Absolute and Relative Employability: Lecturers’ Views on Undergraduates’ Employability

Andrew Morrison,
Cardiff Metropolitan University

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Abstract: This article details the findings of a small-scale study into university lecturers’ perceptions of undergraduate employability. The investigation employed interviews with the lecturing staff on a BA (Hons) in Education Studies, and a member of the careers advice team, at a post-1992 university in South Wales. The aim of the study was to consider the lecturers’ beliefs regarding the extent to which their students would be employable in areas of employment unrelated to education. The staff members believed that the Education Studies degree offered students the opportunity to develop ‘transferable’ skills which could potentially make them employable outside of education-related employment; to this extent, they felt they were able to help the students build skills for ‘absolute’ employability. However, the interviewees also believed the students may encounter class-based disadvantages in the graduate labour market; in this respect, they felt that important aspects of the ‘relative’ employability of their students were beyond their capacity to intervene. In the light of growing policy pressure upon higher education professionals to ‘deliver’ increasingly employability-driven curricula, it is concluded that further research is needed into lecturers’ perceptions of their roles and capacities within this area.

Keywords: Employability; Higher Education; Social Class

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Introduction

This paper reports upon the results of a small-scale qualitative investigation into university lecturers’ perceptions of undergraduate employability. The study used individual interviews with members of the teaching staff on a BA (Hons) degree in Education Studies at a post-1992 university in the South Wales area. Graduates from this degree at the case-study institution typically enter teaching and teaching-related employment, although the degree
itself does not lead to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The purpose of the investigation was to examine lecturers’ perceptions of the level of employability of their students within employment sectors not related to education. In particular, the study sought the lecturers’ perceptions of the extent to which they believed their students were employable in graduate-level positions within the business and financial services sectors. There are three factors which form both the context and rationale for this present study, as I shall discuss.

Firstly, on a general level, employability has become, as Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003, 107) note, a concept that captures the political and economic times in which we live. Policy-makers and business leaders argue that social justice and national economic competitiveness are contingent upon individuals acquiring the knowledge and skills required for employment within a knowledge-based economy (Tomlinson 2007, 285). The discourse of individual employability represents a policy response to the changing nature of workplace structures within a service-led ‘informational’ economy (Tomlinson 2010, 75), which have demonstrated an increasing tendency towards organisational downsizing and occupational delayering. These changes in organisational structures, in turn, reflect the wider political and macro-economic shifts towards the current neo-liberal settlement that have occurred over the past three decades in the UK and beyond. As a result of such developments, employees can no longer expect a ‘job for life’ based around a single occupation or organisation (Tomlinson 2007, 286). Instead, individuals are expected to actively manage their own employability through the development of an appropriate set of skills, and through the adoption of a suitably ‘flexible’ attitude towards their employment terms and conditions. In short, as Tomlinson (2010, 73) observes, employability continues to be promoted as a key organising principle in the way individuals manage their employment within the labour market.

