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Student perceptions of barriers to networking with employers

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the usefulness of the concept of the ‘implied graduate’ to explain the difficulties, which students report when engaging with local employers.

Design/methodology/approach - The ‘implied graduate’ is an analytical concept that aims to bring together assumptions about what a graduate should be like. In this paper the concept has been used to analyse interview data collected from students after they took part in an employability project at a small Higher Education (HE) campus in a Further Education (FE) college.

Findings - The students in this study reported significant issues with continuing to engage and maintain contact with the employers they met during the project. For many, this was the first time they had met graduate level employers and so felt inexperienced in how to approach networking with them. It seems that some of the offers for future contact made by the employers were aimed at an ‘implied graduate’ and, as such, the students struggled to fulfil those expectations.

Originality/value - This paper sheds light on the difficulties that HE in FE students face in engaging with graduate employers. These issues are likely to contribute to the well-established, but unexplained, differences in employment outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: Non-traditional Students, Employability, Graduates, Networking, HE in FE,

Article Classification: Research paper

Introduction

HE in FE and employability

Higher Education (HE delivered in Further Education Colleges (FECs) has a long tradition of delivering vocational education with strong links with local employers, and often attracts local, less confident students, who value the supportive learning environments that FECs can provide (HEFCE, 2009; Parry 2012). The students who study HE in FECs are more likely to be mature, study part-time, and come from areas with low rates of participation in HE, than students who study at a university (HEFCE, 2009, p.9). In addition, the students are more likely to join with vocational or lower level qualifications, and are less likely to hold A-levels than students who go to universities (Parry 2012). In order to make the distinction from young, white, middle-class students who start university shortly after finishing school, other groups of students, such as those from ethnic minorities and areas with low participation in HE are often termed ‘non-traditional’ students (Moreau and Leathwood 2006a). Many of these students attend modern, ‘post-1992’ universities, although the term also applies to a significant number of students who study HE in FECs. There is little discussion in the literature about the differences between non-traditional undergraduate students in universities and FECs. However, we would argue that the diversity of HE students can be represented on a continuum and so it is likely that many of the issues that non-traditional students face are similar, whether they study at FECs or teaching focussed post-1992 universities. As such, much of our discussion would apply to both contexts, although we acknowledge that this is an area that needs further research.

In recent years, the UK government has paid “...particular attention to the notion of ‘graduateness’” to characterise the outcome of the HE experience, in terms of possessing particular knowledge, skills and attributes (Glover, Law and Youngman, 2002, p.294). HE providers, including FECs, have been encouraged to explicitly develop employability skills in their students both within the curriculum and

through extra-curricular provision (QAA, 2011). However, Moreau and Leathwood (2006a) argue that the discourse of employability places an emphasis on the individual to develop his or her skills, and fails to address structural inequalities in society (Wilton, 2011). The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) notes that despite the extensive work undertaken by universities and colleges to enhance graduate employability, unexplained differences in outcomes for students from certain backgrounds still exist. For HE in FEC graduates, the chance of being in some kind of employment or further study 6 months after graduating is broadly the same as for graduates from other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). However, a distinction is often made between graduate level employment, which requires the employee to hold an undergraduate degree, and employment that does not (Pool & Sewell 2007). Interestingly, there is evidence to show that graduates from FECs and other 'non-traditional' HE graduates, experience challenges in seeking *graduate* level employment (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006a; Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008; Wilton, 2011; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014).

Literature Review

The implied graduate

The 'implied graduate' is an analytical concept extended from Ulriksen's (2009) construction of the 'implied student'. Ulriksen's (2009, p.521) 'implied student' aims at "encapsulating the array of official and tacit expectations about what the student should be like and how". Ulriksen's (2009) 'implied student' was inspired by the idea of an implied reader being embodied in a text, and an 'ideal client' around which institutional systems are designed. As such, the 'implied graduate' concept seeks to summarise the unspoken assumptions made about how graduates should behave and conduct themselves as they go about seeking graduate level employment. As Ulriksen (2009) points out, these notions bear resemblance to Jackson's (1968) 'hidden curriculum', or the unwritten rules of conduct that a student must master in order to succeed. In the days of elite higher education, staff, students and their future employers were predominantly of the same social and cultural background (Scott, 1997). However, following the development of 'mass' higher education, the hidden curriculum, including the expectations of employers, needs to be "explicitly and systematically revealed to students" (Smith 2004, p.29).

