Graduate identity and employability

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This paper develops the concept of graduate identity as a way of deepening the understanding of graduate employability. It does this through presenting research in which over 100 employers in East Anglia were asked to record their perceptions of graduates in respect of their employability. The findings suggest a composite and complex graduate identity, depending on employer size and sector. There is no one fixed identity for graduates. Nevertheless, certain themes emerged that seriously put into question the traditional model of graduate employability comprising skills, competencies and attributes. What emerges is a four-stranded concept of identity that comprises value, intellect, social engagement and performance. Thus, when assessing the potential of graduates, performance is not the only criteria that employers take into account. Moreover, the four elements of identity are by no means independent of each other but are expected to interpenetrate producing a composite identity, with different employers emphasising different facets of this identity.

> Everybody talks about transferable skills and nobody knows what it means. That baffles me. What's a transferable skill—they've never transferred anything. …They don't know how to do it. (E-Learning SME, Director)

> What is different about a graduate? Young ideas, freshness, the way they live their lives— a whole lifestyle that brings enthusiasm of youth—[it] brings freshness to the organisation and can create a different dynamic. (Energy Sector, Manager)

1. The concept of graduate identity

Given the succession of articles and reports concerning graduate employability over the past 15 years or so (some of which are reviewed below) it might be thought odd that the question of graduate identity has not been settled by now. There are at least three reasons why this has not happened. First, the concept of what a graduate is has undoubtedly been affected by the growth of higher education: a graduate is no longer drawn from a relatively narrow section of the population. Second, there is bound to be a difference of perspective in terms of what universities think they are producing

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and what employers expect. Finally, it seems reasonable to suppose that the very concept itself—graduate identity—is subject to interpretation, depending on employer, sector and size (at least). Our tentative research suggests that we may be starting to reach a stage where the last of these problems, at least, is being addressed.

The idea of graduate identity has been explored by Len Holmes (2001). Holmes' starting point is a dissatisfaction with the prevailing concept of graduate employability in terms of skills acquisition. The skills approach simply cannot do justice to the complexity of graduateness because of the assumption that skills performance must be measurable and observable. Performance, Holmes suggests, depends upon interpretation of a situation but this ability to interpret cannot be measured in any straightforward sense. Interpretation itself is a complex activity depending on both understanding a situation in terms of a practice and on understanding agents in terms of their identity in the context of that practice. Thus, a practice provides the site within which identity is constructed. This identity itself is not fixed since a practice itself may legitimise a series of related identities depending upon context. Furthermore, a practice also provides the site in which identities can be modified, revised and developed.

What Holmes's analysis does is to take us beyond the skills agenda to an examination of the *conditions* of performance. It is not a naïve condemnation of performativity as such, rather, it provides us with an analysis of the conditions of performativity. In order to perform in the appropriate manner, a person needs to be able to do at least two things: first, understand how a particular practice is enacted (the language and vocabulary, the goals and purposes and the broader environment in which a practice takes place) and, second, be able to construct for herself a legitimate identity. Therefore, when we examine graduate employability we should not think so much in terms of skills and performance but more in terms of practice and identity as forming the basis of that performance. This, however, presents a problem as far as the recruitment of agents into a particular practice is concerned since, to varying degrees, those agents will not be sufficiently aware of either the practice or the identity required. What is required is that those agents have the potential to become cognisant of both practice and identity, based on their current identity. In addition (and this is the peculiarity of employment-based practices) agents also require the potential to perform. This potential cannot always be based on actual performance or current cognisance of a practice. Holmes' suggestion, then, is that graduate recruitment is an exploration of current identity, in terms of graduateness, with a view to judging whether a person is capable of assuming a role in respect of practice, identity and performance.

It therefore follows that graduate identity, of its very nature, is something that is malleable and plastic. It cannot be something that is merely a series of attributes that can be enumerated and ticked off. In an elaboration of his ideas, Holmes (2006) observes that identity is to be taken 'non-essentially, as relational, the emergent outcome of situated social processes…identity is thus socially constructed and negotiated, always subject to possible contestation and so fragile' (p. 9). Thus, it may be that the identity claimed by an individual is also one that is affirmed by others, as recognisable; in this way convergence occurs. But of course, it may be that the identity a graduate presents is not recognised, or at least not wholly recognised, by an

employer. Prior to taking on a graduate identity, an agent has a student identity primarily formed through subject discipline and a range of student experiences. It may well be that the student experiments with her identity during the course of study—this being one of the great benefits of being an undergraduate. But once the student emerges out of university, her identity is no longer under her control. Emerging at last into the public domain, her identity as a graduate is shaped by social and economic processes that are not under her control. And the chief agent in shaping this identity—by virtue of economic power—is the employer.

Nevertheless, graduate identity is something that is inescapably 'owned' by the graduate. What it is he or she owns and how it is owned is what we propose to examine in later sections. Employers operate with a loose, tacit notion of graduate identity which varies according to their own requirements, determined by size and sector. But why do not employers simply select from their own practices a set of criteria against which the graduate is evaluated? The reason is simple: employers can only assess *potential*; they are not able, in the main, to assess actual performance. Employers have to figure out, on the basis of what is before them, how the graduate will perform in the future. They need some kind of basis for conceiving this potential, and this basis is provided through the idea of graduate identity, suitably refracted and diffused in the light of their own requirements and experience of graduate recruits.

2. Concepts of employability

The official, government approach to graduate employability has been skills-led, from Dearing (1997) to Leitch (2006), despite the fact that this has been increasingly called into question. For example, a significant piece of research by Mason *et al.* (2003), summarised by Cranmer (2006), called into question the efficacy of skills provision in higher education. Its major conclusions were that employers prize most highly those skills that can only be feasibly developed in the workplace and that there was no significant connection between enhanced skills provision at university and increased chances of employment. Other research has also indicated that employers are looking for more than skills. For example, Brown and Hesketh (2004, p. 145) showed that graduates need to develop a 'narrative of employability' based on reflection of experience. In particular, they showed the importance of students and graduates using their analytical skills to identify those aspects of their experience (both academic and non-academic) that meet the requirements of an organisation. The authors did not, however, indicate how graduates are to do this in a way that coincides with employer expectations or what happens when students experience a contradiction between employers' expectations and their identities: that is to say, they did not explore in any depth the idea of graduate identity.

