to an expectation by government, parents and also by the students themselves that they will earn sufficient to pay back those loans and still have a good standard of living afterwards. Consequently, the notion of employability has been pushed up the agenda by multiple agencies including parents, government, students, employers and universities themselves.

The economic value of education and the focus on a return on investment, both for the individual and for society as a whole, are perceived by respondent R11 to be part of 'the post ninety-two effect and the massification of higher education's push towards greater participation and the seeming need to justify that from the point of view of the the increased number of people benefiting from or participating in higher education'. He goes on to refer to the introduction of up-front fees in 1997/98 and the subsequent increases as being 'the

points at which the talk about getting a return on investment has increased and it's become a more individualised set of discourses [about] what the individual is going to get out of it, what's going to be the graduate earnings premium.' In other words, 'if you get a degree you are likely to earn £100,000 more over a lifetime therefore it's worth it.' His view is that the balance between the return on investment for the country as a whole and the return on investment for individual graduates has changed over the years, stating that while one has not entirely replaced the other, there has been a greater emphasis on the advantages and the benefits for the graduate which did not need to be stated as explicity when there was lower participation in higher education.

Views were expressed by some respondents that the Higher Education curriculum significantly changed during the 1990s: 'when there was the first real push about developing skills and highlighting those skills, [such as] skills about leadership, teamworking, analytical skills, communication skills' (R3) and that, as a consequence, the HE sector responded by a significant diversification in the way it assessed students, linking employment outcomes more explicitly to taught programmes. Respondent R9 stated that it was during the mid to late 1990s that degree programmes began to feature an explicit skills module and that:

> those modules are now pervasive, they're absolutely there - and I'm not saying it's a wrong direction but I just think it is illustrative of the change from being an assumed part of a degree to one where it's made much more explicit, where you're actually saying to the students: "today in this module, over the course of the next twelve weeks, we are going to be looking at skills and how they link to your degree programme and how then they forward link to any employment context that you might want to go in to.

In parallel to the changes highlighted above, respondent R6 highlighted the significant changes in terms of the perceived strategic remit of Higher Education that have occurred

since the late 1990s, with universities increasingly needing to demonstrate the value that they bring to society in economic growth terms much more explicitly than ever before. He went on to assert that this is set against a backdrop of the UK increasingly being perceived to be:

> moving into a very different type of economy... where countries are like businesses [in that] they have to be competitive, so you need a really, really skilled workforce [and] now it's absolutely imperative that we are seen to be delivering value to the regions that we serve and that's not just the students that come from those regions, but it's also the wider business community. How are we supporting regeneration agendas? How are we supporting inward investment opportunities? How are we supporting the employer skills sets that are in demand? There has been quite a shift [and a need to] set-up the correct interfaces between the university and the outside world.

The view across respondents is that the emphasis on the economic appears to have grown across the years with students being increasingly exposed to media pressure, parental and peer pressure and government rhetoric that 'makes them feel that they have to have an outcome in mind [which] all feeds into that process of wanting more instrumental, more clearly linked degrees to employability' (R7). The majority view is that, by defining the university experience in predominantly economic terms, this impacts on students' understanding of what they might expect to get out of their time at university. Seventy-seven per cent of respondents mentioned that the student is now seen much more as a customer than was the case in the past, with respondent R9 stating that 'it's not just other people it's students themselves who are constructing themselves as customers.' Another stated that 'fees are a key driver, in that suddenly students have this notion that they're paying for the right to pass a degree and get a job as well – as opposed to [the notion that] they're paying for the right to participate in a process that will hopefully enable them to get a degree.'(R5). This view is echoed by respondent R9 who felt that: '[students] used to be members of the [university] community and now increasingly…they are seen as customers

who are purchasing some kind of student experience with an almost guaranteed outcome'. Similarly, R13 felt that competition for graduate employment is significantly higher than thirty years ago when students who went into a university by and large knew that as long as they passed they would graduate and get a reasonably decent job. This is no longer an assumption current students can make. His view is that nowadays students 'are much more competitive and they are working under much more pressure and their expectations have grown now that they are paying fees, or at least expected to repay the fees the government pays on their behalf.' These views are effectively summarised by R9, who stated that:

> the government [is] effectively saying "look don't worry about having to pay this as a loan because actually what you're doing is investing in your own future and you're likely to have a higher future income" [and] that changes quite a lot of the equation about higher education. The explicit deal [is] "you pay for this and this will improve your employment prospects" but very rarely does [the government] say that people who are educated to a higher level have a higher satisfaction with life, or are able to use their leisure and retirement more productively. Those messages are not lost but they're kind of soft pedalled, so I think that also shifts what students are expecting to get out of their education.

There is also a view among respondents that, as higher education has expanded, there seems to have been a move away from the notion that the pursuit of a subject 'is in itself an inherent good or productive activity [as] the greater focus is now on what the degree "will get me when I graduate". It's no longer enough to say that studying [a particular subject] will fundamentally enrich your life, broaden your horizons, enlighten your thinking, improve your critical faculties, you have to now make that link with employment' (R9).

Similarly, respondent R8 was of the view that there used to be:

> a greater identification earlier with the institution. So it wasn't [that] you were going to come out with a degree and a degree happened to be from x but you actually were an x kind of person. I think that was true of here, too, I think there was a sense in which the university gave you a sort of identity as well as a qualification [and] there were some people [who] took on something of the nature of the institution [and] it contributed to their sense

of who they were. It was less transactional then. That might still happen but it feels like there are higher education outlets and you go to your local and most convenient one, rather than that you're joining a community of a particular character and that character might shape you in some way. I suspect it's probably still true with people who go to Oxford or Cambridge.

As discussed above, there is a perception that since fees have 'loomed larger and higher on the agenda' (R9), there has been much more emphasis on the justification of those fees in terms of the individual benefits that the individual graduates will derive from having taken their degree. Respondent R11 expressed the view that this has had:

a perceived negative impact on particular types of study and particular types of degree. Consequently, there is almost inevitably a greater emphasis on vocational subjects and an assumption, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, that there are certain subjects that do not prepare people for the world of work as well as others. This is not to say that there should not be vocational programmes, simply that there is a view that higher education should challenge existing assumptions in this context and articulate the benefits of those particular types of degree [and] not assume that philosophy isn't useful.

While suggesting that mass education is perhaps, 'an acknowledgement of the failure, from a certain point of view, to have a properly differentiated education system with parity of esteem for practical, vocational subjects with academic subjects', respondent R11 emphasised that the justification for more graduates is not entirely economic, as there is also, in his view, the important aspect of social mobility and overcoming the post-war deficit of equality of opportunity, as well as the need to address the issue that 'higher education was elitist and defined as being for a minority of 10-12% of the 18 year old population [so] in part, expansion was also around the social good of things'. However, respondents also emphatically shared the view, articulated by respondent R11 that 'education is a collective good actually. It's a huge benefit to the whole of society.'

2. The idea of higher education as a collective good

There is a view among respondents that there used to be implicit recognition of education 'as a collective good' (R11) and, as expressed by respondent R13, 'an intellectual pursuit with intrinsic benefits to the individual and the wider society [and] I hope we won't lose that going forward.' However, there remains a general sense, as reported above, that education, particularly higher education, is now understood to be primarily concerned with preparing individuals for their future lives, particularly their economic lives in terms of employment. There is a feeling that students are now probably more realistic, more pragmatic in their thinking than previously, focusing on the immediate practical, tangible benefits that are going to be realised in the immediate years after graduation. Although this aspect is acknowledged as being important, respondent R13 asserted that:

> the responsibility of the university hinges around developing an individual in a holistic way so that when they have gone through that higher education experience they come out of that first and foremost as a global citizen, somebody who is prepared for the place of work, somebody who is able to contribute to society not through employment alone but more widely through the contributions they might make culturally and in other ways.

The importance of the non-economic related aspects of education, of a more person centred view, is a dominant theme throughout the responses, particularly in relation to the question that generated the response quoted, namely: 'What would you say is the primary responsibility of Higher Education in relation to the student as individual?'

The views expressed can be summarised in the words of respondent R3, who said: 'being prepared for being a good citizen has got nothing to do with the grade that [students] get.' He contextualised his response in terms of the eventual approach that graduates adopt in working with others and in supporting society. His view being that when graduates look at a problem within the workplace, they will need not simply to consider what the best outcome

is for themselves but will be able to contextualise the problem in terms of the potential impacts on other people and sections of society, and whether the outcome is the best outcome over all. Respondent R3 considered this to be an: 'Us' approach rather than what he referred to as the 'Thatcherite generation Me, Me, Me, approach' which, he feels, given some of the issues that the world is going to have to face, is not likely to be the best way to resolve those issues. R3 cites the financial crash of 2008 as an example of this 'Thatcherite approach', where those individuals involved did not consider the wider impact of their actions on society. Whilst there is an acknowledgement of the fact that this perhaps, in some respects, reflects the broader attitudes of society he stated that it begs the question: 'have we developed a society which is still grounded in working for the benefits of society, [or one that is] working for the individual?'

Respondent R4 echoed this view, arguing that when, in 1987, 'Margaret Thatcher stood up and said "there's no such thing as society" she introduced the each person for themself, neo-liberal discourse into society and at that point, as soon as she said that, she absolved herself and government of the need to be responsible for society, because no such thing existed'. Although commentators have since argued that this quote has been widely misinterpreted (Steele, 2009, Moore, 2010; Hussain 2013), a consequence of Thatcher's proclamation, in the respondent's view, is that the notion of social good has become lost because the focus has shifted towards the individual good and, while social good may include increased productivity and a stronger economy, the connotations in terms of being a citizen in a more socially oriented way have been diminished. Respondent R4 went on to assert that, although Tony Blair's New Labour government tried to distance itself from the Conservative position, they were also:

> sucked in to that neo-liberal, individualism viewpoint because it's very hard
> to put the genie back in the box once you've done that and to turn round to

> people and say 'no, you shouldn't all be trying to compete with each other and trying to get to the top of the tree, you should all be working together and collaborating.'

She went on to discuss the perceptions that the academics, the educators, may have of their students and how well the educators understand the perceptions students have of themselves. Her view was that people might be:

> misreading some of the disgruntlement they encounter in that it is actually because [the students] are more discerning and really want to be challenged. I think we underestimate our students a lot [and] there's a temptation to keep dumbing down stuff [because] you think students aren't getting it. I think the opposite is quite often needed, in that you often need to challenge them more [and] give them tools to deal with that challenge. I think the really big difference is [that] students [pre-expansion] who used to come from more privileged backgrounds possibly had those tools already and could deal with the challenge but we have to [provide our students with] those tools. I don't think they're any less clever or any less willing to learn and [they are] hungry for that kind of challenge.

Respondent R8 stressed the importance of giving students 'space to think about other questions, philosophical questions [and] to be much more challenging [of received wisdom]; to encourage them to be much more independent [and] to see these years as a kind of opportunity for an adventure of learning and discovery. They really like the sound of that but they think that's quite different from what they're being offered.' These views touch on a notion that was not raised by any of the other participants, namely, the specific linking of the idea of 'dumbing down' with mass participation in higher education. I pick up on this in the conclusion as I believe it is worthy of further research. There is an assumption that, with mass participation and the associated constraints, the explicit emphasis on employability and skills and financial return on investment, as well as, according to respondent R13: 'a focus on what they learn, how they learn, passing exams and assessments', students are no longer as aware of the 'innate value in higher education [as] an intellectual pursuit with intrinsic benefits to the individual [and] to the wider society.'

Consequently, the importance of getting 'the balance right '(R13) was emphasised by the respondents. The importance of balance is reflected in Canterbury Christ Church's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2015-20 (CCCU, 2017a). The opening paragraph of the Strategy articulates the University's: 'commitment to providing all students with an outstanding higher education experience which equips them for success in personal aspirations and wider contribution to society beyond graduation.' It goes on to assert that: 'graduate employability and global citizenship for a sustainable future should be key characteristics of a Canterbury Christ Church University graduate at every level.' These aspirations echo respondents' replies to question four: 'What would you say is the primary responsibility of higher education in relation to the student as individual?', where their replies demonstrate a weighting in favour of aspects associated with 'personhood' rather than 'employability' (see chapter 4, fig ii). For example, respondent R5 stated that higher education is about:

> students find[ing] themselves and discover[ing] different dimensions of themselves [and] equipping them with that whole raft of independent thinking, independent life, enquiry, challenge which I don't think you necessarily expect from further education.

The idea of understanding the value of education in terms of how it impacts on the individual and on wider society – the world that the individual will personally inhabit - is perceived to be very important among respondents. Education is perceived to be not only to do with achievement of potential but also about gaining an understanding of one's positioning and role in society and the inherent multiple interdependencies, contexts and responsibilities. The idea of the collective good and the importance of being able to work collaboratively with others to this end feature prominently in the responses, expressed mainly in relation to the notion of 'citizenship'. This notion is manifested primarily through phrases such as: 'the holistic notion of citizenship' (R7, R9, R10, R13); 'preparing [students] to be a good citizen in society' (R3); 'rounded, intelligent citizen' (R5, R10); 'equipping people to be

fully citizens in the richest sense' (R10); 'a citizen of the country' (R9); 'global citizen' (R1, R6, R13); 'citizens who add to the public good in terms of our economy, our society and in terms of our future' (R4). The view about the holistic notion of development echoes Lord Robbins's aspirations for higher education, while the idea of breadth and depth was important to Lord Dearing, who believed that:

> introducing breadth more extensively would assist students to respond to the social, economic and cultural changes they will be facing throughout their lives by assisting them to think divergently and to integrate information and knowledge from a variety of sources…provided [breadth] is not identified with shallowness and lack of intellectual rigour'
> (Dearing, 1997, p.131)

However, respondents expressed the view that notions such as 'breadth' and 'holistic' can be difficult to assess within a curriculum context. An example is provided by respondent R10 as follows:

> In the world of work, collaborative working among people is a really important skill in the 21st Century, but when you try to introduce group assessment the first thing that students are concerned about is absolutely protecting that their own contributions are fully recognised. So, you're actually setting up a system for collaborative working which works against the spirit of collaborative working. In a collaboration in the world of work you might be saying "who's got the best skill set to be able to do that?" and you wouldn't necessarily be seeking to get your contribution in to show that you are worthy of as many "marks" as that other person. So, that's an example of the kind of way in which [a] target-driven approach can undermine what learning could actually be about.

An example of what 'learning could actually be about' was suggested by respondent R2, who stated that higher education is concerned with preparing students: 'for life and for their future wherever that might be and whatever it might be. It's giving exposure, but in a contained environment, where it's a little bit safe to experiment and learn and maybe test out things before you go out to the big wide world.'

A shared view among the respondents is that the purpose of higher education is fundamentally unchanged, in that it is about developing people and it is simply the ways in which we do it that are different, as are the ways in which we talk about it. There remains a belief across the respondents that 'intellectual development prepares you for the world of work and the world of study and the world of being a damn good human being' (R11). This view was succinctly articulated by respondent R8, who stated that: 'I would see [the purpose of education] as learning how to live, rather than learning how to make a living'. He explained this in terms of education enabling one to live and to live well and, whilst he recognised that 'this does have to do with employment', his view is that education is primarily about making 'the world more transparent, so you can read and see and understand what's going on'. He felt that it is this ability which distinguishes human beings from other species, in that we give rational arguments for determining what our purpose in life is and for working out what is a good purpose for life. However, as mentioned, R8 also acknowledged that education is also to do with employment and he echoed the collective view among respondents with his assertion that education is also important in 'specific ways, like in giving you a set of skills which you can take and use to sustain yourself.'

There is a view across the respondents that employability is about more than just skills and that, 'there is no great dichotomy between good education and employability and that they are, and have always been closely aligned.' (R8). This idea is further explored in the following section.

3. Employability and Education: symbiosis and citizenship

Although the notion of employability appears to have become embedded in the language, strategy and practice of higher education, there appears to be no consensus with regard to

what is meant by 'employability'.   Consequently, this section looks, primarily, at interviewees' responses to the question: 'What is your definition of the term "employability"'.

