Employability is in the Eye of the Beholder: Employer decision-making in the recruitment of work placement students

Skills, Higher Education and Work-based Learning

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper outlines findings from an exploratory research project investigating perspectives on the recruitment of work placement students among a diverse sample of employers in order to disentangle what constitutes student 'employability' in the eyes of these employers.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper draws on data collected in 30 detailed qualitative interviews with managers responsible for the recruitment and selection of work placement students in a wide range of organisational settings.

Findings

The paper identifies multiple facets of employability that are the explicit or implicit focus of student recruitment and highlights the often subjective, unknowable and shifting criteria used to select among similar candidates for employment.

Research limitations/implications

Despite the richness of the data, the restricted sample of managers interviewed limits the degree to which the findings can be generalized. It provides, however, a strong rationale for a greater focus in research and practice on the demand-side of the employability equation.

Practical implications

This paper presents a strong argument for a more nuanced understanding of how employers select among applicants to enable more effective student preparation for the labour market.

Originality/value

This paper contributes to the literature seeking to elucidate the range of factors that shape employment outcomes and, in doing so, adds to the political and academic discourse on employability, skills and the role of HEIs in preparing students and graduates for the labour market.

Keywords: Higher education, labour market, work placements, internships, employability, recruitment

Introduction

A central tension exists at the heart of current UK government policy regarding the future of higher education (HE): first, the view that HE has a fundamental role to play in providing the highly-skilled labour for an internationally-competitive knowledge-intensive UK economy (CBI 2009); second, the notion that the state should not ultimately bear the costs of a university education and that students should repay the cost of a degree once in a 'graduate' job. The first of these dimensions of current policy is not new, albeit with some variation in historic emphasis, and has been a fundamental tenet of HE expansion since the 1990s. Similarly, the second is a continuation of relatively recent government policy but further shifts student perceptions of their position within the sector towards that of service consumer. Taken together these aspects of current HE policy, place the notion of graduate employability more greatly at the heart of HE than ever before, the culmination of a long-term shift in policy focus towards vocationalism and an economic rationale for HE that began, in an explicit sense, with the 1985 Green Paper on higher education that signalled the government's promotion of vocational education over the social sciences and arts (although the growth of vocational subjects such as business and management studies was already underway by that point).

Subsequently, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been placed under progressively growing pressure to contribute to the employability of the graduate labour supply (Naidoo and Jamieson 2004). As a result, the inclusion of explicit employability skills 'training' on undergraduate degrees continues to proliferate partly driven by policy imperatives for increased employer involvement in HE curriculum development (for example, HM Treasury 2006; BIS 2009a; 2009b). This is despite contention over *where* employability skills can best be developed (Cranmer 2006) and whether it is the role of universities to explicitly prepare undergraduates for the workplace at the behest of employers (Stewart and Knowles, 1999; Hesketh, 2000). Employers have long bemoaned the 'work-readiness' of the graduate labour supply and evidence continues to suggest malcontent regarding, for instance, proper understanding of the working world (CIPD 2012), aptitude in team working and interpersonal skills, problem-solving and analytical thinking (CMI 2002). This is despite concerted attempts to engage with employers and to address the skills requirements of the labour market, particularly among newer HEIs, reflecting their prior incarnation as vocationally focused polytechnics or colleges of further education. However, Mason *et al.* (2003) report that there actually exists little consensus between managers about the extent of work readiness they expect from new recruits and how soon after recruitment they should be able to work without detailed supervision. Subsequently, the extent to which such employer dissatisfaction represents a 'real' skills gap is contested (Hesketh 2000). Nonetheless, substantial resources have been invested in efforts to develop students' employability skills while they are at university, either by 'embedding' skills within degree course or to offer students 'parallel' or

'stand-alone' courses (Mason *et al.* 2003), in addition to the more traditional 'vocational' offering of sandwich degree programmes with a substantial, often year-long, work placement.