A second related factor lies in the way in which employability has become an increasingly prominent area of higher education policy in the UK. The production of a skilled workforce
to enable the U.K to compete in the global knowledge economy has been a key legitimising discourse that has sustained the expansion of the HE. sector (Gracia 2009; Boden and Nedeva 2010). As Tomlinson (2010, 74) notes, governmental faith in the role of higher education as a vehicle for enhancing the human resource capacity of the labour market has tended to function on two main levels: the collective, whereby national economic competitiveness is aided by the production of a skilled workforce; and the individual level whereby people enjoy higher levels of economic return through the possession of high level skills. The function of universities within the employability agenda has been subject to criticism; Boden and Nedeva (2010, 40), for example, argue that the employability discourse is distorting the traditional liberal educative role of the higher education sector and moving it towards the production of “docile worker/consumer bodies”. Universities are now expected to pursue and demonstrate direct economic utility and, to this end, curriculum design and delivery must be shaped in response to employer needs (Gleeson and Keep 2004). Such a prescriptive policy framework has clear implications for the nature of universities’ pedagogical practices and curricula, and puts a considerable onus of responsibility upon university teaching staff for the successful achievement of employability-related curricular ‘outcomes’ (Boden and Nedeva 2010). From this perspective, therefore, it is important to examine lecturers’ views on a matter which is becoming increasingly central to their professional roles within a marketised sector in which institutions must demonstrate to the student ‘customer’ that their degrees will yield an economic return on their investment (Boden and Nedeva 2010). In fact, the need to investigate lecturers’ perspectives on this issue is made yet more pertinent by the relative paucity of research into this area; while there is now a relatively slim but growing body of studies that have examined students’ subjective understandings of and orientations towards the labour market (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Moreau and Leathwood 2006), little has been written on the question of university lecturers’ perceptions of their students’ employability.
Finally, the issue of graduate employability, and of lecturers’ perceptions of graduate employability, has been made yet more potent by the policy of cuts to public sector employment in the UK. Although there are long standing difficulties in arriving at a clear agreement of what is meant by ‘public sector’, two authoritative sources both calculate that 40% of all employed graduates in the UK work within the sector (Elias and Purcell, 2004, 6; Ball 2010). Estimates of the number of public sector job losses resulting from central and local government cuts range widely, but even the present Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government’s own figures indicate losses of around half a million jobs by 2014-15 (OBR 2010). It is clear then that graduates will suffer particularly hard from public sector job losses, which includes employment in the education sector. Job growth is now expected to come from the private sector (Cameron 2010). This, in turn, raises the issue of the extent to which lecturers who teach undergraduates (such as those on an Education Studies degree) who have traditionally sought work in teaching and related activities within the public sector, perceive those undergraduates to be employable within industrial sectors not related to education. This paper aims to address this question by examining lecturers’ perceptions of the employability of Education Studies undergraduates in relation to graduate-level employment in business and financial services. The decision to examine two particular areas of employment, as opposed to the labour market in general, was made to allow the study a relative degree of focus which would then open up wider theoretical and policy-related concerns. The next section will consider in more detail different constructions of the concept of employability within academic and policy-related literature.

Concepts of Employability
The concept of employability is complex and subject to different and shifting ideological interpretations, making it not amenable to a precise definition. On a very descriptive level, it sometimes simply defined as the gaining and retaining of fulfilling work. As Boden and Nedeva (2010, 41) note, this conceptualisation informs the work of the Higher Education Statistical Agency’s (HESA) graduate employment survey, which gathers data on graduate employment six months post-graduation and which functions as an employability performance indicator. However, as Tomlinson (2010, 78) argues, the reduction of employability to crude labour market outcomes, as inferred through large-scale data sets, has the effect of dismissing important contextual educational, social and labour market processes. Clearly, therefore, any conceptual approach to employability needs to offer an understanding of such processes, that is, of the relationship between education, employment and the labour market. Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003) have identified two principle competing interpretations of this relationship: consensus theory and conflict theory.

Consensus theory embodies the assumptions that underlie the direction of governmental policy towards the education system and the labour market. According to this theory, the globalisation of financial markets, advances in communications technology and the growth of transnational corporations, all signify a need to move away from the traditional mass production of standardised goods, and move instead towards a new competition based on innovation and creativity (Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003, 112). Technology is the driver of social change and knowledge is the new source of capital from which wealth will be created. Tomlinson (2010) has identified two distinct, though closely related, strands within this overall paradigm, both of which have had key roles in the framing of higher education policy in the UK The first views graduate employability within a human capital model, whereby there is a linear and positive relationship between investment in education and training, and its productive returns within the labour market (Tomlinson 2010, 77). Education
enhances individuals’ levels of productivity within the workplace, thus leading to higher economic returns for the individual in the form of earning power, and to improved overall national economic performance. Tomlinson (2010) argues that this account of a virtuous relationship between education, training and labour market productivity is flawed on two main counts. Firstly, he notes that there are many tensions running through the notion of employability skills; on the one hand, there is an assumption of a stable alignment over time between a supply of graduate-level skills and employer demands but, on the other hand, employers continue to voice concerns regarding the nature and quality of graduates’ skills (Tomlinson 2010, 77). Secondly, it is argued that the economistic and instrumentalist assumptions of the human capital model, which frame individuals’ goals within a means-end utilitarian framework, have the effect of dis-embedding individuals’ economic outcomes from their social, cultural and spatial contexts (Tomlinson 2010, 78).

The second key approach within the consensus paradigm to graduate employability identified by Tomlinson (2010) is the skills agenda. It shares with the human capital model the belief that graduate employability is essentially a supply-side issue, whereby universities are charged with the responsibility for producing employable, productive workers (Tomlinson 2010, 79). Here again, the notion of employability skills is problematic but from a rather different angle. Tomlinson (2010, 79) argues that the skills approach, which is premised upon the direct transference of skills learnt within an HEI to the workplace setting, de-contextualises graduate skills from the environments in which they may be employed; the result is a reductive view of skills which ignores the wider social relations in which such skills are located.