Both the concepts of the 'implied student' and 'implied graduate' incorporate the process of socialisation into a specific culture (Becher, 1989; Van Gennep, 1960). Just as students have to adapt to the culture of the institution where they are studying, newly employed graduates must also absorb and adjust to the culture of the organisation that has employed them (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). For the newly qualified graduate this involves the construction of a social identity that is distinct from being a student. In fact the graduate must, or at least look like they might, embody the culture of an organisation in order to be offered the job (Holmes 2001). Although much of the discourse on 'graduateness' reduces it to a set of generic skills that a graduate should possess (O'Connor *et al.*, 2011), it seems that at least part of developing a graduate identity requires the individual to engage in the development of the 'soft currencies' of 'personal capital', such as appearance, accent and charisma (Redmond, 2006). In fact, Scott (1995 p.112) points out that "personal qualities are more important than professional discipline, possession of specific credentials, mastery of specialized knowledge or even of expert skills". Brown and Hesketh (2004, p.35) describe this as a 'personality package' which must be 'sold' in the marketplace and they suggest that "who you are' matters as much as 'what you know'".

It is important to point out that the concept of the 'implied graduate' is more than a description of the ideal candidate for a graduate job. The implied graduate concept also embodies the assumptions around which our institutions and practices are designed. For example, according to Redmond (2006,

p.130) “the term ‘career’ retains certain middle class-related hierarchical assumptions and employment traditions which are likely to make it unfamiliar within typically working-class employment contexts”. As such, the following discussion will examine the extent to which the “white male middle-class norm that still dominates professional and managerial positions in the UK” (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006a, p.320), is reflected in the discourse on graduate employability and so is inherent in the assumptions that contribute to the concept of the ‘implied graduate’. We are not suggesting that the ‘implied graduate’ is white, male and middle class, but that there are assumptions about graduates that suggest attributes, cultural capital and ways of being, which are often associated with that group.

Cultural capital and graduate attributes

As Greenbank (2007, p.370) describes, “those involved in the selection process tend (often unconsciously) to recruit graduates who have the same cultural capital as themselves”. Brown *et al.* (2002, p.28) point out that:

When employers reject candidates as unsuitable, it could be argued that they are being rejected for lacking ‘cultural’ capital. There is absolutely no doubt that this happens when people are seen to have the wrong accent, dress inappropriately at an interview or do not know the rules of the game when candidates are invited to a formal dinner to meet company employees.

The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (2009, p.32) suggest that many of the ‘soft’ skills that employers value are associated with the graduate’s social class background rather than their formal educational attainment. Smith (2005) argues that white middle class students develop the personal attributes of ‘graduateness’ through their family’s cultural and class background rather than directly from academic staff (Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008; Greenbank, 2007; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006b). However, many of the students studying Higher Education courses in FECs are not the so-called ‘traditional’ students but come from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures and so have to acquire this ‘cultural capital’ during the course of their HE studies.

Students from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to work during term-time and work longer hours than those in higher socio-economic groups, which after studying leaves little time for socialising or for employability enhancing activities (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006b; Greenbank, 2007; Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). Lowe and Gayle’s (2007) study of HE students in a Scottish FEC found that the most students combined study with work and/or family commitments and their normal ‘working’ week was of 59-71 hours. Redmond (2006, p.127) coined the term ‘Wash ‘n’ Go’ students, for those “whose engagement in higher education is restricted to formal academic engagements and not involving other socio-cultural aspects of college life”. In terms of graduate employability, this lack of time for extra-curricular activities is problematic because employers value students who are involved in volunteering, societies and events (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). As one employer in Hinchliffe and Jolly’s (2011, p.574) study describes: “I am interested in seeing a range of interests, showing that the candidate has fully exploited the university experience”.

Moreau and Leathwood’s (2006a) longitudinal study of undergraduates in a post-1992 university detected inherent biases in the employability discourse against non-traditional graduates, including against women and those from certain cultures:

“Employers might want, for example, someone who is strong and decisive, but they will inevitably read these qualities differently in different applicants. Such qualities tend to be identified with masculinity rather than femininity, with the consequences that a woman who presents herself as strong and decisive can easily be seen as not feminine enough or aggressive, whereas a man presenting similar qualities can be seen as simply meeting the requirements for the post.” (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006a, p.319)

Moreau and Leathwood (2006a, p.318) also point out that there might be cultural reasons why some graduates would not be able to work away. As one student in their study described:

“There might be a tiny problem with the BBC job which requires, before you used to go away for about a month or so out of London to get trained, and me as a woman and a Muslim woman going there without my parents, perhaps without my family, its going to be a bit of a problem...”

