Ann Pegg

A closer relationship between working and learning? Employers and distance learners talk about developing work skills

Across Europe universities are expected to work more closely with employers to ensure that learners develop employability skills for the workplace. Policy discourse suggests that a closer relationship between universities and employers can act as a mechanism to develop employability skills more effectively. This article draws on a small qualitative case study which investigated the "Graduate@ Work" initiative undertaken by the Open University. These distance learners, sponsored by their SME employers, were already working and the research investigated employer and student understandings of the connections between employability skills, working and learning and whether facilitating a closer relationship between the university and employers would enable more effective learning in relation to the workplace.

The relationship between universities and national economic achievement is one with many tensions, increasingly played out through political agendas which drive funding for universities. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills is pressing for funding and policy change to "build the ability of learning providers to work with business" (UKCES 2009:1) and are clear that institutional change within academia is required to achieve this. However, much of the current debate about employability in the UK,

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and elsewhere, focuses on the transition of young full-time students to the world of work and makes the assumption that graduates enter employment with no work experience and with skills deficits. These beliefs lead to repeated calls for governments and universities to ensure that students develop the skills that are perceived to have value for the workplace. To enhance student employability universities are directed to work closely with employers in designing the curriculum and to provide work experience (Mason et al. 2009, CBI/UUK 2009, Reeve et al. 2009). Likewise, the CBI Higher Education Task Force recommends that employers act: "To ensure all graduates have employability skills, all businesses should provide work experience, internship and live project opportunities for school and university students" (2009:7). The expectation here is that a closer relationship between employers and universities will shape both the content of the curriculum and the teaching of employability skills through the workplace. Many universities are engaging in such initiatives, however, the nature of this closer relationship for individual employers, and its effectiveness as a mechanism for enhancing students' employability skills, is an area that requires further research.

Understandings of employability in the context of higher education often do not take into account the substantial numbers of learners already working whilst they study. The numbers of distance and part-time learners continues to increase (over 1 million in the UK) and many full-time students also work to support their studies (Callender 2008, Little 2005). If employability skills are best gained from the workplace it is worth exploring how employers and their employees who are currently studying and working, view the connections between learning and skills development. The Open University offers distance learning qualifications to over 200,000 students. It works nationally and internationally using on-line communications and supports students through offices in the UK and Europe. Many of these learners are mature students or studying professional development courses, however the Graduate@Work initiative was aimed at young students (under 25) in the rural East of England, who wished to study for a degree whilst working. Young, unemployed, people were placed with SME employers through a partnership between the Open University and a business support agency. Employer/employee pairs were advised about Open University degrees and module options by a facilitator from the agency, and a programme of study was discussed. The design of the OU curriculum allows flexibility in the modules chosen for study towards a degree; involving employers in the discussions was intended to ensure that module choices were relevant to the employers' needs. Support for learning from employers was negotiated at the start of the programme and took various forms, for example, fee payment and/or dedicated study time (and places) in the workplace. Nine students were placed in the first year of the scheme.

The discussion in this article focusses on two aspects of the closer relationship between universities and employers; employer choice in shaping the curriculum and the development of employability skills. Using the Graduate@Work scheme as an example of positive efforts to develop a closer relationship with employers a case study approach was adopted to explore the nature of this relationship. After briefly outlining the policy background encouraging such close relationships I discuss the employer's and student's perspectives in turn. The article ends with an exploration of the issues that arose from the case study and indicates some lines of thought for further research in this area.

Research methodology

Van Teiflingen and Hundley (2001) suggest that pilot studies should be reported more widely to provide insights about both the research process and the outcomes of the pilot study. This qualitative case study (Yin 1994; Stake 1998) explored whether employers and employees in the same workplace had different perceptions of graduate employability and the development of skills through learning at work. This differs from pervious research which either identifies employer perceptions (UKCES 2009; CBI/UUK 2009), student views (e.g. Tomlinson 2008), or both (see Andrews & Higson 2008) but does not link individual employers with individual learners through a workplace. The research sought to gather perceptions about the way that a closer relationship between the university and SME employers might impact upon the development of employability skills for workers. Semi-structured interviews (audio-recorded) were conducted with participants from each of the three relational positions, the university (2), employers (2) and students (3). Data on the remaining employers (6) and students (6) was gathered from Open University records. A thematic analysis was conducted to examine the shared and differing perceptions of the participants using the interview data. Stake (1998) argues that an instrumental case study of this type, using purposive sampling, is not intended to support generalizations but to develop ideas and lines of enquiry for future research. Expanding the research is discussed more fully in the conclusion.

