

Graduate employability and the propensity to learn in employment: a new vocationalism

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This article is about graduate employment, unemployment and under-employment. It looks at the development of employability skills in university education as a response to evidence of the unemployment and underemployment of new graduates and assesses the impact of that response. The article then offers another approach to graduate employability based on the behaviour of graduate employers as reflected in data on graduate employment. The approach focuses on the development of students' willingness and ability to learn in employment. The article concludes by showing that this approach can reconcile the development of graduate employability with the traditional concerns of university education and with the preparation of students for lifelong learning.

Keywords: graduate employment, graduate employability, employability skills, graduate job, propensity to learn

The starting point for this article was an enquiry into changes in the pattern of the first destinations of university graduates across the four decades since data were first published (Bourner and Rospigliosi, 2008). The headline finding of that study was that in the 1960s about six out of 10 graduates remained within the education system (in teaching, research, further academic study, teacher training, other training or education administration) after graduation and now that ratio is down to about three out of 10. The large majority now find jobs in the other sectors, including industry, wholesale/retail, financial services, other commerce and public services other than education. Another finding was that the percentage of students who were still unemployed six

months after graduating was only about 3 per cent in the 1960s. Since that time there has been a rising trend in the percentage of new graduates who are unemployed or employed in so-called 'non-graduate' jobs. Universities have responded by placing more weight on the development of employability and work-readiness in university education. A central part of that response has been increased emphasis on the development of employability skills (King, 2009).

Evidence of increased unemployment and underemployment of new graduates has prompted concern about possible over-supply of graduates. This is of particular concern to government, universities and the students themselves. Government believes that educating more people to higher levels supports the material well-being of the population as a whole; this is a significant part of the case for using public funds to support universities. Evidence of graduate unemployment and underemployment serves, of course, to undermine that belief.

Universities are concerned that graduate unemployment reflects poorly on their performance. Graduate employment is one of the factors used to compile league tables of university performance and at the end of the 1990s HEFCE developed a graduate employability performance indicator which impacts on decisions about the funding received by different universities. Students and potential students are concerned about increased graduate unemployment and underemployment because an important reason for most students acquiring a university education is to enhance their employment prospects (Glover *et al*, 2002).

Consequently, the secular rise in the unemployment and underemployment of new graduates over the last forty years has generated pressure on and within universities to give more weight to graduate employability in university education. This pressure has not been steady, mirroring the secular trend but rather it has followed the year-by-year variations in evidence of new graduate unemployment and underemployment. When unemployment rises in the economy it is amplified amongst new entrants to the labour force whether they be school-leavers or university graduates. Hence the timing of the pressure to give more weight to graduate employability in university education tends to be strongest in economic downturns. The pressure was intense in the early 1980s when graduate unemployment rose to unprecedented levels. It was intense again in the early 1990s when rapid expansion of graduate numbers caused graduate unemployment to peak again. And it has increased with higher graduate unemployment associated with the banking-led recession of 2008-09.

Such pressure from government has included a range of publicly-funded projects intended to stimulate the development of graduate employability skills within university education, starting with the 'Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative' in the 1980s. Universities have sought to develop skills for graduate employment primarily through introducing free-standing course units or by integrating skills development within existing courses. In many cases the stand-alone courses are provided by staff located in the university careers advisory units or academic development (learning and teaching) units ie, staff located outside the students' own departments or schools.

This article looks at the development of employability skills as a response to the unemployment and underemployment of new graduates. It makes the case that this is a weak strategy and suggests a different approach which has more support from the available evidence on graduate employment, unemployment and underemployment.

Skills for graduate employment: a critical appraisal

The development of employability skills within university education is sometimes criticised on the grounds that it dilutes the spirit of university education as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. That is not the criticism we offer in this article. Our challenge is that, for the most part, developing employability skills in university education is not very effective in reducing graduate unemployment or underemployment. We offer six reasons for believing that it is a weak or ineffective strategy for enhancing graduate employability.

First, systematic empirical study of the effects of graduate employability skills initiatives in HE has failed to identify positive outcomes in the graduate labour market. For example, a study by Mason et al (2006) could find no impact of teaching employability skills on either the ability of graduates to find employment within six months of graduating or to secure 'graduate-level' jobs. Moreover, including employability skills in the assessment of students showed no impact either. These results may have been caused by the research methods used (multiple regression using data gathered at university departmental level together with HESA's first destination statistics). Conceivably, they were not strong enough to detect the impact. Even if this were so (and the statistical methods *were* powerful enough to pick up the significant positive effect of student work experience and employer involvement in degree course design) it would indicate that the effects of teaching (and assessment) of employability skills on graduate employment is very weak. By contrast, we have been unable to find any

systematic *empirical* studies of the university teaching of employability skills that report reduced graduate unemployment or higher rates of employment in graduate-level jobs.

Second, graduates from universities which have focused most on developing employability skills seem to have been less successful in finding graduate employment than graduates of universities that have been less focused on them: 'Paradoxically, those institutions at the forefront of employability development may be ignored by the larger graduate employers' (Harvey *et al*, 2002, 2). This observation is confirmed by examination of HESA's 'First Destinations' data on the percentages of graduates unemployed and in non-graduate jobs six months after graduation.