The principal weakness of the consensus perspective, as Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003, 116) observe, lies in the fact that it presents employability as purely a supply-side problem in which the acquisition by individuals of the right skills will inevitably lead to
suitable employment. This interpretation ignores the ‘social congestion’ that is a feature of the competition for managerial and professional employment, and it also makes some unwarranted assumptions about the meritocratic nature of the education and jobs’ markets (Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003, 116). In fact, as Souto-Otero (2010, 399) has outlined, the discourse of meritocracy rests upon very weak foundations in the U.K; educational attainment is still consistently closely linked to class origins, as is occupational destination even when accounting for educational attainment.

The second approach to graduate employability identified by Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003) is conflict theory. This offers a very different interpretation of the relationship between education, employment and the labour market. This theory rejects the belief that we are moving towards a high-skilled, knowledge-based economy; rather, processes of corporate re-structuring and developments in technology have had the effect of de-skilling large swathes of professional and managerial employment, leading to proletarianisation and mass unemployment (Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003, 115). On this reading, as Tomlinson (2008, 50) notes, the expansion of higher education and the growth in graduate numbers clearly do not reflect greater employer demand for high-level skills. The increase in educational credentials is, in fact, seen to add little or no value to individuals’ human capital; growing credential inflation means that qualifications are increasingly demanded simply to serve as a screening device to limit access to jobs rather than being a true reflection of the level of the knowledge or skills required to do the job—a process known as ‘graduatisation’ (Ainley and Allen 2010). As higher education credentials lose their positional value as a consequence of the expansion of the HE sector and of shifting concepts of graduate skills, so individuals’ employability comes to rest increasingly upon their cultural, social and material resources and, crucially, on their capacity to effectively mobilise these within the graduate labour market (Tomlinson 2008). From this perspective, the discourse of employability, as
promoted within dominant policy circles in the UK, represents little more than an attempt to legitimate inequalities within education and the jobs market (Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003, 114).

Ultimately, as Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003, 110) discuss, to understand employability we need to take account both of its absolute dimension and its relative dimension, which they term the ‘duality of employability’. The absolute dimension relates to whether individuals possess the appropriate skills and attitudes which employers need. The focus here is firmly upon employability as an individual attribute that is amenable to change or improvement dependent upon that individual’s personal efforts through education and training. This dimension of employability forms the core of the dominant consensus theory approach and is the basis for much of the employability and skills agenda within current higher education policy. As Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003, 110) argue, this dimension is certainly significant in relation to an individual’s employability since in high-skilled work an employee’s knowledge, skills and sense of commitment will be a source of productivity to the employer. Nevertheless, the singular focus upon the absolute dimension of employability within policy-related discourse has had the effect of disregarding the relative dimension: the reality that an individual’s employability depends upon the laws of supply and demand within the jobs’ market (Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003, 110).

From this perspective, an individual’s employability is a function not simply of their skills (the absolute dimension), but, more importantly, of their position within a hierarchy of job seekers (Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003, 111). A consistent body of evidence tells us that the graduate labour market remains strongly demarcated by social class, with graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds suffering persistently lower future income returns than their middle-class peers (Pollard, Pearson and Willison, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). Furthermore, as discussed previously, an increasingly credentialed workforce means that
social class—or, more specifically, an individual’s levels of cultural and social capital and their capacity to convert these into labour market advantage (Tomlinson 2008)—now appears to be becoming more important, not less, as a determinant of future career success, a fact now at least acknowledged within governmental policy circles (Cabinet Office 2009; 2011). For these reasons, this study accepts the arguments of Brown, Hesketh and Williams with regard to the duality of employability, and their definition of employability as “…the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment” (2003, 111). Within this present paper, therefore, employability will be understood both within its absolute dimension (an individual’s level of skills) and its relative dimension (how a job seeker is positioned in relation to other job seekers in a hierarchical jobs market).

The next section will discuss in more detail the rationale for the particular choice of business and finance as a basis upon which to discuss university lecturers’ perceptions of undergraduate employability.