Narrow definitions that are concerned with acquiring a certain kind of employability skills, sometimes referred to as graduate skills or graduate attributes or transferable skills, are recognised, across the respondents, as being of value at graduate level in employment. Yet, there was a shared concern that an emphasis on graduating with a set of skills that can be applied in a number of different employment scenarios might suggest that the degree subject is not of fundamental importance. The view among respondents, however, is that discipline context is very important because, for some kinds of employment, there is a subject-specific core of knowledge and understanding that needs to underpin the skills acquired. The general feeling, therefore, was that it is necessary to advocate a definition of employability that is not narrowly focused on the instrumental and measurable. Respondent R10 articulated this in terms of promoting:

> the richest kind of university experience [as being] the best kind of preparation for employment that you could have…and means the University having the kind of courage to take that position and live it through policies and practice.

Although it also delivers programmes in the Sciences and Arts and Humanities, Canterbury Christ Church University's primary focus has, historically, been the public services. It was founded in 1962 as a Teacher Training College and then diversified in the 1990s to Health and Social Care. The Teaching and Health professions are generally regarded, in the words of respondent R10, as 'meaning something which is richer than meeting a set of competences.'

Despite respondents' responses largely linking competences and skills to the notion of employability, and knowledge and personal development to the idea of education (see analysis of colour coding in Methods section, (above)), the general view is that there is no real divide between the notions of education and employability. A shared view among respondents is that employability is concerned with providing students with a 'toolkit', some of which will be focused on practical skills, communication, teamworking and other skills that will enable them to make a professional contribution to the world of work and society. However, the component parts should result in what two respondents referred to as the 'intelligent citizen' (R5, R10). This notion of the intelligent citizen can be linked specifically to the inaugural CUAC (Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion) Annual Lecture in 2012 at Canterbury Christ Church University, given by Dr Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and the University's Chancellor at that time. The Archbishop talked about the purpose of the Anglican University, the notion of the intelligent citizen, the nature of intelligence and their importance in relation to that purpose, stating that:

> We can't just treat intelligence as functional - that set of specific skills that I mentioned earlier. But equally we can't treat it as free-floating and self-generated. Because, once again, watch what people are doing. They come up against the limits of their material, the limits of reality. They bang their heads on the world and find that it doesn't immediately conform to what they would like it to look like. They encounter resistance…and that means that intelligence has got to be engaging with *reality* in some important sense. (Williams, 2012, p.3)

Although variously expressed or alluded to, there was a shared feeling among respondents, as articulated by respondent R5, that:

> this university is commited to that rounded intelligent citizen and we're quite clear about that within our strategic framework and in our learning and teaching strategy…That is part of our *raison d'être* really and we try to get the balance between that and also the employability dimension.

Whether belonging to a particular religion or none, there is an overwhelming sense among respondents that the history of Canterbury Christ Church and its identity are deeply and proudly rooted in the values and ethos of the Anglican Church. There is a shared view that education is about preparing students to be able to operate as autonomous citizens, and to express themselves and contribute in a broad kind of range of ways which, arguably, goes back to that Christian notion of bringing out the best in every individual and, according to one respondent, of being 'a kind of celebration of God-given talent…' (R10). This connects to a respondent's view, mentioned earlier, that 'intellectual development prepares you for the world of work and the world of study and the world of being a damn good human being'. For Rowan Williams, the point of a Christian university, in particular is 'connected inescapably with the quest for human flourishing and human liberation' (Williams, 2012, p.4). This idea is echoed by respondent R13 who, in response to the question about the primary responsibility of higher education to the student as individual, stated that there ' isn't a single primary purpose in terms of how we view it as a university but ultimately it has to be about creating global citizens, particularly for the 21st century.'

The difficulty with, and value of, crude employability metrics as measures of achievement and success are highlighted here in the context of graduates going into the Health sector, with respondent R12 stating that individuals must have:

> Emotional resilience and emotional intelligence. They've got to be compassionate so that they come with a set of values, beliefs and behviours that will enable them to work within that particular environment and those will be tested at interview. I can't make somebody compassionate, I can provide the environment in which they are exposed to what compassion looks like and they can discuss and they can work out for themselves what they need to do in terms of ameliorate their behaviour. Whether or not they assimilate that on a permanent basis, that's up to them. At the point at which students graduate from here and register, they are technically fit for practice but that doesn't mean to say that they would necessarily be viewed as employable in six months' time if they didn't continue to demonstrate those values, behaviours and beliefs that are important to the employer.

The notion of employability, as perceived across the respondents, is that it is about more than individuals having the skills and knowledge required of particular professions. It is also about having the personal qualities and attributes that will enable individuals to be comfortable and adaptable within the workplace, as well as the ability to build and maintain relationships. The general, overarching, view among participants in relation to employability and the purpose of higher education can, however, be summed up by respondent R7 who stated that 'I've never had a separation between education for its own sake and education for employability - they're all kind of mixed up together.' This view is supported by the responses to questions 5 and 7 where respondents' gave their views about the purpose of education today and their personal definitions of employability. Analysis of the colour coding used to capture the dominant terminology used in response to these questions shows an even balance between notions of 'personhood' and 'employability' (see chapter 4, Fig. ii). Respondent R11 emphasised the importance of context and balance, stating that: 'to be seen to simply say everything's alright education will sort you isn't good enough…on the other hand we will have failed if we give people these skills [and] include them in our curricula without getting them to reflect on why they're doing them'. This view was endorsed by respondent R13, in the context of the perceived risk that we might 'lose some of that citizenship element of higher education in the drive to make sure people are employable…it's not an either or - it's just getting that balance right'. With regard to balance, respondent R5 expressed the view that 'the employability dimension [in the University] was not as strong two years ago [as it is now]', and that any perceived recent emphasis on this aspect is a direct result of an attempt, through the relevant strategies, to redress the balance in relation to employability in the context of what she referred to as 'the rounded individual'. She went on to say that this has resulted in more projects in collaboration with employers, including within the voluntary sector and a much greater

interaction between the the external world and the university. This aligns with her view that: 'increasingly employers want broader, rounded individuals who can think for themselves [and] who are prepared to challenge and critique'.

Nonetheless, respondents consistently emphasised the benefits to the person and to society of higher education in other than purely economic or financial terms. Respondent R1 expressed the view that employability is: 'a blend of the practical and the more person-centred qualities that someone brings to their role', while respondent R2 asserted that 'it's the state an individual reaches where they can be usefully employed to produce something, or a service, that society needs [and] gives the [individual] a feeling of worth.' Although every respondent mentions skills more than once in response to the question about the definition of employability, use of the word is invariably in the context of a broader conception of employability which respondent R10 described in terms of being comprised of three core aspects:

> [the first aspect is] acquiring a certain set of employability skills [that] you might want to call graduate skills or graduate attributes, or transferrable skills that are recognised as being of value at graduate level in employment [and] that you can apply in a number of different employment contexts. I think that might be the narrowest kind of definition. You would add to that for some kinds of employment that there is a subject-specific set of knowledge and understanding that would need to underpin [those skills] to make you employable in a particular kind of context – so that's the second aspect of the definition. [However] there is also valuing some of the richer kinds of learning experiences and engagement with values and personal development. The criticality-political perspectives and equipping people to be fully citizens in the richest sense of that [and] recognising that those things make you of more use and value in the workplace as well. So, what I would want to promote is a definition of employability where we've said all that, and actually where we were giving students the kind of 'both-and' story.

It is also in response to the question about the definition of employability where respondents repeatedly evoked the notion of citizenship. We saw earlier that citizenship is not to do with

the grade a student achieves but is about being able to contribute to society in a broad range of ways. There is a view among respondents that the notion of citizenship lends itself more readily and appropriately to the idea of a person centred understanding of, and approach to, higher education than does the concept of employability, with its politico-economic led narrative. The idea of citizenship is linked to the perceived importance of enabling students to 'make a professional contribution [which includes] having broad insight and ethical understanding' (R5). This resonates with respondents' notions of the 'intelligent citizen', as reported earlier, and is reflected in the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, in relation to the aspiration of ensuring that graduates are '…ethically engaged with the world and its future.' The importance of the idea of 'professional' is demonstrated by the appearance of the word in the list of seven Graduate Attributes that appear in the Graduate Attributes statement (CCCU, 2017b). Also, as we saw in chapter 2 (2.3), a new Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) has been introduced to enable change in the labour market to be monitored around four categories of graduate employment, including 'traditional graduate occupations', relating to the established professions and 'modern graduate occupations' which refer to new professional fields. Similarly, respondents R4 and R6 expressed the widely held view that universities have always been about developing new skills and knowledge for the professions and equipping people for the professional world.

For the respondents, then, employability is emphatically not just to do with a narrow focus on the acquisition of practical skills, but also knowledge, personal development, citizenship, ethical engagement and professional contribution. Peterson asserts that:

> Recognition that the relationship between citizen and state, and that between citizen and citizen, are not simply political but as inherently moral bestows upon the subject a deeper core that reminds us that teachers of citizenship should not just be involved

with helping students to see beyond their own self interests in an instrumental sense, but should be concerned with the types of people that students are (and may become) and that they are cognisant of their obligations to others.(Peterson, A, 2011, p

However, respondent R3 was not sure that:

many people would necessarily see the good citizen element as core to employability, however it would be better if it was. Would we have the current issue that came out of [the financial crash] of 2008 if we had more people who were willing to think about the broader impact on society rather than how much money [they could] make?

Implicit in this evocation of the financial crash of 2008 is the subsequent public condemnation of the banking profession, in particular, and society's revaluation of the long established relationship with, and trust in, the professions in general. If we accept that 'individually and, in association, collectively, the professions "strike a bargain with society" in which they exchange competence and integrity against the trust of client and community…' (Cunningham, 2008, p.77), then the events of 2008 and the consequential negative global impacts represent a significant fracture in that bargain with society which has seen the integrity of the profession, and professionals, being called into question. Higher Education's relationship with the professions stretches back to the Middle Ages, when French and Italian universities established the professions of law, medicine and theology (Cunningham, 2008; McCowan, 2015; Willetts, 2017) and that this relationship is still important to the higher education sector. Implicit in the responses given to the question 'What is your definition of employability' is the idea that: 'the professional presents an example of a role model…which illustrates not simply the nature of professional practice, but more importantly, the multi-layered value-laden nature of such practice, and of the society within which it takes place.' (Cunningham, 2008, p.92). For Eraut, professionalism is concerned with self-awareness and self-knowledge and the ability to 'reflect and self-evaluate' (Eraut, 1994, p.81). Reflecting on our practice provides an opportunity to consider the impact we are having on those around us which is perceived to be tied up in notions of

citizenship and being a 'damn good human being' (R11). The Learning and Teaching Strategy, under the heading 'educating the whole person' refers to 'love of neighbour', reflecting institutional recognition of the importance of sensitivity to others. However, in a culture that requires higher education to prove the effectiveness of its delivery against proscribed metrics in quantifiable forms, often in the context of a return on investment of government interventions, these aspects can prove very difficult to measure and, therefore, evidence. For respondent R13, evidence of the effectiveness of individuals in this context can only be gathered and demonstrated over the long term. He stated that:

> I think it's easy to judge the academic performance through what [students] do in the assessment and exams in terms of skills. You can look at the employment picture and how many go into graduate jobs etc., [but] what is much much harder to judge is the contribution ultimately our graduates can make. There is a time lag, so that they're not making that more holistic contribution perhaps for some years which does make it quite challenging to measure to some extent. There are ways of doing it which is to take a longer term perpective and do some longitudinal studies.

While a longitudinal study approach is not used routinely across the University, respondent R7 described the way in which he has carried out a longitudinal study over a 36 year period on every individual student who has gone through a particular programme, with an 81% return rate. Although this has been 'a monumental task', it has enabled him to track those individuals throughout their careers and show that less than 2% of them have dropped out of their profession out of all those thirty six years. In return on investment terms, he stated that 'if you divide the cost of their training by retained years it is the most cost effective training out of all the professions. So that's how I've measured it - by long term retention. [However], that is really difficult with a very, very large undergraduate population.'

Despite the difficulties inherent in capturing and measuring all aspects of an individual's progress and development and their eventual broad-ranging effectiveness in the workplace,

models of employability have been developed that attempt to reflect the balance between 'employability' and 'personhood' that the respondents believed is of critical importance. An example of this is the CareerEDGE model of employability that was discussed in chapter 2 (2.5). This model incorporates many of the person-centred aspects associated with the notion of employability that are perceived, by a range of stakeholders, to be important

4. **Educating the whole person: aspirations and adherence to Mission and Values**

A consistent message that emerged from the interviews is that it is the responsibility of higher education to give students the best possible educational experience and prepare them for life after university and to be good contributors to society. The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy refers to this as 'educating the whole person'. Specifically, according to respondent R1, it is about:

> developing knowledge and expertise in a particular subject area but…also about developing yourself in terms of your position within a wider community, whether that's locally [or] globally…It's developing skills and attributes that can help you apply for and secure a job, it's being able to make a valuable contribution to the workplace [and] it's using the knowledge and expertise gained at university in a positive way…

There is a shared view across respondents that Canterbury Christ Church University is commited to developing the rounded, intelligent citizen and this person-centred approach is articulated in its Mission and Values statements that are published on the University's website:

Mission

> Inspired by our Church of England foundation, the University's mission is to pursue excellence in higher education: transforming individuals, creating knowledge, enriching communities and building a sustainable future.

Values

- The development of the whole person, respecting and nurturing the inherent dignity and potential of each individual

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- The integration of excellent teaching, research and knowledge exchange
- The power of higher education to enrich individuals, communities and nations
- Our friendly, inclusive and professional community of students and staff, preparing individuals to contribute to a just and sustainable future. (CCCU, 2017d)

The mission and values inform the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Graduate Attributes Statement. Another consistent message to come through the responses is that, despite having to comply where necessary with the numerous and often testing externally imposed changes and challenges, the University will continue to operate in accordance with its person-centred mission and values. This is articulated by Respondent R5, who stated that:

> if you look at policy documents and White Papers and things like that, well, it's quite linear isn't it? You know people are writing these things without actually understanding what higher education is about. But I think that policy documents will always present an extreme picture and then it's down to the sector to translate that into an appropriate level of strategy, as opposed to "well the policy document says this and therefore we have to deliver that to its 99% degree". I mean, to me that's part of the role of universities: to find how they fit within that overall policy shift.

For respondents, being true to the University's values, despite external diktats, is an important constant, rooted in the Christian foundations upon which the institution's values are based and one which is considered to be a *raison d'être*. This is reflected in the views of Respondent R6 who considers himself to be:

> very fortunate working at Christ Church, where the values are very clearly articulated and very much mirror my understanding of the values of higher education - which is about providing opportunities for personal development and really contributing to the wider society. [It is] through [our] behaviours and what we say and what we do and how we come across to the students [that we] try to instil these particular principles that are outlined in our values.

There are, however, challenges involved in translating mission and values into practice. For example, there is a need to include the balanced approach referred to earlier within the learning and teaching strategy. This approach needs to recognise and address the increased emphasis, in terms of employability, on those additional experiences and skills that employers are looking for, such as work experience and volunteering, along with helping develop the graduate attributes implicit in the notion of the rounded, intelligent citizen. According to respondent R1, graduate attributes:

> don't just focus on securing a job, they also encourage our students to develop a mind-set that they'll continue to study and that they'll question the world and they'll develop a specific or a certain mind-set which isn't just about securing a graduate level job…It's about helping them to become lifelong learners and helping them to become worldly wise and global citizens.

Canterbury Christ Church University's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2015-2020 (CCCU, 2017a) states that it supports the University's Mission and that there are nine principles underpinning it, namely:

1. Educating the whole person
2. Building learning communities
3. Students as partners in learning
4. Supporting success for all students
5. Outstanding learning, teaching and assessment practices
6. Curriculum design for transformation
7. An integrated approach to graduate employability
8. Internationalisation and global citizenship
9. Flexible and responsive learning environments

Under each of these principles are a number of bullet points that expand upon the headings. This section is followed by another that demonstrates the University's commitment to supporting and delivering on the principles. Details of these commitments are articulated under seven headings:

1. Developing the transformative curriculum
2. People
3. Partnerships
4. Infrastructure
5. Building spaces for learning communities to grow

6. Aspiring to an inclusive curriculum to engage all students
7. Delivering a high quality student experience to support learning

Many of the perceptions about the perceived fundamental and important aspects of higher education, from the respondents' perspectives, are evident in aspirational terms within the Learning and Teaching Strategy (CCCU, 2017a). Given the seniority, remit, power and influence of the majority of the interviewees, this might be expected. However, the content has emanated not just from a few of the most senior members of staff but from 'consultations with staff and students across the institution and reflects our values and the opportunities and challenges of a changing world' (ibid, p.1). If, as stated, the strategy reflects a majority view about what constitutes 'an outstanding higher education experience' (ibid), then it would seem that a holistic approach, which addresses the issue of balance implicit in the notion of the 'rounded individual' (R5), is the preferred model and one which is correspondingly advocated in policy and practice. Yet, although elements and terminology associated with what we have come to recognise as related to the notion of employability are evident within the document, the values appear to be articulated in favour of the whole-person, transformational and collective good aspects of the purpose of higher education, such as: 'the development of the whole person, respecting and nurturing the inherent dignity and potential of each individual'; 'enrich[ing] individuals, communities and nations' and 'preparing individuals to contribute to a just and sustainable future.'

