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Marketing students' meta-skills, and employability: between the lines of social capital in the context of the Teaching Excellence Framework

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to examine the role of social capital and higher order meta-skills in developing the employability of Marketing students at a UK university.

Design/methodology/approach: This conceptual article, bolstered by illustrative primary data, provides a broader conceptualisation of *employability*. This is to address the specific research question on how social capital (contacts and connections) is deployed (via capability-based higher order meta-skills) in a UK University developing the employability of a specific group of students. The article is situated in the highly fraught context of teaching excellence measurement schemes [such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK].

Research limitations/implications: While the illustrative primary data are not generalisable, as they are limited to one group of Marketing students in one UK University; the conceptual development, including a new social capital based definition of employability that incorporated the capabilities, provided by higher-order meta-skills, is widely applicable.

Practical implications: The article has highlighted how the impact of social capital, etiquette and meta-skills, while being ‘between the lines’ of the employability discourse and the metrics of the TEF, explains the differing perceptions of the value of employability initiatives. The article highlights the *grey area* of *between the reasons given* as to why some candidates are valued over others. Perhaps no rhyme or reason sometimes, just the ‘hidden’ perception/interpretations of the interview panel of the ‘qualities’ of one candidate over another.

Originality/value: The difficulty in ascertaining the influence of social capital (and how it can be deployed through higher-order meta-skills as capabilities) results in challenges for universities as they endeavour to respond to the data requirements of ‘learning gain’ within teaching excellent measurement schemes such as the UK Teaching Excellence Framework.

Keywords: employability; skills; social capital; Marketing students; teaching excellence; higher education

Introduction

This conceptual article examines the role of social capital (contacts and connections) and higher order meta-skills (including the capability to deploy the former) in the employability of Marketing students at a UK university. It also highlights the importance of what is not explicitly acknowledged in the discourse of employability. That is, the impact of what ‘lies between’ the words, i.e. what is *implied* but remains ‘unsaid’; this hidden ‘added value’ of employability is the importance of students’ tacit knowledge of situational etiquette in communications, that must be realised within their development of soft skills if they are to secure employment. It is, therefore, a key part of the *intangible* aspects of ‘employability’ – in other words, the real reason why graduates with the same degree are chosen rather than their rivals. The *intangible* component of ‘soft-skills’ is thus demonstrated by graduate trainees who can ‘blend into’ an organisation very quickly. The importance of ‘soft skills’ is also demonstrated in research that was conducted on 500 hiring managers and 150 human resource professionals, whereby 74% of employers stated that listening skills were critical in

graduate employees (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Equally, interpersonal skills and the ability to integrate into the culture of the organisation were also highly valued by employers (Doyle, 2020; Rolfe, 2020).

Higher education provision in the UK has slowly evolved from an elite to a mass system over the past few decades (Brown and Carasso, 2013; Hillage and Pollard, 1998). Meanwhile, the encumbered policy structure has been heavily criticized as it attempts to be both a social good and respond to economic need, resulting in a 'Tesco' model of education (Foster, 2002). The instrumental view of education has arisen from the dominance of neoliberalism as the traditional professional culture of universities, as knowledge institutions, has been replaced by regulation and performativity (Barnett, 2000; 2013). Further, at the time of amending this article in October 2020, however, a global pandemic had turned societies inside out (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2020) as the coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused significant disruption to Universities worldwide. As the lockdown and gradual relaxation is predicted to continue for several months, the impact on universities would be considerable with a fall of income over £37 million and a negative cash flow for up to 36 universities (Halterbeck *et al*, 2020, p.11).

During the current lockdown, as universities have had to stop face-to-face lectures and close their buildings, higher education provision has moved online (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2020). The change to patterns of provision will, in turn, affect the necessary skills students develop but – as employment will be equally affected – graduates finding work may rely more on '*who* they know, rather than *what* they know'. Notwithstanding these challenges, this article explores what lies 'between the lines' in the discourse and research on the interpretation of employability in the specific discrete context of Marketing students. While a limitation of the study is that the illustrative, qualitative, empirical data is small-scale, the findings nonetheless mirror the concepts raised across the literature on the importance of students' development of 'soft skills' (Finch *et al*, 2018). As part of an extensive undergraduate and post-graduate review of programmes/courses, over a period of two years, within this project an illustrative empirical study was, therefore, undertaken. The research question was:

What is the role of social capital (and capability-based meta-skills to deploy it) in the employability of a specific group of Marketing students?

