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Beyond employability: a more radical role for Higher Education in developing workplace capabilities

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Ison, Raymond; Shah, Rupesh and Wilding, Helen (2020). Beyond employability: a more radical role for Higher Education in developing workplace capabilities. In: Employability Conference 2020 Expanding the narrative for a rapidly changing world, 11 Mar 2020, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.open.ac.uk/employability-conference/>

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Applied Systems Thinking
in Practice (ASTiP) Group
The Open University



The Open
University

Beyond employability

A more radical role for HE in developing workplace capabilities

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(amongst others associated with...)

Applied Systems Thinking in Practice (ASTiP) Group

Employability Conference 2020

Expanding the narrative for a
rapidly changing world



The Open University

Date: 11th March 2020



...*expanding the narrative on employability*

1. Background to narrative... x3 projects at OU
2. Expanding the narrative... using a political economy approach
3. Prevailing narrative: competency approach to employability
4. Beyond the narrative: capabilities approach to employability
5. Challenges for Higher education



Backdrop to narrative

...on employability and Higher education

Immediate backdrop

7-year action research programme on employability

X3 projects funded by eSTEEem (The OU Centre for STEM pedagogy)

1. Enhancing systems thinking in practice (STiP) at the workplace. (2013-2016) ... transitioning from PG study to PG post-study (Universities with *employers* and *alumni*).
2. Framing professional competencies for STiP. (2017-2018)... transitioning towards workplace capabilities (Universities with *professional bodies*)

Projects 1 and 2 = 'mind the gap'.... Core outcomes: (i) focus on *capabilities* for curriculum design; (ii) *L7 Apprenticeship STP* (systems thinking practitioner) trailblazing group

3. Changing the way the game is played: Transforming PG Curriculum praxis and workplace capabilities. (2018-2020)



Backdrop to narrative

...on employability and Higher education

Immediate backdrop

7 year action research programme on employability

*X3 projects funded by eSTEE**

1. Enhancing systems thinking in practice (STiP) at the workplace. (2013-2016)
2. Framing professional competencies for STiP. (2017-2018)
3. Changing the way the game is played: Transforming PG Curriculum praxis and workplace capabilities. (2018-2020)

*The OU Centre for STEM pedagogy

Wider current backdrop

1. Augar review... tuition fees/ marketisation of HE
2. Levelling up.... apprenticeships/ quality control
3. 'Truth' or Trust ... post-Brexit/ campus free speech
4. Disputes... HEI working conditions, student climate protests