A further piece of research was conducted by Knight and Yorke (2004). They advanced a model of employability that drew both on the deeper learning and the broader student experience traditionally associated with a university education. Advocating the 'USEM' model (understanding, skilful practices, self-efficacy beliefs and meta-cognition), they sought to develop a sophisticated concept of employability

that went beyond the narrow skills agenda. However, these authors were concerned to show, primarily, what a degree programme could bring to employability. What our research will show is that the idea of graduate identity goes *beyond* the degree programme in significant ways—encompassing a wide range of values and the ability to engage with others across a range of situations, for example.

Many universities now encourage students to engage in personal development planning (PDP). Thus, if we take the Higher Education Academy publication *Personal development, planning and employability* (Ward & Watts, 2009), early on PDP is seen in terms of developing 'self-confident, self-directed learners' who 'relate their learning to a wider context' (p. 6). By page 13 it is the qualities of 'self-motivation, self-evaluation and self-management' that are emphasised but what is missing is any clear statement of what students need to reflect on. Personal development planning may or may not be a useful tool for developing employability awareness but in the absence of a concept of identity, PDP simply ends up as another method of disciplining, rather than empowering, the self. The reason for this is that the PDP approach usually succumbs to the list-approach to employability, in which attributes are to be identified, developed and ticked off.

The list-approach has recently been adopted by the University of Sydney (2010) in which a set of graduate attributes has been identified: scholarship, lifelong learning and global citizenship. These, it is true, provide a much richer fare than the old list of key-skills (comprising communication skills, problem solving, IT skills and numeracy). The three attributes can be understood as a 'combination of a cluster of skills', which we are told comprise research and inquiry, information literacy, personal and intellectual autonomy and ethical, social and professional understanding. The problem with this approach is twofold. First, whatever list is provided, there are bound to be some elements that either are not wanted (for example, our research detected no particular priority for graduates to be informationally literate) or missing (our research did detect a very strong desire for engagement with others, which the Sydney list doesn't mention). Second, the idea of graduate identity cannot be reduced to a simple list of attributes that all students should make it their business to acquire. The 'mix' depends on both the student experience and the kind of occupation being considered. The idea of graduate identity, then, needs to be seen more in terms of a 'family resemblance' (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 67) in which there may be a multiplicity of individual identities, which, however, do not share elements in common as a single badge of identity. Rather, there are clusters of features that are shared in common without there being a single 'cluster' that runs through all identities.

What we were particularly concerned to do in this research was to probe behind the standard employability discourse comprising skills-talk and personal attributes in an attempt to discover the extent to which this discourse exhausted employer thinking. Even a thoughtful and insightful report such as the one by Hogarth *et al.* (2007), which discusses the engagement of employers by universities, fails, in our view, to test what employers think about employability. For example, a list is given of what impact graduates could have on a business (mentioned are 'challenging how things are done', flexibility, bringing new ideas and energy [p. 36]) but no attempt is made to rank these

or to assess their relative importance. Exactly the same considerations tell against a list of standard attributes (good communicators, independent, personable etc.) on p. 37 of the report. The result is that we get nothing better than an employer wish-list.

Criticism of skills-led approaches to employability supports earlier theoretical criticisms (e.g., Norris 1991; Hyland 1997) of skills and competence-led learning and assessment. A modified, contextualised approach to skills development was defended by Bridges (1993) and Hinchliffe (2002) but, more recently, Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) have argued that even the modified approach does not fully address the need for critical thinking and judgement. However, all of these theoretical approaches, however valid, are not backed up by appropriate qualitative evidence, making them more easy to dismiss. Our research provides evidence supporting the theoretically-based critique of skills development and, in particular, of equating skills with employability.

3. Investigating graduate identity

The research project, which was conducted over six months from March to September 2009, aimed at probing beneath the conventional employability discourse of skills, competencies and attributes by speaking directly to employers. Moreover, we wanted to hear the employer's voice, differentiated across size and sector. In this way we would test the feasibility of the concept of graduate identity and find out if employers worked with a tacit or explicit concept of graduate identity. Thus we could provide both the data and theoretical framework for evaluating the skills-led approach to employability by higher education institutions.

Participants were drawn from small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), large organisations and public sector bodies predominantly in the county of Norfolk, UK. However, national and multi-national organisations comprised 12% of the respondents. Online surveys (105) were received from a variety of employers, 35% in the public sector; SMEs comprised 66.7% of these responses. Sectors included finance, local government, creative industries, IT, energy, construction, marine engineering and business support. In order to elaborate the responses in the survey, we followed this up with 20 in-depth interviews. Respondents came from a range of roles within organisations, including but not predominantly HR professionals. This reflected the number of smaller businesses with owner-managers and small teams responsible for recruitment. Of those surveyed, 22% had a structured graduate training programme, 27% used assessment centres as part of the recruitment process, with 30% outsourcing some or all of the recruitment process and 81% using a structured induction process.

Since employers naturally use skills-talk in graduate recruitment we asked a series of questions relating to skills and competencies and then broadened this out to ask about further attributes relating to values and engagement. The aim was to find out what employer expectations of graduates were and to see if these expectations reached beyond customary talk about skills and employability attributes. Inevitably we were also told of where graduates fell short of these expectations, but it was not our primary aim to elicit this.

In particular, in the online survey we used three separate but related instruments in eliciting expectations of graduates. The first of these instruments tested expectations in accordance with well-established recruitment criteria. The second instrument then took a limited number of employability skills (elicited from the first instrument) and obliged the respondent to make a forced ranking. The third then explored the extent to which employers recognised broader, social values typically associated with a university experience.