There is a puzzle here. Some universities have taken very seriously the advice of graduate employers about what skills they would like graduates to be equipped with and have gone to considerable lengths to include these skills in their university education curriculum, whereas others have retained a more traditional university education. The paradox is that, according to the first destinations statistics, graduate employers seem to prefer to employ the graduates from the latter. This puzzle replicates the experience in the 1970s and 1980s when polytechnics were developed to provide a higher education that was more employment-led and more focused on the needs of the local economy than was available from the universities at that time. This they did, with consultation with local employers, a higher incidence of sandwich courses to provide work experience (and employment-focused part-time courses) and more emphasis on employability skills, yet the first destinations statistics consistently showed that the graduates of traditional universities remained more attractive to graduate employers (Bourner, 1984).

Third, if skills for graduate employment were a well-ordered list of a limited number of well-defined skills then it would be relatively straightforward to integrate them into university education. In fact, they are not well-defined as different surveys produce different listings of employability skills (Cannon, 1986). Moreover, skills that are highly ranked on some lists have a much lower ranking on others. And the lists are anything but limited. The decade of the 1990s contained the high years of high profile surveys of what graduate employers look for in graduate recruits. Its peak was probably in the mid-1990s with two influential reports on graduate skills for graduate employment by Hawkins and Winter (1995) and Harvey *et al* (1997). Most of the more recent published work has been based on relatively small-scale projects addressing specific issues (eg Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2010). Harvey *et al*

(2002) in a large and systematic project funded jointly by the Association of Graduate Recruiters, the Council for Industry and Higher Education and Department of Education and Employment, provided the research that underpinned a particularly influential report by *Universities UK* in 2002 titled *Enhancing Employability, Recognising Diversity. Making Links between Higher Education and the World of Work* (Harvey et al, 2002). That research is the source of Table 1 which shows an illustrative list of the graduate skills/attributes that such surveys produced.

TABLE 1
62 items ranked in terms of importance by graduate employers

1	Willingness to learn	33	Can deal with large amounts of information
2	Commitment	34	Consideration for others
3	Dependability/reliability	35	Leadership potential
4	Self-motivation	36	Independent judgement
5	Team-work	37	Ability to relate to a wider context
6	Communication skills (oral)	38	Maturity
7	Co-operation	39	Tact
8	Communication skills (written)	40	Equipped for continuous education
9	Drive/energy	41	Innovation
10	Self-management	42	Loyalty
11	Desire to achieve/motivation	43	Tolerance
12	Problem-solving ability	44	Technical ability
13	Analytic ability	45	Influencing skills
14	Flexibility	46	Decision-making skills
15	Initiative	47	Curiosity
16	Can summarise key issues	48	Imagination
17	Logical argument	49	Creativity
18	Adaptability (intellectual)	50	Experience of the world of work
19	Numeracy	51	Leadership ability
20	Adaptability (organizational)	52	Commercial awareness
21	Can cope with pressure/stress	53	General knowledge
21	Time management	54	Financial knowledge or understanding
23	Rapid Conceptualisation of issues	55	Negotiation skills
24	Enquiry and research skills	56	Deep understanding
25	Self-confidence	57	Problem-solving ability
26	Persistence/tenacity	58	Relevant work experience
27	Planning ability	59	Specialist factual knowledge
28	Interest in life-long learning	60	Knowledge of social/political issues
29	Ability to use information technology	61	Knowledge of the organisation
30	Understanding of core principles	62	Prior knowledge of the job
31	Organisational skills		
32	Critical ability		

Collating the results of the many surveys that have been undertaken would produce a list of hundreds of skills and related attributes. Introducing employability skills into a course of academic study can therefore be seen as the thin edge of a large wedge. Some university academics view it as opening a 'Pandora's Box' which might swamp the more familiar concerns of a traditional university education. This anxiety is a significant reason that many traditional university academics resist it, passively if not actively.

Fourth, the term 'graduate employability skills' is really a misnomer as these skills are virtually all equally applicable to non-graduates. Moreover, they are the sort of skills and knowledge that people develop more naturally in employment contexts eg, 'team-working', 'time management skills' and 'commercial awareness'.

Fifth, the implementation of the development of employability skills usually takes the form of either adding stand-alone employability skills courses or including them within existing courses. There seems to be some consensus that the former is not terribly effective, largely because the students do not see the relevance of these courses to their other studies and some see them as a distraction from the main concerns of their degree course. Including them within subject-centred courses is more effective when it works but it rarely works well because it relies on subject-specialists who are more interested in their subjects than employability skills and are not particularly equipped to teach or assess these skills. It is not clear, for example, why a physics lecturer or a statistician or a specialist in Renaissance art will have any particular expertise in teaching a skill such as 'team-working' or 'commercial awareness' let alone expertise in teaching employability skills in general.

Sixth, the belief that employability skills are learned better in the classroom than in the workplace does not stand up to critical scrutiny. We could find no empirical studies to support it and reason suggests otherwise (Cranmer, 2006).

Faced with the problem that new graduates are encountering increasing difficulty in finding employment, and in particular graduate-level employment, the solution of trying to enhance their employability skills seems to be, at best, a weak one. It is difficult to find any evidence that it makes a significant difference to the success of new graduates in finding graduate employment.

A new vocationalism: a different approach to graduate employability

The aim of this section is to find an approach to graduate employment that is more effective than trying to develop employability skills within

universities. In order to do so, our starting point is not the words of graduate employers but their actions as reflected in the data on university graduate employment, unemployment and underemployment.

We are not the first to question the rhetoric of graduate employers and its relationship with actual recruitment and personnel policies in practice:

‘... employers’ “wish lists” should not be taken at face value. Teichler (1998) questions whether employer statements should be interpreted as providing direct and objective information concerning demand in the employment system, noting that such statements are often inconsistent with actual recruitment and personnel policies and practices’ (The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006, 4) See also Purcell *et al*, (2002).