The aim was to elicit the views of academic staff, Marketing professionals (i.e. employers of graduates deployed in their organisations' marketing function) and students on taught postgraduate programmes. We asked their views on what they envisaged were the most effective pedagogic strategies to integrate *employability* in undergraduate and postgraduate courses; in the light of emergent teaching excellence measurement schemes such as the UK government's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This was asked because of the different facets of employability. In general terms, we wanted to ascertain their views/priorities regarding a range of personal, professional, and transferable skills including communications, problem solving and leadership (Mason *et al.*, 2006; Gedye and Beaumont, 2018). While the TEF focusses on undergraduate courses, the university that has been examined in the current study ensured that its metrics for teaching excellence and employability were also applied to postgraduate courses. Also, there are indications that the TEF may be applied to postgraduate courses in the near future (Gov.UK, 2019).

The major limitation of many definitions and conceptualisations of employability, however, is that they are asocial in that they neglect two important dimensions: that of social capital in terms of (1) contacts and connections, *who* the student knows; and (2) the role of meta-skills (Finch *et al.*, 2013, 2018), as a capability, in students deploying their social capital. Therefore, while they accurately reflect the importance of the dimension of human capital (skills and experience – what the student knows [see Becker, 1962]), and according to Coleman (1998), is therefore convertible between the two types of capital. In other words, social capital can enable students to utilize their contacts to access the human capital of others. While Knight and Yorke (2003, p. 3), for example, consider employability as ‘contributing directly to the stock of human capital’, Bourdieu’s (1986) socio-cultural theories explored how people in society gained advantage and he argued that the higher socio-economic status someone has, provides resources that are not just financial. Thus social capital, often part of studying at a UK Russell group, US Ivy League or Australia’s ‘Group of Eight’ universities, is as much about a student’s upbringing, background, personality, and the opportunities that it opens up, such as accent, etiquette, amiability, character, attitude to work, social networks and so on.

So therefore, developing social capital is something that certain ‘elite’ universities do well (Lee and Brinton, 1996; Martin, 2009). It is hard to deny the cachet of being an Oxbridge graduate or a graduate from other prestigious, collegiate universities with regular formal dinners, balls, debating unions and influential alumni that position students well for the social aspects of high-flying employability. Engaging in voluntary social action and work placements have a similar effect. For example, the University of Oxford’s employability statement (2019) refers to ‘surveys of our employers report that they find Oxford students better or much better than the average UK student at ‘key employability skills such as Problem solving, Leadership and Communication’. Clearly, universities assist students to develop social capital via mentoring, careers fairs and many other extra-curricular activities; but it is not so evident in the extant definitions and conceptualizations of employability.

Concomitantly, one definition of employability is that it is “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Knight and Yorke, 2003, p. 5). Oliver (2015, pp. 59-60) usefully adapted Knight and Yorke’s (2003) definition to incorporate graduates (as well as students), to widen the verb ‘acquire’ to a more longitudinal perspective of ‘discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance’ and finally to ‘find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work’ (rather than to ‘secure ... chosen occupations’ to take account of job insecurity and precarity, the sharing economy, and a wider variety of employment opportunities). Hence, whilst acknowledging prior attempts to incorporate social capital into employability definitions (Brown *et al.*, 2004, 2012; Fugate *et al.*, 2004; McArdle *et al.*, 2007; Smith, 2010), we adopt a wider conceptualization of employability than the asocial definitions of Knight and Yorke (2003) and Oliver (2015, underlined adapted from *ibid*), with our adaptation in bold text below:

Employability means that students and graduates can discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes, **initiate and exploit social contacts and connections and develop higher-order meta-skills** that together make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid

work that benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (adapted from Knight and Yorke, 2003; Oliver, 2015).

Although we might argue that other institutions also contribute to the building of students' and graduates' social capital, and yet the UK government's employability reference in the Teaching Excellence Framework neglects this concept. Preparing graduates for the pressures and setbacks of a career is difficult, as so much depends on the personality of the individual, the more confident student will enhance their psychological capital, through the exploitation of 'who they know' through networking (Tomlinson, 2017).

In the next section, we provide the context of the study by introducing and explaining the UK Teaching Excellence Framework. The extant literature on employability in relation to the concept of social capital is then discussed. We then outline the qualitative research that was conducted during the course reviews and present the quotations from the illustrative empirical data, followed by a discussion of these findings. The paper closes with a conclusion offering a challenge for future research into employability to integrate social capital into any understandings of the concept.