**Business and Finance Sectors and Jobs Growth**

In line with the aims of this study, it was decided to investigate lecturers’ perceptions of the employability of Education Studies undergraduates in the areas of business and finance for three reasons. Firstly, these occupational areas are not within the field of education and, thus, provide the opportunity for the lecturers to reflect upon their students’ employability outside of their typical area of employment. Secondly, despite rhetoric on the need for a sectoral ‘re-balancing’ of the UK economy away from financial services (BIS 2011), it is clear that both the U.K central government and the Welsh Government continue to identify this area, based predominantly within the private sector, as a significant source of future employment growth (BERR 2010; WAG 2010). However, the capacity of the private sector to replace lost public
sector jobs has been brought into question by critics of the policy of public spending retrenchment (Bell and Blanchflower 2011); moreover, where existing development within the business and finance sectors is weak, as it is in the South-East Wales area, new job creation could prove problematic (Pringle et al. 2011).

Employability Skills

The business and finance sectors, therefore, occupy an important place in governmental hopes for jobs growth in the UK in general and in Wales in particular. Moreover, official discourse surrounding graduate employability insists upon the potential for graduate mobility between occupational areas. The employers’ representative body, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), has identified nine graduate ‘employability skills’, at least six of which are, arguably, generic in nature (CBI/UUK 2009, 8). Employability is, thus, unproblematically positioned as a largely functional undertaking, involving the development of a suitable attitude and attributes. For this reason, the CBI asserts that two-thirds of all occupations that demand graduate-level skills are open to graduates of all degree subjects (CBI 2009, 12); this claim is supported, to some extent, by research into the business and financial services sectors which has found that (depending upon the specific professional area) employers regard generic skills to be of equal, and sometimes greater, value than vocationally-specific knowledge (Kavannagh and Drennan 2008; Wilton 2008). From this perspective, therefore, business and financial services jobs are, in principal, accessible to graduates of an Education Studies degree. This represents the third reason for investigating lecturers’ perceptions of the potential employability of Education Studies undergraduates in relation to business and financial services: to understand whether and to what extent the lecturers’ perspectives align with official rhetoric on this issue.
The next section will now detail the research study from which the data for this present paper were gathered.

The Research Study

Case study institution

The case study institution is a post-1992 university in the South-East Wales area, recruiting principally from the South Wales area. The majority of the in-take are from working-class backgrounds and are mostly among the first generation in their families to go to university.

BA (Hons) in Education Studies

As Ward (2008, 1) notes, Education Studies is one of the fastest growing university subjects. It draws from sociology, philosophy, psychology and history with the aim of presenting a critical approach to education as a field of study (Ward, 2008, 2). In the 2010—11 academic year, there were 103 students enrolled on the third-year of the BA (Hons) degree at the case-study institution, of whom 89 (86.5%) were female and 14 (13.5%) were male.

Staff Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted between 17 August and 14 December 2010. All five members of the Education Studies teaching team, three women and two men, were interviewed. In addition, it was also felt important to interview a member of the University’s careers team in view of her important function in relation to student
employability. The next section will present and discuss the findings from the interviews. This will then be followed by a discussion.

**Operationalisation of Employability**

As discussed previously, the concept of employability by which this present study is guided is that developed by Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003) whereby employability is to be understood as encompassing both an absolute aspect (skills) and a relative aspect (where an individual stands in relation to other job seekers). Within this present paper, the absolute dimension has been operationalised through lecturers’ perceptions of the employability skills gained by the undergraduates from their Education Studies degree; the relative dimension has been operationalised through lecturers’ perceptions of the influence of students’ social class with regard to accessing employment in business and financial services. It should be noted that this dichotomy is employed here as a heuristic device; there is no clear dividing line between the absolute and relative aspects of employability. It is recognised, for example, that skills—particularly those of a ‘soft’ type related to an individual’s inter-personal abilities—are socially constructed and embedded within a society marked by inequalities of class, ‘race’ and gender (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

**Skills and absolute employability**

There was a general belief amongst the staff members that the Education Studies degree did help to develop the students’ employability skills to the extent that they could, in principle, be employable within the fields of business and financial services:
I think that a lot of the skills that we teach them are transferable in terms of the fact that, because education is such a wide ranging sort of subject area, you know, those skills that they learn in terms of learning the disciplines of sociology, psychology etcetera are transferable in other areas. So, I wouldn’t say that they were limited in terms of applying for graduate positions. (‘Christine’1: Lecturer)

It depends what the private sector employer is looking for. I think that a recent survey of employers suggested that employers are not looking at university as a training ground in vocational skills. What they’re looking for is for universities to provide, err, students with the generic skills so that they can undertake tasks. So, in that sense if we can provide our students with the generic skills, generic skills in terms of criticality, critical thinking, creative thinking—I’m a bit dubious about that phrase—but creative thinking, being articulate, being confident, being motivated, well, then they’re hopefully equipped to work in any sector. (‘Adrian’: Lecturer)

It was notable that while the lecturing staff understood and articulated ‘skills’ exclusively within the traditional liberal educative sense of criticality of thinking, the careers advisor was inclined to also employ the term as it is used within more contemporary educational discourse, and as promoted in official policy-related documents (CBI/UUK 2009).