We start by the naïve observation that graduate employers advertise vacancies that specify that applicants must be graduates. We also observe that in most years most graduate job vacancies are open to graduates of any subject; indeed, the percentage of new graduates finding employment in jobs open to graduates of any subject is likely to be underestimated as they are drawn from vacancy advertisements by graduate recruiters. This means they underestimate sectors where the figure is likely to be higher, such as SMEs, jobs obtained as a result of speculative enquiries and promotion of graduates out of entry-level jobs. And we observe that, on average, employers are prepared to pay a premium to recruit graduates. This raises the question, what do graduate employers get from graduates that they don’t get from non-graduates? What is the distinction about graduates that makes the difference?

The defining difference between graduates and non-graduates is that the former have acquired the knowledge, skills and attitudes of a university education and a proven ability and willingness to learn. Our next step is to unpack that definition to look for the difference that makes the difference to graduate employers.

The knowledge

What knowledge have graduates acquired from their university education that employers value? New graduates should have up-to-date knowledge of the subject of their degree. How important is it that this knowledge is as up-to-date as possible? Clearly it is valuable to some employers. However, it is only a small minority of graduate employers who really seek the most up-to-date knowledge of an academic subject (eg, universities seeking academic staff and organisations with research

labs) and they are more likely to be recruiting graduates with Masters degrees (or even PhDs) than graduates with first degrees only.

Most employers of most graduates are not very concerned about how up-to-date is the academic knowledge of the students they recruit. It turns out that they are not even very concerned about the subject of the degree at all. The evidence for this statement is the fact (noted earlier) that most (around two-thirds in some years) vacancies for graduates each year ask for graduates of any subject at all.

‘Of course, there are many students who find employment in an area directly related to their degree courses. Engineers become engineers, medical students become physicians, some linguists become interpreters and translators ... But it is also true that every year between 40 per cent and 70 per cent of all graduate vacancies ask for a degree in any discipline because the knowledge content of the student’s degree is immaterial to the position’ (Roberts (2006), 12).

The skills

The skills that are particularly associated with a good university education are: the ability to think critically, the ability to write for an academic audience and subject-specific skills that support a particular academic discipline such as maths to support a degree in physics, Old English to support some degrees in English literature and so on.

The skill that is most prized within most universities is the ability to test assumptions, assertions, arguments and conclusions ie, the ability to think critically. In the words of Sir Douglas Hague, long-time chair of the Economic and Social Research Council: ‘Academics must believe that acquiring the ability to test ideas and evidence is the primary benefit of a university education’ (Hague, 1991, 64).

There is no evidence, however, to suggest that most employers of graduates place as much value on the skill of critical thinking as university academics. Table 1 shows that employers, when asked to assess the importance they attached to each of a list of 62 graduate attributes ranked ‘critical ability’ 32 – behind such items as dependability, co-operation, drive, self-management, flexibility, initiative, time management, self-confidence, persistence, planning ability and ability with information technology. Even the rhetoric of graduate employers assigns a relatively low position to critical thinking. Faced with choice between a graduate recruit who could make the best business case for a graduate employer’s policy, project or product and one who could mount the best challenge to any of these, it is not obvious that the latter would be preferred.

The ability to write for an academic audience is a skill that is vital to those going on to become professional academics. Students spend time, for example, learning how to structure an academic paper and reference sources correctly. However, most graduate employers do not particularly value the ability to write in an academic way. In fact, some see this as something to be ‘unlearned’ as new graduate employees acquire alternative communication skills such as writing business reports, executive summaries and other forms of organisational communication which require rather different abilities.

That leaves the subject-specific skills, ie, skills that support an academic subject (such as statistics to underpin a degree in economics or lab skills to support a degree in chemistry). As the majority of graduate employers place little value on knowledge of any specific graduate subject they are not very likely, in most cases, to place too much value on the subject-specific skills that support the knowledge of a specific academic subject.

Graduate attitudes

A good university education seeks to develop a questioning attitude, disinterested enquiry and objective impartiality. Again, the belief that these attitudes are prioritised by graduate employers has not been supported by studies of what employers look for in graduate recruits. In fact, if anything, they seem to prefer attitudes towards the other end of the ‘disinterested observer’ spectrum such as commitment and proactivity.

What’s left?

If it’s not the knowledge, skills and attitudes that graduates bring with them by virtue of their university education then what is it that the majority of graduate employers value in graduate employees enough to pay them a ‘graduate premium’?

What’s left is their proven ability to learn and their willingness to do so. There are many terms that express the aptitude of graduates for learning: ‘graduates are quicker learners’, ‘graduates know how to learn’, ‘graduates find it easier to learn’, ‘graduates are better at learning’ and so on.

Why do graduate employers expect that, on balance, graduate recruits will be better than non-graduates at learning? Because they have had to demonstrate an aptitude for learning to be accepted onto a university degree course ie, they have had to satisfy entry requirements that test their ability and willingness to learn at school. Also, they have

spent the whole of their undergraduate years, at least three years of full-time study (or part-time equivalent), in which they are required to do little else than learn: they are specialists in the practice of learning.