A closer relationship between employers and universities: policy discourse

National governments and European Union policy makers have consistently suggested that workers need to be flexible, adapt and move between different jobs during their working lives and to continually develop as workers within a knowledge economy. English government initiatives such as "Aim Higher" (a promotional campaign to encourage more school leavers to take up higher education), the Government White Paper, The Future of Higher Education

(2003) and more recent government reports (BIS 2009, UKCES 2009) consistently emphasize university connections with employers and focus on the issue of employability. Top level policy initiatives embed employability within qualifications frameworks such as Bologna[1], national level agreements[2] and funding arrangements ensure that policy discourses of student employability encompass both the aims of higher education institutions and their measures of success (HEFCE 2009). Prokou (2008) suggests that "the emphasis on the employability skills of graduates is associated with the emergence of the 'market oriented' or 'pragmatic' university" (2008:392), and certainly performance measures for universities now include measures of graduate employability identified as employment in graduate level jobs. These measures are acknowledged by researchers as problematic, yet used to support data and research about graduate employability in higher education (Harvey 2001; Morley 2001; Mason et al. 2009).

De Bruin and Dupuis (2008) call employability an 'ambiguous' notion. The current definition of the term identified in the CBI/UUK document 'Future fit' (2009) is explained 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 (2009:8).

This differs in only small ways from definitions discussed by Yorke (2004) and Moreau and Leathwood (2006). Broader definitions of employability for higher education students do exist; employability has been linked with career satisfaction (Tomlinson, 2008), lifelong learning, innovation and sustainability and identity formation (Holmes, 2001). These broader conceptualizations can shift the discussion away from definitions of skills, and supply and demand in the labour market, but policy discourses within government and higher education funding bodies have increasingly moved towards the narrow conception of employability in terms of employment, listing individual skills and employer identified skills gaps (Moreau & Leathwood 2006; Boden & Nedeva 2010). Closely associated with this latter discourse of employability is the idea of employer engagement, that universities should develop closer relationships with employers and shape the curriculum to meet their requirements, and through doing so more effectively develop the employability skills of higher education students.

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[1] www.ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf
[2] The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – QAA 2008 and The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland – QAA 2001.

Working with the university: shaping the curriculum and developing employability skills

For the two employers in this study the notion of "graduate employability" was understood in terms of broad discourses rather than the narrow individualistic discourse identified above. Understanding that distance learners were embarking on a programme of study towards a degree that might take up to six years changed the perspective about skills from something that a worker might "possess" to something that the worker would be developing. The employers interviewed for this research focussed on the possibility of a degree as an achievement and currency rather than developing specific employability skills. The students were seen as capable workers in their job roles and received short, in-house or local training in relation to those roles. However, not all degrees had the same value for the employers:

> Don't do a lightweight, what we, in industry if you like, what we would say was a lightweight degree. Because I wouldn't have been very comfortable, despite us being a publishing company, had he chosen something like media studies, compared to what would have been a traditional thing, we place a greater value on a traditional (degree). (Robert, publishing company director)

The student, Ulrich, in this company is undertaking a degree in English Literature. For this employer the degrees in themselves suggested a certain capacity for work:

> Our belief is that someone who does do a degree has shown a level of ability and understanding and it's something that stretches them mentally in different directions. (Robert, publishing company director)

Whilst for the other employer there was an issue of engaging a worker capable of accessing academic knowledge to benefit the business. Although there was again flexibility in the choice of degree the company expected it to be in a relevant area. This was broadly interpreted and covered 'anything in the field of science' (Tom, pharmaceutical company) to complement the work of a laboratory technician.

The work itself generated other, more specific, employability skills:

> The nice thing is that he's got a work, business work ethic, and in time terms he's there from 9 till 5.30 and his nose is to the wheel (Robert, publishing company director).

These ideas resonate with what Harsthorn and Sear (2005) suggest fits with a modern knowledge economy where basic skills (literacy, numeracy and attitude to work) should be integrated with enterprise skills (e.g. innovation, risk, autonomy) and sector specific skills (e.g. work context knowledge, creativity and specialist knowledge). They suggest that combining these elements will ensure continued and flexible employment for individuals across regions and sectors and a closer match between individual skills development and local economic development.

In the context of this rural area, rather than the urban area that Harsthorn and Sear are discussing, the local working environment proved to be an important issue in terms of staff retention and the types of jobs available. No matter how well individuals developed there might not be "flexible" opportunities for them locally, an area which suffered from movement to nearby urban areas by younger people and well qualified workers. Tom (pharmaceutical company manager) referred to the company 'sourcing' the scheme for an employee:

> Daniel joined us a couple of years ago and we were keen to tap into his obvious academic knowledge […] we saw potential there. So we looked around, and discovered that the OU was probably the best route given what we were trying to achieve – to maintain Daniel here as an employee (Tom, pharnaceutical company).