However, as mentioned earlier, there are challenges involved in translating ambition and mission into practice. The following four aspirational bullet points, taken from the Learning and Teaching Strategy, can be used to demonstrate this:

(a) Maximising potential for learning, living and contributing must be at the heart of all our teaching and assessment practices
(b) We encourage the development of a sense of wonder, the quest for knowledge, love of neighbour and a commitment to a sustainable future

(c) Initiatives to support graduate employability should be embedded in curricula

(d) Where appropriate, employers should contribute to curriculum development, teaching, learning and assessment

The first two seem to align themselves most closely with the person-centred aspects of the higher education experience, while the latter seem explicitly to do with securing employment. However, although we are beginning to understand that both are inter-related and perhaps even interdependent, points (a) and (b) are couched in language that does not lend itself to immediate understanding of meaning or, crucially, how these aspirations might be delivered or measured. How can we recognise, much less, maximise someone's potential? Or, more pertinently, how do we know when or how we have maximised it? Similarly, I have shown that ideas about 'love of neighbour' and the 'collective good', are important aspects but this can only be identified and measured at some point in the future. If we think of this in terms of future socio-economic impact then, as respondent R13 suggests, it would be necessary to:

> take a longer term perpective and do some longitudinal studies so you pick some cohorts of some students in different subjects in maybe a particular year, or two or three years, and track them for five, ten, fifteen, years to see how they're getting on and its really that sort of qualitative research, backed up by a cohort trial [that] is probably the way you're going to get a really meaningful answer to [whether or not] these people are really going out and making a really holistic contribution to economy and society broadly, because there is no easy other way of measuring.

The Canadian think tank, Cardus, recently carried out such a longitudinal education survey of Canadian graduates (Cardus, 2016), which aimed to:

> provide a "fuller picture of Canadian graduates." That is, too many studies of graduate outcomes provide a reductive analysis of how well education prepares one for a good job. While this matters, our report enfolds graduate job and income findings into a much broader, multi-dimensional focus that additionally looks at the school effects on political involvement and religious orientation, habits of home and social ties, levels of trust in

institutions, and how much a graduate gives of his or her time and resources. In other words, we want to go beyond a two-dimensional analysis and give you a fuller picture of how Canada's graduates are being prepared for adult life together (ibid, p5)

As the results of the survey are analysed and reported so as to provide detailed comparisons between public, religious and home schooled graduates in Canada, the detail is not reported on here. The example is used primarily to show how Cardus has used longitudinal surveys to challenge the 'current overemphasis on…performance outcomes [that are] often under girded by the very utilitarian approach to education that we call into question' (Cardus, 2016, p.19).

With regard to the bullet points referred to above, the second two examples, (c) and (d) are much easier to interpret. It could be argued that this clarity is precisely because government policy and, increasingly, regulatory frameworks are so dominated by the notion of employability that universities have come to understand what it is the government is expecting, or requiring, of universities in respect of metrics and assessment (including, for example, the number of graduates in graduate jobs and salary levels).   In addition, government funding, such as HEFCE's Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), is available to encourage engagement with industry.   Universities who do not meet the associated (primarily financial) targets are penalised by means of a reduction in income, or awarded none at all, in some cases. It is relatively easy to integrate employability modules into academic programmes and to identify and encourage employers to contribute to curriculum development. It is also fairly easy to gather the employment data that feeds into government reports, future policy and league tables. However, it is, arguably, more difficult to identify and assess the perceived laudable and important aspects associated with (a) and (b). There would appear to be no immediately discernible government criteria or metrics

against which to situate and measure these, arguably, fundamental aspects of higher education.

There is an obvious observation to be made at this point which is that there seems to have been a consistent move over the years towards making the measurable important, rather than making what is perceived to be important measurable. As mentioned previously, the difficulty of measuring the contribution of higher education in terms other than financial is recognised by the Higher Education Funding Council, in the context of HEIF, which states that:

> We recognise that income is an imperfect proxy for the impact of KE (Knowledge Exchange) on the economy and society. There are areas of KE where income is particularly inadequate, for example, where the focus is on developing wider social or community benefit… [but] we do not have methods presently to measure all these non-monetised benefits. (HEFCE, 2011, p20 (footnote)).

It would appear, therefore, that the aspirations in the Learning and Teaching Strategy relating to employability are easier to identify, articulate, implement and measure than those person-centred aspects associated with human flourishing. This is primarily because the former lend themselves more easily to interventions, initiatives, metrics and assessment – and to clarity of communication.

The transformative effect of higher education is a recurring theme among respondents and one which is evident in the University's mission statement. This view is articulated by respondent R10, who stated that 'wherever they come in [from], they go out as different people because their experience and learning has been broadened in ways that they didn't anticipate'. Inherent in this is the idea of development of the person which, as he goes on to explain, is understood:

In a sort of fully human sense rather than a skill set that is just about employability, something that stimulates [students] to value learning in the areas that they're learning about for its own sake. If there isn't something that enables them to develop that criticality that I talked about, and a capacity for questioning and a capacity for creativity, then I don't think we're giving them their entitlement…There's a whole set of things I think we do as a university to try to formalise that kind of entitlement [that] helps them to think harder about their own practice, and can contribute to improving it - but also gives them some of that sustaining criticality that you probably need if you're going to survive for more than a few years in [employment]… If you keep just doing the stuff that you're told to do, what do you do: a) if the government policy and orthodoxy changed, and you haven't been trained to do it and you can't think for yourself? Or b) if you reach a position where you think 'actually, this doesn't work but I don't know what to do'?

This last question echoes Rowan William's assertion mentioned earlier 'that intelligence has got to be engaging with *reality* in some important sense' (Williams, 2012).

The Learning and Teaching Strategy reinforces the importance of the idea of transformation that is at the heart of the University's mission by stating that:

> The CCCU graduate should be well equipped to contribute to the world through their skills, knowledge and attitudes. Therefore the University has made it a priority to develop a Graduate Attributes statement to describe the distinctive qualities of our graduates at all levels. (CCCU, 2017b, p.5)

The Graduate Attributes Statement was produced in 2016 and was, like the Learning and Teaching Strategy, subject to university wide consultation. The language used is very focused on the person, with an opening statement that reads:

> Canterbury Christ Church University is committed to the development of graduates who are intellectually curious, skilled and ethically engaged with the world and its future. Through transformative experiences, students have the opportunity to develop critical and imaginative thinking and a compassionate responsibility.

The attributes are listed as follows:

- Adaptable
- Digitally literate
- Effective communicator
- Informed

- Innovative
- Professional
- Self-aware

Each bullet point has several explanatory sub-bullets. The Statement provides a mechanism by which both students and University staff can jointly work towards developing and instilling these attributes. Most universities have produced similar statements, with respondent R11 remarking that:

> it's nothing necessarily new...but implicitly, there was [pre expansion] a notion of what a graduate looks like but we didn't talk about it, it was just there, Again it's to do with talking explicitly. So in a sense what I'm saying is that there is a constant but what's new is the way in which we talk about it and what's new, and I'm absolutely comfortable with this, is that we do talk about that in part in economic terms. [Previously] people would recognise a graduate, whether by accent or articulacy or by the proxy measure of the kind of job they were doing. But I'm not sure if you asked many graduates - if you'd asked me when I became a graduate - what is it that marks you out as a graduate, I'm not sure I could have said that. Now...we have given them the framework to [be able] do so. There is possibly a more explicit and diversified set of measures [now]. We just do so much more to help graduates articulate what it is that they are and can do.

The Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Graduate Attributes Statement represent an attempt to overcome the challenges of putting aspirational aims into practice. Both have only recently been developed and implemented and future research will be required to ascertain their success.

Conclusion

While I have found that there is, for a number of reasons, a sense of nostalgia for the pre-expansion period, there is also an emphatic insistence on the relative importance of employability in a period of mass participation - where graduates cannot be as sure as their early counterparts were of securing employment commensurate with their qualifications. There is similar insistence on the importance of the broader, non-financial, 'good' of higher

education, both for society and for the person. This was often communicated in terms of being: 'a damn good human being', 'an intelligent citizen' and 'professional'.

The responses show how Lord Robbins' holistic vision for higher education, particularly with regard to his emphasis on the importance of higher education's role in developing 'not merely good producers but also good men and women' (Robbins, 1963, p7) has failed to feature in subsequent political discourse. Rather, the participants' replies demonstrate, often with time-specific examples, how the employability and skills narrative has, over the fifty year period being examined, increasingly focused on the quantitative and financial elements, at the expense of the qualitative and person-centred elements.

In chapter two, I show that employers, when considering what they require from graduates, think beyond the skills dimension, ranking aspects such as integrity above specialist or technical skills. Similarly, the interviewees – all of whom work within higher education – also emphasised the importance of 'educating the whole person' (CCCU, 2017a). This demonstrates that there is a disconnect between how employers and universities perceive employability and skills and how they are perceived at a political level.

I have shown in this, and the preceding chapters, that the concept of employability is complex and that the role of higher education in this regard is similarly complex and multi-faceted. I argue that failure by successive government to recognise this complexity has resulted in a simplistic employability and skills narrative that, if not addressed, has potential negative consequences for higher education and for society as a whole.

The next chapter explores the findings in more detail and analyses participants' responses in relation to the dominant political discourse, the employability literature, university policies and notions of personal formation and human flourishing.

Brief Pen portraits of the respondents are provided below.

Brief pen portraits of respondents and summaries of their views

In order to comply with the confidentiality conditions agreed with respondents at the time of interview, I am unable to disclose any specific details that might lead to identification of any individual. The purpose of this section is to offer some insights, where possible, into the trajectories of the participants and to enhance the case studies that appear in chapter four.

Further areas for potential research have emerged from the interviews and these are suggested at the end of the section and are reiterated in the conclusion.

The Respondents

Respondent R1 is female and has been working in Higher Education for 13 years.

R1 moved in to Higher Education from the private sector. Her view is that.the purpose of purpose of education has changed over the years in response to a change in the jobs market. In other words, 'the way you find a job and secure a job, and how you long you spend in that job has changed and higher education has had to keep up with those changes'. She believes that a there is now much more emphasis on the development of employability skills and nurturing the whole person and said that when she went to university in 1995, there was not so much of an emphasis on any 'additional stuff that sits around your course because you went to study your subject.' She feels that students are now made more aware of employability and related extra-curricular activities because they are paying for their education and there is a need for them to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive jobs market. Her view is that this has resulted in students perceiving themselves as consumers with an associated right to an education that leads to employment. She feels that this has led to a 'focus on what has to be done to get a first [or

a] high mark [and that] the student has a lot more power within the academic-student relationship than previously [resulting in] a more transactional approach to teaching and learning.'

R1 believes that her view might be influenced by her role because 'in some respects we're a bit conditioned to think that our primary responsibility is to help secure that student with a graduate level job at the end of their university experience [and that is] how we are measured. But that's at odds with things like graduate attributes where we're also encoraging students to become life long learners, to have a thirst for knowledge and want to continue to study and nurture themselves. I think it's quite difficult [and that] some of the messages are a bit mixed actually.'

Respondent R2 is female and has been working in Higher Education for 22 years.
When R2 left school 'it wasn't expected that you would go to university [as] only one or two people did because they were particularly bright. The majority went straight into employment because they needed to earn money to live.' Her view is that the government targets have added to the current expectation that many more should go to university and that very many people have been 'swept along with the idea that it is an absolute necessity to go into higher education to get a degree even though that perhaps you might not necessarily need it.'
She feels that the majority of young people, and employers, now have the expectation that a degree is necessary to progress and that this is reflected in job adverts which stipulate education to degree level but do not stipulate a particular subject. This has led her to question how important academic study is in relation to gaining employment and how much it is showing the ability at all to achieve something. She is of the view that the

employability agenda and the extra-curricular activities that give 'a rounded experience to the students' were not evident twenty years ago and that this demonstrates a move from successful achievement of an academic degree to achievement of an academic degree with added extras, such as placements, voluntering and work experience. Her view is that students feel they need to do that little bit extra to make themselves more employable, whereas before, gaining a degree would be sufficient. She believes that finances play an important part and that 'twenty years ago fees were a nothing really [whereas] now fees are so extreme [I wonder] how they manage. We're introducing [students] in to a world where debt is not just acceptable but it's expected almost. We've all got our views on what's right or wrong. You work in this environment and you do that because you want to and you believe in it but there are still some things you are not comfortable with entirely – but it's the same with any role really.'

Respondent R3 is male and has been working in Higher Education for 35 years.

R3 believes that in the pre expansion period the expectation was, particularly from within working class communities, that you went to university to secure a better job; whereas for those who came from public schools, university was seen as the natural progression towards a professional career. He also feels that there used to be an expectation that, education would prepare [individuals] for their future careers while also preparing them to be good citizens in society. However, he feels strongly that 'being prepared for being a good citizen has got nothing to do with the grade that students get and not many people would necessarily see the good citizen element as core to employability - but it would be far better if it was.'

R3 feels that businesses have particular expecations of Higher Education but he is not sure that they have a real understanding of what HE is actually doing. His view is that employers want graduates who are work ready, with a broad range of skills, and seem to be less concerned about knowledge. He believes that this is the legacy from the pre expansion period when there were fewer graduates, whereas now companies are putting graduates into posts which in the past would have taken A level students. He also believes that what HE puts in to the curriculum has significantly changed since the early 90s, which is when he feels there was 'the first real push about developing skills and highlighting those skills [and that] the HE sector responded by a significant diversification in the way it assessed students. Leading on from that came employability, [a] word that has arisen in this century; prior to that it was about skills development and skills enhancement -but it was leading to the same place.' In his opinion, there has been a move from the theoretical to a more applied curriculum that is relevant to society, rather than just studying for the for the sake of the subject. Finally, he is of the view that employability has become a far bigger issue within higher education over the last 10 years and that this is linked to the advent of fees and a political agenda to justify the return on investment in terms of securing better paid jobs. In his opinion, the media and politicians have promulgated and perpetuated this particular point of view.

Respondent R4 is female and has been working in Higher Education for 16 years.
R4 has a vocational degree but, influenced by her family background, also thought of 'university as the more classic kind of ivory tower where subjects were created, curated and developed. So, knowledge for its own sake really.' She believes that when she went to university in the 1970s she was 'probably part of 10-15% of the population who went to unversity [whereas] now that figure would probably be around 49% of 18-30 year olds'.

Her view is that the widening participation agenda has changed perceptions of Higher Education, leading to allegations that 'we're letting in anyone and everyone, we're creating degrees that aren't really meaningful and then, more recently, the strong link in people's minds with employability.' She is of the view that mass expansion was about increasing the workforce and increasing the capacity and the capability of the work force and she feels that 'from the policymakers' perspective that was never really hidden, but it's become more obvious in the discourses that abound around higher education and, because of that, I think there has been a sort of a push back from those who feel that university is somehow a hallowed knowledge generator and curator.' She feels that when she went to unversity 'the only people going to university from what might be called a more disadvantaged background would have been [those] who'd managed to get in to grammar school.' She thinks that the changes that have taken place were largely due to 'having a labour government in power for 13 years and, regardless of what one might think of what they did in terms of social changes, I think their policies were essentially about making society more equal and giving opportunities equally aross the board [but also about] moving into a very different type of economy where where countries are like businesses [and] have to be competitive – so you need a really skilled workforce.'