The Teaching Excellence Framework

At the same time as the course reviews, the *Higher Education and Research Act* (2017) was passed by the UK government and the Teaching Excellence Framework was introduced mainly in England. An Office for Students was also established at the same time and is now the sole regulator of the English Higher Education system. Despite critiques of the Teaching Excellence Framework (for example, Ashwin, 2017; Barkas *et al.*, 2017; O'Leary *et al.*, 2019), it is relevant to international readers because it may be adopted and implemented in other jurisdictions and hence, any lessons learned with regard employability and teaching excellence measurement schemes are of immense relevance globally. This is because the current pandemic has forced tuition online. Academic staff must ensure that their materials and teaching online is as good as face-to-face and must not be a detriment to students' learning (QAA, 2020).

The Teaching Excellence Framework, (currently paused because of the pandemic) to date, has been implemented in the following three phases (with further stages scheduled for the next few years):

1. automatically awarded universities with a single award (meets expectations) if providers met the minimum criteria for quality based on the Quality Assurance Agency rating.
2. consisted of institutions' data being refined with some receiving a higher medal category, and others demoted in 2017.
3. the Longitudinal Education Outcome dataset was added to the metrics in 2018, drawing on data from various Government Departments (Gov.UK, 2019).

The Longitudinal Education Outcome dataset disaggregates data across the full range of subjects studied at university and show the employment and earnings outcomes for graduates 1, 3 and 5 years after graduation. Furthermore, a report of the views of 6000 staff showed 'overwhelming disapproval of the purpose of the Teaching Excellence Framework and its current methodology' (O'Leary *et al.*, 2019, p. 5). Over 80% of participants in a study conducted by O'Leary *et al* (2019) stated that they could not see the value in another system

of measurement that emphasised ‘dividends’ and outcomes, based on salary as quantified in the metrics of the TEF. However, the issues in defining what exactly is *teaching excellence*, run parallel to addressing what can be defined as *employability*, which we now consider.

Employability: a social capital, ‘soft-skills’ and meta-skills (capabilities) perspective

We now review the extant literature on employability to highlight the missing element of social capital and higher order meta-skills (capabilities). Given that Becker (1962) distinguished general human capital from specific – or domain-specific – human capital, one neglected dimension of employability is how those higher-order meta-skills (Finch *et al.*, 2013, 2018) acquired by graduates while at University enables them to deploy their social capital in the workplace. Thus, employability becomes less about *what* they know (specific human capital (Becker, 1962), and more about *who* they know and *how* they deploy their specific human capital and social capital in a sophisticated way that is thus a capability of value to employers. This aspect includes whether Marketing graduates are viewed as “work-ready” by employers (McArthur *et al.* (2017). Employability is how students and graduates ‘discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance’ (Oliver, 2015) skills (Knight and Yorke, 2003), i.e. domain specific human capital (Becker, 1962), on the one hand. On the other hand, employability also involves initiating and exploiting social contacts and connections and developing higher order meta- skills (or, in the terminology of Becker (1962), general human capital). While the term ‘employability’ can be traced back to World War II and simply described whether people were available for work (Gazier, 1998), it has become a ‘multi-dimensional term over the intervening years’ (Lees, 2002, p. 2) used prolifically throughout the literature on higher education. Thus, graduates gain social capital at University and also the capability (as a meta-skill) to deploy their social capital and domain and subject-specific knowledge (specific human capital (Becker, 1962)) in the workplace.

Social capital has been extensively addressed in the extant literature (see, for example, Adler and Kwon, 2002; Coleman, 1994; Granovetter, 1973, 2005; Lin, 1999; Sarkar *et al.*, 2001). Social capital is defined as the network and connections that individuals use in their personal lives, working lives, and for other purposes. Meta-skills (Finch *et al.*, 2013, 2018) can be conceptualized as being the capabilities that enable individuals to deploy their social capital. Arguably, both social capital and these capability-based meta-skills can thus be developed at University. The simplistic assertion is that the *real* definition of employability in a higher education context is not about the skills taught in/across a subject and the jobs (employment outcomes) that graduates can find, however precarious or disassociated from their degree subject (Knight and Yorke, 2003; Oliver, 2015), but about the *money* (economic capital) as well as the happiness, achievement, and self-actualization obtained, from the reputational and esteem factors incorporated in being an employable graduate (symbolic capital), which is the final outcome of University employability efforts.