Despite a lack of resolution regarding this long-running debate over the extent of the graduate skills deficit and whose responsibility it is to address, the imperative for HEIs to better prepare students for entering the labour market will continue to intensify as a result of both the increased personal contribution to the costs of HE and contemporary patterns of youth, including graduate, unemployment and under-employment. Understanding graduate labour market dynamics and the 'real' needs of employers, and subsequently seeking to provide students with the range of skills, attributes and competencies to best enable them to achieve the employment outcomes to which they aspire, is of paramount importance for both HEIs and their students. This requires the detailed and systematic exploration of the impact of those activities that contribute towards graduate employability, including work placements integral to an undergraduate programme of study. More than this, it requires a sophisticated appreciation of what constitutes 'employability' and how different activities within the HE experience contribute to its development. As policymakers, universities, employers and prospective students focus ever-greater attention on employment outcomes of graduates (Pond and Harrington 2011), HEIs will seek to develop all avenues by which graduates can develop the attributes and experience desired in the labour market. Moreover, despite the huge expansion of the graduate labour supply in the last two decades, employers continue to talk in terms of a 'war for talent' and the scarcity of particular graduate attributes. In this respect, ensuring a proper understanding of the relationship between work experience, competency development and labour market attainment would seem more critical than ever.

Work Placements, Internships and Employability

A long-standing means by which vocational students can acquire work experience as an integral part of their undergraduate study is the 'work placement'. Such work placements are characterised by an extended period of employment – typically 9 to 12 months in duration – between the second and final year of a degree programme and are often a key route into employment in a graduate role. Despite the proliferation of alternative means by which students can acquire meaningful work experience during their studies (Universities UK 2009), the 'placement year' appears likely to remain a strong feature of undergraduate provision, retaining a recognizable currency both for employers (Lowden *et al.* 2011) and students (Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership 2002; Pollard, Pearson and Willison 2004). Subsequently, the provision of work placements in areas not traditionally associated with sandwich degrees, such as the arts and humanities, is being promoted in some quarters to address historic patterns of comparatively high levels of unemployment and underemployment among graduates of these subjects (Purcell *et al.* 2005). Whilst recent trends suggest both declining take-up of work placements among students (Walker and

Ferguson 2009) and a reduction in the availability of placements provided by employers (UUK 2009) the positive relationship between work placements, the development of employability, and movement into graduate-level employment has, therefore, been systematically amplified over recent years, both within policy discourse and that activities of HEIs themselves.

Research into work placements has tended to focus on either the impact of placements on subsequent employment outcomes (for example, Cranmer 2006; Blackwell *et al.* 2010; Mann 2012; Wilton 2012) or on examining the student experience during placement (for example, Bullock *et al.* 2009; Smith *et al.* 2007). This literature suggests that for graduates entering the labour market, the combination of a sustained period of work placement as part of a sandwich degree is often held up as a significant asset, providing two broad categories of benefits associated with the completion of a work placement: the development of student's generic skills and personal attributes (Coates and Koerner 1996); and, the provision of opportunities for (early) employment and career achievement (Bowes and Harvey 1999; Crebert et al. 2004; HECSU 2005; Mason *et al.* 2003; Pollard *et al.* 2004). However, Wilton (2011) reports that the employment 'returns' to students who have undertaken such placements were more variable than such a happy consensus appears to suggest. In a study of the early career paths of over 1000 business and management graduates, Wilton (*ibid*.) found that, despite universally positive views on work placements among interview respondents, completing a sandwich placement as part of business and management degree programme does not universally translates into either greater reported skills development or superior labour market achievement, either immediately after graduation or four years post-graduation. Whilst such studies are enlightening about the employment outcomes of undertaking a work placement, they tell us little about the process by which placement employment is obtained. Connectedly, what is also less evident in the literature is an employer perspective on placement employment (although recent research by Atfield *et al.* (2009) does explore the costs and benefits of placements to employers). In particular, there appears to be no systematic exploration of the process by which placement students are recruited and, more specifically, the attributes that constitute placement employability from an employer viewpoint.

In order to begin in assess how placements contribute to achievement a proper understanding of employability is needed, starting with those applicant attributes that placement employers look for in placement recruits. However, despite its typically offhand use, the notion of employability holds shifting and diverse meanings (Gazier 1999) and it's true nature – in terms of what factors are most significant in shaping graduate employment outcomes – remains contested (Tomlinson 2012). A useful starting point in understanding dimensions of employability is the oft-cited conceptualisation provided by Hillage and Pollard (1998) who identify four factors upon which individual '*capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required'* (p.1) is dependent: possessed assets (knowledge, skills and attitudes); how these assets are used and deployed in the