I would see them being equally if not more employable than the average Humanities graduate...English, History, Politics whatever. Education Studies, because it has a vocational focus but without a specific qualification, a vocational professional qualification, is a bit of a

1 All names used are pseudonyms.
hybrid. So, it’s got the strengths of the Humanities in terms of looking at the very broad skills base. It’s got that analytical edge to it, it’s got a strong focus on communication skills which again are very highly valued, it’s got the teamworking element. All those things which employers want are in Education Studies courses. (‘Rhiannon’: Careers Advisor)

Such an interpretation of ‘skills’ may be anticipated from a staff member whose occupational remit requires her to be constantly up-to-date with the dominant language of employability skills as framed within policy discourses to an extent that her teaching colleagues do not. The different interpretations of ‘skills’, therefore, could be seen to reflect the different occupational roles of the interviewees as much as distinct philosophies of education; nevertheless, the interviewees’ different approaches to the question of ‘skills’ are also illustrative of the ways in which the employability skills agenda has disturbed the ‘very epistemological foundations of higher education’ (Bridges 2000, 46). Baldly stated, while the lecturers view transferability solely in terms of a ‘knowing that’ form of knowledge which develops critical thinking skills that may then be applied across occupational areas, the careers advisor is much more cognisant of contemporary discourse which sees transferability in terms of a task-based ‘knowing how’ form of knowledge (Bridges 2000, 46). Writ on a larger scale, these two approaches raise questions about the educative purpose of higher education and of the relationship of curricula to the employability agenda. Boden and Nedeva (2010, 48), for example, take a sceptical view in arguing that elite institutions will continue to be able to interpret employability within the first approach, through the accumulation of broad-based knowledge and cultural capital, whereas in less elite universities employability will be interpreted more narrowly through a skills-based approach with the purpose of a direct vocational preparation.

Finally, it was noteworthy that while all of the staff members perceived the Education Studies degree to provide the opportunity for the development of transferable employability skills
(however defined), in the experience of two members of staff these opportunities did not necessarily translate into actual functioning skills among the students. The careers advisor was very concerned about poor standards of attainment in the ‘hard’ skill of written communication at the case-study institution, and about the likely effects of this upon future job prospects:

It’s a horrendous issue at [case-study university]. I think standards of literacy here hold students back more than any other feature. The ones who come to us with well-written CVs and applications forms for us to look over are the very small minority... As an employer, when I’m looking at application forms I’m heavily influenced by the standard of English, and even from people with quite high level qualifications I’m still finding mistakes and with the younger ones you sometimes want to cry! It really is very sad. (‘Rhiannon’: Careers Advisor)

The careers advisor’s comments are by no means unique. Rather, they reflect more widely held concerns within both academia and industry that large numbers of graduates lack the appropriate level of written communication skills that may reasonably be expected of a graduate (Wingate 2006; Davies, Swinburne and Williams 2006). Several explanations have been advanced for this apparent deficit, including developments in digital technology and the concomitant growth of a deleterious ‘text message’ culture among young people (Davies, Swinburne and Williams 2006). It is not within the scope of this present study to make a judgement upon the veracity of these claims nor of the likely causes. The salient point is that such concerns exist at all and appear to be widely held. Concerns about graduate standards of literacy are reflective of a more general lack of faith in the proxy value of educational credentials, despite the existence of an elaborate testing regime throughout compulsory schooling (Ainley and Allen 2010). Employers’ scepticism about standards of writing in
higher education clearly has worrying implications for the employability of graduates; Davies, Swinburne and Williams (2006, 40), for example, report that growing numbers of employers view graduates to be no more valuable than school leavers, and thus find it more cost effective to employ school leavers and then train them themselves.

The second complaint, from one of the lecturers, related to what he perceived to be inadequate ‘soft’ skills among the students, which then had the consequence of poor quality academic work.