3.1. *Evaluating employer expectations of graduate potential*

In the first of these instruments, a total of 47 statements of graduate potential were explored. We grouped these under four headings: expectations of graduate performance within the organisation; as a team member; within the individual role; and, finally, the qualities that the individual is expected to bring to their work (see Figures 1a, 1b, 1c and 1d). These statements incorporated a range of accepted employability skills, competencies, attributes and personal qualities based on a survey of recruitment literature (examples of sources for the list of statements include the Institute of Directors [2007], Archer and Davison [2008] and also the UK-wide graduates careers website, Prospects [2009]). We were interested in finding out how soon employers were expecting these attributes and skills to be developed, on a timescale of up to three years. For example, were graduates expected to integrate quickly into a team on appointment, after one year or after three years? (In this case, 93% of employers expected this skill on appointment—few employers were prepared to wait three years.) Figures 1a, 1b, 1c and 1d group the statements under the four headings
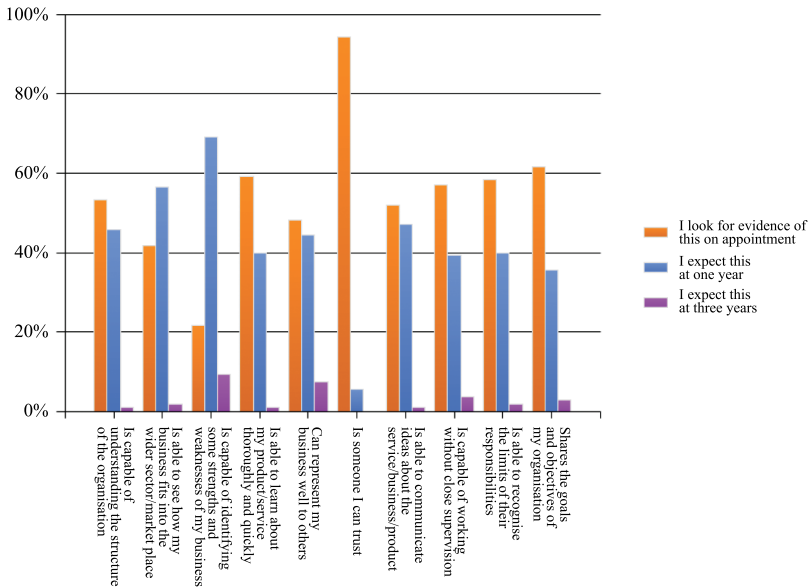

Figure 1a. Employer expectations of graduate performance within the organisation as a whole
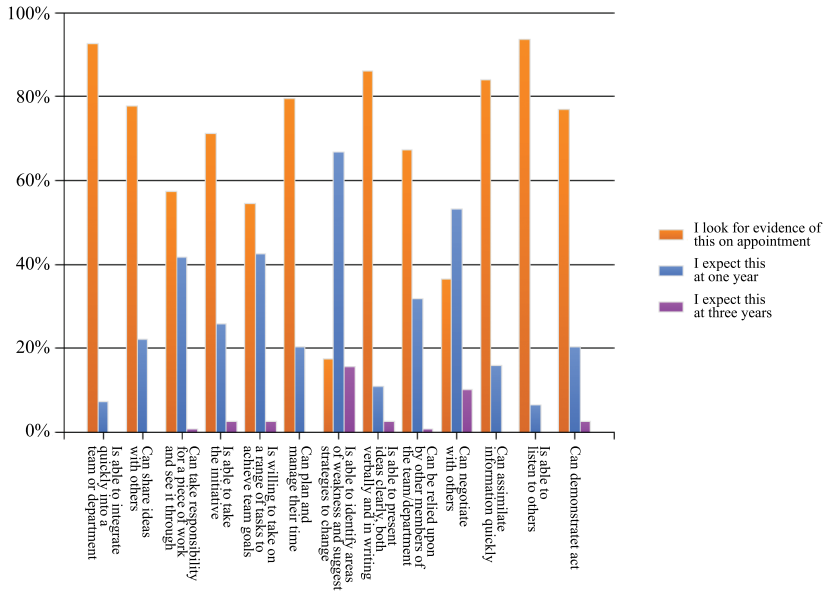
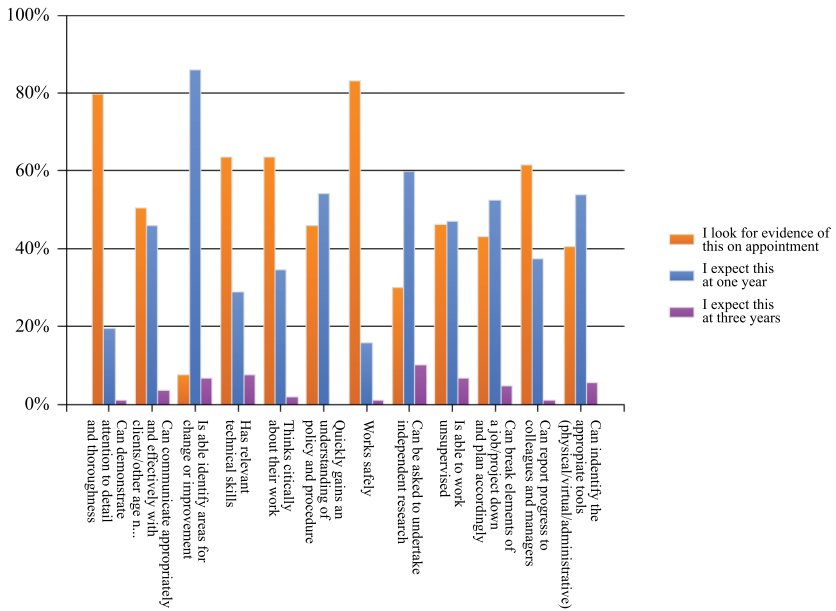Figure 1b. Employer expectations of graduate performance in a team environment

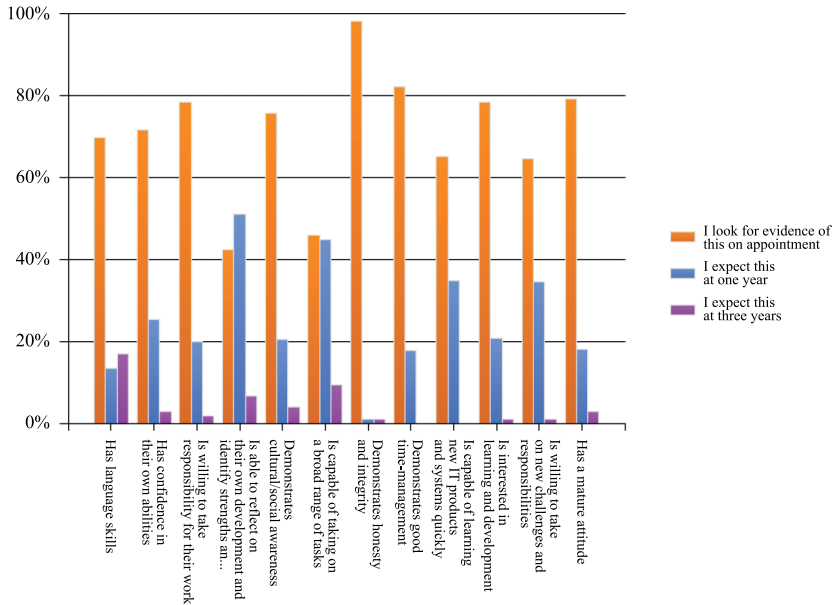Figure 1c. Employer expectations of graduate performance in a work role