labour market (reflecting career management skills, job search skills, labour market information and personal adaptability); the way these assets are presented to employers (for instance, in applications, CVs and personal and aesthetic presentation) and, the context of their deployment and in which the individual works (both the supply and demand for skills and jobs and wider individual circumstances). Within this conceptualisation there is an explicit consideration of what Brown and Hesketh (2004) refer to as the *absolute* and *relative* dimensions of employability, the former being the attributes of the individual, the latter being the context in which they are deployed, both of which are critical to understanding the factors associated with labour market attainment. Similarly, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) stress the importance of 'broad' definitions of employability (as opposed to 'hollowed out'), which incorporates individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors, including labour market factors, vacancy characteristics and recruitment factors. This is clearly a critical consideration in evaluating both undergraduate student and graduate access to jobs as previous studies have long identified both social group disadvantage and institution of study as key aspects of one's broad employability (Purcell *et al.* 2005; Wilton 2007, 2011), particularly where firm-specific recruitment decisions implicitly or explicitly reinforce this disadvantage (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

However despite recognition of the multi-dimensional nature of employability in much academic literature, much of the discussion of employability within HE and wider policy is inherently reductive, presenting employability as what Gazier (1999) refers to as 'initiative employability'', where employability refers only to the marketability of cumulative human capital, with an explicit focus on individual responsibility for one's own employability. In other words, employability is often presented as context-free. For instance, the CBI/NUS (2011: 14) define employability as *'a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy'.* This notion of employability is most typically the focus of government or institutional policy and approaches to enhancing graduate employability, usually in the form of a list of generic qualities that recruiters expect or desire in applicants, whether for placements or graduate roles. For example, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2009a) report, *'employers particularly value* [in graduates] *broad 'employability' skills, such as communication, motivation, independence, analysis, confidence and problem solving… this is one of the strongest messages from employers to government'*. As such, these 'narrow' conceptualisations of employability tend to address only one of two perspectives on employability, that which focuses on individual 'potential' to acquired desired employment (through the development of appropriate human capital) and, not what might be termed 'realised employability' – the actual acquisition of desired employment.

This paper contributes to the literature that seeks to elucidate the range of factors that shape

employment outcomes outlining the findings from an exploratory research project investigating perspectives on the recruitment of placement students among a diverse sample of employers. Drawing on 30 detailed qualitative interviews conducted with managers responsible for the recruitment and selection of work placement students in a wide range of organisational settings, the paper disentangles what constitutes student 'employability' in the eyes of these employers, whether directly stated or inferred by formal and informal recruitment practice. In doing so, this paper adds to the political and academic discourse on graduate employability, skills and the role of HEIs in preparing graduates for the labour market and to the debates around the current policy focus on the supply-side of the labour market and reported employer malcontent with the work-readiness of recent graduates.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted between October 2012 and March 2013 with managers responsible for the recruitment of undergraduate placement students during a 40-week paid industrial placement. The research benefited from the cooperation of the placements offices in two faculties of a post-1992 university – the Faculties of Engineering and Technology and Business and Law. These placements offices provided the researcher with the names and contact details of managers in organisations with whom they had either previously dealt with as a placement employer, who had visited the institution as part of an employer's process of placement recruitment and/or who the placement team had a longstanding relationship, typically resulting from a steady stream of placement students which these employers viewed as of high quality. Interviewees were contacted, either replying to agree and arrange the interview or referring the request for interview to a more suitable colleague. These interviews were either conducted over the telephone or face-to-face at the manager's place of work. Interviews typically lasted approximately 45 minutes.

The sample of 30 employers covered a range of industry sectors (including the public sector, ICT, pharmaceuticals, surveying, financial services and business services), company sizes (from sole traders to large MNCs), number of placement students taken yearly (ranging from 80 to one) and location. In larger organisations, where placement students were recruited and supported via a dedicated HR department, job titles of those contacted included student recruitment manager, early talent recruiter and employee development officer. In smaller firms, responsibility (and often advocacy) for placement students fell to a diverse range of managers and directors. The interviews covered a broad range of issues relating to the recruitment and management of placement students. Key themes included: criteria employed in the recruitment of placement students; perceptions of student work-readiness on arrival; the process of employment 'assimilation'; benefits of placements for both parties; connection between placement and post-graduation employment; and, the role of universities in preparing students to obtain and be successful during work placements. All interviews were

recorded and transcribed in full. Analysis of the data was conducted using qualitative data analysis software in order to identify and explore specific themes that arose in each conversation, to make links between emergent ideas and to begin the process of conceptualising areas of interest, as well as to evaluate responses in the context of key organisational attributes (such as size of employer and industry sector). The coding process was ongoing throughout the research project and interviews were gradually more finely coded, and themes and sub-themes more deeply explored, to build up layers of understanding and identify patterns in the data.