Many employers expect graduates to be mobile, and to be able to ‘go where the work is’, which in itself implies that the ‘implied graduate’ has few family ties or responsibilities. Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) found that the working class students in their study did not want move away for their career, or for university, as they preferred to maintain ties with existing family and friends, or felt pressure from family members to stay in the vicinity. In Lowe and Gayle’s (2007) study of HE students in a Scottish FEC, one in three had children and so would be less likely to want to take up graduate positions that involved a travel or relocation. In their study of what employers look for in graduates, Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011) found that flexibility was prized by employers, and clearly graduates with family and caring responsibilities are less able to work long, unpredictable hours and travel at short notice.

Another characteristic notable in the discourse on graduate employability is the assumption that graduates are young. As one manager in Hinchcliffe and Jolly’s study (2011, p.563) describes:

“What is different about a graduate? Young ideas, freshness, the way they live their lives – a whole lifestyle that brings enthusiasm of youth – [it] brings freshness to the organisation and can create a different dynamic”

As has already been mentioned, a significant proportion of HE in FE students are mature students and so will have to convince employers that their ideas are fresh and youthful. Little (2011, p.58) points out that the “references to employability focussed on ‘preparing’ the next generation of graduates to meet the increasing demands that businesses are making of their ‘new entrants’, and so by default does not include the many HE, and particularly HE in FEC, students who are already in work. In Lowe and Gayle’s (2007) study, almost all the part-time HE students in the FEC had a job and almost half of the full-time students did also.

Methodology

This article draws on a study carried out at a small HE campus, which is part of a FEC in the North of England. The research was centred around a project which aimed to provide a forum for students to meet and engage with local employers. The project was designed around a model where a local graduate employer designed and facilitated an employability event or session. During the events, many of the employers also made offers to continue contact with interested students, whilst they continued their studies, by explicitly offering opportunities for work experience, work placements, job shadowing and mentoring.

A total of 135 students from ten different degree courses took part in nine employability events (See Table 1). After the events had taken place, all students completed a questionnaire. In addition, 8 employers completed a feedback survey, via email, evaluating the events. One employer gave particularly detailed feedback about their experiences of working with the students in the project. This feedback gave us a starting point for the focus group interviews and analysis. A total of 21 student volunteers took part in one of 6 focus groups, which were video recorded. Focus group interview data were hand coded using emergent headings.

The focus group participants were not specifically asked about their social class background or whether they considered themselves to be non-traditional students. However, during the interviews, students provided a range of indications of their background, such as referring to their ethnicity,

country of origin, family's education or economic status (see Moreau and Leathwood, 2006b). This meant that 20 out of the 21 students who took part could be classified as non-traditional students, which is indicative of the composition of the campus as a whole.

Table 1. Employability Events

Session	Format	On/Off Campus	Recruitment	Extra Curricula	Duration	Number of students	Year of study
What's the big idea?	Interactive Workshop	On	Compulsory	No	90 mins	21	2nd & 3rd
Meet the professionals	Seminar & networking	Off – at employer's workplace	Voluntary - by application	Yes	60 mins	4	2nd
Start a business and change the world	Interactive Workshop	On	Compulsory	No	90 mins	21	1st
Leveraging your degree	Lecture	On	Compulsory	No	90 mins	20	2nd
Meet the professionals	Interactive Workshop	On	Compulsory	No	120 mins	28	1st
Building your creative CV	Interactive Workshop	On	Compulsory	No	60 mins	7	1st
Working in the charitable sector	Workshop and networking event	On	Voluntary - by application	Yes	90 mins	14	1st
The Enterprise Challenge	Interactive Workshop	On	Compulsory	No	180 mins	18	1st
Work shadowing opportunities	Work shadowing	Off – at employer's workplace	Voluntary - by application	Yes	Full day	2	2nd

Findings

Immediately after the employability events, over half of students (57%) expressed interest in following up the opportunities for continued contact offered by the employers. However, very few students followed this through and actually contacted the employers after the events. One employer became quite perturbed about this:

Given that as much as 90% of the cohort expressed an interest in working in and around my field and we could offer them networking, distance learning and CV enhancement opportunities... I am amazed that so far only two students have engaged with us since (and one of them had already come to us in the summer). (E1)

Whilst this outcome was initially a disappointment, we were interested to understand the reasons behind it. The focus groups provided an opportunity for this issue to be explored in more detail and

students expressed a definite wish to follow up contact, but then subsequently qualified this with the reasons why it might not be possible.

Finding time for extra-curricular employability activities

One quickly proffered reason was having enough time to follow up contacts and commit to some of the opportunities offered:

I'd definitely like to keep in touch. The only thing that worries me is flexibility because I'm working as well as studying, obviously... and I've got a small child as well, but I would love to get involved. (S14)

A number of authors have pointed out the apparent mismatch between the assumptions about how much time students have available to spend doing unpaid extra-curricular activities made by employers and the reality of studying for many students (Lowe and Gayle, 2007; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006b). With part-time work and family responsibilities on top of their full time studies, many of the students in our study would fall into Redmond's (2006) "wash and go" category as they are simply unable to commit more time to university activities.