Figure 1d. Employer expectations of individual graduate qualities and abilities

mentioned above and Table 1 removes the headings, ranking each statement according to the percentage of respondents who expected the statement to be evidenced on appointment.

The first thing that is noticeable here is that the majority of employers require graduates to perform to expectation by the end of the first year, with many attributes required on appointment. This judgement is not confined to smaller businesses, but applies across all sectors and sizes of organisation. There are other interesting results as well. To begin with, it is clearly those personal ethical qualities of honesty, integrity and trust that are expected at appointment, ahead of any other skill or competence. Moreover, technical skills are not expected to be as highly developed as so-called 'soft' skills (e.g., listening skills, ability to integrate). The employer is prepared to wait (for up to a year only) for technical skills to develop (though it should be noted that during interview it emerged, unsurprisingly, that certain specialist employers, e.g., in engineering, did require a range of technical skills at appointment). But for many employers, less is expected regarding technical skills than the one thing that all graduates are presumably good at: the ability to present ideas clearly, both verbally and in writing. Indeed, the ability to demonstrate cultural and social awareness, on appointment, comes ahead of IT skills.

This does not, of course, demonstrate that employers think that technical skills are less important than soft skills. But they *may be* less important when deciding whether a graduate should be offered a job. The graduate must be able to fit quickly into a team and if this attribute is lacking they may not get appointed even if their technical skills are highly developed.

Table 1. Employer expectations ranked by preference

Expectation	On appointment (%)	At one year (%)	At three years (%)
Demonstrates honesty and integrity	98.10	0.90	0.90
Is someone I can trust	94.40	5.60	0.00
Is able to listen to others	93.50	6.50	0.00
Is able to integrate quickly into a team or department	92.60	7.40	0.00
Is able to present ideas clearly, both verbally and in writing	86.10	11.10	2.80
Can assimilate information quickly	84.10	15.90	0.00
Works safely	83.20	15.90	0.90
Demonstrates good time-management	82.20	17.80	0.00
Can plan and manage their time	79.60	20.40	0.00
Can demonstrate attention to detail and thoroughness	79.60	19.40	0.90
Has a mature attitude	79.20	17.90	2.80
Is willing to take responsibility for their work	78.30	19.80	1.90
Is interested in learning and development	78.30	20.80	0.90
Can share ideas with others	77.80	22.20	0.00
Can demonstrate tact	76.90	20.40	2.80
Demonstrates cultural/social awareness	75.70	20.40	3.90
Has confidence in their own abilities	71.70	25.50	2.80
Is able to take the initiative	71.30	25.90	2.80
Can be relied upon by other members of the team/department	67.30	31.80	0.90
Is capable of learning new IT products and systems quickly	65.10	34.90	0.00
Is willing to take on new challenges and responsibilities	64.50	34.60	0.90
Has relevant technical skills	63.60	29.00	7.50
Thinks critically about their work	63.60	34.60	1.90
Shares the goals and objectives of my organisation	61.70	35.50	2.80
Can report progress to colleagues and managers	61.70	37.40	0.90
Is able to learn about my product/service thoroughly and quickly	59.30	39.80	0.90
Is able to recognise the limits of their responsibilities	58.30	39.80	1.90
Can take responsibility for a piece of work and see it through	57.40	41.70	0.90
Is capable of working without close supervision	57.00	39.30	3.70
Is willing to take on a range of tasks to achieve team goals	54.60	42.60	2.80
Is capable of understanding the structure of the organisation	53.30	45.80	0.90

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Expectation	On appointment (%)	At one year (%)	At three years (%)
Is able to communicate ideas about the service/ business/product	51.90	47.20	0.90
Can communicate appropriately and effectively with clients/other agencies	50.50	45.80	3.70
Can represent my business well to others	48.10	44.40	7.40
Is able to work unsupervised	46.20	47.20	6.60
Is capable of taking on a broad range of tasks	45.80	44.90	9.30
Quickly gains an understanding of policy and procedure	45.80	54.20	0.00
Can break elements of a job/project down and plan accordingly	43.00	52.30	4.70
Is able to reflect on own development and identify strengths and weaknesses	42.50	50.90	6.60
Is able to see how my business fits into the wider sector/market place	41.70	56.50	1.90
Can identify the appropriate tools (physical/ virtual/administrative)	40.60	53.80	5.70
Can negotiate with others	36.40	53.30	10.30
Can be asked to undertake independent research	29.90	59.80	10.30
Is capable of identifying some strengths and weaknesses of my business	21.50	69.20	9.30
Is able to identify areas of weakness and suggest strategies to change	17.60	66.70	15.70
Is able identify areas for change or improvement	7.50	85.80	6.60

Noteworthy, too, are those statements towards the bottom of the list: for example, universities sometimes pride themselves on introducing research methods into undergraduate programmes, but only 29% of respondents thought research skills were as important on appointment (though this figure goes up sharply after one year, once the employee has been 'bedded in'). As one would expect, employers are looking for graduates who are self-directed (manage their time, interested in learning and development).

