Alumni Perceptions of an Employability Focused Curriculum

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Introduction:
As highlighted by Yorke (2004), much developmental work is still to be done on the student experience. Research is required to identify student perceptions regarding undergraduate programmes, to help universities better design programmes to meet the changing needs of the labour market and develop students' personal qualities in terms of employability (Danh Nguyen et al. 2005). Very little extant work on students' perceptions of employability has used the perceptions of alumni (Mason et al. 2003, Crebert et al. 2004).

Alumni have a unique, dual perspective to contribute (Leitch 2006). From the perspective of former students, alumni can provide feedback to help evaluate how the content and delivery of the curriculum can be improved (Carter and Collinson 1999). Recently entering employment means the alumni can communicate what aspects have been the most important during the transition from university to employment, helping to identify gaps between the skills graduates have on graduation, and the skills needed to function effectively in the working world (Allen et al. 2005).

This poster will focus on research investigating how alumni from the School of Sport & Exercise Sciences (SSES) at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) perceive their employability, and how their attitudes, mindsets, theories and beliefs regarding HE relates to their personal reason for undertaking HE.

Methods:
17 alumni were interviewed using in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were deemed an appropriate method for this study as it allowed the participant the opportunity and flexibility to define the content and direction of the interview, and offered the researcher considerable scope to pursue a range of topics. The interview, although relatively open-ended, was focused around particular themes and guided by some general questions.

| Question Theme 1: | To determine alumni perceptions of the skills required in the workplace, and how HE impacted on the development of these skills |
| Question Theme 2: | To assess the impact of HE on the personal and professional development of alumni |
| Question Theme 3: | Evaluation of the curriculum; from the alumni perspective |

Content analysis is being conducted on the interview transcripts to identify common themes that are occurring. The interview themes formed the basis of the analysis system. Additional themes were developed inductively as the researcher immersed themselves in the transcript data.

Results:

1. What is the definition of employability?
   - ‘How appealing an individual is to an employer, based on the individual’s ability to undertake a given job/profession.’

   Alumni discussed a broad range of skills/assets in relation to employability, including: initiative, willingness to learn, motivation, communication and desire.

   Alumni highlighted their perceptions of employability: ‘not all the skills learnt at uni. are degree specific; a load of skills are built on that can be used and adapted to any given profession.’

   ‘The most employable person is not necessarily the most academic person, but the person who can adapt to the situation and keep learning.’

   ‘Skills are learnt at uni. without you realising it. When you enter the working world you begin to realise the skills you are putting into practice are ones that you have developed during uni.’

2. What is the purpose of HE?
   - To develop job specific skills and experience
   - To develop generic life skills
   - To develop graduates' employability
   - To 'bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood'

3. What was your personal reasons for attending HE?
   - Career aspect – ‘To discover what career options were available’
     - ‘Gaining a degree opens more doors’
     - ‘To increase a specific knowledge base’
   - Personal aspect – ‘To better myself’
     - ‘To enhance independence’
     - ‘To experience different things’
     - ‘To achieve more skills’
   - Natural progression – ‘Drilled into you to go to uni’
   - Social aspect – ‘To experience big city life’
     - ‘To meet new people’

4. What more could be done to prepare and support HE students’ employability development?
   - More information into career route ways
   - Mandatory career sessions
   - Personal tutor systems
   - Placements
   - Careers services utilisation

5. Strengths of employability development in the HE curriculum; the alumni perspective.
   - The HE experience enhanced employability, life skills and the maturity, preparing alumni for various working world scenarios

6. What advice would you give current students for things that they can do to enhance their personal and professional development?
   - Get involved, make the most of the opportunities available, including: placements, independent learning, work experience, attendance, volunteer, careers service, research career route ways, volunteer for research projects within your field
   - Identify weak skill areas and work towards strengthening them
   - Form good relationships with staff members
   - Get a good balance between work-and-play

Discussion and on-going work:
The alumni perceptions in this study have illuminated potential areas in the curriculum that can be developed in order to enhance the employability of SSES graduates. In order to supplement these findings, the researcher is using ethnographic methodologies (observations, informal conversations, focus groups and documenting) to immerse themselves in the current SSES students’ HE learning environment and culture, allowing for a better understanding of students’ actions, attitudes, mindsets, theories and beliefs.

The researcher will then interview students at the end and after their HE experience, to identify developments that occur in the perceptions of students in the early stages of their careers.

Outputs will create a set of employability focused recommendations for curriculum design, highlighting ways to enhance the student learning experience and personal and professional development.