Not only have graduates spent at least three years more than school-leavers honing up their learning faculties, but the processes of learning at university are different from school in ways that develop students' capacities to plan and manage their own learning. As one moves up the education ladder there is a steady increase in the amount of self-direction of student learning. Many of us can remember chanting multiplication tables in primary school under the instruction of teachers who specified what we learned and how we learned and supervised the learning process itself, in that case repetition through chanting. In secondary school students have more freedom to decide how they will learn and more so at the top (A level classes) than at the bottom (year 7 classes). In higher education there is more freedom still; students choose what they will study in higher education from an extensive range of subjects and have much discretion about how they study. New students at university find that higher education is more self-directed than school education. Moreover, it becomes even more self-directed as students pass from first year through intermediate levels towards graduation. Universities tend to provide most academic direction and support to first year students as most of them are making the transition from school to university (or from work to university, in the case of mature students). The amount of academic direction is normally reduced at intermediate levels and at the final level of undergraduate education students often have to undertake a dissertation unit which they are expected to plan and manage from start to finish. At Masters' level, they are expected to require even less supervision of their learning than at undergraduate level. And at the highest level of all, doctoral level, students not only plan and manage their own learning they also determine the intended learning outcomes ie, what they aim to discover through their research. In other words, a university education is intended to develop the capacity to plan and manage students' own learning without supervision by teachers. If a university has done its job well then its graduates are able to plan and manage their own learning: '...our ultimate goal in higher education must be to encourage students to be responsible for, and in control of their own learning ...' (Zuber-Skerrett, 1992, 24).

In summary, graduate employers can reasonably expect that on average university graduates will be better at learning than non-graduates for three reasons: graduates have had to satisfy university entry requirements that test their ability and willingness to learn at

school, graduates have spent 3+ years specialising in learning and honing up their learning faculties and university degrees are usually structured in a way that develops students' capacity to plan and manage their own learning.

Graduate employers are looking for graduates who are prepared to learn and the term 'prepared to learn' can be unpacked into 'able and willing to learn'. Ability to learn and willingness to learn go together. People who are good at learning tend to be more willing to learn because the cost (mostly in terms of time and effort) of learning is lower for them and because people tend to enjoy doing what they are good at. The correlation is not, of course, perfect; not everyone who is good at learning is disposed to do so and not everyone who enjoys learning is brilliant at it. The bottom line, however, is that graduate employers can be reasonably sure that, on balance, graduate employees are more able to learn and more willing to learn than non-graduates and that is the difference that makes the difference.

'Old vocationalism' and 'new vocationalism' compared

So far, we've noted that universities responded to evidence of increased unemployment and underemployment of new graduates by giving more weight to employability skills to make university education more vocationally-relevant. We can term this the 'old vocationalism' since universities have been responding in this way for a long time, at least since the huge rise in graduate unemployment in the early 1980s. In this article we are proposing a new approach to graduate employability focused on the capacity and disposition of graduates to learn. To differentiate it from the 'old vocationalism' we have termed it 'new vocationalism'.

As this section contrasts the two approaches it is important to be quite clear about the meaning of each of these terms. Old vocationalism (OV) is HE that is orientated towards the expressed needs of graduate employers. It typically involves listening to employers' words about what they want most to see in new graduates and then making room for that in the curriculum. At the heart of the old vocationalism is the development of employability skills. These are normally developed through stand-alone courses or embedded in existing courses and may be included in the assessment criteria.

By contrast, new vocationalism (NV) is orientated towards developing students' capacity and disposition to learn. The term that most precisely captures the new vocationalism is 'preparedness to learn'. This term includes two elements: ability to learn and inclination

to learn. Students who have successfully completed a 3+ year course of university education have thereby been prepared to be effective learners. It is reasonable to believe that graduates are more prepared also to learn in the sense of willingness, even keenness, to learn than non-graduates.

Both OV and NV come from a similar philosophy of higher education which is as follows: the primary purpose of a university education is to prepare students for their lives after university, a significant part of the lives of students after university is the work they will do, therefore a significant part of the purpose of a university education is to prepare students for the work they will do after they have completed their university studies.

We have seen that there are good grounds to doubt that OV (attempts to develop employability skills) has had much effect on graduate employability, whereas graduates who can show that they are ready, willing and able to learn are likely to be more successful in finding employment. The advantages of the new vocationalism (NV) over the old vocationalism (OV) do not stop there.

OV is focused on the *application* to employment of skills and knowledge acquired during a university education. By contrast, NV is mostly about the *acquisition* of new skills and knowledge after university. A university education that develops the capacity and inclination to learn empowers students to acquire more knowledge *after* university.

OV focuses on short-term employment whereas NV is equally applicable to long-term employment. OV is based on the skills that employers claim to be looking for in new graduates so the emphasis is on the graduate's next steps after university – the graduate's immediate problem of finding employment after university. By contrast, NV is even more valuable in the long-run when graduate requirements for particular knowledge and skills cannot be known. Developing students' capacity and disposition to learn is the best way of equipping them for work in a future that is unpredictable and grows more unpredictable as the planning horizon extends into the more distant future.

OV is quite narrowly focused on preparation for finding work after graduation; its contribution to the other aspects of students' lives is largely confined to the fact that the lives of students who can find graduate employment are likely to be enhanced compared to those who cannot. By contrast, the position of NV is that although employment is a very significant part of the lives of students after graduation it is only one part and developing their capacity and disposition to learn contributes to the other parts too. Not only is it difficult to predict future

change in the world of work, it is difficult to predict future change in the worlds outside work and success in adapting to such change also depends on the capacity and disposition to learn.