*I would say that a lot of them lack skills in terms of things like time-keeping, of general courtesy in terms of informing people when they won’t be able to attend lectures, giving reasons why they can’t, for turning up on time, for actually embedding themselves in their assessed work. A lot of it seems to be what I would call a ‘job unfinished’. They don’t, a lot of them, don’t seem to offer any intrinsic engagement with the subjects. They see it as a task to be done by the deadline and got out of the way. (‘Phillip’: Lecturer)*

Again, the lecturer’s complaints regarding what he perceives to be the overly instrumentalist attitude of the students find an echo in previous critiques. For Ainley and Allen (2010), the increasingly pragmatic attitude of young people towards learning may be explained as a rationally adaptive response to the intense testing regime with which they are faced. However, while such pragmatism may help learners to jump through the necessary educational hoops, it does not sit well with the official rhetoric of employability. Within the dominant language of employability skills, the students appear to be demonstrating low levels of a ‘positive attitude’, defined as “...a ‘can-do’ approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen” (CBI/UUK 2009, 8).
Research certainly indicates that employers expect graduate employees to be self-motivated and to require less supervision than non-graduate employees (Andrews and Higson 2008). Here again, however, employers’ organisations report dissatisfaction in this area, with only 14% of employers estimating graduates to possess an appropriate level of ‘self-management skills’ (CBI/UUK 2009, 16). This may, however, be due to increased expectations on the part of employers as much as with graduate attitudes to work \textit{per se}. As Brown and Hesketh (2004, 153) note, employers, particularly within the corporate sector, are increasingly demanding that graduates demonstrate not just a sense of \textit{capability}, but rather a sense of their \textit{proactivity}—a drive for success within work that merits recruitment. This requirement, it is noted, is becoming increasingly mandatory not just for appointments to fast-track management programmes, but also in recruiting the ‘foot soldiers of the knowledge economy’ (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 153).

**Social class and relative employability**

A graduate’s social class is one of the chief determinants of the relative aspect of their employability (Ainley 1994; Brown and Hesketh 2004). Within this present study, social class has been operationalised through the use of two concrete proxy characteristics: accent and HEI attended. Language and speech continue to carry strong connotations of social class (Hey 1997), and remain an important factor within the graduate labour market (Brown and Hesketh 2004); the relationship between social class and type of HEI attended within a hierarchical HE. sector has also been well documented (Archer, Hutchings and Ross 2003).

*Staff perceptions of the social class of the students*
Prior to addressing these issues, however, the staff members were asked to identify the social class of the students. The aim of this was to ascertain how far the lecturers’ perceptions aligned with data held by the institution on the students’ socio-economic backgrounds. Five of the six members of staff indicated that they thought a large majority of the students were from working-class backgrounds.

Two of the staff members volunteered opinions that the background of the students tended to ‘hold them back’:

\[ I \text{ think they hold themselves back, some of them. Because they’ve only gone locally to university I think sometimes that hampers them from thinking outside of Wales, thinking outside of the area, outside of, you know, the South Wales area. So, I think, you know, they limit themselves in terms of the fact that they haven’t had experience outside of the context of Wales and sometimes are reluctant then to look further afield for job opportunities. (‘Christine’: Lecturer) } \]

\[ \text{We do have I suppose a large cohort of people who have led fairly restricted lives, with fairly restricted horizons. I’m thinking of a first year [name of course] student who was desperately homesick and was crying every night for weeks, and weeks and weeks and was going home every weekend to Ebw Vale. And it wasn’t about the distance, it was about not being with her family and having all her friends around her and just being in her home environment. (‘Rhiannon’: Careers Advisor)} \]

The two staff members believe that the students are disadvantaged by having relatively narrow ‘horizons for action’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). The ‘localism’ of working-class
students’ higher educational decision-making has been noted in previous research, and it has been attributed to a combination of material and cultural factors (Reay, David and Ball 2005). Amongst working-class Welsh students in particular, the existence of strong family and community ties have helped to maintain a tradition of ‘keeping close’ (Pugsley 2004) which, in combination with generally poor levels of knowledge of the HE. ‘market’, have served to limit students’ choice-making. In their comments, the lecturers are framing (with the best of intentions) the strong ‘bonding’ capital (Putnam 2000) of the working-class students within deficit terms: it is perceived to constrain future occupational mobility by imposing a geographical fixity upon the students. However, as Clegg (2011) argues, we need to move away from an implicitly deficit model of the forms of capital held by disadvantaged and non-traditional students, and instead be far more cognisant of the potential value of the social resources that such students may be able to employ in their higher education decision-making. On this view, there is, in fact, plenty of evidence to suggest that bonding capital can facilitate the breakthrough of first-generation students into higher education (Clegg 2011, 96).