Finally, R4 questions 'how well we understand our students' and felt that students might be more discerning than academics believe. Her view is that 'our students want to be challenged, they really want to learn and they're disappointed with some of the experiences they have. I think we underestimate our students a lot [and] I think there's an awful lot of temptation to keep dumbing stuff down because you think students aren't getting it, when I think the opposite is quite often needed and you often need to challenge them more but [also] to give them tools to deal with that challenge. The really big

difference [between] students who used to come from more privileged backgrounds [is that they] possibly had those tools already and could deal with the challenge, but we have to [give our students] those tools [because] I don't think they're any less clever or any less willing to learn, and [they are] hungry for that kind of challenge.'

Respondent R5 is female and has been working in Higher Education for 26 years.
R5 came into Higher Education with high level vocational qualifications, having worked for a number of years in industry and then in Further Education. There was no university in the town where she lived, so she had 'absolutely no concept of what a university was, I went to an FE college and as far as I was concerned the university was simply the next level of educaiton.' Her view is that a university education is about equipping people to be able to participate in working life in a professional context by providing complementary knowledge [to technical knowledge] and the ability to work collaboratively in teams and problem solve. She identified the most significant changes in perceptions of the purpose of higher education as being linked to the advent of fees and the associated increasing emphasis on employability. She believes that the changes have been felt to a greater extent in the humanities than in more vocationally oriented subjects but that, overall, fees are a key driver of change in the sector because 'suddenly [students] have this notion that they're consumers and that they're paying for the right to pass a degree and get a job as well. As opposed to they're paying for the right to participate in a process that will hopefully enable them to get a degree.'

R5 believes that her views are influenced by 'a very strong vocational orientation right from day one as opposed to other higher level discussions around the purpose of education.' Ultimately, however, she now feels that Higher Education is about allowing

students to 'find themselves and to discover different dimensions of themselves. To reach into themselves, into places that they perhaps wouldn't have found had they not gone into higher educuation. I suppose it's equipping them with that whole raft of indpendent thinking, independent life, enquiry, challenge, and essentially creating their own future and being able to navigate the future which I don't think you necessarily expect from further education.'

Respondent R6 is male and has been working in Higher Education for 9 years.

R6 came into Higher Education from the private sector and his only previous experience of the sector was when he was a student in the 1980s. He went to university to 'follow a subject that I wanted to know more about [and] was fascinated about for the sake of learning, of intellectual stimulation. I can't say that [would be] the same for someone who wanted to become a doctor or a dentist, I'm sure they have a very different set of ideas. But I do get the sense that people who are going into higher education now are probably more realistic, more practical in thinking about the immediate benefits of their education.' His view is that a university education is about 'providing opportunities for personal growth, for economic gain, career development, fulfilment, intellectual stimulation, social mobility and for [contributing to] the economic wellbeing of the country as a global citizen.' He links perceived changes in perceptions of the purpose of higher education to when Tony Blair was Prime Minister and to the setting of participation targets which 'gave permission I think to a wider group in society to really consider the opportunities of higher education but also fulfilling the economic needs, busines needs [and] industry requirements around productivity [and] about being able to compete as a nation.'

He feels that the changes in funding of the sector, where 'the money follows the student', has changed the relationship between student and institution, with the former having a

stronger voice and being more likely to be perceived as a customer.   He believes that this has brought with it 'a whole new set of requirements which are usually around being fit for employment and that has an impact on how we present and shape our offer to meet those economic and employablity drivers. So we're having to be far more in tune with the economic environment.' His view is that 'the power shift has moved more towards the students and the societies that we support [and] we need to be able to demonstrate the value that we bring to society in a far more explicit way' and that, since the introduction of fees this value is now most often expressed in terms of return on investment, notably 'through employability opportunities, salary opportunities, graduate employment opportunities [and the requirement to provide] the evidence for that.'

Respondent R7 is male and has been working in Higher Education for 32 years.
R7 came from the health sector into Higher Education. He knew from the age of twelve which vocational career he wanted, 'so the whole of my engagement with higher education as a student was with a clear employabilty end in mind. I've never had a separation between education for its own sake and education for employability - they're all kind of mixed up together.' He felt that, although he would be doing a particular job he 'needed a greater understanding of the world and to be educated about the world and people in order to do that job and develop a strong sense of an integrated professional and personal identity.' However, he understands that with mass education at a higher education level, 'you know you've got to have breadth of offer because you can't expect everybody to be going [to university] with their purpose clearly worked out.'
He is of the view that during the 1980s and 1990s 'people would be doing jobs without degrees that now require degrees – and higher degrees are required for some of those jobs.'

He feels that the advent and rise of fees has led to a change in perception about the purpose of higher education, and 'a greater expectation by government and perhaps by parents, and indeed to some extent by the students themselves, that they will earn sufficient to pay back [student] loans and still have a good living afterwards. So I think that's forced employability up the agenda.' He is emphatic about the need 'be more imaginative about how we measure change and look to some long term measures' and believes that fees have introduced a 'consumer dynamic into the education process in a more powerful way.' He also firmly believes that the purpose of higher education is to provide students with good opportunities to learn and develop in a cognitive sense and to engage with them as 'multi-dimensional people [because] the holistic notion of development is important to me in how I think about education.'

Respondent R8 is male and has been working in Higher Education for 22 years.
R8 has always worked in Higher Education and, when he first started his employment, he 'thought the purpose of education was about developing the mind and character of the students and inducting them into a particular academic discipline - so a particular way of thinking and valuing [of] learning how to think, how to argue, how to communicate, how to weigh evidence.' He feels that the changes that have come with a mass education system have put pressure on universities with regard to awarding grades. Whereas 'in 1994 a good 2:2 would have probably been fine for many employers, now it's sort of 2:1s or above [and this] is a way of [employers] sifting out [now]there are many more graduates looking for employment.' In his view this is part of the 'pretence, with which the governments of the day have been quite happy to collude, [which is] that essentially what you've got is more people participating in the same experience - whereas in fact I think with more people comes a shift in experience.'

He believes that the introduction of fees has let to students becoming much more passive, with a focus on' how much they need to know to get a 2:1 [as] they are consumers of what's being offered [which is linked to an anxiety about] becoming employed at the end of [the period of study].' He feels that the government is 'effectively saying don't worry about having to pay [fees through] a loan because actually what you're doing is investing in your own future and you're likely to have a higher future income. [So] that changes quite a lot of the equation about [the purpose of] higher education.' In his view, the purpose of education 'is learning how to live, rather than learning how to make a living.' Ultimately, he 'doesn't see a great dichotomy between good education and employability, I think they're actually very, very closely aligned and part of the trouble with the discourse at the moment is it's sort of separated it off. [It's] as if you do your education and then, oh yeah and by the way, you've got to get these employability bits in.'

Respondent R9 is male and has been working in Higher Education for 15 years.

R9 has always worked in Higher Education and feels that, 'since the mid to late 1990s' there has been a change, with 'a greater focus for both good and for ill on employability [meaning] a much more instructional approach [in] that you take higher education specifically and only to get a better job.' He feels that this is being increasingly seen in government quarters as the only purpose behind entering higher education and that the media has contributed to this perception. His view is that whereas previously it was assumed that students acquired cognitive and transferable skills for the job market for employability as part of their degree course 'that link [to employability] was never really made clear. Now it very much has to be.' He feels that the expansion of higher education and the introduction of fees have led to the perception that 'the student is buying a degree and that this has resulted in a move away from the notion that the pursuit of a subject is in

itself an inherent good or productive activity.' His view is that, while transferable skills

are valuable, the time spent at university 'can be so extraordinarily valuable to developing

you as a person [and] there is nothing more satisfying than seeing someone develop as an

individual, holistically, both in terms of their skills but also in terms of their values.'

While he 'laments the language of the consumer' he is also 'very comfortable talking

about the skills acquisiton [as] that's perfectly relevant.'

Respondent R10 is male and has been working in Higher Education for 35 years.
R10 has always worked in the education sector, moving from working in Secondary

Education to Higher Education. His view of the purpose of education is to do with

'personal development and the idea of the betterment of the individual through learning,

cultural understanding, acquiring the knowledge, having a critical perspective and using

education to become prepared to be a member of society [which] includes employability.'

While he emphasises that the changes that have taken place in Higher Education have not

been linear, they have gone 'fairly consistently in one direction which is towards increased

marketisation [and] a clear drive towards a focus on employability.' His view is that the

changes in the Higher Education sector have been heavily influenced by government

changes to 'school education policy in the 80s [when the government] took control of the

curriculum, saying "this is what pupils must study."' He feels that the government is

seeking to engage with 'teaching and learning in universities in a more hands-on way than

we've ever had before' and that this is partly due to the costs of education and 'the sense

that government has both right and responsibilities in terms of managing that public

money.' His is of the view that, particularly in Canterbury Christ Church University, the

idea of Higher Education is about 'the Christian notion of bringing out the best in every

individual [which is] there in the [university's] teacher education history and in the extent

to which [our] public services' work is about things where we still talk about people having a vocation. We still use the term profession to mean something which is richer than meeting a set of competences.' He believes that Higher Education is 'about employability but also about having an effect on community and communities.'

Respondent R11 is male and has been working in Higher Education for 33 years.

R11 has always worked in Higher Education. He feels that, prior to the expansion of the sector, there was 'far less explicit reflection on the purpose of education than there is now [with] an assumption that education was a good in its own right [and] would automtically, lead to a professional level employment post graduation.' His view is that, since the second half of his career, and primarily resulting from the advent and subsequent increase of fees, there has been an explicit emphasis on the economic value of education and the related return on investment issues. He feels that 'the balance between the return on investment for the country as a whole and the return on investment for the individual graduates has changed. It's not that one has entirely replaced the other but there's been a greater emphasis on the advantages and the benefits for the graduate.' He also believes that there is now a greater stress on vocational subjects and 'an assumption that there are certain subjects that do not prepare people for the world of work as well as others [and] I believe that is open to challenge and it's up to us to articulate the wider benefits of higher education [because] it is a collective good actually. It's a huge benefit to the whole of society.'

R11 emphasises his view that 'intellectual development prepares you for the world of work and the world of study and the world of being a damn good human being and that doesn't mean it isn't necessary to talk more explicitly about what routes to employment there might be [and] I'm absolutely all for that but I don't think that changes the purpose of education, I just think it changes the way we talk about it.'

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Respondent R12 is female and has been working in Higher Education for 16 years.

R12 came into Higher Education from working primarily in the public sector. When she first came into university, she felt 'absolutely driven to make sure that individuals in practice who were operating in specialist environments were given the right level of knowledge to enable them to do their job to the best of their ability.' It was only after having been in Higher Education for a few years that she came to understand that it is also about ensuring 'that individuals gain, enhance and build on knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that change themselves and the way they may work in the future.' Her view is that 'it's got to be transformative in some way and I don't think necessarily we should prescribe the way in which it should be transformative, or at what point in life. There is something I think about being driven by your subject and not recognising that actually, in undertaking that journey, you will pick up all of those extra skills including employability.'

She feels that there are 'two distinct camps' when it comes to views about the purpose of higher education which are influenced by discipline and whether that discipline has a professional/vocational focus, such as engineering or health. However, regardless of discipline, she feels that the introduction of fees has been a key driver of change, resulting in universities needing 'to become more commercial [and] clearer in articulating what they can and can't do because they have had to become clearer [and], in terms of employability, the need for universities to reach out and work in partnership with industry has never been greater.' Nonetheless, she feels that, while she can provide the ingredients to make somebody employable,' it doesn't mean they will be viewed as employable [especially if] they don't continue to demonstrate those values, behaviours and beliefs that are important to the employer...so it's all snapshot stuff isn't it?

Respondent R13 is male and has been working in Higher Education for 30 years.

R13 is of the view that 'there is an innate, intrinsic value in higher education which enables each individual to gain a range of aptitudes, skills, knowledge and experiences which will help that individual in their further life to contribute broadly to the economy and society; and that intrinsic value of higher education is both beneficial to the individual as well as to the wider society.' Although his view has not changed over the years, he feels that it has evolved 'in so far as I do see more emphasis being placed by universities, and rightly so, on preparing students for the place of work [and whereas] thirty years ago you could take a range of other routes including apprenticeships and so on and feel quite confident that you'd have a succesful career in your chosen field, now there's a sense of thinking that [you] have to go to university if [you] are going get a good job and I think that's a shift.'

He believes that higher education has 'evolved beyond recognition' in the thirty years he has worked in the sector, largely due to mass participation and 'the fact that some professions which were in the past not seen as degree level professions are now absolutely higher education level professions - nursing, allied health professions are a good example, and teacher education.' He also feels that the student is now perceived to be 'much more of a consumer, rather than a passive recipient of knowledge [and] expectations have undoubtedly grown [now that] they are fee paying students.' His view is that the 'employability dimension of the curriculum is much more explicit than would have been the case thirty years ago.' He emphasises that there 'not a single primary purpose in terms of how we view the purpose of education, as a university, but ultimately it has to be about creating global citizens, particularly for the 21st century [and] there is a risk that we lose some of that citizenship element of higher education in the drive to make sure people are employable. I mean, its not an either or - it's just getting that balance right.'

Further research

Two potential areas for further research have emerged from the interviews, namely:

- To what extent are perceptions of the notion of employability, and the purpose of higher education, 'conditioned' (R1) by an individual's job role within a university?
- To what extent, if any, has there been a 'dumbing down' (R4) of Higher Education since the expansion of the sector in 1992?

These potential research areas are briefly expanded upon in the conclusion to this thesis.

<center>**Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings**</center>

Introduction

This chapter is an analysis of perceptions of employability, within a single university, in relation to the dominant political discourse, university policies, employability literature and notions of personal formation and human flourishing.

I have found that the dominant political discourse depicts employability as a deficit model that has emerged from the failure of labour market policies to secure full employment (Finn, 2000) within a narrative that presents a reductionist view of higher education. This is a narrative where universities are seen, first and foremost, as mechanisms for delivering the skills considered by government to be vital to industry and the national economy. With its focus on the financial and its divorcing of employability from wider considerations of personal formation and human flourishing, I argue that the dominant political discourse significantly impoverishes the notion of employability in higher education by presenting a one dimensional narrative that undermines and diminishes the notion of employability and the broader role, and value, of higher education.

I further argue that the sector is regulated in accordance with a narrative of 'economically valuable skills' (Leitch, 2006, p.44) and outcomes that can be quantified and empirically evidenced, rather than with any philosophically or morally enlightened view of the purpose of higher education.

This chapter is concerned with establishing the validity of these claims and it comprises four sections:

-Employability through a philosophical lens (underpinning theory)
-Key assertions
-Analysis
-Conclusion

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Employability through a philosophical lens (underpinning theory)

In chapter two I took a broad brush approach to the subject of educational philosophy, by way of an introduction to the work of David Carr and to notions of personal formation and human flourishing. I also began to identify and examine ideas that might provide a different perspective to that communicated through the dominant, instrumentally and fiscally focused, discourse. While acknowledging that there is wealth of contributors to the field of educational philosophy, I draw, primarily, on Carr's work - particularly in relation to his thinking on moral education. Focusing in on particular texts has allowed me to dwell on them, think more deeply and consider what it is I am asking of them in the context of this study, rather than attempt to move my lens loosely across the plethora of theories that abound in the field of educational philosophy. In terms of approach, carrying out a conceptual analysis has enabled me to take a neutral position and 'hold [my own] values at bay while search[ing] into the logical features of educational ideas' (Soltis, 1968, p.68).

However, it is necessary to abandon the neutral approach for the final section, where it is important, not least for coherence and credibility, to identify the theory that underpins my analysis and to justify its relevance. I do this first by introducing it and then by relating it directly to the analysis, where appropriate. For the reasons given in chapter one, as well as for consistency and continuity, and to demonstrate how a narrowing of focus can help clarity of thinking, I have continued to draw largely on Carr's work.

Underpinning theory

I am taking as axiomatic the assertion that:

> Few occupations besides teaching (and ministry) are so clearly concerned with the actual formation of others in positive values and attitudes. In short, it is hard to deny that education involves improving people in a sense that extends beyond mere coaching or training in information and skills to wider *personal* formation (Carr, 2003a, p.77)

The idea of personal formation to notions of human flourishing is of prime importance to Carr and much of his work is concerned with the exploration of 'what constitutes a flourishing human life [as] this question must lie at the very heart of any worthwhile human endeavour' (ibid, p.75). Taking as self-evident that education is a worthwhile human endeavour, Carr looks primarily to the field of moral education to seek answers to this question. It is his work on a virtue approach to education that I argue is of particular interest and relevance to the analysis. This virtue approach is identified, elaborated upon and justified, in theoretical terms, as *virtue ethics* (Carr, 1998; 1999; 2003(a); 2003(b); 2006(a); 2006(b)).