Some of the skills that employers want from graduates are quite general (eg team-working) and some are quite specific. IT skills, for example, are quite specific to the current state of technology. Asking graduate employers to identify the skills they want from graduates is bound to produce a bias towards current skill deficits and specific skills to meet the current problems. This is one reason that surveys of graduate employers over the years have produced different rankings amongst the

TABLE 2
Comparisons of 'old vocationalism' and 'new vocationalism'

	Old vocationalism	New vocationalism
<i>Definition</i>	Higher education that is orientated towards developing employability skills	Higher education that is orientated towards developing students' willingness and ability to learn
<i>Main goal</i>	To equip students with the skills to find employment as graduates	To enhance students career prospects by developing their powers of learning
<i>Relationship with new knowledge</i>	Focus on the application of the latest knowledge and skills to employment after university	Focus on the acquisition of new knowledge and skills in employment after graduation
<i>Time horizon</i>	<i>Short-term:</i> the focus is on finding employment after graduation	<i>Short-term and long-term:</i> the focus is on preparing students for learning in employment that is likely to extend over next four decades after graduation
<i>Work-life balance</i>	Narrow focus on work ie helping students find work after university	Focus on adapting to future changes within work and also outside of work
<i>Skill specificity</i>	Focus on specific skill shortages of employers and current skill deficits	Focus on the most transferable skill of all, ie the ability to learn

skills sought. By contrast, graduate long-term employment prospects are better enhanced by developing skills that are more general, more transferable and less short-term. The most transferable ‘skill’ of all is the ability to learn.

The lead-time in ‘producing’ a graduate is at least three years and much can change in three years – a labour shortage can become a glut as the state of the labour market changes; technological change, in particular, can produce obsolescence in knowledge and skills. This means that a higher education that produces graduates to satisfy current demands is always likely to be vulnerable to changes in demands for graduate skills. By contrast, NV aims to satisfy a more stable labour market demand, for people who like to learn new things and are good at so doing. Table 2 summarises the differences between OV and NV.

Discussion

The last section compared university education that is oriented towards graduate employers’ current demands for skills and knowledge (OV) with university education oriented towards developing students’ inclinations and ability to learn (NV). This section discusses some of the issues that emerge from that analysis.

Graduate jobs

According to the new vocationalism, the main reason that most graduate employers employ graduates is because they are better prepared and more inclined to learn than non-graduates. Why is this so important to graduate employers?

In order to answer that question it is helpful to start by addressing another question, ‘For what sort of job is enhanced learning capability and disposition particularly important?’ One such sort of job is where keeping up with emerging new knowledge is an explicit part of the job description. This would include, for example, all jobs in academia and, to a greater or lesser extent, all the jobs for which graduates are employed in the education system. It would also include jobs in the traditional learned professions such as medicine, where doctors, for example, are expected to keep abreast of the growing stream of new knowledge and filter genuine advances from the promotional claims of pharmaceutical companies.

The other sort of job where the ability and disposition to keep on learning is important is where there is likely to be a significant rate of change in the job or its context. The key to surviving and thriving in a changing environment is adaptation and the ability to adapt depends on

learning. Many people have made the link between environmental change and the ability to learn. For example: '(1) When the rate of change is faster than that of learning, the organism fails. (2) When the rate of learning is as fast as (or faster than) that of change, the organism is likely to adapt, to survive and even grow.' (Revans, 1984, 30).

Change alters the environments in which organisations operate. Organisms which cannot adapt to significant changes in their environments die out and organisations that cannot adapt to change in their environments are similarly fated. Adaptation by, and within, an organisation implies learning. Organisations that are made up of people who are unable or unwilling to learn stand little chance in a changing world. By contrast, organisations that are filled with people who are willing and able to learn can survive and thrive in a changing environment; that is why organisations need to recruit people who are good at learning. This line of reasoning implies that more graduates are likely to be employed in those jobs and in those sectors of the economy which are experiencing the fastest change. It also implies a new definition of a graduate job, ie a graduate job is one where a satisfactory level of performance requires that job incumbents maintain a high rate of learning. This implies, furthermore, that jobs that place emphasis on the continuing professional development of incumbents are likely to be graduate jobs.

NV and the link between university education and economic growth

Many people have asserted that an increase in the supply of highly qualified labour is necessary for economic growth and hence advance in the material well-being of the population. This includes not only those with an interest in promoting this belief such as Universities UK, but also groups that would bear at least part of the cost of increased supply of graduates, including the government. There have always been dissenting voices who point to particular academic subjects, such as medieval history, and ask for the precise mechanism whereby more medieval historians accelerates the growth of the economy.

The new vocationalism (NV) offers such a mechanism and it works as follows. Knowledge is accumulating at an increasing rate but what limits the impact of that new knowledge on the material well-being of society is the rate at which people can learn to use it and adapt to the consequences of its use, ie the constraint on economic growth is the rate of *absorption* of new knowledge not its rate of production. It is possible to develop powers of learning by study of almost any subject at all over the course of 3+ years of university education, including medieval history.

So, rather than thinking of graduate supply *causing* economic growth, it is more realistic to see the rate of economic growth as *limited* by the ability of people to learn and thereby adapt to the environmental change that economic growth implies. If a university education is primarily about developing the ability to learn, as contended by the NV, then increasing the number of people in the economy who are good at learning, and helping them to become better learners, relaxes that constraint on the rate of growth.