The approach taken to data analysis was inductive in that the focus was on theory building rather than theory testing. However, on the basis of the literature review undertaken prior to the analysis, a number of themes were identified as being central to an understanding of the complex nature of student and graduate employability, for example, the influence of context. Therefore, at the outset of the analytical process, a framework of ideas and themes had been identified which were to be explored in analysis. However, certain areas of interest emerged as important during the process of analysis itself, most notably, the at least partially subjective nature of recruitment decisions.

For the purposes of this paper, the focus of the analysis was on employability and the 'signifiers' recruiters employ to identify suitable recruits and the process by which such candidates are selected. Whilst not directly engaging respondents in a discussion of employability *per se*, the interviews provided an opportunity to provide an assessment of employability in organisational context and to identify commonality and difference among how employers select between candidates for employment. As such, the interviews provided an opportunity to explore both absolute and relative dimensions of employability and the factors important in students bridging the gap between 'potential' and 'realised' employability.

The principle limitation of this study was the sample size. Whilst the data collected in the interviews provided a rich resource by which to assess individual and organisational perspectives of employability, they do not necessarily provide the basis for generalisation to other employers. However, given the data were collected from a diverse sample of recruiters across a range of industry sectors and who recruit from different disciplinary areas of HE, the findings indicate a series of consistencies across employers that point towards the need for deeper understanding of employability that incorporates the views of employers and extends beyond supply-side notions. In this sense, it provides, at the very least, a sound rationale for further research in this area and provides a useful insight into how universities might best target energy and resources to serve the needs of their students and how students can help themselves in securing desired-for work experience.

In addition, it should be acknowledged that, for many employers in the sample, the HEI under

question was considered one of a select number of institutions they prioritised during the recruitment of placement students and, reciprocally, they were viewed by university staff as offering students a positive developmental experience whilst on placement. This may have led to a more subjective assessment of graduate attributes than would have been ideal, not least regarding the importance of both institution of study and university-organisational relationships in student recruitment. However, the interviews provided sufficient evidence to suggest that employers provided a relatively dispassionate assessment of the range of factors that shape recruitment decisions and the means by which they arrive at these decisions.

Discussion

Reflecting the previous discussion regarding the importance of considering both human capital and contextual dimensions of employability, a working definition of employability is considered useful for the purpose of assessing employer's perspectives. Given that the focus in the recruitment of work placement students is on evaluating the potential among candidates for high levels of future job performance then, for the purposes of analysing the interview data and discerning how employer's conceptualise the notion, then 'employability' is defined as *'the individual possession, and the ability to convey the possession, of the skills, knowledge and personal attributes, that are positively associated with future job performance and are appropriate to a specific organisational and work setting'*. This bears relation to the notion of employability proposed by Hillage and Pollard (1998) discussed previously. This is not to disregard the importance of the wider social context of employability (particularly, the impact of social group disadvantage), rather a device to focus attention on the impact of individual signifiers of applicant potential and the explicit and implicit means by which such potential is 'deduced' through formal and informal recruitment and selection practices. Indeed, as discussed below, whilst individually focused, such a definition of employability needs to be viewed within its wider socio-economic context.

For the purposes of analysis, we can break this definition into three parts reflecting a) individual human capital, b) context-specific employability and c) the ability to articulate the possession of desired attributes.

Individual human capital

With regards to the absolute dimension of employability, the interview findings in this area were unsurprising as to the individual attributes that recruiters expected candidates to possess. Although there was a degree of variation in emphasis between employers - not least between those offering relatively generic management work placements and those offering specific technical roles - most were in agreement that a baseline requirement for participation in the recruitment process was the demonstrable possession of particular

competencies that they would expect of a prospective employee, including: strong work ethic, computer literacy, willingness and ability to learn and to ask questions, confidence, pro-activity, problem-solving ability, time management and communication skills. This reflects the findings (albeit in the context of graduate employment) of Lowden *et al.* (2011: 24) who report that *'employers expect graduates to have the technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and often managerial abilities or potential*'. More variable, however, was the extent to which employers prioritised academic performance with some stressing minimum standards of achievement in and prior to HE and others using academic performance as a proxy for particular competencies, but accepting alternative means of demonstration, such as prior work experience or volunteering. Recruiters use extra-curricular activity and (any) employment experience as a proxy for applicant possession of desired attributes such as personal ambition, maturity and motivation.