Expanding the narrative ...a political economy approach

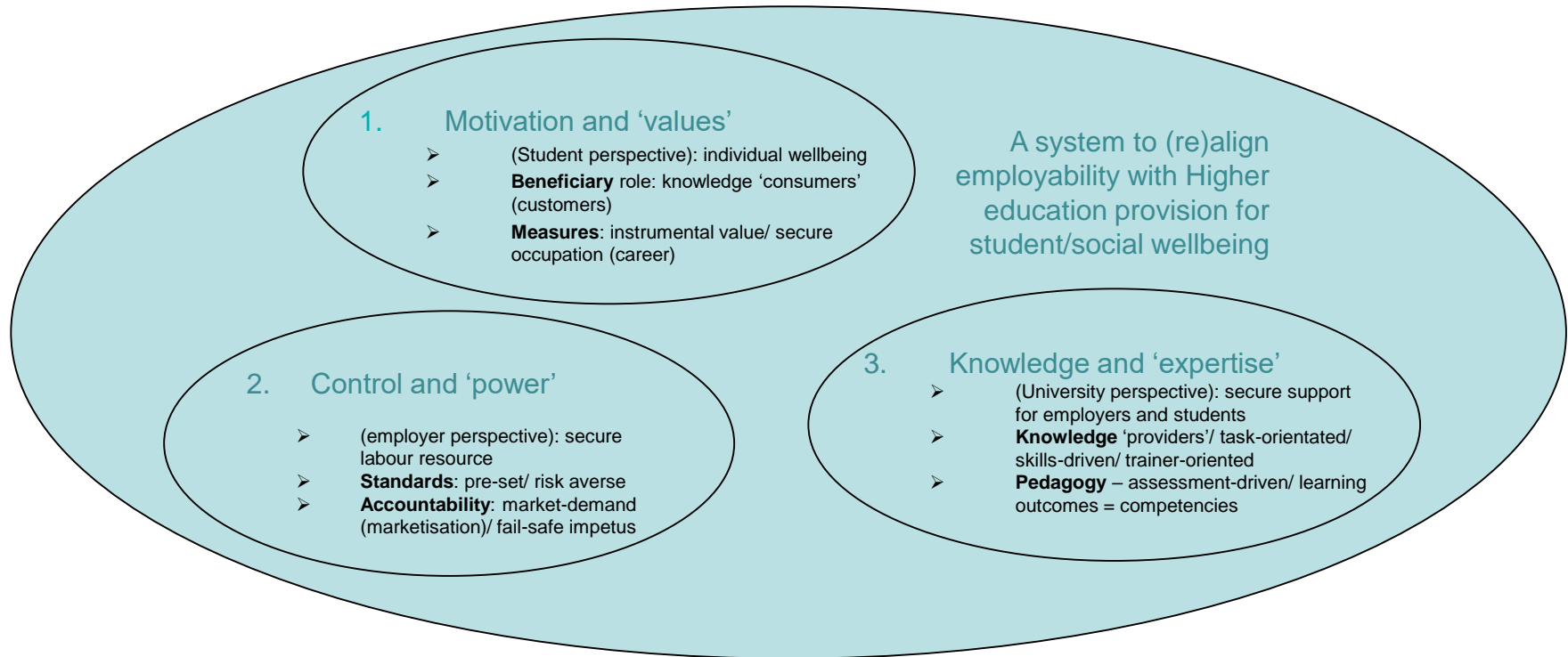
- Systems thinking in practice (STiP) = creating space (narrative) for meaningful conversation
- ...Critical systems heuristics (CSH) = one of many STiP traditions*
- CSH = reference system: x4 questions associated with political economy
 1. Who gets what? (motivation and values)
 2. Who owns what? (control and power relations)
 3. Who does what? (knowledge and trust)
 4. Who suffers (with) what? (legitimacy and politics)
- Use of CSH to frame conversation on two contrasting models of *a system to (re)align employability with higher education provision*:
 - a) Model 1: Competency approach (residual)
 - b) Model 2: Capabilities approach (relational)

*Ulrich and Reynolds (2010 [2020]) [Critical systems heuristics: the principles of boundary critique](#). In: Reynolds, Martin and Holwell, Sue eds. *Systems Approaches to Making Change: A Practical Guide*. [2nd Edn] London: Springer pp. 243–292.



Prevailing narrative

Model 1: competency approach



4. Legitimacy and 'politics' (who suffers (with) what?)

- (societal perspective): collective wellbeing
- **Worldview**: survival of fittest/ competition/ marketisation/ utilitarian (functionalist)
- **Learning**: 'positivist' assimilative process/ knowledge as 'commodity'/ technocentric/ **system=residual**

Prevailing narrative

Model 1: competency approach

A system to (re)align
employability with Higher
education provision for
student/social wellbeing

1. Motivation and 'values' (predetermined)
 - (Student perspective): individual wellbeing
 - **Beneficiary** role: knowledge 'consumers' (customers)
 - **Measures**: instrumental value/ secure occupation (career)
2. Control and 'power' (fixed standards)
 - (employer perspective): secure labour resource
 - **Standards**: pre-set/ risk averse
 - **Accountability**: market-demand (marketisation)/ fail-safe impetus
3. Knowledge and 'expertise' (predetermined 'competencies')
 - (University perspective): secure support for employers and students
 - **Knowledge** 'providers'/ task-orientated/ skills-driven/ trainer-oriented
 - **Pedagogy** – assessment-driven/ learning outcomes = competencies
4. Legitimacy and 'politics' (free-market/ bureaucratic)
 - (societal perspective): collective wellbeing
 - **Worldview**: survival of fittest/ competition/ marketisation/ utilitarian (functionalist)
 - **Learning**: 'positivist' assimilative process/ knowledge as 'commodity'/ technocentric/
 - **system=residual**



Beyond the narrative

Model 2: capabilities approach -1

1. Motivation and 'values'

Model 1 (competency approach)

- (Student perspective): individual wellbeing
- **Beneficiary** role: knowledge 'consumers' (customers)
- **Measures:** instrumental value/ secure occupation (career)



- (Student perspective): individual wellbeing... beyond the workplace
- **Beneficiary** role: knowledge 'makers' (active citizens)
- **Measures:** intrinsic value/ life-long learning

Augar Review implementation?