I have identified virtue ethics as an appropriate theoretical framework within which to situate my analysis for four main reasons:

i. It resonates with the holistic vision for higher education advocated by Lord Robbins, who asserted that society needs 'not merely good producers but also good men and women' (Robbins, 1963, p.8), and will help us understand why this is important.

ii. It aligns with the guiding principle for this study identified in the Introduction, namely that:
Education is, at base, a moral enterprise…ultimately about the formation of persons [and] developing and contributing to the good life of individuals and society… it is toward these high moral ends that the human enterprise of education in a democratic society is negotiated and directed. We lose our moral direction when this ultimate end is forgotten in the pursuit of more immediate and pressing ends (Soltis,1989, p.124),

iii. It is an approach toward which I am inclined, based on my personal beliefs and values outlined in chapter one.

iv. The key findings justify the use of a virtue ethics theory and the analysis seeks to show this.

Before articulating and elaborating upon the key findings, it is necessary to explain what is meant here by a virtue approach and virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics

As with any theory, there are many different, often opposing, views about the precise nature of an ethics of virtue. Carr makes it clear that the theory he is advocating is predicated on a narrow interpretation which: 'grounds moral life and the aims of education in other than utilitarian or Kantian considerations' (Carr, 1999, p.7). To understand the importance of this positioning, it is necessary to briefly explain that ethical theories are understood to be either deontic or aretaic in nature. Whereas a deontic interpretation relates to the idea of duty (from the Greek, *deon*), an aretaic interpretation relates to personal values and virtues (from the Greek, *arete,* meaning excellence). It is the second category to which virtue ethics belongs and it is the 'distinct emphasis on good character over right conduct' that differentiates the rival theoretical approaches (Carr, 1999, p.10). Notions of character and conduct can best be understood by reference to their manifestations in general discourse, and can be recognised in phrases such as 'one should keep one's promises' or 'one should always speak the truth' (deontic), and 'she has great strength of character' or 'her devotion is admirable' (aretaic). These examples serve to show that the nature of deontic judgement is primarily based on types of actions, whereas aretaic judgements 'are *also* concerned with the evaluation of persons, their characters, intentions and motives' (ibid, p.8). To summarise:

> This distinction between deontic and aretaic judgements gives us some purchase on the difference between a deontic and an aretaic ethics. It is characteristic of an aretaic ethics that: first, aretaic judgements and predicates [such as 'good' and 'bad'] are treated as basic or primary, at least in relation to deontic ones; second, deontic judgements and predicates [such as 'right' and 'wrong'] are regarded as, if not inappropriate or redundant, at least derivative of, secondary or reducible to aretaic ones (ibid)

For Carr, 'virtue ethics is *necessarily* aretaic and character-centred' (ibid, p.16).

It is also important, particularly in relation to its relevance to the analysis, to emphasise the significance of Aristotelian conceptions of virtue ethics, of which Carr is a proponent, and according to whom:

> The supreme virtue of Aristotelian virtue ethics lies in its recognition of the way in which moral principles are essentially regulative of aspects of human nature and associations – natural inclinations, needs, sentiments and sensibilities – that render the virtues crucial to human integrity and well-being in *any* cultural context (Carr, 2003(a), p.81)

Virtues, in this case, are identified as including honesty, fairness, courage, self-control and compassion (ibid).

The analysis that follows is underpinned by, and draws on, the theoretical thinking associated with virtue ethics.

Key assertions

The analysis is organised around four key assertions:

1. There is a disconnect between political perceptions of, and approaches to, employability in terms of human flourishing and those of other stakeholders, notably businesses and universities.

2. There is a nostalgic pragmatism among respondents, which can be understood as a sense of yearning for the pre-expansion period of higher education, balanced by recognition of the relative importance of the concept of employability in an era of mass participation.

3. There has been a shift in narrative to the extent that the holistic view of higher education that was communicated in the early government commissioned reports has been diminished almost to the point of extinction

4. There are potential implications for the higher education sector of a dominant discourse that fails to recognise the notion of human flourishing, expressed in other than financial terms, as being critical to the concept of employability.

Analysis

1. There is a disconnect between political perceptions of, and approaches to, employability in terms of human flourishing and those of other stakeholders, notably businesses and universities.

I am taking as self-evident the idea that higher education transforms the person. However, there is a stark contrast between the dominant, economic-led employability and skills narrative and the more balanced, holistic narratives of Lord Robbins and the respondents in this study, which communicate a view of higher education that necessarily incorporates: 'an appreciation of non-instrumentalist person-constitutive dimensions of knowledge, understanding and skill – those features that enable us to understand ourselves, the world around us and our relations with others' (Carr, 2003a, p.12). In terms of the respondents, this view is most apparent in their replies to the question: 'What would you say is the primary responsibility of higher education?' where aspects associated with 'personhood' rather than 'employability' dominate (see chapter 4). Similar views are expressed in aspirational and diagrammatic forms through the representation of the CareerEDGE model of employability (chapter 2(2.5)) and within Canterbury Christ Church University's Learning and Teaching Strategy and Graduate Attributes Statement (chapter four).

It could be argued that the terms of reference of the later government commissioned reviews lend themselves to a particular representation of employability and skills, given that their focus is on university-business collaboration. Contrasting narratives, therefore, could be related to the assertion that: 'companies and universities are not natural partners: their cultures and their missions are different.' (Robbins, 2003, p.14). It might also be the case that they have different, even competing, value systems which, in the case of a business, is to do with having 'the right skills to meet its business needs' (FSB, 2011, p.21). However, even though the workplace may 'sometimes be seen as a value-free, technocratic domain'

(Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.576), there is evidence, based on an empirical study of employers, that 'personal ethical qualities of honesty, integrity and trust are expected on appointment, ahead of any other skill or competence.' (ibid, p.570). These 'personal ethical qualities' are recognisable as virtues and this insight from the business community demonstrates their importance to employers.

As I have shown within the previous chapters, these person-centred aspects have been, and continue to be perceived as important elements of higher education and, as research demonstrates, they are valued by employers. So why do they not feature in the dominant discourse?

One reason could be connected with the view, expressed earlier, that suggests different opinions are not necessarily: 'disagreements between those who value the one *rather* than the other, but disputes between people who value *both,* but cannot see their way clear to the simultaneous promotion of both' (Carr, 2003a, p.60). However, if we take as axiomatic that 'education is profoundly implicated in the essentially normative task of promoting personal formation' (ibid, preface, p.x), and that 'forms of knowledge, understanding or skill are more constitutive features of personhood than contingent or disposable commodities of individual and social consumerism' (ibid, p.12), then we can move the debate about the meaning or purpose of education away from a dominant political discourse that depicts human flourishing in terms of wealth generation, towards a discussion that situates the person and moral purpose at the centre of conceptions of education. In virtue ethical terms, this would include instilling an awareness of the intrinsic, rather than just the extrinsic value of the different forms of skills, knowledge and understanding. This aspiration is shared by HEFCE, which has as one of its four aims for higher education: 'to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake' (HEFCE, 2008, p.6). A virtue ethical approach looks to moral education to demonstrate the ways in which the possession of virtues such as honesty,

fairness, and charity can enrich personal life (Carr, 1999, p.245), thereby demonstrating an alignment to the Aristotelian view that: 'moral understanding is not a matter of ascent to the universal but of descent into the particulars of human experience' (Carr, 1998, p.126).

In chapter two, I explored the notion of personal formation in relation to ideas of 'the good life', the 'worthwhile life', 'human flourishing' and 'personhood', and used a quote from Carr which succinctly summarises a view of education that resonates with views expressed by respondents and early iterations of the dominant discourse:

> …education as opposed to training in pre-specified skills is nothing less than a collaborative exploration of the key conditions of human wellbeing or flourishing – of precisely the search for the good life. (Carr, 2006b, p.178)

Whether ideas about what constitutes personal formation and human flourishing are articulated in terms of 'citizenship' (62% of respondents), or in relation to 'learning how to live, rather than learning how to make a living' (R8), or in any other way, the central importance to education of these notions is increasingly being publicly emphasised and endorsed. An example of this is the campaign by the Royal Society of Arts, subtitled 'rediscovering education's true purpose', which aims to focus:

> The public and professional debate about education on its highest purposes – like personal fulfilment, societal progress and human flourishing – rather than the proxy goals of tests, target and league tables (Astle, 2017)

Although the campaign is focused on schools, it espouses the view that human flourishing is a critical component of education and one of its highest purposes. It follows that human flourishing should underpin primary, secondary and tertiary education.

The importance to individuals and society of a collaborative approach to work and life was remarked upon in chapter four where respondent R4 stated that:

the notion of social good has become slightly lost because the focus has shifted towards the individual good and, while social good may include increased productivity and a stronger economy, the connotations in terms of being a citizen in a more socially oriented way have been diminished.

Similarly, respondent R3 asserted that a focus on the self in terms of personal accumulation of wealth, along with a lack of understanding or concern about the consequences of individual actions on others, contributed to the financial crash in 2008. This view is explored, in the context of virtue ethics, later in this section.

Inherent to these views are what have previously, and variously, been referred to as attributes, qualities, soft skills or transferable skills (chapter 2(2.2)). Irrespective of the terminology used, a study of the literature shows that businesses have emphasised that these aspects are of at least equal importance to the technical or specialist skills that they reportedly lack. (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011). Furthermore, when employers were asked to rank their expectations of graduates on appointment, the top four related more to personal attributes than technical skills (ibid, p.571). They are listed as follows:

- Demonstrate honesty and integrity (98.1%)
- Someone I can trust (94.4%)
- Able to listen to others (93.5%)
- Able to integrate quickly into team or department (92.6%)

Having shown that a range of stakeholders, including employers, perceive traits associated with human flourishing, to be important aspects of higher education and to notions of employability, it is necessary to identify the barriers that are preventing messages about the importance of personal formation and human flourishing finding their way into the dominant discourse.

Although in chapter four I have claimed that a powerful and persuasive rhetoric is driving the employability and skills narrative and contributing to its dominance, it does not

necessarily follow that government rhetoric is a barrier *per se*. Those rhetoricians, or 'skills-talkers' (Johnson, 1998, p.2003), behind the dominant employability discourse could just as easily utilise their influence and rhetorical skills to advocate and lobby for the 'person-constitutive' elements of higher education as they do for the 'economically valuable skills' argument. I have found that there are two primary reasons why they do not and these are expanded upon below. The first is to do with the fact that, at a political level, there is currently neither the inclination nor the method to capture the non-economic contribution of the higher education sector to the individual and society. The second relates to the determined push by government, in the face of ever increasing participation in higher education, to expand vocational education. According to Ed Byrne, Principal of King's College London, some politicians see the former as a potential threat to the latter:

> Some [House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee] members were concerned that the 50 per cent participation in higher education target was, in fact, undermining both the esteem and level of investment in the unit of resource connected to vocational and technical pathways outside a higher education setting. (Byrne, 2017, p.32)

With regard to the first point, although I have demonstrated that non-financial aspects associated with human flourishing are considered to be important for a variety of reasons, in chapter 2 (2.5) these are shown to be very difficult to measure. (HEFCE, 2011, p.20: NEF, 2011, p.4). The extract below, from a report in a recent edition of the Times Higher Education Magazine, demonstrates that this view is also held at the highest and most influential levels, with no indication of imminent change:

> The OECD might be seen as one of the key influences driving higher education policy-makers in the direction of instrumentalist measures of outcomes. Asked whether the organisation puts too much emphasis on earnings returns in its evaluation of higher education systems, Schleicher [OECD's Director for Education and Skills] is surprisingly candid. "I accept that criticism completely," he replies. "It's a very narrow, very limited, very instrumental view. We are only capturing a fraction of the outcomes." Earnings "are a mix of supply and demand factors: you never

> know to what extent the high earnings…simply reflect skill demand [from employers], as opposed to the quality of higher education", he adds. The solution, says Schleicher, is "measuring learning gain directly". This would make it possible to "really look at the human qualities, the…social and emotional skills that people have [as a result of university study], rather than just the instrumental value," he says.
> The OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes project was an attempt to do just that: measure the skills that graduates gain during their university study. But it was blocked from implementation after key nations, including the UK, failed to support it. (Morgan, 2017, p.39)

The second reason for the non-instrumental aspects of higher education being subordinated to the instrumental aspects, relates to the government's determination to rapidly expand vocational education. The Enterprise Bill (DBIS, 2016) announced the creation of a new independent body: the Institute of Apprenticeships, as well as the introduction of an apprenticeships levy. These initiatives will facilitate the implementation of the government's:

> Commitment to create 3 million apprenticeships by 2020 [and ensure that] the term "apprenticeship" [is] protected in law. This will strengthen their reputation, help working people and ensure apprenticeships are recognised as a career path equal to higher education. (DBIS, 2015b)

Apprenticeships will span all levels, including degree level. Universities, including Canterbury Christ Church University, are already offering or developing degree level apprenticeships as part of their overall strategies. In addition to this initiative is the Government's Industrial Strategy (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ((DBEIS), 2017) which introduces the proposed creation of institutes of technology. The prioritisation and positive publicity being accorded to apprenticeships by the government, given the 3 million target and short timescale for delivery, is in stark contrast to current negative depictions of universities. This negativity is evident in Lord Willett's statement that: 'not many people say that they love universities at the moment' (Willetts, 2017b).

Sometimes the stark contrast is made within one statement, such as that of MP Richard

Halfon, chair of the UK's House of Commons Education Committee, who asserts that:

> too many graduates are going to universities and not coming out with
> highly-skilled and well-paid jobs [so] we're going to offer every young
> person from the age of 16 … a state-of-the-art apprenticeship from level
> two right up to degree level [investing] many billions in degree level
> apprenticeships and build[ing] a skills nation [with students being] virtually
> guaranteed a job at the end of it (Morgan, 2017, p.15)

The previous chapters go some way to demonstrate that this generalised statement has as

much to do with rhetoric as it does with reality.   It also reinforces my view (see chapter

two) that the 'skills-talkers' are largely responsible for perpetuating the dominant, one-

dimensional employability narrative and that this makes them potentially 'more dangerous

than those who [are] completely wrong' (Johnson, 1998, p.202).

Chapter four showed the perceived importance of a balanced approach to the employability

and higher education debate and, in this regard, respondents' views echo the sentiment

expressed by Lord Robbins, who asserted that:

> While there is no betrayal of values when institutions of higher education
> teach what will be of some practical use … there is a function that is more
> difficult to describe concisely, but that is none the less fundamental: the
> transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship.
>
> By this we do not mean the forcing of all individuality into a common
> mould: that would be the negation of higher education as we conceive it.
> (Robbins, 1963, pp.6-7)

However, although I have found that normative notions of personal formation and human

flourishing are widely perceived to be fundamental to the idea of education, I have shown

that there is currently no inclination at the highest political levels to consider or promote

these aspects within contemporary political narratives, largely because they cannot be easily

or empirically evidenced or measured (HEFCE, 2011, p.20, Morgan, 2017, p.39, Willetts,

2017, p.146). Another reason is that the interpretation of human flourishing, as depicted

within the dominant discourse, is predicated primarily on self-interest expressed in terms of wealth accumulation through the acquisition of skills. An example of this is the idea of the graduate premium which despite evidence to the contrary (Atkins, 1999; Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), 2016), is promoted as being a justification for the investment in higher education.

An important observation must be made at this point, which is that while technical and specialist skills are visible and measurable by virtue of their physical application and the subsequent effectiveness of that application, the person-constitutive features that are integral to human flourishing, such as compassion, emotional intelligence, integrity and empathy, are arguably at their most noticeable when they are absent. Often this absence only becomes apparent in the aftermath of a catastrophe. An example of this relates to the widely reported unethical, in some cases fraudulent, banking practices that brought global financial systems to the brink of unprecedented disaster in 2008. Immense wealth was generated by traders leading up to the banking crisis. With the crash came the realisation of the substantial losses caused by individuals at some of the world's largest and most influential banks. Trader Kweku Adoboli 'almost destroyed the banking giant UBS' (The Guardian, 2012) through his rogue trading, causing losses of £1.5 billion. According to Perry Stokes, the City of London police detective chief inspector who led the investigation, Adobli was: 'a young man who wanted it all and was not willing to wait' (The Guardian, 2012). As for Adoboli, he claimed that that he 'never set out to deceive the bank' (Bloomberg, 2012). Other examples include scandals within the National Health Service (Bentham, 2001; BBC, 2004) and the Church (BBC, 2010); the MPs' expenses fiasco (Martin, 2014) and illegal journalistic practices (BBC, 2012). While an exploration of the particular moral and ethical considerations relating to these examples is beyond the scope

of this study, they do serve to reinforce the notion that: 'morality is barely intelligible apart from the consideration that our actions have serious consequences for the actual harm or well-being of others' (Carr, 1998, p.124). It could also be argued that they validate the virtue ethical claim that:

> No social principles and practices that are not consistent with or grounded in fundamental dispositions to appropriate self-control and concern for self and others in the light of some responsible reflection, can conduce to individual or social human flourishing (Carr, 2006a, p.452).