Becoming an HE student before becoming a graduate

It has been suggested that the employability skills should be developed "from day one" of a university course (CBI, 2009, p.6), and as such, the majority of the employability events in this project were aimed at first and second year undergraduate students. However, Tymon (2011) found that first and second year students often lack engagement with employability activities, even when they are embedded within the curriculum. We asked the students in our study about this, and they commented that the reason that other students may not engage with employability activities is because of the notion that simply passing a degree constitutes a guarantee of a job:

They [students] think that if they just scrape the grades, they're guaranteed a job." (S18).

People probably think it will be a cake walk...and that you'll pass and get a great job without putting in any effort." (S19).

The focus group participants also questioned the ambition of other students and felt that their lack of motivation meant that they were only prepared to be passive recipients of information, rather than actively engaging in developing their employability:

Some people see uni education as an easy ride instead of getting a job and they haven't necessarily got an ambition at the end of it so they just sit there and take the information. (S1)

The students associated this attitude with what they termed the 'college mind-set', implying that those with this attitude were viewing their higher education studies merely as another sub-degree or further education level course. They suggested that students who were not thinking about enhancing their graduate employability did not fully appreciate the reality of being a student in HE, where independent learning and initiative are prized:

I think the people who aren't enthusiastic are still in the college mind-set where they think they can just come in, play about and have fun. (S18)

It's your own initiative and if you're not prepared to do that then you're not going to get what they're going to provide... it's how focused you are and how serious you are about your studies. (S2)

It seems that before even thinking about enhancing their graduate employability, students must become fully aware of what it means to be an HE student. As Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011, p.565) point

out, “prior to taking on a graduate identity, an agent has a student identity primarily formed through subject discipline and a range of student experiences...”. Students in the first year of a course are likely to be still absorbing and adjusting to studying on a degree programme and may not have fully appreciated the significance of becoming a graduate in a few years’ time. It also raises the question of how obvious the difference between completing FE and HE level courses is to some students, particularly if it occurs on the same campus.

Greenbank and Hepwoirth (2008) found that students tend to focus on finishing their course before thinking about their career and employability. This is echoed in our study, where a second year student commented:

I haven’t contacted them yet.... I think I will contact them in the future ...and so if I can finish my course... they will be the first people to contact because they sounded encouraging and they sounded like a firm that is helping students....She told us to keep in touch.... but I do not see the need yet. (S4)

Of course, the issue here is whether the employer would remember the student when they finally graduate in 18 months’ time. Whilst for some the strategy of waiting until the course is almost finished before making contact with potential employers may pay off, it is clear that employers value students who take up extracurricular opportunities whilst studying. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) found that over 60% of the employers they surveyed expected graduates to be willing to take on new challenges, which would be aptly demonstrated by work experience or volunteering with an organisation (Tymon, 2011). In our study this is borne out by the fact that a number of the employers had employed former students from the campus, who had done work experience with them. As one pointed out:

I used an example of a Grade A student from last year’s cohort who has stayed in touch with me and is now part of my creative team. He achieved this through initiative, hard work, talent and STAYING IN TOUCH. (E1) [emphasis in original]

Lack of experience and confidence

When we probed in more detail, the students reported a number of reasons why they did not follow up on the contacts and opportunities on offer. One major theme that emerged was feeling inexperienced in communicating with graduate level employers and feeling that the employers were too busy to be bothered by students.

Employers and senior management seem aloof and a bit too busy for everybody so they don’t want me emailing them just to use them as a contact. (S21)

Many of the students felt as though they just did not have the confidence to approach the employers:

I was scared before - I wanted to carry on but I wasn’t sure if they’d let me. (S2)

Most of us immigrants you have sort of a barrier, you always feel like you can’t talk to these people or maybe they might reject me. (S4)

In Hinchliffe and Jolly’s (2011) study, over 70% of employers expected graduates to have confidence in their own abilities on appointment. It seems from our study, however that employers expect students to display confidence not just on appointment to a graduate post, but throughout their courses so that they can engage in the development opportunities that exist through being in Higher Education. A demonstration of the role that confidence plays in approaching employers occurred when, during one event, a student put her hand up and asked the employer directly for a work placement, in front of the rest of the class. Interestingly, a number of students commented in the focus group that this approach seemed too direct and that they preferred to ask general questions about the sector to get themselves noticed: “I thought S was brave but I personally wouldn’t do it as I prefer a more indirect

approach. I asked what skills gaps there are currently” (S10). Nevertheless, it is no coincidence that the only student to leave the session with the employer’s business card was the student who had directly asked for a placement.