Reported median starting salaries for graduates in the UK vary between the range of £19,000 and £22,000 (Graduate-jobs, 2019), £25,000 (Total jobs, 2019) nationally per annum, or £29,975 per annum in London (Glassdoor, 2019). Newton (2020) argued that a myopic focus in monetary terms on the value of a higher education does not account for the social benefits. Students make new friends, ‘thinking and practice are developed and ways of living and understanding each other are experimented with – the benefits of this can have long lasting effects’.

In response to the Office National Students (ONS) report that 31% of graduates were overqualified for the work they were doing; a number of letters were received by the Guardian newspaper. For example, Rose (2019) echoes the work of Cardinal John Newman from 1852 arguing that higher education's "purpose was to encourage students 'to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyse', with these skills he believed that graduates would be well prepared to make a positive impact on their communities in whatever capacity they might serve. He questioned: 'could it be that it is not the level of education that is disturbing those who contributed to the ONS report, but the possibility that universities may be producing increasing numbers of graduates able to challenge the status quo?'. In a similar vein Freedman (2020) argued that the true value of a higher education is a public good and not a 'plaything for the exchequer'.

The extent to which course designers can take responsibility for maximizing graduate salaries, however, may be somewhat limited. Graduates from universities in Northern England, who remain there to work might be expected to receive a significantly lower salary than they might if they moved to London to work; there is nothing that universities can do within their curriculum that will change that and yet rhetoric and ratings associated with the Teaching Excellence Framework will invariably be critical of the institution and the value of their degrees. Responding to the complexity of employability, therefore, presents various interrelated challenges for universities and academic staff. For these universities, this barrier is particularly difficult to overcome within the context of the Teaching Excellence Framework. This is because its measurement focuses rather too much upon metrics such as skills and knowledge at the expense of the social capital, that is one of the most valuable gains from a degree programme and which arguably explains the employment outcomes of many graduates. For example, students who study on courses with work placement years commonly obtain employment as a direct result of social capital gained during their work placement (Student Jobs 2020). Additionally, social capital can involve weak or strong ties with the latter being trust-based (Granovetter, 1973) and can often explain the employability outcomes of more employable graduates.

Other authors have considered social capital and employability (Brown *et al.*, 2004; Fugate *et al.*, 2004; McArdle *et al.*, 2007; McArthur *et al.*, 2017; Smith, 2010). Fugate *et al.*'s (2004) definition incorporates both human and social capital as one of the dimensions of their multidimensional heuristic model of employability, along with career identity and personal adaptability. However, the definition of Knight and Yorke (2003) that we introduced earlier remains one of the most prevalent and, also acknowledging Oliver's (2015) amendments to that definition, we have incorporated 'initiate and exploit social contacts and connections' to reflect the still neglected, but critically important, element of social capital for graduate employability. Research into what is meant and valued by employers, in terms of graduates' skills and preparation for work, reveals considerable diversity, especially into the importance of 'soft skills' such as the ability to interact and communicate well, as against the 'hard skills' of the management of technical skills (Teng *et al.*, 2019). While understanding the importance of 'soft skills' and why they are an intrinsic part of a student's psychological capital, research into graduate work readiness (GWR) in Asia, Winterton and Turner (2019) showed that soft skills were not valued as highly in different parts of the world (e.g. in China) as in Malaysia. As a university that recruits a high number of international students from these countries, this is an important finding that helps our research into how best to place the emphasis on 'soft skills' development on the courses.

Nonetheless, questions of how, and in what way, that the links between degrees, value, employment and economic success may be possible have arisen in the UK academic literature (Barnett, 2013; Brown and Carasso, 2013; Hillage and Pollard, 1998) as higher education has expanded; alongside an equally expanding managerial approach with the regulatory system resulting in an uneasy relationship for universities as they navigate a path between marketization and increasing state control. O’Byrne and Bond (2014, p. 577) describes this trilemma as tensions between the three competing paradigms in terms of quite distinct models of higher education: ‘the intellectual, consumerist, and managerial models’. While the intellectual model of higher education remains, the consumerist influence on curriculum design intensified after recent increases in students fees across the UK higher education sector (Gov. UK, 2019). This emphasis, however, on quality assurance and performance measurement indicators also remains central to higher education’s ‘time-honoured references to employers’ skills and economic benefits’ (Tomlinson, 2018, p. 715) but how to stay abreast with employers’ requirements for skilled graduates is a key question for academic curricula designers.