**Importance of accent**

Four of the six staff interviewees (all of whom were from the South-East Wales area) believed that accent did matter, and that a local South Wales’ accent could possibly be a source of disadvantage to the students if they were to apply for graduate-level positions within business and financial services. In the opinion of the careers advisor, the South Wales’ accent carried unfair connotations of a lack of intelligence. However, while the structural injustice of this is recognised, the interviewee clearly accepts (again, with the best of intentions) that it cannot be challenged and instead it is reduced to a problem of ‘impression
management’ (Goffman 1990) which locates the students themselves (as opposed to the class-based prejudice) as being in a state of deficit.

_We do get problems with what we call typical Valleys because sometimes the accent can give an impression that you’re a bit slow and in fact we’ve had that problem with a few students from certain areas of the Valleys where their accent comes over as a bit of a drawl...and they speak slowly and you just think this is not an intelligent person I’m talking to. You have to drill into what they’re saying quite consciously to realise that this is a perfectly intelligent person saying perfectly intelligent things! But the overall impression can count against them and that is quite sad._ (‘Rhiannon’: Careers Advisor)

Another staff member had a rather different approach to the question, although he arrived at a very similar conclusion. The interviewee chose not to address the question of employment within business and financial services directly as he felt that he had no actual experience of these areas; instead, he discussed the matter in more general terms by drawing on his own biography as a working-class teacher trainee.

_Having the same regional accent as [the] students...I’ve never taught outside of South Wales. I’ve never been interviewed outside of South Wales for a teaching job. I was due to be sent on my teaching prac in 1993 to [name of college] in Bristol. I’m sure that if I had gone there on my teaching prac, it wouldn’t have resulted in further employment, and as it was I went to Ebw Vale not far from my home so I was in an_
environment with the same accent as my own so I fitted in really well.

(‘Phillip’: Lecturer)

The staff members’ comments need to be viewed in the context of the shifting and ambivalent attitudes that prevail in the U.K towards regional accents. Thus, Crystal (2010, 32) reports that regional accents, which once attracted negative connotations, are now seen as more ‘trustworthy’ and ‘friendly’ among the public than the traditionally hegemonic received pronunciation (RP) accent; this change has been noticed by large organisations which rely upon the voice presentation skills of their employees (such as call centres) and so regional accents, it is noted, are now much more common in business. However, although regional accents may be becoming more ‘acceptable’, accent remains firmly coupled to social class and thus positions the speaker within a symbolic economy of differential worth (Hey 1997). Moreover, there is evidence that accent is an important part of the ‘social fit’ of large corporations’ recruitment procedures, with the result that a regional accent can still place an applicant at a disadvantage in the graduate jobs market (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

**Importance of HEI attended**

Finally, the staff were asked whether they thought the Education Studies students would enjoy the same potential job prospects within business and financial services as students from a comparable course at the local Russell Group institution. There was a general belief that the students could well be at a disadvantage in relation to their peers at the older pre-1992 university:

*I would say that probably in that situation, [local Russell Group university] might be a little bit higher. Err, because [local Russell
Group university] has got a good reputation and if you’re looking at business and if you’re looking at people going into business then I think that the employer would be looking at the name of the university. (‘Emma’: Lecturer)

Well, a degree from an older redbrick institution is still, in a lot of areas, is still regarded as a better degree than from a new institution. However, having said that, and that could be the case though I’m not entitled to know, if you’re talking about the financial services sector, that could be the case. (‘Adrian’: Lecturer)

