

5-5 Employability: “A Weasel Word”

Introduction

Having explored the term ‘*vocational*’ the participants were prompted to give their views on the term ‘*employability*’ as a means of surfacing any discursive tensions between the two terms. Asking participants to distinguish between these words in terms of their understanding and usefulness encouraged them to bring further clarity to their rationale for media studies and provided responses that can be compared with the academic and public discourses of media studies and higher education. The outcome was that *employability* is regarded by participants as related to *vocational* but with some distinct differences in interpretation, acceptance and validity in relation to media studies.

In their report *Pedagogy for Employability* (Pegg, 2012), the *Higher Education Academy* cite two definitions for employability:

“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)

and

“Employability is not just about getting a job. Conversely, just because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic. Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a current career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner.” (Harvey, 2003, p.3)

These two definitions capture the essence of the debate and this is reflected in the responses of the participants. Whilst there was a consensus that employability is an outcome of learning that results in the learner improving their

prospects of securing employment and successfully managing their career, there were differing views on what constitutes the most important features of learning for employability. Some, as suggested by the Yorke definition above, see learning for employability as the acquisition of skills, knowledge and attributes that are immediately and directly related to those required for both generic graduate-level employment and employment in specific industries relating to the degree subject. Sometimes referred to as 'hard skills' in order to distinguish them from 'soft skills' and 'emotional intelligence' (Hurrell *et al.*, 2012), these can include areas such technical and practical skills, written and oral communication and presentation skills, time management, team working and project management skills. This view of employability then begins to overlap with the usage of the term '*vocational*'. Alternatively, others see employability as being derived from the development of academic and intellectual skills and attributes that lead to critical and analytical approaches to problem solving, enabling a graduate to make a deeper contribution to professional practice as well as developing '*critical citizenship*' (Johnson and Morris, 2010) and general personal development. Responses from eight of the participants contribute to this analysis.

Analysis

This first set of responses covers the participants' views on the relationship between the two terms, '*vocational*' and '*employability*', together with their definition:

See, for me, vocational and employability are not very dissimilar words. (Participant 19)

Well, it is different, isn't it? Because you can be vocationally trained and unemployable. (Participant 04)

No, it is my life. It is what I do. [Laughs]. I make films; I think about films; I teach films, and that's what I do. So you know, in that sense, it's a vocation for me. (Participant 19)

...that comes out of the theoretical side of the course in as much as it's sociology and political economy, but it's practical. It's employability: it's not vocational as such, I would have thought (Participant 04)

I try to say this to students we are trying to say to them, you know, the employability agenda is very important, but it will come if you are passionate about it. And... and that's what you've got to do, be passionate and follow your dream. (Participant 19)

The ambiguity in the usage of the terms 'vocational' and 'employability' and the relationship between them is illustrated by the responses of Participants 04 and 19. Both these participants are experienced members of academic staff teaching and researching media. Participant 04 has had an extensive academic career in a number of universities whilst Participant 19 had a career in the media industries before becoming a university lecturer.

Participant 19 sees employability as arising from a passion for the life style of a film maker ("*it is my life. It is what I do*" and "*be passionate and follow your dream*") and sees that passion as defining a 'vocatio'n as a film maker. This contrasts with the approach of Participant 04 who draws a distinction between what he sees as 'vocational' training, an attribute of a course and 'employability', an attribute of a graduate ("*you can be vocationally trained and unemployable*"). Further to this, Participant 04 sees graduate employability as being promoted by the more theoretical aspects of media studies ("*comes out of the theoretical side of the course in as much as it's sociology and political economy*") rather than making a link between 'employability' and the practice-based elements of a course. This is a

contrast with some of the institutional promotional material considered within Chapter Seven, Section 7-2 where practice-based skills with media industry relevance are cited as a key element of employability.

For other participants, *employability* does imply a specific skill set:

...in employability terms, thinking widely about employability, then the key things are basically how well can students communicate?
(Participant 02)

So employability, you're going in to do a degree, you're gaining the knowledge and the practical, skills in order to be employed within the roles that [...] for instance, a film company has or a media company has or you go and work for an animation company. And that's what employability means. (Participant 03)

Employability is to me it has got (...) various nuances. (...)
Employability (...) means that you have developed certain skills (...) that (...) you can operate in a world out there. (Participant 12)

None of these participants are media studies academic staff. Participant 02 is responsible for teaching and learning at an institutional level, Participant 03 is a media graduate and Participant 12 is a senior member of an academic registry with a background in quality assurance. For these participants, their perception of '*employability*' does conform to the Yorke definition with the media graduate ("*practical, skills in order to be employed within the roles*", Participant 03) being quite specific about the need for practical, industry-relevant skills as an essential part of '*employability*'. Whilst Participant 12 does not have a teaching or industry background in the media, she does imply a similar view but in a more general way ("*you have developed certain skills (...) that (...) you can operate in a world out there*"). This theme of skills for "*a world out there*" is echoed by Participant 06 ("*it's that reality of what exists out there*", "*the reality of the industry*"). This

participant is a course leader working within a department with an art school approach and she sees courses that are “*just purely academic*” as delivering less employability.