The delivery of employment skills on all courses is further supported by the central Careers Service, which employs highly trained recruitment specialists and related professionals to assist current students (and recent alumni) to secure employment. It has a range of online resources that students and recent alumni can access, including a CV Builder, an Interview Simulator, and practice tests. The service offers its users access to a Professional Mentoring scheme working with a wide range of employers – and offers students the opportunity to apply for the University’s Professional Award which recognises their extra-curricular achievements. The specialist Careers Advisors also collaborate with a wide range of employers and organisations in order to promote vacancies and/or volunteering opportunities to students and recent alumni. The University also hosts a number of employer fairs and events throughout the academic year. Over the course of the programme reviews, the academic staff embedded many of these employment skills developments into their programmes and this built on the existing, strong relationship with the Careers Advisors. During 2020, as a result of adjustments that have had to be made because of the pandemic, the University has scheduled its support, such as careers fairs for October, to be offered all online.

Although the debates about the nature of what constitutes employability skills have been extensively discussed in the academic literature for some considerable time (Brown *et al.*, 2004; Brown *et al.*, 2012; Harvey and Knight, 1996; John and Fanghanel, 2016), the nature of these ‘employment skills’ remains nebulous. The work of this early research on employment skills is cited here to highlight the tension between higher education and all its stakeholders, that continues into 2020. How these skills can be acquired, and how they are transferred from the educational setting to the workplace, presents a number of challenges for the course designer in higher education. And yet again, ‘employability’ is measured by metrics related to skills that do not incorporate the critically important role of social capital. The extant literature still focuses myopically only upon skills and employment outcomes – and the linkage between these – but there is a paucity of consideration of social capital, which is where our study contributes to this emergent field of literature on employability.

The following section explains the importance of the course reviews and offers illustrative primary empirical data that was collected throughout the University's undergraduate and postgraduate review process.

Course reviews

The policies of course reviews mean that universities must ensure that all higher education courses are accredited to the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (2019). Data for Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (2019) is required by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) that was established in the UK by agreement between the higher education funding councils, higher education providers and the associated Government departments. In the UK, the QAA has developed a range of benchmark statements, covering most subject disciplines, each of which in varying degrees of detail outline what a graduate should be able to do on completion; the knowledge they should have and the skills they should have been able to demonstrate (QAA, 2019). Ensuring that the subject content and the learning outcomes of each course aligns with the requirements of the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies is critical if a course is to be approved. Vocational courses, such as management and marketing, must also be aligned to the relevant professional bodies, such as the Chartered Management Institute (2019) and the Chartered Institute of Marketing (2019) to be (re)accredited.

Engagement with professional bodies – not just in the design but in course delivery – might also enhance the students' social capital through; for example, events which bring practitioners and students together outside of the formal classroom setting. The emphasis on ensuring that graduates have the skills to find jobs, however, is also now a key factor in the introduction of the requirement to show 'learning gain' within the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework.

Illustrative primary data

The illustrative primary data revealed the repetition of the themes across all the different programmes so we highlight the responses of marketing students and staff. The value of the empirical study reported here is that it was conducted to ensure that the redesign of the learning outcomes was aligned with the developments in industry. As noted above, the research reported in this article was undertaken as part of a course review policy at a UK university where all undergraduate and postgraduate courses undertake an annual review and a further development/approval process once every six years.

As part of the review process, the research was categorized and approved as 'low-risk' within the University's research ethics approval process (Author, 2019). This article reports on the responses to the questions on employability that were part of a larger study conducted on course development. As we were gathering the data, we were able to see how social capital crossed the themes that emerged. A qualitative approach was undertaken and data gathered through interviews and questionnaires. Analysing qualitative data has multiple challenges, such as an over-emphasis on interpretation, double interpretation (double hermeneutic), or the merging of data analysis and interpretation (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). So, these challenges were addressed through an iterative process of discourse and thematic analysis (Denscombe, 2017) to address the following research question (RQ):

RQ: What is the role of social capital (and capability-based meta-skills to deploy it) in the employability of a specific group of Marketing students?

The empirical data were thus drawn from Marketing practitioners, academic staff, post-graduate, and under-graduate students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 academics, 10 marketing practitioners and 165 course evaluation questionnaires (Postgraduate Marketing course) and a smaller response of 18 questionnaires was received from an undergraduate Business Management degree. The course evaluation forms were reviewed as part of the longer course development study and for the University's formal module annual monitoring. Students were advised that responses would be anonymised and utilised in research projects with a box to tick if they preferred to opt out (i.e. informed consent).