The rate of accumulation of new knowledge is accelerating. The traditional way that new academic knowledge is placed in the public domain is in the academic journal and there has been accelerating growth in the number of academic journals worldwide, especially if one includes the relatively recent phenomenon of the on-line academic journal. Knowledge advances not only by the production of new knowledge but also by its dissemination and storage, and acceleration in both of these is evidenced by the digital revolution. An accelerating rate of accumulation of knowledge drives an accelerating rate of economic change and an accelerating rate of social change. The faster that change occurs, the less value is old knowledge and the more value is the ability and willingness to learn.

An important consequence of this accelerating accumulation of knowledge is that much up-to-date knowledge soon becomes out-of-date knowledge. In other words, the shelf-life of knowledge is falling and no matter how up-to-date the knowledge of a new graduate, it will soon be out-of-date without new learning. For example, a doctor who acquired no new knowledge after graduation would soon be hopelessly out of date. Consequently, continuing professional development has become a feature of all the learned professions.

So why is it so important to graduate employers that graduates are better prepared and more inclined to learn than non-graduates? The answer lies in the platitude that the pace of change is increasing. This is a platitude because it is true. It is particularly true of those parts of the economy that are dependent on the production, storage, communication and interpretation of information. Graduates are particularly valued in such knowledge-intensive industries. This means it is particularly true of graduate employment and graduate jobs.

Accelerating accumulation of new knowledge accelerates change in the economy which raises the demand for employees who are good at learning. If accelerating change in the economy had not increased the demand for people who are good at learning, then the huge increase in the percentage of school-leavers who go on to graduate from higher

education in recent decades would have long since eliminated the graduate premium.

Developing a disposition to learn

According to the new vocationalism (NV) the best way of preparing students for employment in graduate jobs is to develop their powers of learning and their disposition to learn. Developing a student's powers of learning is explicitly addressed in Bourner (2009) and touched on at various points in this article. This section looks at students' *inclination* to learn.

'Keeness to learn' is rarely explored in the graduate employability literature, despite the fact that there are clues that it is highly valued by graduate employers. On those rare occasions when it is included in lists of desirable graduate attributes it scores highly. For example, in the survey results shown in Table 1 'willingness to learn' got top billing. Perhaps its neglect in the graduate employability literature reflects a belief that there is little universities can do to affect this factor. Perhaps it is a taken-for-granted assumption that all graduates are willing to learn. Such an assumption certainly seems reasonable; those who are unwilling to learn are unlikely to submit themselves to degree courses of 3+ years of full-time study or a much longer part-time equivalent.

However, it is also reasonable to suppose that inclination to learn varies across the student population. At one end of the spectrum are students who love to learn and at the other end are students who will only learn if tangible incentives are strong enough. According to NV, graduate employability will be higher for those graduates who can signal that not only are they highly capable learners but also they are keen to learn.

How can a university help students to signal to potential employers that they have a high propensity to learn? They can help students develop their inclination to learn and they can help them provide effective signals of this to graduate employers. The nature of such help is addressed below.

The value of A level results to graduates

The fact that some graduate employers place weight on A level results of graduates can seem perplexing. Degree results are more current than A level results that are at least three years older, and degree results are therefore better indicators of the knowledge, skills and attitudes possessed by a university graduate. Some commentators explain such 'irrational' behaviour as the result of ignorance by people who themselves need to be educated:

‘There is also the process of educating some of the professional and statutory bodies in the issues to be addressed as in a number of instances they have developed membership or accreditation criteria based on graduate entry but determined by the initial “A level” points score. Many involved in HE find it somewhat surprising that such bodies focus on the ‘raw material’ and not the “finished product”, thereby totally ignoring the educational process’ (Layer, 2004, 13)

NV offers an explanation for graduate employers’ interest in graduate A level results and predicts the kind of graduate jobs for which A level results are likely to be relevant. Graduate jobs which require a significant amount of the sort of (planned) learning that occurs in schools will place more weight on A levels in the recruitment process than those that place relatively more weight on experiential learning. It would therefore not be surprising to find that accounting firms recruiting graduates would place more weight on A level results than firms recruiting graduates to general management schemes, since graduate accounting trainees will be required to study for accounting qualifications with pre-specified learning outcomes and sit the sort of examinations for which A level performance conveys predictive information. More generally, most weight is placed on A level results by employers recruiting to those graduate jobs which lead to study for professional qualifications in ways that bear most resemblance to school study and examinations. NV therefore predicts that most weight will be attached to A level scores in the recruitment of graduates to jobs that involve further study for professional examinations.

Some implications

The main conclusion of this article is that the primary reason that most graduate employers recruit graduates is that graduate employees have a higher propensity to learn in their employment than non-graduates. From this perspective, graduate employability depends critically on graduates’ powers of learning and their ability to convince potential employers that they have highly developed powers of learning. This has many implications.

Vocational higher education and traditional university education are often seen to be pulling universities in different directions. Traditional university education is focused on equipping students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to contribute to the advancement of an academic subject discipline. By contrast, vocational higher education is focused on equipping students with knowledge,

skills and attitudes to enhance their employability in the graduate labour market. To the extent that vocational higher education is centred on developing the employability skills of students, the perception that these are divergent forces is accurate because time devoted to developing knowledge of the world of work, team-working skills and entrepreneurial attitudes etc, is time taken from subject-centred studies. On the other hand, enhancing students' powers of learning serves the goals of *both* subject advancement and student employability. Students with enhanced powers of learning are in a better position to contribute to the advancement of an academic subject just as they are in a better position to contribute to an employing organisation. Enhancing students' powers of learning is a way of resolving the divergent forces of vocational higher education and traditional university education.