A specific problem for students – and by association, HEIs - lies in the range of rather more vague attributes by which applicants appeared to be differentiated and, subsequently recruited, as in the quote below:

> '[We look for] *somebody who's got the patter, who's got some charm, who's able to talk the client, not talk the client into things but who clients will warm to and will listen to because to be honest, if you've just got the patter, clients aren't interested at all, it's got to be somebody that they trust'* (Line Manager, Construction Industry)

Therefore, whilst the possession of generic employability skills or attributes might represent 'table stakes' that allow students to progress to interview or assessment centre, the problem remains of high levels of subjectivity or invisible criteria being applied to select from a pool of applicants. In this sense, therefore, 'absolute' or human capital 'employability' is rather more than the demonstrable possession of skills, knowledge and attributes that might be developed in HE and can be viewed as something more esoteric. As such, the standard 'policy' models of employability (e.g. CBI/NUS 2011) based on attributes of a 'good' employee (for example, someone able to work in a team, who is resilient and self-motivated) is of limited utility, as it only tends to tell applicants what you need to be like once in employment, rather than seeking to develop what they need to be like to *get* initial employment. This reflects the distinction between employability as the potential to gain desired employment and the realisation of this potential. Given the subjectivity and vague criteria often apparently applied in selection decisions, then what might be more of use to students in preparation for obtaining placements is to instruct them on how best to 'play the game' alongside the hard skills of researching and preparing for formal selection processes. This would seem particularly important where graduates or students are competing for jobs with many similarly qualified, experienced and prepared candidates.

Context-specific employability

Alongside the more generic attributes referred to by many of the interview respondents there were also a range of more specific competencies that placements students were expected to display during their employment and, therefore, evidence in the selection process. These can be characterised either as relating to person-job fit or person-organisation fit. The former included such attributes as the ability to handle pressure, as in the example below:

> *"…* [We need] *to make sure they're going to fit in, in the environment as well because it can be, on the dealing side at busy times, it can be a case of you're on the phone from 8 in the morning till when the market closes in the evening. Obviously that's different on the settlement side of things but again it still can be quite pressurised because you've got to get paperwork dealt with and it's the same on the accounts, you've got to get things paid and everything done on time so we do stress that the environment, especially on dealings, can be a case of you get in, you don't stop talking all day long on the telephone, are you comfortable in that sort of environment".* (Dealing Desk Manager, Financial Services)

In most cases, these attributes were expressed in formal recruitment 'literature' or made explicit in the recruitment and selection process or could be discerned from the type of job role that individuals were expected to fulfil. In this way, they can actively inform student preparation for the recruitment process.

Person-organisation fit was also important in recruitment decisions and, therefore, formed a key dimension of context-specific employability.

> *'…we have very low staff turnover for a reason, that we get people who we think will fit. If you go into other firms of surveyors, I've been in meetings with other surveyors, God almighty, I wouldn't want to work with him/her because they're exceptionally arrogant, they wouldn't fit here, they just wouldn't fit. You do get quite a lot of the people who work in professions who are incredibly arrogant; they wouldn't fit into this organisation. But,* [on the other hand] *if somebody is painfully shy they wouldn't fit'.* [Partnership Secretary, Construction]

Unlike person-job fit, however, these attributes were not always foreseeable or made explicit. For instance, one company director referred to a desire to recruit '*'someone I can go for a beer with'* [Managing Director, Business Services] thus stressing not the job or work requirements but the social expectations and informal workplace culture associated with employment. This reflects the findings of Brown and Hesketh (2004) regarding subjectivity in recruitment decisions in graduate assessment centres and the importance of social connections in gaining desired employment. Therefore, whilst in formal selection processes, such as assessment centres, where social interaction will inevitably inform the hiring decision, social criteria for selection also influences decisions in more subtle and, apparently unconscious, ways. Whilst this finding is far from revelatory, in the context of seeking to

prepare students both for work and for recruitment processes, such criteria present a notable challenge. Moreover, there was some evidence in the interviews that even within the same firm, recruitment criteria and the importance attributed to particular aspects of employability can vary according to the preferences of the recruiting manager, as outlined in the following extract:

> '… *some of the managers would say* [that] *if you can see… on the student's CV that they dabble and* [electronics] *is their hobby as well, that's really important because it just underlines the individual's motivation for doing what we do* [and] *they want … a couple of managers will look for top A's in A levels and GCSE's in Physics and Maths*... [Alternatively] *one of the managers will say, well actually I appreciate that there are some late starters and so maybe the topmost students don't matter to me so much,* [what's more important is] *an aptitude and a willingness to learn and a baseline of ability to learn… so there is a mixture* [of priorities]' (HR Manager, ICT)

As such, even where applicants demonstrate the possession of explicit or reasonably foreseeable generic and context-specific credentials, competences and attributes, then selection decisions can apparently often be made on more nebulous or variable grounds which render the preparation of candidates for applying for and securing placements that much more problematic. Much is made in the 'new' career literature of the need for individuals to become 'Protean' (Hall 1996) in their career outlook and to be able to adapt to different work scenarios and to nurture professional relationships. A key dimension of one's employability would, therefore, appear to be the capacity to play not only the 'game' in recruitment processes, but also to identify and enact specific roles depending on social and organisational context.

The ability to articulate the possession of desired attributes

As per the definition of employability employed here, the final dimension for placement students to consider is the *'ability to convey the possession'* of the attributes that employers require. In the first instance, this demonstration is in the presentation of 'self' through CV, covering letter, demeanour and personal appearance. These are clearly dimensions of employability where HEIs can aid students through coaching and support and which are largely in the control of the applicant. Employers use a range of proxy measures to assess the individual possession of required attributes, including previous academic performance, work experience and volunteering and personal extra-curricular pursuits. Such experience or achievement constitutes a means of self-presentation and again represents an area of possible intervention whereby institutions can both provide opportunities for students to develop required attributes and the language by which to articulate their possession. When respondents were asked what more HEIs could do to prepare students for placement recruitment, this tended to be the focus of responses. Most employers stressed that students often needed further assistance in *'getting the basics right'* in respect of attention to detail in

application forms, covering letters and CVs and in ensuring students are aware of the need to properly research firms prior to interview. Beyond this, employers were ambivalent about the ability of universities to help students prepare for placement recruitment beyond such briefing on recruitment protocol. In this sense, therefore, employers were under no illusion that they expected to be recruiting a polished performer and that investment of time, effort and money would be required during the course of the placement to assist in the development of employees.

However, there were also aspects of employability, as inferred by a potential employer, that remain largely outside the control of the individual. For instance, both placement and graduate jobseekers are perceived against a backdrop of the institution of study that they attend or had attended. For placement students, this institutional context appeared to represent a source not only of 'traditional advantage' (or otherwise) associated with attendance at a particular HEI (Tomlinson 2012) (for example, based on perceived academic 'quality' or standards or fit between programme and organizational demands) but also reputational advantage in respect of the 'quality' of institutional liaison staff (for example, placement support staff), academic staff which might have a role in supervising placement students and prior placement students. This latter group appears crucial in making a prediction of the 'future job performance' of an applicant from a particular institution. Therefore, studying at a 'preferred provider' HEI represents a key dimension of individual employability as a proxy for many of the academic and personal attributes sought by a specific employer. However, this process of identifying partner institutions for many firms was not fixed and can vary according to the development of specific relationships between HEIs and employers (for example, in the development of programmes of study) or based on more complex criteria applied each year, as below:

> *'…The budget to promote and advertise placement schemes, it's very, very expensive* [so] *I need to have a very clear strategy as to what I'm doing. So, I will pick universities where I'm going* [to target]… *we have a list of tier one and tier two universities… We do the list every year based on five criteria*, [including] *the reputation of the universities…* [and] *placement support… does the university support long-term placements* [as] *part of their studies, whether it's optional or compulsory… because* [some] *might be top* [universities] *but I can't have their students for a year so that's a bit of a problem'.* (Account Manager for European Staffing, ICT)

Conclusions and Implications

Taking the variable returns to work placements identified by Wilton (2012) and apparent inconsistencies in both employers' labour market demands and satisfaction with the graduate labour supply, there exists a clear imperative to better understand how students obtain a 'good quality' work placements – those that can best contribute to the employability of the student - and how HEIs can best help students to obtain such placements. On the face of it,