In the analysis of the data, a thematic approach was undertaken, as this provided a systematic, logical, way of analysing the qualitative data (Denscombe, 2017). The analysis was then processed through Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis in the form of 'Leximancer' text mining software. Leximancer analyses the content of collections of textual documents and displays the main concepts and relations between concepts based on the frequency of words used (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

Emerging themes

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the empirical data were related to knowledge and skills development in the marketing course: the strategic versus the tactical aspects of the subject; theory versus practice; ownership and merging of disciplines within marketing and the challenges of responding to the skills required to work in integrated marketing communications. The importance of 'advantage' in terms of social capital was a recurring theme that emerged throughout our research but it was difficult to draw out explicit statements. When invited to expand, participants were reluctant to elaborate, using phrases such as '...you have to be so careful not to discount someone simply on how they look or speak' or 'we are so worried about being accused of discrimination that we stick to the job spec!' We found that participants were happier to speak about 'value' than anything causally related to social capital/gains. During the research and revalidation of the courses, participants views of social capital were similarly intermingled in their responses to *value*, and for example, expressed in similar terms as the examples below:

When academics were asked '*How do you think studying Integrated Marketing Communications prepares students for work?*', they responded:

'The students need to see communications at different levels but sometimes they can walk into the classroom and they don't see how all that they are learning relating to the outside world'.

'Difficult unless you can get live projects going, maybe more in from industry to work in the seminars'.

'I do think they do have more confidence in being able to adapt, I do think that is one of its major strengths'.

Academics were asked, '*Do you think the current Integrated Marketing Communication educational practices meet the needs of stakeholders?*':

‘The curriculum needs variety, entertaining, comprehensive, built on frameworks, theoretically underpin what you’re saying’.

‘Integration and digital and how that is done on the planning on a practical level’.

‘Wouldn’t it be good if we could work with the advertising teams on tasks? So that we could compare how the IMC students and how the creatives respond to the same brief’.

Their responses on social capital included comments such as :

‘This is a tricky one, not sure really, I have been on many interview panels where I recall we have convinced ourselves that a perfectly good candidate was not right and we have gone for a different one. The fine line between confidence and arrogance, some young people have had more exposure to different situations perhaps’.

‘Some students start off with a great advantage, they are confident and have the support of their parents, whereas for others it’s the first member of the family to attend university’.

‘Social capital? Well how would you describe the massive advantages some people have’.

‘We do our best to help students’ confidence and I think we do a good job, but more than that, I don’t know, some people just seem lucky with connections and get on quicker than others.’

Practitioners (Employers of Marketing graduates) were first asked: *‘What do you think someone graduating with a PG qualification in IMC should know and be able to do?’*:

‘Communications, Storytelling, Curiosity, Passion and drive, Reliable and Accountable, some self-doubt, Open to change, Adaptable, Take constructive criticism, Purposeful, Problem solver, Good with numbers, Shared values and experiences’.

‘Obviously need to have a grasp of digital requirements. But it does depend, so for a job like mine and most jobs you do not need to go right into the depths and details of performance – well unless you are working for an ecommerce brand. You won’t need to know as much’.

‘Cultural underpinning of work sharing, collaboration, simplifying and teamwork’.

They were also asked: *‘How do you think University education prepares students for roles in this industry?’*:

‘I think there is a gap between what I call the technical person and the management/Director. We have lots of people that can do it but don’t know why they’re doing it’.

‘It’s a challenge to match up the right skills set with the right job however a culture fit is as important as the skills’.

‘Students speed of work and time plans are not really realistic...students need to work much quicker than they did once they work in an agency’.

‘web design, coding and soft skills are needed...students need to get thrown into it so that they know how to write a proposal, how to do an invoice, how to do design’.

‘Especially those that are older than me think that everyone that comes out of University will know everything about social media and that is totally wrong.’

Postgraduate students (Marketing) were asked: ‘*How valuable do you think the subject of Integrated Marketing Communications is to your future career?*’

Students were recognized that they were developing knowledge about marketing, gaining further understanding of integrated marketing communications in the industry and enhancing their skills in communications, teamwork, and presentations. Some examples are:

‘I enjoyed and learnt many things about IMC - It will be especially useful in my business career... suggest this module for all business and management students’.

‘This module is really interesting and useful in our future work’.