Developing cultural capital

One third year student in the study described her journey from feeling scared at the beginning to learning about the graduate labour market:

You quickly learn that it’s about who you know, so you sort of learn the business talk... and I’ve got used to talking to people... and you learn that everyone’s after the same [job]. (S3)

Interestingly, this student mentions having to learn ‘the business talk’, emphasising that this was a different way of communicating to her normal everyday conversations. This process of learning ‘business talk’ echoes learning the ‘rules of the game’ and developing the personal capital that many authors argue graduates need in order to be successful with graduate employers (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Smith, 1995; Redmond, 2006). It is worth pointing out that a student or graduate without access to environments where ‘business talk’ is spoken, is unlikely to be able to develop this way of communicating, just as it is difficult to be truly proficient in any language without being immersed in it. When asked, it appeared that for half of the focus group students, the employability project was their first opportunity of meeting senior management and graduate employers. This reveals the differences in cultural capital between these students and a student whose parents are both graduates with distinguished careers and extensive professional connections:

I’ve never met that level of management before. It’s not something I aspire to go into as I want to be hands-on with clients, but I wanted to meet them for a day or two. (S21)

For me, uni is the first time that anyone’s bothered getting in people from another environment. (S19)

Of those who had met these kind of employers before, only four had met them through their personal life and the others had met them through jobs or work experience. Interestingly, one student started by saying he had not met anyone at that level before, but then as he was speaking started to remember other experiences:

I have, but not realised on the way, met people. I’ve met the Chief Executive of the Housing [Association] ... I’ve met the Minister for Housing while I was there as well, and I’ve met them ... had a chat with them, that kind of thing, he invited me down to the Houses of Parliament. So I had, I’d just not realised. (S13)

In this example, it was clearly not enough to have just met, briefly, these high ranking individuals as the student almost forgot about the experience. As such, it seems that in order for students to get something meaningful out of the encounter, they have the opportunity to build a relationship with the person, through regular or repeated contact.

Conclusions

As well as possessing the many employability skills developed during their studies, a graduate must also possess certain personal attributes to meet the demands of the graduate employer. This study has identified a number of the tacit assumptions in the discourse on ‘graduateness’. In particular, we found that graduates are assumed to have had sufficient spare time to engage in unpaid, extra-curricular employability enhancing activities, which is not the case for many HE students studying in FECs. They are also expected to understand what graduate employers value, and are looking for,

from the very beginning of their studies so that they can rationally plan and take advantage of the activities and opportunities on offer. This, in turn, assumes that students have fully appreciated the significance of studying at HE level and have absorbed the ethos of taking their own initiative, being independent and responsible for their personal development. Finally, the students are then presumed to already have the confidence and cultural capital to be able to contact and communicate effectively with employers. For the students in this study, issues with these factors combined to produce barriers to engaging with the employability activities and opportunities on offer to them.

In this paper we have collected together these sometimes hidden or unconscious assumptions made about what a graduate should be like into the concept of the 'implied graduate.' It is important to point out that, just as we are not painting a portrait of an ideal person, nor are we suggesting that employers expect graduates to all have the same attributes and characteristics. Instead the concept is an analytical tool to help us make sense of the discourse on graduate employability and to shed light on why different groups of students and graduates have different outcomes in the employment market. By collating the assumptions that are often made about graduates and students, we can see the difference between these expectations and the realities for many HE in FE students. In particular, realising that many students had not previously met graduate level employers before helped to explain many of the difficulties that they had in communicating with them. Both the employers and project organisers had made assumptions that all we had to do was provide the opportunity for contact with employers, and that the students would know what to do once they got there. In this case, it would have been useful if we had explicitly revealed the assumptions that professionals would have about suitable ways to communicate and provided specific advice on how to go about this.

The assumptions embodied in the concept of the 'implied graduate' form part of the hidden curriculum for undergraduate students, wherever they study. These implicit conventions need to be articulated in the learning outcomes of programmes and employability activities, both in terms of the knowledge and skills that students will acquire but also in terms of the values, attitudes and behaviours that are being developed (Smith, 2005; Bloom et al 1971). It is hoped that by tracing the assumptions we make about graduates through the programmes that are designed to enhance graduate employability, we can design and deliver more effective packages that will go some way in addressing the social inequalities that exist in the labour market and improve outcomes for non-traditional students. We must not forget that students will also have experiences outside of study which will be valuable in preparation for work and we must harness this in some way.

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