It is in this context that the virtue ethical idea of moral perception is relevant and important, in that, according to this view: 'it is indispensable in order to know how to respond properly to the needs of others that one is capable of a certain sympathy or fellow feeling for their plight, and that one also *cares* enough to do something about it' (Carr, 2003a, p.82).

The following is an articulation, by one of the respondents in this study, of how this issue is regarded and approached within a higher education setting. It demonstrates a recognition both of the importance and the difficulty associated with the Aristotelian notion of moral perception:

> [Individuals] must have emotional resilience and emotional intelligence. They've got to be compassionate, so that they come with a set of values, beliefs and behviours that will enable them to work within that particular environment and those will be tested at interview. I can't make somebody compassionate, I can provide the environment in which they are exposed to what compassion looks like and they can discuss and they can work out for themselves what they need to do in terms of ameliorate their behaviour. Whether or not they assimilate that on a permanent basis, that's up to them. At the point at which students graduate from here and register, they are technically fit for practice but that doesn't mean to say that they would necessarily be viewed as employable in six months' time if they didn't continue to demonstrate those values (R12)

It is pertinent, here, to raise awareness of aretaic *agent* virtue ethics (Carr, 1999. p.9), in that this 'captures the widespread view that an ethics of virtue centres on the goodness or badness of agents and their character, rather than on the rightness or wrongness of actions or kinds of actions' (ibid).

I have found through the interviews and engagement with the literature and other artefacts that ideas of personal formation and human flourishing are of critical importance, for a range of reasons, to the individual, the workplace and wider society. However, consideration of these findings within a virtue ethics theoretical framework has enabled me to begin to show *why* they are important, and to introduce the argument that: 'virtue ethics, as theoretically basic to a conception of moral education, would presumably be to conceive moral education as a matter of the development of such traits, along with promotion of some understanding of their moral value or significance' (ibid, p.5)

2. There is a nostalgic pragmatism among respondents, which can be understood as a sense of yearning for the pre-expansion period of higher education, balanced by recognition of the relative importance of the concept of employability in an era of mass participation.

Bringing a case study approach to the conceptual analysis of employability has resulted in some unique insights, including a new understanding of a phenomenon that I have called 'nostalgic pragmatism.' This refers to a sense of nostalgia for the pre-expansion period, combined with a pragmatic approach to employability in an era of mass participation.

I have found that the sense of nostalgia communicated by the respondents is not based on rose-tinted, ideal-typical perceptions of higher education during the pre-expansion era, nor is the apparent pragmatism a cynical response to the ubiquity of an externally imposed employability and skills agenda. Rather, responses to the interview questions reveal a

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nuanced understanding and articulation of employability and higher education as complex and multi-layered concepts - and not necessarily hierarchical in terms of the relative importance accorded to each layer. This understanding has contributed to the respondents' collective insistence on the idea of balance, which has emerged as a theme from the interviews (chapter four). The idea of employability as multi-dimensional, with a consequent need for a balanced approach, is also reflected in the literature (Yorke, 2006; Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Pegg et al, 2012; Ransome, 2013; McGowan, 2015).

The sense of nostalgia that emanated from the respondents relates to the perception that, as higher education has expanded, there has been a move away from the notion that the pursuit of a subject:

> is in itself an inherent good or productive activity [as] the greater focus is now on what the degree "will get me when I graduate". It's no longer enough to say that studying [a particular subject] will fundamentally enrich your life, broaden your horizons, enlighten your thinking, improve your critical faculties, you have to now make that link with employment' (R9).

McCowan articulates his concern by suggesting that employability might change the relationship with knowledge: 'towards a valuing of learning only in so far as it can provide immediate, tangible and most probably economic benefit' (McCowan, 2015, p.280)

This view is also expressed by respondent R10, who stated that:

> [for some students] to participate in society in terms of employment and to contribute in a broader way to society are dominant over the notions of learning for some kind of broader idea of personal development or what we might call a kind of more pure desire to acquire knowledge, understanding, and even skills…unless those things are seen as somehow linked with this broader goal of employability. That's the direction of travel.

The literature also shows that there are perceptions of the pre expansion period as having been a time when higher education focused more on enquiry and the challenging of conventional wisdom, critical engagement and general intellectual capabilities than it does now (Ransome, 2011; Wingate, 2007; Watson, 2014). By contrast, the post-expansion

period is commonly considered to be associated with what has been referred to as an: 'instrumental-performative rationale' (Ransome, 2011:219) and it is in this context that employability is most often viewed. This is further reinforced by a claim highlighted in chapter 2 (2.1) which states that: 'employability has become central to education policies and practice' (Chertskovskaya, 2013, p.706)

There is an emphatic insistence among respondents, however, on the idea that education remains a collective good, is of intrinsic value and that the aspects associated with human flourishing that were considered to be fundamental to a university education during the pre-expansion period, are as valid and important today as they have always been.

The idea of education as having intrinsic value reflects the theories of R. S. Peters who was a leading (UK) educational philosopher of the post-war period and was writing at the time of the Robbins' Review of Higher Education in 1963. In his 1973 work 'The Philosophy of Education' Peters explores and attempts to identify the aims of education, three of which I show below:

> i) Education as being a quest for knowledge and understanding
> ii) An emphasis on forms of knowledge as being of intrinsic rather than extrinsic value
> iii) The insistence of a distinction between education and training, which is connected with the above

While respondents' perceptions may, or may not, have been directly or indirectly influenced by the received wisdom of the pre-expansion period, they do reflect considered views, recounted anecdotally, of employability and higher education based on their personal experiences, both as former students and as professionals and academics currently operating within the sector. Thus, the nuanced understanding referred to earlier is also likely to be underpinned by a tacit awareness of the changing worldview that occurred in the mid to late twentieth century that saw a move away from post-war, modernist thinking towards a post-

modern paradigm that questioned existing ontologies and epistemologies, considered knowledge itself to be contestable and challenged inherited grand narratives (Hartas, 2010, p.48). On the journey from pre-expansion elitism to post-expansion mass participation, the higher education sector (and society in general) has encountered significant political, socio-cultural, ontological and epistemological upheavals. It is perhaps understandable, therefore, that there is a sense of nostalgia for what has gone before. However, many of the respondents were insistent upon communicating their view that, in spite of the consistent and increasing emphasis and influence of the employability and skills narrative, the purpose of higher education is fundamentally unchanged, in that it is about developing people. It is 'the ways in which we do it and talk about it that have changed' (R11).

The perception is that this change has largely been brought about by the introduction of fees which has precipitated a need to demonstrate financial return on investment, as discussed in chapter four, and this idea also appears in the literature (Ransome, 2011; McCowan, 2015). There is an assertion that the sector's responsibility for employability is framed in such a way as to provide a justification for the cost to the public purse that the employability agenda represents (McCowan, 2015, p.268). A view is that employability has become a more explicit part of the discourse that takes us in to an articulation of employability as one of the outcomes of education. This is demonstrated in the assertion that it has become:

> sort of separated off - as if you do your education and then "by the way, you've got to get these employability bits in"…as if employability's either an add-on or something that's got to be freshly integrated into education – as if education in itself is not going to help make you employable. (R8)

As far as the respondents are concerned, the separation between employability and education that the dominant discourse has engendered and perpetuates is an unhelpful dichotomy. Although they perceive the word 'employability' to be relatively recent, the

majority of respondents see no great divide between employability and education and consider them to have always been closely aligned. Furthermore, there is general acknowledgement of the need to emphasise the work-related aspects and benefits of higher education given that today's graduates, unlike their pre-expansion counterparts who could almost be guaranteed employment after their university education, have no such certainties. Again, the more nuanced understanding of the complexities associated with pre and post expansion issues and the purpose of higher education are evident, with the respondents' narrative painting a more balanced, holistic picture of employability and the role of higher education. This narrative is in stark contrast to the political dominant discourse which, since Lambert in 2003, has incrementally created a one-dimensional narrative of employability and skills that has diminished the value of higher education by depicting universities' primary purpose as being a producer of skills for industry. (Leitch, 2006; Sainsbury, 2007; Witty, 2013).

This is also where the pragmatic part of 'nostalgic pragmatism' is evident. In other words, in relation to the idea of balance which we have shown to be of importance to an understanding of the concept of employability. Examples in the literature that reflect the thinking in relation to this notion include the suggestion that, instead of talking in terms of performance and skills, employability should be conceived more in terms of identity and practice (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.564). Similarly, we saw in chapter two (2.4) how Ransome considers the life-transforming potential of qualitative pedagogy to be crucial, in that it:

> affects the whole person and not just part of them [and can] bring about fundamental changes in self-awareness and sense of self. It shapes and filters the ways in which personality is expressed [and] the changes that take place tend to be irreversible. The person cannot remain untouched by the learning process because this process is one of self-enlargement [thus] the object of transformation is the person and not simply the extent of their

> factual or technical knowledge…It increases confidence in a person's underlying capacity for critical evaluation as distinct from the passive acquisition of descriptive information. (Ransome, 2013, p. 214)

I have found that the idea of balance, which incorporates recognition of the multi-faceted nature of employability, is particularly important in relation to the perceived potential of losing: 'some of that citizenship element of higher education in the drive to make sure people are employable [as] it's not an either or - it's just getting that balance right' (R13). It is this desire to achieve a symbiotic balance between employability and the broader aspects of higher education, underpinned by the fundamental principle of 'the development of the whole person' (CCCUa, 2017) and to translate it into practice, that is encapsulated in the term 'nostalgic pragmatism'.

The notion of citizenship is evoked many times by respondents (see chapter four). Their replies suggest that they consider citizenship to lend itself more readily and appropriately to the idea of a person-centred understanding of, and approach to, higher education than does the concept of employability, with its politico-economic led narrative. As we saw in the previous section, Lord Robbins evoked the idea of 'common standards of citizenship' in his 1963 Report, where it is enshrined as one of his suggested Principles of higher education. He explains that this is an important aim because: 'we believe that it is a proper function of higher education, as of education in schools, to provide in partnership with the family that background of culture and social habit upon which a healthy society depends' (Robbins, 1963, p.7). This resonates with Carr's thinking in a paper on the moral roots of citizenship, where he states that:

> One might hope that effective citizens are capable of ordering their conduct and pursuing their various projects in the light of some personally compelling conception of the good or of what is humanly worth achieving:

citizenship, so construed is also a matter of the formation or cultivation of significant values, virtues and attachments (Carr, 2006a, p.444).

Yet, while those within the academy articulate the broader benefits of higher education within their institutional strategies and policies and recognise and accept the need to engage with the notion of employability, government discourse continues to privilege ideas associated with financial return on investment and national, competitive advantage. This contributes to the reductionist representation of higher education and perpetuates the perception that: 'higher education institutions are there primarily to improve the "employability" of young adults' (Ransome, 2011, p.207). Furthermore, it reinforces the perception that: 'employability has become central to education policies and practice' (Chertskovskaya, 2013, p.706) and that 'the applied and concrete may come to squeeze out the theoretical and abstract, in order to attend to the perceived needs of employers' (McCowan, 2015, p.280).

From what has been argued so far it is: 'hard to deny that education involves improving people in a sense that extends beyond mere coaching and training in information and skills to a wider *personal* formation' (Carr, 2003a, p.77). Yet, I have shown that it is difficult to capture and communicate the broader benefits of higher education to government, students and other influential stakeholders when the dominant narrative and the related metrics are almost completely geared towards results that can be quantified and empirically evidenced.

3. There has been a shift in political discourse, to the extent that the holistic view of higher education that was communicated in the early government commissioned reports has been diminished almost to the point of extinction.

The following quotes provide a snapshot of the evolving narrative over a 50 year period:

- The good society deserves equality of opportunity for its citizens to become not merely good producers but also good men and women. (Robbins, 1963, p.8)

- The purpose of education is life enhancing: it contributes to the whole quality of life. (Dearing, 1997, p7)

- The role of universities is to educate students [but] it is important for the UK economy that students leave universities with skills that are relevant to employers. (Lambert, 2003, p.107)

- Funding Councils should require universities to publish information [on] graduate and postgraduate employability. (Lambert, 2003, p.108)

- The prize for our country will be enormous [with a] possible net benefit of £80 billion over 30 years. (Leitch, 2006, p.1)

- The demand for skills will grow inexorably. (Sainsbury, 2007, p.95)

- Strategies to ensure the development and recording of students' employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship skills should be implemented by universities in the context of the university's mission. (Wilson, 2012, p.2)

- Universities…should assume explicit responsibility for facilitating economic growth. (Witty, 2013, p.6)

Although both Robbins and Dearing mention skills in their reports in the context of economic growth and competitiveness, the emphasis grows inexorably during a fifty-year period with the word being mentioned 8 times in Robbins (1963), 73 in Dearing (1997); 75 in Lambert (2003) and 244 in Wilson (2012). Skills are hardly mentioned at all in the Witty Review (2013) but, when they are, it is mainly in the context of skills as a disembodied commodity that can be provided or supplied to industry. Even though the focus of the Witty review is to consider 'how to make the most of the economic benefits which may be derived from universities in order to promote local growth' (Witty, 2013, p.41), the apparent divorcing of skills from any sense of individual agency or benefit is stark. Where students or graduates are mentioned it is primarily in product and income generating terms, using phrases which imply they are vessels for the 'provision of skills' (ibid, p.15) and the 'supply of skills'(ibid, p.44).

The narrative begins to change in terms of an increased emphasis on employability and skills following the Labour Party's decision in 1995, after election defeats in 1987 and 1992, to abandon its 'commitment to traditional full employment and create "economic and employment opportunities for all [by] improving "employability"' (Finn, 2000, pp.385-6). The success or failure of the subsequent welfare to work strategy and New Deal programmes, introduced by Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997, largely depended on 'the major political effort made to engage employers and the business community [through] "partnerships"' (ibid, p.389). It was against this backdrop that the Lambert review was commissioned by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, with a specific remit to look at university-business collaboration (see chapter 2(2.2)). The review also reported to the Secretaries of State at the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department for Education and Skills. Similarly, Lord Leitch was commissioned by Tony Blair's government with a specific brief to look at skills, with the aim of considering: 'what the UK's long-term ambition should be for developing skills in order to maximise economic prosperity, productivity and to improve social justice' (Leitch, 2006, p.1). The title of the work emphasised its aspirations: 'Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills.' This review contributed to a narrative that promoted prosperity primarily in financial and economic growth terms, predicated on the assumption that there is a 'direct correlation between skills, productivity and employment' (ibid).

The concept of employability, therefore, can be seen to have emerged from failed labour market policies which were based on the promise of full employment and which resulted in Tony Blair's New Labour government's pledge to create 'economic and employment opportunities for all.' The aim was to make:

> the unemployed more employable [because] unlike the old certainties of
> the post-war era, the new orthodoxy suggests that it is no longer feasible to

simply expand the economy or frame labour market policies within the context of guaranteed "job for life". In the modern UK labour market future entrants will not even be able rely on a "skill for life". The key to future social cohesion and job security is seen to be in developing the employability of the potential and actual British workforce. (Finn, 2000, p.387)

Within this study, I explore some of the implications of the insistence on the potential of employability and skills to turn around the UK's productivity and employment status. At the time of writing, and despite massive investment in skills, scores of initiatives and an abundance of advisory and strategic organisations (Robbins, 2006, p.72), the UK continues to have a poor productivity record (Guardian, 2017). This poor record is acknowledged in the government's Industrial Strategy Commission's report, which states that:

> …agreement that skills are important has not led to either consensus or consistency on how to achieve better skills or deploy them. A recent report from the Institute for Government described further education and skills reform as "the worst failure of domestic British public policy since the Second World War"; [and there have been] twenty-nine major reforms of vocational education since the early 1980s. In less than four decades, there have been 28 major pieces of legislation, 48 Secretaries of State with relevant responsibilities and no organisation focused on skills policy has survived longer than a decade. (Industrial Strategy Commission, 2017, p.42)

As a consequence, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Phillip Hammond, announced in his November 2017 Budget the government's intention to commit to 'extra funding for artificial intelligence, skills and technology' (Guardian, 2017).