‘This is a nice module. I can learn about the marketing communication; it will help me in the future’.

Undergraduate students (Marketing Module on Business Management) were asked: ‘*What do you think are employment skills?*’:

‘Employment skills are about what you can do, your behaviour and attitudes’

‘Calculation, analyse, teamwork’

‘I think employment skills can vary from job to job, but I think people look for certain skills in potential employees that can benefit the company/business. Someone who can blend in well and has a reasonable amount of knowledge in the job area’.

And: ‘Why did you choose this degree?’

‘I chose this course as it was part of my assessment in College and I really enjoyed doing the accounts as I am good with figures’.

‘I chose my degree because I enjoy the subject. In my home country it would be really relevant as the degree you achieve is more important than work experience.’

Discussion of the illustrative primary data

The academic staff, marketing practitioners/employers and students all reported that employability was addressed, but perceptions of *value* differed. The perceived importance of employability to individual students varied widely. Practitioners emphasized the increasing fast pace of change, especially in technology. Academic staff believed they were doing all they could to keep up. The requirements under the quality system in higher education does not allow for spontaneous amendments. In courses that combine subjects from a disciplinary or vocational area such as marketing, the composite employability skills needed compounds the difficulty of how best to locate skills within the module/paper or wider course. The perceived importance of the personal and professional (or often termed ‘soft’) skills in management roles as noted by Weiss (2019) are also valued in the marketing sector, where,

in the same way as academics, practitioners have to work across different areas. These professional skills are identified as including leadership, diplomacy, creativity, analytics, coordination, and ability to see the bigger picture, but also, specific personality traits such as ‘inquisitiveness, and lack of ego’ (Wright, 2009, p. 19) and knowing how to behave appropriately in a professional/work context (Dixon-Todd 2019). The increasing demand on academics to ensure that their courses address this complex range of skills and competencies for employability results in academics having to face their own fears and concerns, presenting work-loading issues for both the organization and the staff. Not just about what to include in terms of new technology but wrestling with decisions of what to include/exclude to keep their subject attractive to students and employers. For example, in Integrated Marketing Communications, academic staff have to decide the tactical and strategic nature of the course and how it differs from marketing communications. These are aspects that also affect practitioners who are seeking to ensure their skills and knowledge are relevant to the digital developments and influences of social media in the marketing sector (Dixon-Todd, 2019).

Conclusion

The ongoing marketization of higher education has resulted in more students from different backgrounds taking up this opportunity, and this is welcomed (Author, 2011). While it could be suggested that the challenges for universities in terms of employability, therefore, are not just about providing ‘work-ready graduates’ in terms of developing social capital and higher order meta-skills to deploy social capital, they also relate to finding ways to help students adjust and become resilient (Burke and Scurry, 2019; Scurry et al., 2020) but at the same time, also not over-selling employment prospects. Brown *et al.* (2012) found evidence of a ‘global auction’ for graduate-type opportunities and limited vacancies throughout the world for certain high-profile opportunities. The extent to which universities have the resources to include job-specific skills (i.e. Becker’s (1962) specific human capital) is difficult to answer. However, it is equally difficult to balance is the extent to which a focus on ‘job skills’ is, or should be, the main function of a higher education. Indeed, as we have indicated, the broader social capital (the intangible contacts and connections) and the higher order meta-skills (i.e. the aptitude by which graduates can deploy their social capital, as well as other measures of emergent expertise) provided by attending University all enhance graduate employability. Universities do provide extra-curricular internships, mentoring, careers fairs, work placements and practical ‘real-life’ projects but this experience does not necessarily guarantee a student a job (Dixon-Todd, 2019), especially with a lack of social capital and meta-skills that employers demand. While academic staff endeavour to design courses that are relevant to current employment, it is a weaker proposition to state that a ‘graduate job’ is a guaranteed outcome of a higher education. As recent lawsuits have shown, however, this aspect of a university’s marketing requires considerable scrutiny; but so too is it inhibiting to employers just to badge graduate employability as enhancing skills when it can also be about enhancing social capital and meta-skills (higher-order capabilities to deploy social capital). The implications for practice for Universities are as follows. Graduates who are disappointed by the employment opportunities available to them are then challenging the statements made by their university in their marketing and course information and, perhaps as a consequence at least in part of the consumerization of higher education, they seem prepared to do so through the courts. Whilst there have, to date, been no successful claims made, at least through the courts, by graduate blaming universities for their failure to secure graduate employment, it may only be a matter of time. Universities in the US, Canada and Australia are all experiencing similar claims. The Consumer Rights Act 2015 and the work of the

Competition and Markets Authority arguably makes the potential for a first successful case, particularly in the context of the increasing ‘employability’ rhetoric in University marketing materials which is arguably being driven by the national narrative on the value of a university degree.