the findings of this exploratory research are not particularly novel or surprising. However, what is perhaps most interesting is the opportunity that these interviews have provided to explore the concept of employability through the eyes of employers and to go beyond an supply-side, 'absolute' or 'hollowed out' (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005) understanding of the notion, to something more nuanced. Much policy discussion of graduate employability tends to focus on the development of individual attributes in response to the demands of employers. Whilst this would seem logical it presupposes that there is both coherence and consistency in the demands of employers and relative uniformity of requirements across workplaces and sectors. As such, without suggesting the widespread generalizability of these findings and acknowledging the limitations of the study previously discussed, the data collected shines a light on the complexities of recruitment practices and processes at a time when HEIs are grappling more greatly than ever with how to respond to increasing calls to 'ensure' the employability of graduates and the conceptual and practical problems associated with doing so. This complexity is heightened when considered in the context of on-going inequality of access to jobs in the graduate labour market that can be ascribed to social group disadvantage as mediated by HEI attended and course studied (Purcell *et al.* 2005; Wilton 2011). Indeed, the data collected in this study regarding the importance of individual personal attributes and organisational fit in selection decisions offer some insight into the continued prevalence of indirect discrimination based on social group, particularly social class.

The discussion of recruitment practices and criteria in the interviews suggests that not only are some of the criteria used for selection 'unknowable' to applicants, but also the means by which employers infer the possession or otherwise of these criterion can lie outside of the control of the individual employee. Following McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) therefore, employability needs to be understood, and addressed in policy, as fully located in its broader organisational and labour market context. They include, therefore, in a 'broad' employability framework, *recruitment factors* (as part of the external dimension of employability) including employers' formal recruitment and selection procedures; employers' general selection preferences, employers' search channels and the form and extent of employers' use of informal networks. The interview findings presented here suggest that employability can best be understood as comprised of absolute, relative, relational, reputational and contextual dimensions. Understanding employability as altogether more complex than 'narrow' conceptions suggests, might help better understand why demonstrable attainment of specific skills, attributes and competencies by graduates during their studies does not necessarily translate into the achievement of desired employment outcomes (Wilton 2012). It is of course questionable whether the extent to which even the most sophisticated understanding of formal recruitment practices among HEIs would impact significantly on the inequality that continues to pervade the graduate labour market, alerting job student and graduate job seekers to the demands of employers beyond a list of generic attributes might contribute to some greater equality of access.

On one reading, these findings indicate that HEIs need to be wary in how they seek to develop student employability, not least because the production of 'cookie cutter' applicants through intensively 'taught' employability programmes might prove counter-productive. On this evidence, it is in the interests of both prospective placement students and their HEIs to focus on not only developing generic employability skills but, where possible, the context-specific competencies related to a specific (or range of) job role(s) or organization, as well as the means by which students market themselves, not least because, as one respondent reported, shortlisting for placement opportunities is often *'brutal'* with simple errors of presentation in covering letters or CVs leading to rejection irrespective of their content. Preparation of students for placement should, therefore, focus on ensuring students understanding the nature of employment in general and in the specific firm, an appreciation of the conventions of recruitment processes, encouraging and maximising opportunities for extra-curricular activity and ensuring students can communicate the connection between their studies and organisational practice. It also requires students to be aware of the need to be responsive to the social and personal dynamics associated with student or graduate recruitment.

Reflecting the relational and reputational dimensions of individual employability identified here, in order to improve the chances of success in accessing placement opportunities, it may be particularly profitable for HEIs to prioritise the development of relationships with employers, not least through their placement specialists, as this appears a critical way in which they can enhance the relative employability of their students. This follows the view of Lowden et al. (2011:25) who stress the need for *'effective, sustained and equitable partnerships between HEIs and employers'*. With HE likely to be characterised by an increasing requirement for fiscal restraint, targeted investment in developing employer networks and positioning themselves as a student 'provider of choice' is likely to be the basis for serving the needs of all parties: HEIs, employers and students.

Overall, whilst the data presented here relates to the views of managers in a relatively small sample of employers and, therefore, cannot be considered more widely generalisable, it does provide a clear indication of the need to better understand employers' demands for student and graduate labour beyond wish lists of skills and reported widespread dissatisfaction. Fruitful future research in this area should focus, therefore, on the recruitment processes and practices of employers in order to provide a sound basis for investment of scarce resources for the development of student and graduate employability. Moreover, whilst the study was undertaken in relation to one UK university, given that graduate employability is of concern to employers and HEIs in other nations (see, for example, Jackson 2010) these findings may resonate with recruitment practices outside of the UK. As such, there would appear to be a need to consider the degree to which such employer perspectives are replicated in other

contexts and under different HE and employment systems, along with the likely implications.

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