In recent years a third force has emerged in higher education; it is to equip university students for lifelong learning. A growing awareness in the 1990s of the accelerating pace of change in technology, the economy, society and in employment led to growing awareness of the need for lifelong learning (Brown, 2009). It was increasingly recognised that the 'half-life' of knowledge and skills acquired in institutions of higher education was declining and this implies a need to prepare students for continuing learning throughout their lives. Some university academics saw this as an opportunity for universities such that graduates would return at intervals throughout their lives to be topped up with the latest knowledge (eg Watson and Taylor, 1998). Others saw that the real need was to develop students' abilities to plan and manage their own learning after university. In other words, as well as being subject-centred and vocationally-relevant there was increasing pressure for a university education to prepare students for lifelong learning. This third goal was the third force which university teachers felt as a pull in yet another direction.

We have seen that enhancing students' powers of learning resolves the dilemma posed by meeting the goals of providing a traditional academic university education and a vocationally-relevant education. On reflection, it also addresses the goal of preparing students for lifelong learning. Enhancing students' powers of learning not only increases their employability in graduate jobs and their fitness to contribute to the development of their academic subject, it also equips them to continue their learning after university and across their lifespan.

Our conclusion that the root cause of graduate employability is enhanced capacity to learn has significant implications for government. The pressure in the 1990s to include the goal of preparing students for lifelong learning came mainly from government. The underlying reason

that government provides funding support for university education is because it believes that university graduates contribute to the material well-being of the population as a whole. This is the classic 'social benefit' rationale for subsidising an activity. This belief is relevant to the conclusion of this article in the following way: national economic growth is limited by the pace of change in the economy which, in turn, is limited by the ability of the people as a whole to learn and make the most of the opportunities afforded by the growing accumulation of knowledge. In other words, a university education that places more emphasis on learning capacity is one that supports faster advance in the material well-being of society which is a core aim of government. A higher education that puts more weight on developing students' powers of learning is therefore likely to be welcomed by government and hence attract government support.

For universities there are considerable implications. First and foremost is the need to emphasise enhancement of the students' powers of learning. A university that develops students' capacity and inclination to learn not only enhances their employability but also their ability to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and also prepares them for lifelong learning. Developing students' capacity to learn and disposition to learn should therefore be emphasised in institutional learning and teaching strategies.

What can a university do to enhance its students' powers of learning? It can ensure that new students are very clear that university education will be unlike school; in particular, university education will be more self-directed. It can focus learning instruction and direction on newly-arrived students and withdraw it in a planned way over the students' undergraduate careers so that the students take increasing responsibility for planning and managing their own learning. It can ensure that the final year of undergraduate study contains *at least* one course unit of independent study, ie study where the student has responsibility for setting the learning outcomes, the means of achieving them and the means (and criteria) of assessment. Are lectures an appropriate form of learning support for students in their final year? Would it be unreasonable for the whole of the final year of a degree course be self-planned and self-managed by the student with the university providing support for these processes? Radical methods of developing students' powers of learning are explored in Bourner (2009).

What can universities do to develop students' *inclination* to learn? They can try to make the learning experience enjoyable and rewarding for the students. They can model enthusiasm for learning (Greener,

2009). They can encourage students to study the subjects that most interest and excite them as this will stimulate their learning inclinations. They can facilitate transfers between courses where possible to capitalise on emerging interests in particular fields of study. And they can seek to develop a love of learning. Developing students' love of learning for its own sake is often viewed as being in opposition to developing graduate employability. The NV approach suggests that this is a false dichotomy.

What can universities do to help students identify signals to graduate employers that they are keen to learn? They can ensure students realise the importance of conveying their keenness to continue learning when they communicate with potential employers, especially through CVs and interviews. Also they can help students explore their experience to date to identify past activities and achievements that indicate a high propensity to learn and continue learning.

In addition to the learning and teaching strategies at the level of the whole university and their implementation at the level of individual departments and courses, there are also implications for other parts of the university. Students need to be supported in acquiring expertise in writing CVs that signal their powers of learning and their keenness to learn in different situations and circumstances. This seems to be a natural task for careers advisory staff in universities. The point is that it is not just a matter of producing a 'good CV' it is a matter of producing a '*graduate CV*' which is one that emphasises evidence of capacity and disposition to learn in the broadest sense of that word.

There are implications also for education development (learning and teaching) units in universities. If there is to be increased emphasis on developing students' powers of learning this is bound to enhance the position of that part of the university that has most expertise, experience and knowledge about learning processes and learning development. Educational development units would receive more requests for advice on the educational development of students to enhance their powers of learning.

There are many implications for students. The main conclusion of this article for students is that they can best enhance the likelihood of finding graduate employment by signalling to graduate employers that they are capable, versatile learners who are keen to learn in whatever circumstances they find themselves. How can they do this? Most obviously, they can get the highest class of degree of which they are capable. This is a clear signal to employers about their powers of learning and the first destinations data shows a significant positive relationship

between class of degree and the percentage of students finding employment within six months of graduating. For any given class of degree there is also a significant positive relationship across universities between the level of university entry requirements and the percentage of graduates finding employment within six months of graduating but this information is of limited value to students who are already enrolled on a degree course at any particular university. Students can provide evidence of achievements that require substantial learning (such as holding a significant office in the student union). They can provide evidence of willingness to place themselves in situations that demand new learning (such as backpacking in countries very different from their own). They can get the kind of work experience that involves much new learning (such as a substantial and significant volunteering project). These are all signals on a student's CV that convey information about the student's ability and willingness to learn in different circumstances.

One more thing...

