

Book review

GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN CONTEXT: THEORY, RESEARCH AND DEBATE

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Much ink has been spilled on the concept of employability. From my own position as a former practitioner and manager in higher education careers work, and now course leader in career development professional programmes, it's a word that has become most familiar to my spellchecker. Many of the publications I've come across that have employability in the title have been dangerously lightweight. This one is resolutely not: it's a weighty tome in every way.

Michael Tomlinson and Len Holmes are already significant names in academic discussion of graduate employability. Tomlinson's (2007, 2012) research on student perspectives has identified an 'ideal type' model of orientations that has become well known in higher education careers work. Perhaps even more usefully, he challenges us to pay attention to how students construct their own narratives of employability, rather than accept an imposed framework. Holmes (2001, 2013) also rails against such frameworks, highlighting the process of becoming employable through assuming a graduate identity, rather than taking possession of a list of skills.

In this new publication, Tomlinson and Holmes have pulled together 15 chapters exploring the subject from a variety of angles, bookended by their own contributions which map the territory and set an agenda for continued work. A selection of social scientists subject the term and its baggage to a series of contrasting heuristic devices, slicing and dicing along the way. I enjoyed reading the book, considering in particular its potential value to a higher education career development practitioner. It is established early on that there are problems with current associations and uses of the term. The introduction and opening chapter do a great job of reminding us of some of the terms of the debate. Employability is contrasted with employment, we are reminded of distinctions between relative and absolute employability, considering the role of employers and the labour market and ways of unpicking the currency of qualifications, before an overview of the contributions is given. Fifteen chapters follow by a range of single or multiple authors: twenty three in total. Some names were familiar to me from the UK context such as Rothwell, McCash, Greenbank, Burke, Baruch, Scurry, Hincliffe, Bridgstock and Dacre Pool, but others were refreshingly new, such as Nilsson, Cashian, Coetzee, Li and Siivonen, and give a useful international dimension.

At the outset, Tomlinson set us off on a sociological footing, using Bourdieu to unpick the role of various 'capitals', and big sociological names are referenced throughout with Tholen, Archer and Giddens also regularly cited. Non sociologists might want to read with an introductory reference guide to one side. Burke, Scurry, Blenkinsopp and Graley use social theory to consider social class in relation to the graduate labour market, exploring the role of higher education in increasing inequality, focusing attention on the congruence of Bourdieusian concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' and in particular how individuals reason when the field changes. Key concepts introduced here are Margaret Archer's morphogenesis (practices emerging from the interactions of structure and

agency) and insights into the ‘internal conversations’ we all might have with varying degrees of reflexivity.

Given the promise of that, I was disappointed that there was not more reflexivity throughout. Only Paul Greenbank and Phil McCash wrote themselves into their accounts at all. Although some of the concepts discussed such as capitals are now well used in practitioner discussions, there are few mentions of career development practice and little consideration of how practitioners might work with this material. I think there is space for subsequent publications to do just that.

As an edited collection, there are by necessity many voices within and the change of tone and pace between chapters makes for a few lurches along the way. This introduces the potential for inconsistency. For example, I found it slightly incongruous that despite being critical of a possessional approach to atomised ‘employability skills’, the possession of two such attributes (judgement in Hinchliffe and Walkington’s chapter and emotional intelligence in Dacre Pool’s exposition of CareerEdge) are the subjects of whole chapters.

Tomlinson has set out in his introduction the importance of considering the concept from three perspectives: the ‘macro’ or wider system level, the ‘meso’ or institutional level and the ‘micro’ or individual level. The collection does deliver on this. Nilsson’s labour market analysis and other theoretical perspectives looking at professional learning. The ‘meso’ is covered by a consideration of the institutional responses of Edge Hill University which raises some pertinent ethical issues. The ‘micro’ is accounted for in Coetzee’s chapter on ‘psycho-social career preoccupations’, reporting on the use of two quantitative tools.

As well as practitioners, students do not feature highly. The only student voices present in any substantial sense are in chapter 10, ‘Cultivating the Art of Judgement in Students’ by Geoff Hinchliffe and Helen Walkington, and I would have liked to have seen more of this.

This text can certainly assist the reader in understanding graduate employability in context

and theorising in new ways to challenge entrenched positions uncritically espoused. There is still further nuance possible, however. What distinction do we notice between the use of the term ‘employability’ use in companion to ‘career’ or on its own? Why the particular focus on graduate employability? For academic authors, I sometimes wonder whether their proximity to students and their stake in higher education informs their focus.

This stimulating read deserves a readership who will no doubt identify further nuance, and ink supplies will continue to be needed.

References

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