The staff appear to be clearly aware of the HE hierarchy within the U.K of and where the case-study institution may be perceived within that. However, as the comments above indicate, the lecturers of this present study also believed that although the local Russell Group institution may have enjoyed greater ‘reputational capital’ (Strathdee 2009) than the case-study university, this did not necessarily mean that the case-study institution’s courses or graduates were of a lower quality. In fact, it was a generally held view that, if employers were to view the university’s graduates in terms of their skills rather than on the reputational value of their paper qualifications, then the students were potentially very employable within business and financial services. This point was developed in greatest detail by the careers advisor. Although the careers advisor recognised the existence of some employer prejudice in terms of institution, she perceived the graduate labour market to be relatively wide open. In her experience, there are even employers who take an ‘enlightened’ view that post-1992, non-traditional students may offer them more than graduates from more prestigious institutions. On this view, class disadvantage may actually be a marketable asset in the labour market, so long as it can be successfully packaged into a coherent ‘narrative of employability’ (Brown and Hesketh 2004).
It depends on the employer. Some employers, the Co-op is one that springs to mind, actually respect someone who has not done so well at first but has pulled themselves up by the bootstraps and really improved. Some of them deliberately focus on the new universities, the post-1992s, because they’re more likely to be producing students with a variety of work experience, with a hunger, and those who’ve faced a lot of challenges in their lives and who’ve learnt from them and grown as a result. So, there are opportunities there for them. (‘Rhiannon’: Careers Advisor)

In fact, although the Careers Advisor’s comments may well reflect the position of a minority of large employers, they do not appear to indicate the actions of the principal recruiters within the graduate labour market; research conducted with the leading 100 graduate-recruiting organisations indicates that the top five universities from which they select applicants were all elite pre-1992 elite institutions, while no post-1992 university appeared in the list of top twenty institutions (High Fliers 2011).

Discussion

This study has examined the perceptions of a group of lecturers on an Education Studies degree, and of a member of the university careers advice staff, regarding the employability of their undergraduate students in relation to two occupational areas: business and financial services management. The two jobs were used as cases-in-point to allow the study to excavate wider policy concerns. However, before discussing the conclusions and policy implications of this research, it is important to recognise its limitations. This present study has employed a very small sample size of staff members with a focus upon students of one
degree course at one institution. Both the preceding analysis and the following discussion should, therefore, be viewed within this context. Having acknowledged this caveat, this study has raised some important issue with regard to the employability agenda in higher education.

Firstly, it is apparent that the staff members believe that the Education Studies degree offers students the opportunity to equip themselves with ‘generic’ or ‘transferable’ skills that would make them potentially employable within business and financial services. Thus, in Brown, Hesketh and Williams’ (2003) terms, the staff members believe they can help their students to acquire at least some of the skills required for absolute employability. To this extent, therefore, their perceptions appear to align with official policy discourse that views employability as the technocratic development of an appropriate skills set by the individual. Nevertheless, it was equally apparent that the staff members perceived the undergraduates to be potentially disadvantaged by social class: concretised here through proxies of accent and HEI attended. In this respect, some of the factors related to the relative employability (Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003) of the students were beyond the lecturers’ capacities of intervention.

If these findings on relative employability prove to be more widely held by university teaching staff, particularly those within the less prestigious post-1992 sector, they raise important questions about their roles in developing student employability. Previous research would certainly seem to point to the constraints faced by those working within the ‘new’ universities in this respect. As Boden and Nedeva (2010, 49) remark, less prestigious universities are able to do very little to enable their graduates to compete on more equal terms with their peers in more elite institutions; such an unequal playing field has led, in turn, to a differential earnings potential of up to six percent between graduates of elite and non-elite universities (Chevalier and Conlon 2003, iii). It is likely, moreover, that such differences will have been exacerbated by the present economic crisis and its depressive effect upon the
graduate labour market. In this context, there is likely to be yet further pressure—of which the recent higher education White Paper (BIS 2011) is a clear present example—upon lecturers to ‘deliver’ curricula that is increasingly explicitly framed and driven by an employability agenda. However, as the limitations of this agenda (leaving aside questions of the wider educative purpose of universities) for graduates’ actual employability, i.e, the gaining and retaining of graduate-level employment (Hillage and Pollard 1998), become apparent, then we may experience the beginnings of a crisis of legitimacy for the discourse of meritocracy, and for the HE sector which helps to support it (Souto-Otero 2010; Ainley and Allen 2010).

We are not quite there yet, and may never be. It is important, however, to understand more about university teachers’ perceptions of their graduates’ employability, and of their role in developing this. As Boden and Nedeva (2010, 50) point out, academics shoulder a burden of responsibility for student employability yet have little voice in the shaping of such a politically-loaded concept. Further studies with larger samples of staff across a range of courses and institutions will be necessary to obtain a fuller picture of this important issue.

**References**


http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/completed/7yrs2/rp1.pdf


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