3.2. Forced ranking of employability skills

The second instrument takes a selection of skills related to the above statements in order to find out just how much employers are committed to them. In order to achieve this, we asked the employers to indicate their rankings which were, in effect, forced—with the results shown in Table 2. The ranking confirms much of what employers told us about what their expectations were on appointment. Interpersonal skills come out as far ahead of any other skill and, again, written communication comes ahead of IT skills. Note the low priority given to presentation skills—possibly suggesting that

Table 2. Employer rankings of employability skills

Employability skill	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	7 (%)
Interpersonal skills	57.80	18.90	8.90	8.90	4.40	1.10	0.00
Written communication skills	14.40	28.90	13.40	16.50	17.50	6.20	3.10
IT skills	9.00	15.70	19.10	18.00	14.60	9.00	14.60
Experience of the work environment	8.40	8.40	14.70	13.70	13.70	20.00	21.10
Commercial/business awareness	7.50	16.10	14.00	9.70	16.10	12.90	23.70
Numeracy skills	5.50	9.90	19.80	16.50	16.50	18.70	13.20
Presentation skills	1.10	9.70	16.10	17.20	14.00	25.80	16.10

Note. Respondents were asked to rank these skills in order of importance, on a scale of 1–7. Figure 2 gives a summary of responses weighted by overall ranking (i.e., a ranking #1 = value of 7, ranking #2 = value of 6 etc).
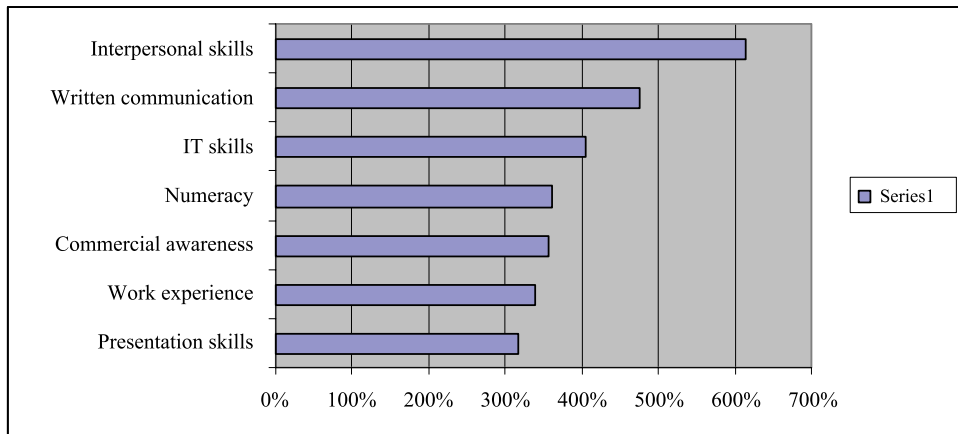

Figure 2. Overall ranking (weighted) of employability skills valued by employers

academics would be better employed in improving their students' written communication rather than spending hours helping them to hone skills using PowerPoint. Of course, once we weight the skills (Figure 2) differences are less dramatic. The fact that an employer ranks IT skills less than interpersonal skills doesn't mean that the former are thought to be unimportant. But we also found out (through comments in the online interview, confirmed in the interview stage) that employers are greatly concerned that the requisite written communication skills are lacking (see next section).

Another surprising finding was the comparatively low ranking accorded to experience of the working environment: when obliged to prioritise, employers found themselves ranking other attributes and skills much more highly. Yet this low ranking was also confirmed at the interview stage, for what employers emphasised there was the *quality* of the work experience. The implication is that work experience, as such, may not count for much unless that experience can be translated into a demonstration of, for example, strong interpersonal skills and an ability to reflect on that experience:

> Those who have had the largest variety of summer jobs are far more flexible, far more likely to adapt, but they need to use it to think about what employment is all about, think about how the world of work operates. (Education Sector, Manager)

Moreover, for the employer below, clearly more was looked for, in addition to work experience:

> I am interested in seeing a range of interests, showing that the candidate has fully exploited the university experience. I also look for indications that their subject is a genuine academic interest, which they have pursued beyond the compulsory elements of their course. (Third Sector, Arts Organisation)

3.3. Recognition of broader values

Here, we tried to adopt a different perspective by focusing less on employer requirements and more on the kind of values associated with the university experience. We wanted to find out the extent to which employers recognised the kinds of activities that universities themselves typically value and encourage their undergraduates to develop (for example, as shown in the corporate plans and mission statements of universities). The results are shown in Figure 3.

These findings contain a few surprises. For example, we had not expected such a strong endorsement of diversity awareness, although the importance of this had already been flagged up by the first instrument: 75% of respondents indicated that they expected diversity awareness on appointment. At the interview stage, employers told us that this ranking flowed from the diversity of their customers and clients: the importance of diversity awareness was business-driven and was not determined by expectations related to political correctness. By contrast, the comparative indifference with which interest in sport is treated strongly suggests that graduates who list their sporting prowess on their CVs are simply wasting their time—unless they can use this as evidence
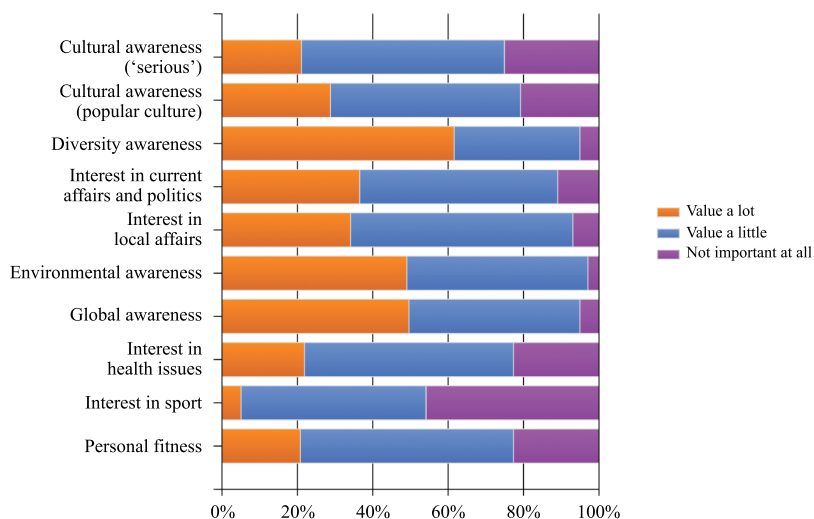

Figure 3. The value to employers of broader attributes gained through the university experience

for demonstrating interpersonal skills. Again, the importance attached to environmental and global awareness flows from a business perspective: this kind of awareness is valued because with it, business opportunities are more likely to be generated.