In chapters two and four we saw examples, from the literature and respondents' views, of how the expansion of the sector was seen as a catalyst for the changing perceptions and expectations of higher education in relation to employability and economic growth. Mass participation in higher education also fed in to Tony Blair's vision regarding 'employment opportunities for all' (HMT, 2000) and we saw in chapter 2 (2.3), how the government's aspirations to 'build security through employability' became strategic priorities in the

DfEE's 1997 strategy: 'Learning and Working Together for the Future.' It was around this time that respondents began to notice the employability narrative beginning to infiltrate their working environment, as summarised below:

> [During] the Blairite time I certainly noticed that [higher education] was playing a far more important political and economic role…as a way of increasing social mobility but also fulfilling the economic needs, the business needs, industry requirements around productivity [and] about being able to compete as a nation. That was really brought into sharper relief for me at that particular time. (R6)

Echoing the 'new orthodoxy' idea referred to earlier, he further asserted that the UK is 'moving into a different type of economy [and] it's absolutely imperative that we are seen to be delivering value to the regions that we serve' (R6).

Canterbury Christ Church University's commitment to the employability and skills agenda is evidenced within its 'Higher Education Innovation Funding: Institutional, 5yr KE Strategy, 2016.' This strategic document states a number of key priorities in this regard, including:

- The desire to build on [the University's] excellent reputation for engaging with and serving its local communities

- The commitment to making a significant contribution to supporting economic growth and developing a strategic approach to supporting businesses across Kent

- The development of STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths)

The Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) is a formula-based allocation of money that incentivises university-business collaborations and is provided by government, via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), according to the amount of externally generated knowledge exchange income secured by universities over a three-year period. This is an example of the 'major political effort to engage employers and the business community' (Finn, 2000, p.389). Finn's article was published in 2000 which was

the year after the first incarnation of what would eventually become HEIF was announced. The government's 'Higher Education Reach out to Business and the Community' (HEROBAC) initiative was a competitive fund that was launched in 1999, two years after Tony Blair became Prime Minister. Its aim was to encourage collaborations between universities and the business community and Canterbury Christ Church University successfully bid to the fund. Engagement with HEIF reveals a long-standing commitment by the higher education and business sectors to successive governments' employability and collaboration aspirations and corroborates the recollections made by some respondents with regard to the chronology of the evolving employability narrative. It also demonstrates that Sir Andrew Witty's recommendations for universities to: 'assume an explicit responsibility for facilitating economic growth' (Witty, 2013, p.6) and to make it a 'core strategic goal' (ibid, p.14) have been taken on board by the higher education sector. Similarly, the STEM aspirations outlined in Canterbury Christ Church University's HEIF 5-year institutional strategy demonstrate a commitment to delivering what Leitch referred to as 'economically valuable skills' (Leitch, 2006, p.44). The University has, since the publication of the HEIF Strategy, secured £12m of government funding towards the realisation of its STEM ambitions (CCCU, 2017c).

I have also shown, however, that there is an institutional determination, as demonstrated in the university's strategic and policy documents and interview responses, to provide an education that is predicated on a broader, more holistic, concept of higher education that incorporates employability as part of a symbiotic whole. However, the dominant discourse, with its economic conception of prosperity, pays scant attention to aspects such as integrity, professionalism and citizenship which are perceived to be integral to the notion of human flourishing and, thus, fundamental to the idea of higher education. These aspects are

considered important by the respondents and were evoked in relation to the financial downturn in 2008 where their perceived absence was considered to be a contributory factor to the crisis. Respondent R3 was particularly vocal in this regard, asserting that it is unlikely the situation would have arisen: 'if we had more people who were willing to think about the broader impact on society rather than how much money [they] could make.' This resonates with the view that:

> We need to recognise that our own good is often precisely realised in other-regarding concern for the interest of others. From this viewpoint, it seems a mistake to draw a sharp line between self- and other-regarding interests, for we may not even know wherein lies or own good if we try to conceive this as independent of the good of others. (Carr, 2006b, p.179)

A similar view is expressed by McCowan who asserts that: 'employability needs to be promoted within the bounds of ethical action: the way one acts within employment should be guided not only by the interests of one's direct employer and one's own interests, but also the interests of others in society'.(McCowan, 2015).

Based on what has been argued so far, the absence in the dominant discourse of aspects integral to the notions of personal development and human flourishing is a significant lacuna and demonstrates that the dominant political discourse has moved away from the more holistic view of higher education, espoused by Lord Robbins, in favour of a view which substantiates the assertion that:

> There are things we're in thrall to in education. One of them is the idea of linearity: that it starts here and you go through a track and if you do everything right, you will end up set for the rest of your life [but] life is not linear, it's organic. We create our lives symbiotically as we explore our talents in relation to the circumstances they help to create for us. (Robinson, 2010).

A statement made by respondent R9 not only reinforces this view but also dates the change in perception to the time of the New Labour government:

> there has been a greater focus for both good and ill on employability and I mean by that a much more instructional approach that you take higher education specifically and only to get a better job. That is seen as the only purpose behind entering higher education in government quarters and there has inceasingly been that view since 2001, perhaps even before that.

Although 'the forcing of individuality into a common mould…would be the negation of higher education as we conceive it' (Robbins, 1963, p 7), I have shown there to be a determined and consistent effort by successive governments to utilise the concept of employability, brokered by universities, to drive through labour market and economic growth policies - arguably at the expense of the broader considerations of the value of higher education, most notably those aspects associated with human flourishing. The statement by Richard Halfon MP, suggesting that those 'existing universities that do not provide a good return on academic courses could reinvent themselves as centres of technical excellence' (*International Business Times*, 2017), is evidence that the approach is likely to continue.

This procrustean refashioning of higher education to fit political exigencies has resulted in a one dimensional discourse that undermines and diminishes the richness of the employability narrative and the broader role, and value, of higher education. It also demonstrates how far perceptions of, and aspirations for, higher education have moved away from those articulated in the Robbins Report. Furthermore, I argue that the insistence on the promotion of human flourishing in primarily economic terms has created a skills-based identity for graduates, whereby they are seen primarily as vessels for the 'provision of skills' into the workforce (Witty, 2013, p.15); and that this comes at the expense of other, virtues based, aspects of personal formation that are important to human flourishing. I have

shown throughout this study, particularly in the examples discussed in this analysis, that it is important to consider and incorporate these aspects into the debate about employability and higher education, not least because we have come to to see some justification for the view, cited in chapter two, that: 'such forms of knowledge, understanding or skill are more constitutive features of personhood than contingent or disposable commodities of individual and social consumerism' (Carr, 2003a, p.12).

It is from this viewpoint, we can begin to understand that:

> In order to act wisely and well in this world, we need to be as undeceived in our perceptions and feelings as in our cognitions, and it is again education, understood as the capacity to pursue and value knowledge and truth for its own sake, which is crucially presupposed to the development of such correct discernment (Carr, 2000, p.184)

Failure to reconsider employability and higher education in the light of the above has potential implications for the higher education sector. Some of these implications are explored in the following section.

4. There are potential implications for the higher education sector of a dominant discourse that fails to recognise the notion of human flourishing, expressed in other than financial terms, as being critical to the concept of employability.

I have identified and situated some of the potential implications under three sub-headings which are consistent with the key themes within this study. These are:

- Metrics and messages
- Labour market realities
- The skills imperative

Metrics and messages

The 'application of market principles within public sector organisations' (Brown, 2003, p.121) and the 'concomitant commodification of education' (Carr, 2003a:242) have resulted

in the generation of a wide range of diverse metrics, upon which funding is often contingent (Chertskovskaya, 2013). Metrics are most commonly associated with the world of commerce where the data generated are routinely used for measuring success, primarily in terms of profit. How a business performs within a fiercely competitive community is critical to its survival, so the significance of measuring results in the world of commerce, therefore, cannot be overstated. Similarly, universities are now operating in a multi-provider, competitive market place, where 'global benchmarking and positional competition [are] part-and-parcel of everyday life' (Brown, 2003, p.121). Consequently, metrics are assuming ever-increasing importance and influence, evidenced by the introduction of a new regulator for higher education, the Office for Students (OfS), whose immediate task is to introduce a new regulatory framework requiring: 'institutions to publish value-for-money statements' (Else, 2017, p.18). Nicola Dandridge, CEO of the OfS states that: 'the trebling of the tuition fees to £9,000 in 2012-13, accompanied by deep cuts to direct public funding, had made it almost inevitable that the higher education funding council would have to shift to a regulator' (ibid). She goes on to refer to the expansion of the sector, stating that:

> Many more students are going to university now than was ever the case before, so the systems and structures, the regulatory oversight that may have worked when going to university was just for a very few people just doesn't work in a contemporary environment. (ibid)

This demonstrates that the government recognises the implications of mass expansion in a regulatory context but that this recognition is not similarly publicly accorded to other areas that have been adversely affected by the expansion of the sector, such as the unit of resource (Willetts, 2017, Collini, 2012). This suggests that higher education will continue to be dominated by a culture of audit and surveillance (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Ransome, 2011; Taylor, 2013), despite the view mentioned earlier that: 'these practices offer a technical solution at the level of organisation and administration and as such have no truck with the *ideas* about what higher education and learning is *for'* (Ransome, 2011, p.217). The

increasing dominance of quantitative metrics, situated within the context of a financial

return-on-investment and economic growth narrative, coupled with no apparent mechanism

or will for capturing or recognising the qualitative benefits of higher education (HEFCE,

2011, p.20, Morgan, 2017, p.39, Willetts, 2017, p.146), effectively shuts down   any

meaningful discussion about those benefits.

As a result, and despite their perceived value by the majority of stakeholders, the personal

formation and human flourishing aspects of higher education, along with their value to the

individual, employers and society more widely, enjoy neither the recognition nor privileged

position accorded to 'economically valuable skills.'   This view is reflected in David

Willetts's assertion that:

> The evidence is that education does matter and it matters because you learn
> stuff and develop skills which don't just boost your earnings but may well
> make for a more fulfilled life. Going to university is more beneficial for
> your health than a five-a-day-diet. [However], while the evidence of the
> benefits of higher education is as compelling as for a healthy diet it is harder
> to communicate and get it accepted. (Willetts, 2017, p.146)

Lord Willetts suggests that this could be due to 'educational snobbery at the expense of

fellow citizens who have less education' (ibid). While this may be so, I find the remark

disingenuous, given that the dominant employability discourse (and Willett's book) makes

much of the superior salary securing potential of graduates. He continues in the same vein,

asserting that:

> There is a decent reticence about arguing that graduates lead better lives
> and contribute more to society [as] it can easily come across as just the sort
> of arrogant self-regard which people associate with graduates. (ibid: 126)

Even if we were to accept this unsubstantiated statement as true, Lord Willetts has no such

reservations when it comes to lauding the financial advantages enjoyed by graduates, stating

that: 'aiming to boost your earnings is not an ignoble ambition which we have to apologise

for.' (ibid: 127). Neither, I would argue, is the ambition to lead a better life and contribute to society.

The above leads me to conclude that higher education is regulated not in accordance with any philosophically or morally enlightened view of the purpose of education, but rather in accordance with a narrative of 'economically valuable skills' (Leitch, 2006, p.44).

Yet, there is little evidence of universities collectively challenging the dominant discourse or generating consistent and robust sector-wide, qualitative metrics - such as longitudinal surveys and Social Return on Investment methods; or to question the UK government's decision to block implementation of the Higher Education Learning Outcomes project (see section 1, above). It could be argued, therefore, that they are reinforcing and perpetuating the quantative-biased, reductive view of higher education. The sector is also missing an opportunity to shape an alternative, balanced, narrative of employability that recognises the concept as multi-dimensional in its own right and promotes it as being a symbiotic part of the whole that we call higher education.

Perhaps Stefan Collini is correct in his assertion that: 'finding a language in which to talk about this ineliminable tension is certainly not easy, but if we do not try, then the critics will be right to say that we have let the case for universities go by default' (Collini, 2012, p.94).

Labour market realities

The crucial omission in the dominant discourse around employability and skills is that it appears to completely disregard the numerous external factors inherent in the notion of

employability (Yorke, 2006; Dacre and Pool, 2007; Watson, 2014, IFS, 2016). This omission is significant, given that:

> There is a lack of evidence about the long-term consequences for graduate employment of either narrowly focused vocational education or education that emphasises efficiency in generic 'employability skills', rather than emphasising the higher order intellectual capabilities involved in adaptable expertise. (Gibbs, 2010, p.42)

In addition, there is the assertion that: 'many of the proposed skills policies will continue to face substantial challenges, often caused by structural features in the labour market' (Keep, 2015). There are also ramifications for higher education, notably with regard to the expectations and responsibilities of the sector in preparing individuals for the workplace and ensuring they secure graduate level employment. Yet, we saw in chapter 2 (2.2) that, while higher education is able to make an important contribution to the former, its contribution to the latter can only ever be indirect (Harvey, 2005; Yorke, 2006; Brown, 2003). Watson expresses the view that:

> In the current political and economic obsession with graduate "employability", it is hard to see how universities can ever win in the "employability" arena. Most of the things that those outside the academy say they should be supplying in terms of education and training are not only out of the higher education institutions' control, but also poorly understood and ideologically loaded. (Watson, 2014, p.77)

These views demonstrate that, while government discourse persists in articulating the notion of employability and skills in macro terms, evoking quasi-idealistic representations of a fully functioning labour market and economic growth, the employability literature articulates it in more micro terms, rooting it in a context that is driven by external agendas and influences over which it has little control. (Hillage and Pollard,1998; Yorke, 2006; Dacre and Pool, 2007; Watson, 2014).

Nonetheless, universities are increasingly being obliged to prepare students for a labour market that is constantly in flux, where employers are unable to articulate current or future skills needs (Pegg, 2012) and where many employers continue to look to the most prestigious universities for their employees (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Watson, 2014; High Fliers, 2015). In addition, although the graduate premium is cited as a significant benefit, and rationale, for undertaking a degree programme (Sainsbury, 2007; Browne, 2010), the graduate premium argument is not proven (Atkins, 1999; Pegg, 2012; Paton, 2014; Watson, 2014; IFS, 2016). This is because it fails to take into account that it is contingent on a variety of influencing factors such as personal circumstances, the status of the university attended and the subject studied (Yorke, 2006; Dacre and Pool, 2007; Watson, 2014). Evidence supporting this is provided by research carried out by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, which found that: 'while the graduate premium over non-graduates has held up well over most of the period, the level of graduate wages has been falling; and the variation in wages, according to what you study and where, is huge' (IFS, 2016). Furthermore, some subjects have more perceived value in the workplace than others, such as STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) which incorporate what are perceived to be 'economically valuable skills' (Leitch, 2006, p.44). To this end, the government is considering: 'how graduate employment outcomes for graduates from Computer Sciences and STEM degrees more broadly could be strengthened' (DBIS, 2016, p.12).

Failure to mention the realities of the labour market, and other influencing factors affecting an individual's ability to secure employment, means that the employability narrative is, at the very least, disingenuous. It raises false expectations and hopes which, in turn, contribute to a blame culture where individuals are perceived to be at fault if they are unable to find employment (Chertskovskaya, 2013) and where those individuals may, in turn, be inclined

to pass the blame on to their higher education institutions. In other words, individuals may not only 'use the logic of employability to explain their failures in the labour market' (ibid, 2013, p.708) but also in relation to their university education.