Another implication for practice is that any attempt to address meta-skills (Finch *et al.*, 2013 2018) including soft-skills/professional skills development to increase social capital can provide a business opportunity for other providers in personal, self-development. Knowing how to communicate and behave respectfully and appropriately in any situation is a tacit skill that is vital for success in the business sector, but is also ‘between the lines’ of conventional politeness. ‘Sensing’ what is appropriate is not quantifiable, but encouraging students/graduates to reflect on their performance in an interview, forms part of how professionals, such as Careers/Recruitment Advisors, encourage young people to be more self-aware of how they are perceived, especially as many potential employers would be a key part of interview training. It could be that universities of the future have to become fully engaged in addressing improvements in students’ social capital and become ‘professional finishing schools’, creating modules on mindfulness and cultural etiquette. Business opportunities have presented themselves in terms of providing graduates with an ‘edge’ over their peers. Professional Finishing Schools have become extremely popular, for example, the London School of Etiquette (2019) purports to ‘...cater for an urgent demand in modern etiquette in a global environment where companies are looking for higher standards in a competitive environment’. It cites an impressive list of top-employers in their list of clientele. The company offers a range of professional and personal courses to help people gain confidence by understanding and applying the appropriate etiquette in different business and cultural settings. In the not too distant past, this type of training was provided by international companies, including in cultural awareness in English as a Second Language courses and provided by Careers services in universities (Author, 2011). While graduate resilience is arguably rightly demanded by many employers (Burke and Scurry, 2019; Scurry *et al.*, 2020), attention to high levels of self-awareness for young and mature students is also critical.

It may be, however, that while universities manipulate courses to include deeper aspects of employability skills such as vocationally specific aspects of digital marketing (Dixon-Todd, 2019), they also consider ‘buying-in’ professional etiquette trainers to help students raise their social capital and support students chances of securing a graduate job still further (London School of Etiquette, 2019). Professional etiquette training would help students to understand the importance of common courtesy in the workplace; for example, in previous years, it was socially ‘normal’ to hold the door open for someone who was just behind you, but all too often the young person rushes through, slamming the door in the face of the follower. This would not go down too well in the workplace, especially if the person behind was a senior professional employee. The little pleasantries of ‘transaction situations’ make for a pleasant, and important part of repeat business, such as courteous staff in coffee shops showing an interest and engaging with customers. During the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, there has been an increase in community spirit across the globe. Articles across the media cited extraordinary examples of kindness, generosity of spirit and goodwill. Ranging from regular acknowledgement of the work of health care professionals by whole communities, (while remaining socially distant). Yet against the goodwill, the backdrop of the effect of COVID-19 on every aspect of society remains uncertain, so while universities, like the media, endeavour to respond to the challenges it has presented to higher education and employment, it remains painful and difficult; as summarized by ‘you know some people

feel you haven't got it right, and you know yourself you don't always get it right. You can only do your best.' (Walsh, 2020).

Future research, however, should examine in other disciplines and contexts the role of social capital and higher-order meta-skills in employability. At the moment, the nature of the start of the new academic year in Autumn 2020 is uncertain. This is because of the challenge of implementing safe physical distancing with young people if it is possible to return to on-campus teaching. Also, the most appropriate ways to help students to understand how best to develop the ability to recognise the subtle nuances of etiquette and conversation within communications and soft skills remains a challenge for academics and career developers. No matter how long it takes to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges of preparing students for employment remains. Whether or not to employ the integration of employability skills, however defined, inside or outside the curriculum, raises not some, but a matrix of multifaceted questions. The causal link between good teaching and employment is somewhat tenuous as the data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (2018), and reports from related organisations such as The Longitudinal Education Outcomes has demonstrated. As the findings from the research has shown 'the learning gain' students obtain, depends on so many different variables, including social capital. To answer the intricate questions related to degree course developments and how to address the complexity of employability, is, as the TEF & UCU's (2019) report on the Teaching Excellence Framework recommends, necessary to engage in a deeper and wider discussion between all stakeholders in higher education, and thus the role of social capital and meta-skills in the TEF must be refined and defined.

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