What also emerges, as we shall see, is that the kind of values that many students and their lecturers espouse and develop are also recognised by employers. Moreover, it was clear from the interview stage that this recognition ranged across all sectors and all types of employers, including SMEs. It was reinforced by frequent comments by employers on how much they valued a broad-based experience in which graduates, as students, had made the most of all the opportunities available to them in through volunteering, societies and events. Employers were often suspicious of graduates who had used their student experience in a narrow way, merely to re-capitulate the experience they brought with them from school and family—as we shall see in the next section.

4. Constructing graduate identity

In constructing graduate identity, it is not enough simply to read off employer requirements. For this merely gives us the attribute list-approach to employability whereby skills needed for employment can be duly 'ticked off'. Yet if anything emerges from our findings it is that employers do indeed think beyond conventional skills discourse and attempt to probe a broader range of graduate experience in order to assess their potential. How, then, should we conceptualise this experience? A heuristic method instantly presents itself: instead of reading off from employer requirements a list of skills, we use these requirements to identify the kinds of graduate *experience* that employers are interested in. And, given our findings, four types of experience suggest themselves. First, it is clear from the employer concern with diversity and personal ethics that values are a key component of graduate identity, that is, the extent to which the graduate has engaged with values. Second, it became clear (especially in the longer interviews) that employers value the role of intellect, which they see as delivered through discipline-related study. Third, all employers are looking for performance—the ability to deliver results. And, finally, it goes without saying, from the persistent high ranking given to interpersonal skills, that employers are looking for evidence of experience of engagement with others across a variety of contexts. Graduate identity, we suggest, is made up of the four strands of values, intellect, performance and engagement. The precise mix will vary across employers, size and sector, reflecting the distinct nature of each organisation, its structure, 'product' and ethos. The implication of this is that graduates need to be aware of their own identity (or profile) across these four sets of experience. We shall now explore the four strands in a little more detail.

4.1. Values

Values include personal ethics, social values and contextual, organisational values, including the value of entrepreneurship. The world of work is sometimes mistakenly

seen as a value-free, technocratic domain. Thus, the emphasis placed on personal ethics is not something that is merely a given: without this personal commitment and the desire to gain trust, employment rapidly becomes pointless:

> We hired two graduates last year, both of whom skived off given the chance and only worked when we were stood over them to ensure they were doing so. Both were astonished and disgruntled when we let them go at the end of their probation, which in turn astonished me—what did they expect? (IT Sector, Anonymous)

Or, as another employer put it:

> The trust thing is really important because without it we can't have confidence in some-one—even leaving someone to lock up if they are last one out is an important sign of trust in them. (IT Manager, International Company)

Thus, graduates need to be able to demonstrate they have held positions of trust: it is not assumed that everybody is equally trustworthy. This demonstration of trust often requires a practical commitment.

By social values we refer to diversity awareness, cultural awareness, interest in the environment and the other values indicated in Figure 3. As we have already mentioned, the importance placed on these is primarily business driven. But an engagement in social values does not only indicate that a person has a more height-ened sense of social responsibility: it indicates to the employer that the graduate who has demonstrated awareness is more likely to be aware of, and respond to, the normative environment in which the business operates. Partly this is a question of a willingness to espouse all the issues across diversity and equal opportunities that employers have to address. But the normative dimension is also an aspect of the business environment: an employee who is diversity-aware is less likely to miss or neglect real business opportunities.

Thus the awareness of different cultures, races and religions developed at university was important to respondents, recognising that such awareness may bring benefits to the client/customer relationship. Testing these findings at interview, it was also noticeable that diversity awareness was appreciated for and of itself, rather than to fulfil or comply with legislative requirements in the workplace. Such social values were also expressed in terms of respect for others and, more subtly, a respect of status (the individual recognising their need to learn and develop and not to impose ideas and opinions on colleagues or clients):

> It's less because we have to tick [the box], yes we are a diverse organisation, but for me it says more about their mind. If you are culturally aware and aware of diversity you are prob-ably a more rounded person. In our organisation we probably don't have a huge number of external clients, we've got lots of internal clients and being able to meet someone for the first time and assess how you can then develop a rapport with them; its quite important. I think that if you have that awareness, it helps, because you are able to adapt your style…to get the results you want, the answers that you need. (Finance Sector, Multinational)

Contextualised values were those shared with the ethos and/or objectives of the organisation, whether it be a shared understanding of demands placed on an SME (for example, the need to be a flexible and outward-looking employee) or a shared

understanding of the broader aims of the organisation (for example, in providing a service to clients). Such shared values were particularly central to younger, smaller organisations that relied, in part, on the strength of a small team and the benefit that a shared vision might bring to its success:

> If [the graduate's values] are streaming into the right sector or business then there is not such a risk for employers. That's the problem: the second-guessing from employers. For loads of employers that I am in contact with, the question is 'are they [the graduates] going to *get* it'. (Retail, Large SME)

Entrepreneurship (and by association, intrapreneurship) is related to, but should be seen as distinct from, contextualised values, in that it is something that motivates the individual (often into making initial career choices) and may influence the demands of the employee to develop their own career path. The inherent value of an entrepreneurial individual to the organisation (one with an ability to recognise and act upon opportunities) is also recognised by employers as a quality that will move the employee on and perhaps away from the organisation:

> I think that's the other thing that I used to see in graduates, this kind of 'I've done my study, I'm really eager, I want to continue to learn but I want to be in the kind of environment where you are going to teach me, I'm going to soak it up, and I'm really going to make a difference, and I'm going to bring all of the stuff that I've learned, and I'm going to really change things for you.' (IT, SME)

4.2. Intellect

Intellectual rigour is central to the graduate 'offer' and, at its core, this means the graduate's ability to think critically, analyse and communicate information, reflect on all aspects of their work and bring challenge and ideas to an organisation.

Again, intellect can take many forms in the mind of the employer, but may be best defined as creative, situational or applied and reflective.