Furthermore, universities themselves may be contributing indirectly to the dominant discourse to some extent by maintaining:

> The pretence, which the governments of the day have been quite happy to collude with, that essentially what you've got is more people participating in the same experience. Whereas in fact I think with more people comes a shift in experience and the HE sector hasn't always been honest about what it can offer. (R8)

The respondent goes on to state that the sector has had to educate many more people: 'with a unit of resource that has shrunk massively over time [and] this has resulted in a pressure to demonstrate that we can still get people to the same end point.' This is despite respondent R13's assertion that: 'entry to the labour market was much more straight forward [pre-expansion] when you were dealing with a much smaller cohort of students and they were invariably the most academically able [although] not necessarily the brightest.' These views are reinforced by the statement that: 'expansion came at the cost of a significant fall in the funding available for each student' (Willetts, 2017, p.57) and Stefan Collini's claim that 'in 1981, a savage reduction in university funding was implemented, in a move that appeared almost deliberately to undermine rational planning and damage morale' (Collini, 2012, p.33).

However, in spite of labour market and other influencing factors, the government is committed to employability and to measuring universities on the number of their graduates going into graduate level jobs, as well as the salaries the graduates earn. This is made clear by their intention to, for the first time, 'link higher education and tax data together to chart the transition of graduates from higher education into the workplace' (DBIS, 2016, p.15).

The skills imperative

The continuing emphasis on skills is evident in the current push to promote degree level apprenticeships and the Industrial Strategy's focus on universities' role in ensuring graduates have the skills that employers need. The Industrial Strategy White Paper, *Building a Britain fit for the future*, aims to:

> Ensure that higher education is responsive to employer and industry needs –and to students' employment expectations – the Higher Education and Research Act, passed earlier this year, will put in place a modern regulatory framework through the creation of a new regulator, the Office for Students (OfS). Ths OfS, which will be established in January 2018, will address employer and student needs and expectations in the short, medium and long term- considering the skills gap that exists today, and anticipating the demands of the future economy (DBEIS, 2017b, p.101)

Although it could be argued that these latest government schemes might be an attempt to address what could be perceived as 'the failure, from a certain point of view, to have a properly differentiated education system with parity of esteem for practical, vocational subjects as opposed to academic subjects' (R11), they also serve to further implicate universities into a skills-based, training model of education most commonly associated with further education colleges. Notwithstanding the acknowledgement and acceptance of the need to engage with the employability agenda, there is nonetheless some concern among respondents about the potential for the perceived privileging of employability to erode the aspects of higher education that differentiate it from the extreme functionality model associated with further education. While higher education's engagement in research and scholarly activity sets it apart from further education, respondents articulated other differences that they felt it was important to maintain. The importance of not just 'teaching content' was raised in this context by respondent R4, who expressed the view that Higher Education, as opposed to Further Education, is 'a lifelong way of looking at the world which

you had to work for…It's about the way you think in that discipline'. She explained that it is about:

> effectively inducting your students into a very special way of thinking, according to your subject or discipline and that is the key thing… [students] are not just going to learn Sociology [they are] going to learn to be a Sociologist and that's going to give [them] a way of thinking and behaving in the world which [they will] find really important. (R4)

While for respondent R5, higher education enables students to:

> find themselves and to discover different dimensions of themselves, [to] reach into themselves, into places that they perhaps wouldn't have found had they not gone into higher education…it's equipping them with that whole raft of independent thinking, independent life, enquiry, challenge, not taking this for read just because people are telling them that that's the case. I suppose [it's about them] essentially creating their own future and being able to navigate the future, which I don't think you necessarily expect from further education.

Historically: '[Further Education] colleges' employer engagement [which is] a prized feature of college as against university higher education' (DBIS, 2012, p.118) has been recognised and lauded for its focus on generating skills for industry, including through apprenticeships. As universities increasingly engage with and respond ever more effectively to the employability, business collaboration and economic growth aspirations communicated through the dominant discourse, there is the potential for perceptions of the purpose and roles of Further Education and Higher Education to become blurred. Respondent R13 is emphatic in his view that:

> intellectual development prepares you for the world of work and the world of study and the world of being a damn good human being, and that doesn't mean it isn't necessary to talk more explicitly about what routes to employment there might be - I'm absolutely all for that. But I don't think that changes the purpose of education I just think it changes the way we talk about it. Otherwise, we're going to turn education, particularly higher education, into glorified training. I do think there's a difference.

Although this further reinforces the general acceptance of the need for employability to be an integral part of a university education, for all the reasons discussed, there is some concern among respondents that employability may contribute to an erosion of the boundaries between further and higher education. Having asked the question 'has the balance shifted too far?' respondent R13, after some reflection, concluded that: 'it's a very difficult call, actually. It's close to going too far the other way [towards employability] but I don't think I could categorically say its gone too far.'

Conclusion

Higher Education is currently under intense scrutiny on a number of fronts and the role of universities is changing rapidly in a pluralistic, global market place fraught with challenges and uncertainties. 'For good or ill' (R9) employability, is perceived to be an integral part of a university education and it is unlikely, not least as vested stakeholders, that we would disagree with the comment made by Lord Robbins, who stated that:

> We deceive ourselves if we claim that more than a small fraction of students in institutions of higher education would be where they are if there were no significance for their future careers in what they hear and read; and it is a mistake to suppose that there is anything discreditable in this. (Robbins, 1963, p.6)

Yet, the ever increasing emphasis on skills is contributing to the perception that higher education is there mainly to improve the employability of students, (Ransome, 2011; Chertskovskaya, 2013).

In the preamble to this chapter, which introduces the virtue ethics theory underpinning my analysis, I assert as axiomatic the view that: 'it is hard to deny that education involves improving people in a sense that extends beyond mere coaching or training in information and skills to wider *personal* formation (Carr, 2003a, p.77). I have found that there is a

widespread view that personal formation in the context of human flourishing is perceived to be important, I have shown, through recourse to a moral education theory of virtue ethics, *why* it is important.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

If an important aspect of higher education is to encourage students to ask deep questions and challenge existing assumptions (CCCUa, 2017), then the sector itself must be seen to practice what it preaches. It is precisely because claims 'can be distorted by those who have an interest in suppressing or misrepresenting the truth...that universities must maintain their position as centres designed to limit these distortions' (Bridges, 1999, p.608). This means challenging a dominant, instrumentally and financially focused, employability discourse that is positioned as self-evident common sense (Arora, 2015) but is one which I have shown to be highly contestable - with the potential to significantly change perceptions of, and practice within, higher education.

Universities play a significant part in shaping student and graduate identity (see chapter 2(2.4)) and this identity is increasingly aligning with the dominant discourse in terms of the accented importance of 'economically valuable skills (Leitch, 2006, p.44). Although I have shown that aspects associated with personal formation and human flourishing are being advocated and implemented at a local level through learning and teaching strategies, universities do not appear to be raising concerns about the largely one-dimensional employability and skills narrative at national level (Willetts, 2017, p.149). It could be argued, therefore, that higher education is contributing to the conception of employability referred to in chapter 2 (2.4) as a 'cultural fantasy that organizes identity around the desire to shape, exploit and ultimately profit from an employable self' (Bloom, 2013, p.785).

I argue that this failure by the higher education sector to 'be critical of the taken-for-granted assumptions behind educational practice' (Pring, 2010:22) has allowed the contemporary debate to be hijacked by a dominant, political employability and skills narrative which, as

highlighted by the government's Industrial Strategy Commission, has failed to deliver (see section 3).

However, given the current challenges facing the sector, such as the potential impact on the sector of the EU referendum result (see Marginson, 2017), the rise of populism and anti-intellectualism, caps on immigration, private providers, policy changes affecting Health and Education provision, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), research funding, the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) and the major review of post 18 education announced by Theresa May in February 2018, it is unlikely that a sectoral debate on issues pertaining to the notion of employability will be high on any priority list. Yet, I would argue that it is precisely because the moral aspects and ramifications of employability may be overlooked or ignored, that it is necessary to review and rewrite the dominant employability narrative and construct it in accordance with 'the origins and implications of employability in relation to the organisation of society, and the fundamental moral and political principles of the good life, and of a just and prosperous society' (McCowan, 2015, p.269). If we consider as aspirational the view that it is the role of higher education to help individuals to 'grow in the wisdom and virtue conducive to their living not just skilled or well-informed but also morally worthwhile lives' (Carr, 2003a, p.42), then consideration should be given to utilising a theory of virtue ethics to inform and underpin a revised narrative. This in turn could contribute to the new 'philosophy of educational purpose' that Ransome suggests the higher education sector is waiting for. (Ransome, 2011, p.216)

As stated in chapter three, it is not the purpose of this study to redefine the concept of employability, because 'complex concepts are…not reducible in any plausible way to simpler replacements, and are too important to be disposable in favour of any such replacements' (Jaeger, 1988, p.144). Rather, I have brought a particular strand of moral

educational philosophy, virtue ethics, into the conceptual analysis in order to explore the ideas behind important educational issues and identify and understand alternative perspectives and approaches. I have shown how conceptual analysis can 'illuminate the connections between concepts within a particular discourse' (Katz, 2010) and how this has resulted not only in a deeper understanding of the concept itself, but also how the concept of employability has been able to inform the debate about higher education more broadly. Added to this is the analysis within a single university, of perceptions of employability in relation to the dominant political discourse, employability literature, university policies and notions of personal formation and human flourishing which further shows 'the power which the techniques of analysis provide to force abstract and vague ideas into concrete and more meaningful contexts' (Soltis, 1968, p.67). This approach has enabled me to demonstrate that the dominant political employability discourse is not *the* narrative but *a* narrative.

I have also shown how the current reductive and one-dimensional political narrative could be enriched by recognition and inclusion of the, non-financial, aspects of personal formation that are important to the higher education and business communities and to the holistic conception of human flourishing, as advocated by Lord Robbins (Robbins, 1963, p.6). Furthermore, this recognition and inclusion would allow for the emphasis to move away from what employability can bring to the person, towards what the person can bring to employability.

In the introduction to this thesis, I stated that the following quotation would serve as an underpinning principle.

> Education is, at base, a moral enterprise. Education is ultimately about the formation of persons. It is about developing and contributing to the good life of individuals and society. Even though we may disagree about the specifics of what constitutes the educated person and the good life, it is toward these high moral ends that the human enterprise of education in a democratic society is negotiated and directed. We lose our moral direction

> when this ultimate end is forgotten in the pursuit of more immediate and pressing ends...' (Soltis, 1989, p.124)

For the purposes of this study, therefore, 'education as a moral enterprise' and the notion of 'good' have been explored primarily in relation to those aspects that are associated with personal formation and human flourishing, primarily in the context of higher education. However, the research has exposed the existence of some, largely unexplored, moral dilemmas that run through the contemporary employability narrative.

Firstly, although universities have, as part of their accepted remit over a number of years, engaged with and delivered against the employability agenda (see section 3, above), they have not collectively sought to challenge the dominant discourse by creating a sector narrative that articulates and promotes the quantitative *and* the qualitative benefits of higher education. This point is raised by David Willetts, who states that: 'universities should not be afraid to analyse their own value, using tools they themselves have developed for others' (Willetts, 2017, p.149). However, Willetts goes on to say that ministers could also exert influence 'by commissioning independent research that can influence thinking even without a clear clarion call from universities themselves' (ibid). Nonetheless, the absence of a sectoral counter-narrative perpetuates a dominant employability and skills narrative that has its foundation in failed government policies (chapter 2 (2.3)). Furthermore, by failing to challenge the absence in the dominant discourse of realities associated with the labour market and other variables that influence an individual's chances of securing employment, it could be argued that higher education is contributing to the 'democratisation of insecurity' (Brown 2003, p.108) that is referred to in chapter 2 (2.2).

Secondly, there is the view that although mass participation has changed perceptions, practice and expectations, government and universities are continuing to 'collude [in the

pretence] that what you've got is more people participating in the same experience' (R8). While Nicola Dandridge, CEO of the OfS, draws attention, in financial-regulatory terms, to the implications of mass participation (Else, 2017, p.18), the broader considerations and implications are not similarly acknowledged, nor are they mentioned in the wider political dominant discourse.

Lastly, there is the idea of the university as a 'positional good' in the context of widening participation and social mobility aspirations in a mass participation era (Watson, 2014, p.75). One of the potential implications of this was raised by respondent R12 who, as reported in chapter four, stated that: 'it's almost like you will fail as a parent if your child doesn't go to university [and] it is in some way perceived to be a failure amongst your social group - bearing in mind that I think the middle-working class group [must now] be the biggest group in society.' This comment is an example of the unintended consequences that can arise from laudable ideas, such as widening participation and social mobility. Watson elaborates, stating that: 'as provision expands it increases the gap between the life chances of those who participate and those who do not' (Watson, 2014, p.75). Competition - whether it relates to securing a university place, finding a job or competition between universities themselves - is now 'part-and-parcel of everyday life' (Williams, 2016), with the inability to achieve whatever goal is being sought likely to be construed as failure. (Arora, 2015). While we might agree with Carr's assertion that:

> there is a cultural inheritance to which all young persons are entitled – irrespective of differences of ability, social background and vocational destiny [and that] the different vocational destinies of children should not be allowed to undermine their common entitlement to proper initiation into the 'best that has been thought and said' (Carr, 2003a, p.18)

it is possible that widening participation and social mobility targets are contributing to an 'ideology of anxious self-improvement' (Valenzuela, 2013, p.863). Watson takes this

further and asks the question: 'is higher education participation essentially a shield against downward social mobility for dull middle class children?' (Watson, 2014, p.75)

The higher education sector should look to educational philosophy to help address these issues because: 'good philosophy helps us to pursue these questions, and to pursue them where they lead' (Standish, 2010, p.9)

Further research

Two potential areas of research have emerged from the interviews:

1. In chapter four, I included an extract from respondent R4, who asserted that:

> I think we underestimate our students a lot [and] there's a temptation to keep dumbing down stuff [because] you think students aren't getting it. I think the opposite is quite often needed, in that you often need to challenge them more [and] give them tools to deal with that challenge. I think the really big difference is [that] students [pre-expansion] who used to come from more privileged backgrounds possibly had those tools already and could deal with the challenge but we have to [provide our students with] those tools. I don't think they're any less clever or any less willing to learn and [they are] hungry for that kind of challenge.

This was in response to question 3b: 'Do you think students' expectations about the difference the university experience will make to their lives have changed? The specific linking of 'dumbing down' resonates with Scott's assertion that:

> in the current rush to achieve the highest student satisfaction and best positions on university league tables we are at significant risk of dumbing down what's being taught at universities…We are becoming too focused on satisfying the student customer, turning our universities more into secondary schools rather than places of academic challenge and critical thinking (Scott, 2014).

It also echoes the view of respondent R8, who stressed the importance of giving students 'space to think about other questions, philosophical questions, [and] to be much more challenging [of received wisdom].

If we also take into account the assertion that the 40 per cent rise in the number of unconditional offers being made to applicants (*The Times*, 2018, p.29) 'is destroying the very idea of a university [and] pays no attention to academic standards, integrity or ability' (ibid), I would suggest that there is an urgent need to engage in further research on the notion of 'dumbing down' in higher education.

2. Respondent R1 felt that her job role might be influencing her perceptions about the notion of employability because 'in some respects we're a bit conditioned to think that our primary responsibility is to help secure student[s] with a graduate level job at the end of their university experience [and that's] how we are measured. But that's at odds with things like graduate attributes where we're also encoraging students to become life long learners, to have a thirst for knowledge and want to continue to study and nurture themselves." This perception about job role resonates with my own experience in that, prior to undertaking this research, my understanding of, and concerns about, employability and skills were heavily influenced by my role.

If we accept that skills are one component of a healthy and competitive economy, that employability has a contributory role to play and that at least a part of what universities are for is to ensure 'that the graduates emerging from the HE system are ready and able to contribute to future economic growth through the provision of knowledge, skills and creativity in new business environments' (Pegg, 2012, p.6), then further research must be carried out on the concept of employability within higher education. The two areas of research suggested above would provide further unique insights into how the notion of employability is perceived within universities.

Finally, this thesis serves as a counter narrative to the dominant, neo-liberal discourse that has not only infiltrated the collective consciousness but also has the potential to profoundly influence our views about the fundamental purpose of higher education and to radically change practice.

Glossary

CBI	Confederation of British Industries
CCCU	Canterbury Christ Church University
CIHE	Council for Industry and Higher Education
DBEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
DBIS	Department for Innovation and Skills
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
FISSS	Federation for Industry Skills and Standards
FSB	Federation of Small Businesses
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEIF	Higher Education Innovation Fund
HMT	Her Majesty's Treasury
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OfS	Office for Students
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
UKCES	U K Commission for Employment and Skills
UUK	Universities U K

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