The last section identified a range of implications for universities and students. There is one more implication which goes rather deeper and is therefore worth exploring further.

The main conclusion of this article is that the principal difference between graduates and non-graduates is that graduates are more prepared to learn and better prepared to learn. This implies that the primary task of university education is to develop students' powers of learning and inclination to learn. But what exactly do we mean by the term 'learning'? 'Learning' can be unpacked into planned learning and unplanned learning. These two components of learning are exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories; all learning that is not planned must be unplanned (and vice versa) and no learning can be both planned and unplanned. Planned learning and unplanned learning are the two sides of the learning coin.

Planned learning is learning that is goal-directed. The term 'planned learning' therefore implies learning goals (or intended learning outcomes) together with some idea about how those outcomes will be realised. Most of the espoused learning of institutions of education, including universities, is planned learning. Typically teachers (and lecturers) set goals and try to manage the learning processes.

Unplanned learning, by contrast, is learning that can take place in the absence of learning goals. It is normally simply a by-product of experience. For that reason it is sometimes called experiential learning. If one wishes to develop the ability to distil more learning from

experience then the key seems to be more reflection and better reflection. This is why David Boud *et al* titled their 1985 book *Reflection: the Key to Turning Experience into Learning*. It is also why Donald Schon's influential 1983 book on learning from the experience of professional practice is titled *The Reflective Practitioner*. And it is why education development units in universities emphasise reflective practice in courses of professional development for university teachers (Bourner *et al*, 2003).

Our understanding of unplanned learning (and its close relatives, experiential learning, informal learning, action learning, emergent learning and reflective learning) is relatively new; it is associated with such names as Kolb, Revans, Schon and Boud who produced significant work in the latter part of the 20th century. Consequently, it has, as yet, established only a limited foothold in educational institutions which remain focused on planned learning.

Within our education system most new knowledge appears first at the highest level and then filters down in increasingly predigested form. Doctoral study is aimed at the actual discovery of new knowledge. The reading lists of Masters' degrees are usually heavy with journal articles which report the latest findings in a field of study. As one moves down from the final year of an undergraduate degree through to the first year the appearance of journal articles on student reading lists become rarer and instead intermediate textbooks appear and then at first year level are the introductory textbooks. And material that was once taught only at university eventually finds its way onto the A level curriculum and so on.

In a similar way we might expect the latest thinking on reflective learning to have most impact in the first instance in higher education. It is significant that the clearest evidence of such thinking within HE is the courses that universities provide for the development of university lecturers in learning and teaching where there is considerable emphasis placed in reflective learning and reflective practice (Bourner *et al*, 2003). Whether by design or by accident, it is through these courses that university lecturers are becoming equipped to extend university education to develop students' powers of unplanned learning in the form of reflective learning.

If the main advantage that a university education confers on students is the development of their learning faculties (and hence their capacity and disposition to learn) then there is no reason why this should be limited to planned learning only. Universities can confer further advantage on their students by developing their ability and inclination to capture the lessons of their experience in employment by unplanned

learning. In other words, a university that seeks to develop its students' powers of learning can ensure that, as well as developing students' ability to manage their planned learning, they also get an opportunity to develop their powers of unplanned learning, ie their ability to capture the lessons of their own experience. It can do so by developing their ability and inclination to learn from reflection.

Conclusions

The starting point for this article was the changed (and changing) pattern of destinations of new graduates since the data was first published in the 1960s. Evidence of increased unemployment and underemployment of new graduates is worrying for many groups in society not least the government, universities and the students themselves. The belief that giving more weight to the development of employability skills within university is a strong or effective solution to the problem is not supported by the empirical evidence. This approach, termed the 'old vocationalism', has been tried with increasing intensity since at the least the 1980s but with limited success. When a course of action meets with limited success one response is to try harder and another response is to find a different approach. In this article we have looked for a different approach to the development of graduate employability. This search has led to an approach which gives greater weight to the development of students' learning capabilities and inclinations which we have termed 'new vocationalism' to differentiate it from increasing emphasis on the development of employability skills.

This approach resolves the divergent forces within HE towards developing student employability, the traditional academic university education and the preparation of students for lifelong learning. It also has the benefit of playing to the existing values and strengths of the higher education system, including developing students' practice of learning, and to the preferences that graduate employers reveal in their hiring decisions (taking on graduates as employees who are ready, willing and able to learn). In so doing, it elevates the priority attached to developing students' powers of learning and reduces the priority of chasing a changing and expanding set of employability skills. For the students, this new vocationalism offers a chance to build on the abilities that gained them a place at university and develop a strength that experts in lifelong learning have concluded will serve them well for their entire life: willingness and ability to learn without close supervision.

In traditional university education knowledge is the goal and learning is the means to that end. The new vocational higher education has a different teleological position; learning is the goal and the acquisition of

knowledge is the means. The phrase that best captures the nature and aspiration of traditional university education is ‘knowledge is power’ whereas the message of the new vocationalism is ‘learning is power’.

Universities will always be pulled between the competing demands of professional bodies, employers, government and the increasingly loud student voice, in addition to their own funding and efficiency constraints in a time of growing student numbers. The new vocationalism involves holding fast to developing students’ powers of learning and the preparation of students who are versatile learners, ready, willing and able to learn in whatever situations they find themselves in after graduating. This is something that universities are equipped to excel in with the support of active learning and teaching units and careers advisory services.

Universities have always produced graduates for employment in the *learned* professions and it is time to recognise that that they are now also producing graduates for the *learning* professions.

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