Intellectual curiosity and a creative approach (particularly to problem solving) are elements of the graduate identity that are especially valued by medium-sized organisations and those with a structured graduate route. These respondents (at interview) viewed the graduate development process as an opportunity for trainees to apply their recent experience of learning, questioning and testing to a new environment. Therefore, the need for proactive, enthusiastic individuals who offer fresh ideas was paramount and reflected this desire for intellectual curiosity:

> I want people who can think, who can paint pictures and communicate that, and be prepared to have discussion and debate and dialogue and argument. (Construction Sector, Departmental Manager)

With regard to applied or situational intellect, the knowledge base developed through study at a higher level was paramount to particular sectors, for example IT (requiring a sound understanding of the principles of programming) or engineering (where a measurable technical skill-set is required). The size and sector of each business had a profound effect on the value of applied intellect, with the more technical/professional

organisations requiring (and sometimes expressing concern over) the quality and ability to apply knowledge as graduates enter employment. Partly this concern was with the ability to work at the appropriate level of detail and accuracy:

> Accuracy is imperative in our field. In education establishments, errors in calculations may be acceptable to an extent, even in the real world no errors can be allowed, 95% is not enough. (Civil Engineering, SME)

> In engineering, 97% accuracy is not enough. (Automotive Engineering, SME)

Occasionally, disquiet was expressed with the quality of the degree itself:

> Sometimes what graduates bring to the workplace is not sufficient, especially where they are being taught old stuff rather than state-of-the-art knowledge. (Director of Engineering Company, SMI)

Implicit in this concern was the need for awareness by the graduate that their knowledge or skill may not be of the required standard (that there is more learning to be done) and that they were then capable of acting on this. Such awareness did not apply only to technical skills and knowledge, but to general commercial awareness and independence in 'learning about the job':

> I get this thing that comes back from them; if they don't know how to do something they blame it on the course. I wasn't taught how to run a business—I worked it out. (IT Sector SME, Director)

Employers recognised the central role that university plays in developing intellect, but inherent in this is also the ability to broaden thinking and reflect on learning and development:

> In a nutshell—wouldn't it be great if unis [sic] could develop a person's self-knowledge, not just here's a piece of paper that says that I can do PR but what do you mean by that? How much do you know yourself? How much have you put that into practice, how much have you tested that? Just something that shows I have stripes on my sleeve doesn't mean that I am a leader. (Creative Industries Sector, Director)

The capacity to reflect is one of the fundamental requirements of employers, influencing, as it does, the graduate's ability to make choices about and develop their own careers, operate well in a team and with clients, identify development and training needs and assess the efficacy of their own work.

4.3. Performance

Performance may be usefully defined as the application of skills and intellect in the workplace and for the graduate this equates to the ability to learn quickly and effectively and to develop skills appropriate to the role. Performance is therefore most closely aligned to the established employability skills matrix that dominates current definitions of graduate identity. Performance is about delivery and results. In this respect, the survey interrogated employability skills both implicitly (embedded in competency statements in Section One of the survey) and explicitly (requiring respondents to rank commonly accepted employability skills).

The value to employers of the widely accepted employability skills was dependent on size and sector and, in that respect, there is no universal measure of employability that can be usefully applied. For many, presentation skills, IT and numeracy (in a general setting) were seen as of average importance, whereas written communication was placed in the first or second ranking by 43.3% of those surveyed overall, but by 55% of public sector employers. Interpersonal skills, interpreted by the majority of those questioned as communication skills (which have a major influence on performance) were the only category that was clearly identified by respondents as a prerequisite across all sectors, with 76.7% of respondents placing this in the first or second ranking (67.7% public sector). Consistently in both survey responses and at interview, employers combined their sector/business specific requirements with a desire for strong communication skills:

> I expect them to have done research on my service/organisation using information in the public domain. I also test out how the individual interacts with various groups of people. (Public Sector, HR)

> When I think about it, it all boils to the ability to communicate. I think that's really the key for me when I recruit. You've got to have a 2:1, get through the numeric tests, through the telephone interview which tests your commercial awareness. But even when we get people at the assessment centre you know that they are not going to get through, because they don't have the ability to communicate… (UK Graduate Recruitment Manager, Multinational)

Employers generally expressed confidence in the graduates' ability to take a foundation of skills gained at university and apply them in a new setting: for example, the knowledge of IT languages could be applied in order to learn new programmes. However, there were notable concerns about core skills. For example, attention to detail and thoroughness was required by 80% of employers on appointment. Yet both those surveyed and those interviewed expressed grave concern over the ability of graduates to check and revise their work and considered this to be one of the most lacking of competencies in graduates. Employers expressed similar concerns with regard to written communication:

> I am very concerned about the young people in the job market in general, who are almost illiterate, not being able to cope with writing or interpreting formal written English. It is quite low in the general population of young people and it is not really any better among people who hold degrees. Not only that, but they are not concerned about it and do not appreciate what a heavy overhead it is for a manager to have to check each and every piece of written work that is done because it is rarely fit for purpose. This is a serious deficit in the skills of young people and when I talk to them about it, they tell me they have never been taught. When people are in their 20s, they are too old to learn such skills, and while they might feel they are able to learn new things quickly, in the matter of literacy, this is not the case. An enormous amount of my time is spent supervising the written work of those who are otherwise very intelligent and able people. It can never be allowed to go unchecked. Not only can they not spell, but their general vocabulary is limited so they are unable to express subtle or complex ideas and concepts, either verbally or in writing. This makes me wonder about the value of the degree they have undertaken and what sort of standard is expected when they are able to become fully fledged graduates with such low-level skill in this area. (HR Manager, Public Sector)

This is a particularly trenchantly expressed view and although other employers did not express themselves so strongly all of them recognised the concerns expressed in this quote.

By contrast with these core skills related to performance and delivery, it was interesting to note that project management, when tested, was something employers were willing to allow a long timescale to develop, as was the application of strategic and analytical thinking to the organisation.