Beyond the narrative

Model 2: capabilities approach -2

2. Control and 'power'

Model 1 (competency approach)

- (employer perspective):
secure labour resource
- **Standards:** pre-set/ risk
averse
- **Accountability:**
market-demand
(marketisation)/ fail-safe
impetus



Levelling up?

- (employer perspective): secure
resource-ful source of labour
- **Standards:** developmental
'entitlements'/ experimental/ capacity
to choose
- **Accountability:** market-forming
(externally adaptive)/ safe-fail impetus/
risk-embracing



3. Knowledge and 'expertise'

Model 1 (competency approach)

- (University perspective): secure support for employers and students
- **Knowledge** 'providers'/ task-orientated/ skills-driven/ trainer-oriented
- **Pedagogy** – assessment-driven/ learning outcomes = competencies



'Trust' deficit?

- (University perspective): secure support for society, employers and students
- **Know-how** 'providers'/ sustainability-aware/ contextualised-driven/ improvisation-oriented/ learn-ability
- **Pedagogy** – relevance-driven/ learning objectives = capabilities



Beyond the narrative

Model 2: capabilities approach-4

4. Legitimacy and 'politics'

Model 1 (competency approach)

- (societal perspective): collective wellbeing
- **Worldview:** survival of fittest/ competition/ marketisation/ utilitarian (functionalist)
- **Learning:** 'positivist' assimilative process/ knowledge as 'commodity'/ technocentric
- **system=residual**



*Disputes/ protests..
UCU, climate
breakdown?*

- (societal perspective): collective wellbeing with eye on most vulnerable
- **Worldview:** communitarian/ cooperative/ public work/ social/ emancipatory (constructivist)
- **Learning:** 'transactional'/ knowledge as 'contractual'/ provisional/ democratic
- **system = relational**

Challenges (options...)

- ? Transform model 1 to model 2
- ? Integrate model 1 into model 2
- ? Retain both co-existing systems (allow students to choose)
- ? Enable (re)design (modelling) of curriculum praxis

* eSTeEM project 3: Transforming PG Curriculum praxis and workplace capabilities

Opportunities (The OU...)*

Curriculum 'innovations':

- OpenStudio/ OpenBox/ OpenLearn
- Microcredentials (FutureLearn)/ Peer assessment
- Portfolio design/ Apprenticeships
- Pro-active use of LOs
- eSTeEM/ PRAXIS/ SCiLAB/ FASSTEST/ LATIS scholarship/

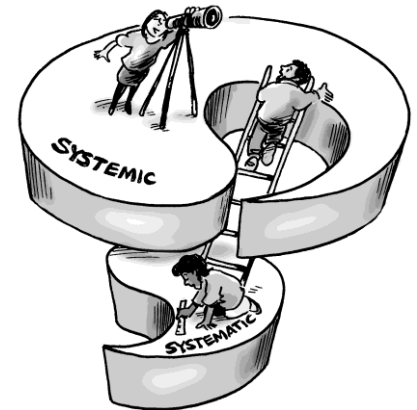
“...greater flexibility in degree provision will help people access the life-changing opportunities that a university education can provide. ...we will need greater dynamism in our higher education provision – including reforming traditional course delivery ...recognising the need to provide more in-work options like part-time, distance learning, and apprenticeships....In developing the ideas in this section, I have benefited from The Open University being akin to a public policy lab on ‘what works’ in supporting learning and earning.”

Carolyn Fairbairn Director-General of the CBI. Forward in OU pamphlet ‘Fixing the broken market in part-time study’ (November 2017 p.2... my emphases)



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Extended narrative – re-purposing?



Innovations in curriculum praxis