What’s interesting is, I think from our delivery of our course because of the industry experience that employability is almost built in to how we deliver the modules, it’s that reality of what exists out there. So I do feel that courses that maybe are just purely academic driven with and maybe delivered without that experience built in, doesn’t necessarily benefit the students in terms of the reality of the industry.
(Participant 06)

Participant 08 is also working within a department that identifies itself with an art school approach but has a more nuanced position because, as part of her role as the head of a media department, she is also participating in the development of an institution-wide corporate approach to employability:

...but particularly looking at soft skills actually, and not at hard skills. But then that’s my bias and I have consciously been articulating that bias at the employability group. But it’s fallen on very open ears.
(Participant 08)

This participant prioritises ‘*soft skills*’ over ‘*hard skills*’. Here ‘*soft skills*’ implies generic inter-personal and communication skills as distinct from the ability to perform specific job-related tasks within a specific industry context, ‘*hard skills*’. The participant goes on to elaborate on how this operates institutionally. However, the description is of something remarkably insubstantial (“*it’s very, it’s very light touch*”, “*a narrative that can be gleaned from the syllabus*”, “*we always will avoid, anything that is remotely box ticking-ish*”):

It’s very, it’s very light touch but, you know, we have a thing, you know, the employability agenda, there needs to be a narrative that can be gleaned from the syllabus that proves to the institution that

certain things are happening. But we expect them to be fully embedded in the learning. So, and we definitely have avoided, and I think we always will avoid, anything that is remotely box ticking-ish.
(Participant 08)

This seems quite defensive with the unprompted implication that the institutional employability initiative is not particularly onerous (*“light touch”*) nor a perfunctory and pointless exercise (*“avoid, anything that is remotely box ticking-ish”*) and may relate to the possibly difficult dual role of being both an academic head of department and a member of a corporate leadership team, requiring a context-sensitive switch between discourses.

Other participants take a broader view of employability without a direct reference to any specific skills:

I think the person has to make themselves [laughter] employable and they will do that by understanding the culture of what it is they're studying, by understanding the culture of the area, industry, profession into which they want to go and by their own motivation.
(Participant 01)

Participant 01 sees employability as an attribute that students actively acquire themselves rather than being something they passively receive as an outcome of studying a course. Rather than being a specific set of skills, this participant sees employability as cultural awareness within a particular academic and industry context. Participant 04 also sees employability in more generic terms with an emphasis on active student acquisition (*“has as much to do with the student's response to the learning experience as it does to the content of that experience”*). He also sees employability as more than *‘hard skills’* acquisition due to the limited lifetime (*“going to be redundant fairly early on in their careers”*) of any specific

technology-based skills. Participant 19 relates ‘*employability*’ to the more general term ‘*professionalism*’ which is seen as a combination of skills and attributes:

In a sense, technology moves fast enough that you’re often training people in skills that are going to be redundant fairly early on in their careers, and there are newly emergent skills that are only crystallising during their course (...) so employability I would have thought has as much to do with the student’s response to the learning experience as it does to the content of that experience because it’s about students registering that for themselves. (Participant 04)

And employability is a noun, and... and professionalism is a key aspect, which leads towards employability. Professionalism is...is a range of skills, employability is the aims and attributes, and employability is what those attributes and skills are aimed towards. (Participant 19)

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, the participant responses are part of a discourse of ‘*employability*’ that is closer to that of Harvey (2003) with an emphasis on broader graduate attributes that go beyond narrow industry-specific skills. Participant 17 provides a useful, summarising insight into a media academic discourse of ‘*employability*’. His conception of ‘*employability*’ combines both specific skills (“...*somebody* (...) *that can write, communicate...*”) with the broader attribute of being able to “*think critically*”:

...Whereas (...) to be... employability, I, I think (...) does, you know, weasel word or not (...), it's quite a good word. Because I think, i-it does imply (...) this is somebody (...) that can write, communicate, (...) think critically, all the things urm (.....) an undergraduate degree ought to be doing anyway. (Participant 17)

But significantly, he sees *employability* as a *weasel word* (“*a word used in order to evade or retreat from a direct or forthright statement or position*”, (Merriam-Webster

online dictionary)). *Employability* can be seen as a more acceptable term for use by academic staff as it allows greater ambiguity in meaning; it allows engagement with a discourse that sees higher education as directed primarily towards employment and the economic implications of that whilst still being part of a discourse that looks beyond employment to broader personal development and societal benefits of higher education. Within this discourse, employment and career development are outcomes that follow, amongst others, from well-educated, well-informed and critically-aware citizenship.

“This is a way to rethink that New Labour weasel word ‘employability’. Students from FE and the new (new) universities have to convince remaining employers that, while their abstract ‘book knowledge’ may not be expressed with the literary elegance of the ‘Cambridge model essay’, their practical all-round experience has given them the ‘nose’ to put that theory into practice.” (Ainley and Allen, 2010, p.148)

This positioning of media academic staff at the loci of two oppositional discourses demonstrates how power in media studies is brokered through academic professional practices; the term is assimilated from the public into the academic discourse but appropriated to fit academic ‘ways of thinking’.