4.4. Engagement

From an employer's perspective, engagement could be defined as a willingness to meet personal, employment and social challenges head on and to be 'outward looking'. For some employers, this involves having a wider perspective:

> I am often disappointed by the fairly narrow world that people inhabit so their knowledge of what's going on around them they get from Heat magazine. (Public Sector, Manager)

For others it involves drawing on a wider experience:

> Those who have had the largest variety of summer jobs are far more flexible, far more likely to adapt. (Education Sector, Manager)

And for others it involves making the best use of student life:

> I am interested in seeing a range of interests, showing that the candidate has fully exploited the university experience. (Third Sector, Arts Organisation)

Whereas for some it's all a question of attitude:

> A positive, can-do attitude is a real selling point for graduates. This doesn't have to be loud and gregarious, more a quiet confidence, willing to work hard to achieve goals which accord with the company's objectives. Pride in your own work and a desire to give of your best will also go a long way. (Civil Engineering, SME)

The concept of graduate identity has this distinct advantage: we do not have to translate each and every employer requirement into an employability requirement. Recall that graduate identity is all about potential: how an employer decides that a graduate is likely to fulfil particular requirements. What came across strongly at the interview stage was a desire by employers to see some kind of evidence that graduates have engaged in work experience, in volunteering, in making to most of the student experience and have shown a preparedness to step outside the familiar and the comfortable. In particular, this may involve a willingness to step outside the domain of the curriculum and to experience different types of communities apart from the academic community. However, what employers also want to see is that this has been done over a sustained period and has not been merely haphazard. They are looking, in other words, for engagement in communities of practice, whether these be work-based communities, virtual communities or social communities. In this way, the graduate will have had to learn a different kind of discourse through the very act of participation itself.

This is the kind of situated learning that Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) have shown involves systematic participation and engagement in which:

- often much of what is to be learnt is not written down;
- learning affects and transforms attitudinal and behavioural response;
- learning often requires the development of relatively sophisticated interpersonal skills;
- there is always a co-dependency on others so that learning never belongs solely to the individual but of its nature is sharable;
- respect and recognition arise through sustained participation; and
- awareness of context (which itself may shift and change) is vital if successful learning and interaction are to take place.

Whilst graduates are not expected to demonstrate a sustained engagement with a community of practice over several years, employers do, indeed, expect some limited engagement with a such a community to demonstrate an awareness that learning does not only arise through traditional disciplinary engagement. It is the experience, albeit limited, of a community of practice that enables an employer to assess those all-important interpersonal skills.

6. Conclusion

These findings suggest that there is no simple model of transfer—whether of skills or of knowledge—in the transition of students into graduate employment. Thus Hager and Hodkinson (2009) suggest that 'we should cease thinking and writing about "learning transfer" and think instead of learning as *becoming*, within a transitional process of boundary crossing' (p. 635). Graduate identity can be seen as the cultural capital acquired prior to entering an organisation. Thus, skills and knowledge are not identifiable phenomena apart from this identity: they enter into this identity mediated through the four strands that we have spoken of. Skills and knowledge are not, as Hagar and Hodkinson say, 'reified and isolatable phenomena' (p. 632). They therefore suggest that the metaphors of boundary crossing and transition are more appropriate than the metaphor of transfer when we try to evaluate and understand the complexities of life-change. Above all, the metaphor of transfer is suspect because the transition is not managed by a stable agent seamlessly transferring skills and knowledge from one domain to another. Rather there is a process of learning and what is learnt is not only that which is measurable and identifiable but also the development of an identity. The graduate identity itself is, of course, a transitional identity and the agent, once embedded into employment, must then embark on a further learning process as the identity of a graduate is left behind, to be replaced by another employment or professional-orientated identity. But in order to reach the latter, we suggest that the stage of graduate identity has to be negotiated first.

A useful way of interpreting the idea of graduate identity that we have been elaborating is through the concept of capability, drawing on the work of Amartya Sen. When he first theorised the concept of capability Sen (1982) suggested (in the context of asking questions about social re-distribution) that perhaps we should focus not so

much on goods and resources as what people could actually *do* (pp. 365–367). This idea was further theorised by Sen (1999) in terms of 'functionings' or modes of being and doing. The idea is that a capability can enable a range of possible functionings (pp. 74–75). A 'capability set' is therefore, according to Sen, a combination of functionings. The key point here is that there is no one-to-one correlation between capability and functions—capabilities enable a range of functionings. It follows that the development of capabilities has an empowering dimension: capabilities enable persons to do more with their lives in terms of potential functionings. For Sen, the concept of capability therefore includes a normative dimension that goes beyond standard human capital theories: a capability set becomes an index of freedom and well-being.

For graduates, then, there is a complex capability-set that encompasses values, social engagement, intellect and performance. It enables, potentially, a range of functionings. What our research suggests is that underpinning the employability specifics—writing CVs, undergoing recruitment assessment, interview perfor-mance—is the need to construct an identity through combining the four matrices we have identified. As we have already emphasised, the precise mix and balance depends on the individual's experience, aims and preferences. What Sen's thoughts on capability suggest is this: that the development of employability needn't be thought of in terms of developing a set of instrumental skills and attitudes aligned to human capital requirements but entirely divorced from questions of well-being. For Sen, the development of a capability-set is central to human well-being and so, for us, the development of the graduate capability set is central to graduate well-being. To live a satisfactory life (leaving aside for the moment the critical question of finding employ-ment), graduates need to think about their own values, engagement, intellect and performance. And our research suggests that if they do this then they are already starting to think about and undertake the kinds of beings and doings that will make them more, not less, employable.

There is some evidence that students themselves are likely to respond to the identity and capability model of employability rather than the skills model. For one thing, students themselves seem very sanguine about the role a degree plays in secur-ing employment. Yet this does not mean they regard their period at university as a waste of time: 'there is little evidence to support [the]…prediction of disappointment and disillusionment with education as graduates enter the job market' (Brooks & Everett, 2009). There is, however, plenty of evidence that students are uninterested in skills training. Thus a survey involving 15 case study universities across a range of disciplines (biosciences, business studies, sociology) (Jary & Shah, 2009) concludes: 'The employability and skills agenda of the government is not always fully shared by students. A narrow focus on skills and employability neglects the equally important ways in which higher education changes people's lives' (p. 5).

Our studies suggest that universities and government would be better employed promoting student employability indirectly through the promotion of graduate identity and well-being (through the provision of opportunities for functioning) rather than directly through employability skills. What is more, *employers themselves* are not

unsympathetic to this approach. Does this also suggest a perfect congruence between student/graduate well-being and employability? That would be going too far! But it does suggest that the development of graduate identity, along the lines suggested, need not damage one's employability and may often enhance it.

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