For both employers developing a closer relationship with the university seemed to be more clearly connected to labour market issues than with developing employability and skills within the workforce. There was an implicit acknowledgement that wages in this rural environment were low and that retaining staff with higher level capabilities was difficult, problems linked to rural restructuring (McGrath 2001). Retaining staff was also an issue at the publishing company and the director there clearly expressed this.

> If their longer term ambitions are elsewhere that's fine, because you can't always find promotional opportunity for people within a set organisation this size. The fact that they're actually good enough to go on, if they've gone on, and they've given you a good 2, 3, 4 years whatever it is, good luck to them as well. You know,, we feel really, really pleased if they're happy and we've had good payback if that's the case. We believe that [the G@W scheme] might be a good model. (Robert, publishing)

This employer seemed to regard supporting learning as a strategy to utilize higher calibre staff than the business might otherwise attract in an area of low wages and with a rural location. Within this framing of the job opportunities

available McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005:209) "broad" concept of employability which considers individual factors (qualifications and skills), personal circumstances (resources, caring responsibilities and culture) and external factors (labour market demand and recruitment methods) seems highly pertinent, with the relational aspects between the personal circumstances and external factors being the most significant for distance learners. These relational aspects became increasingly apparent as students gave their views about their current skills and future prospects.

Concerns with the issue of the time taken to achieve a degree were expressed by Robert, the publishing director. He identified a tension between the business work ethic and the "holiday" ethic of students with long breaks between their study modules. The implication was, because he had set aside two study days a week for Ulrich to work on his degree, that the long "holiday" periods when these two days were not required meant that the momentum and focus of the work ethic was lost. It was difficult to find work to fit in with the study schedule and other staff members might feel that the workloads were different for the student.

> he's the guy there with three days a week employment, and all of a sudden he's got days off which are holidays which can't be accommodated by doing, post for example. […] but in business we don't have 13 weeks or whatever [holiday] it is in education. That bit, given that they're working on modules, I would have thought would have been better used, to have shortened that excessively long period of gaining, of actually obtaining a degree. (Robert, publishing)

The second issue that was raised about this long journey to the degree was one of monitoring progress. Both employers expressed an interest and expectation that as the employer they might expect some sort of progress report from the university rather than relying on the students to let them know about progress.

> Essentially just keeping in touch with us to sort of keep track of how Daniel is doing, and what progress he's making. And whether or not he may well continue or should perhaps look at something different. We get feedback from Daniel, but essentially that's all one sided. (Tom, pharmaceuticals company)

The two employers had views that they hoped the university would take into account as part of the closer relationship, but neither continued to use the facilitator discussions to influence module choices for the students. The employers broad notion of employability, and use of other workplace training courses to

enhance workers skills, seemed to mean that they were satisfied with the university shaping the module content and the student's choice of module within the degree, once the initial degree choice had been made.

Student perspectives: local security and imagined futures

It was interesting that Ulrich, working in the publishing company, made a more specific connection between the skills gained from study and his workplace activities. The extract below shows how Ulrich made an immediate connection between describing his role and specific skills:

> Ulrich: Yes, well I did start with roles in admin, and I dealt with the subscription list which was incoming calls and outgoing calls; sending out reminders that are needed to pay; their subscription fees; sending the mailing list over to the printers and then any queries that I'd deal with, and also incoming cheques I'd post on to the accounts and take off the accounts. But now I'm doing sales, telephone sales. So I ring up and sell advertising space, so I have to negotiate and stuff.
>
> Interviewer: Oh right, yes. So what kind of skills do you? Well negotiation that's a skill.
>
> Ulrich: Negotiation's the main one, and you have to, it's not something that just happens in 30 seconds, you have to take your time, prepare the call, think what you're going to say, what they might say.
>
> [two lines omitted]
>
> Interviewer: Yes, yes. Do you think in any way your studies have helped you develop skills that are helpful in the work?
>
> Ulrich: The studies teach you to, you have to be a lot more independent, and a lot more organised, which helps you not only with work but with everything. I think in life you need to be organised, so it's helped me in that respect. And with the planning, when I plan my call, because I have to plan the stuff I'm doing on the course, and it helps in that respect as well.

Negotiation, independence, organization and planning were all helping Ulrich to perform as a sales negotiator and administrator even though the subject specific content of his degree was not mentioned. Two of the nine students had chosen degrees that were not obviously relevant to their work roles (Ulrich and Isobelle) but they were able to relate general skills gained from their courses to their work. Like Ulrich, Isobel, working as a graphic designer identified the skill of analysis gained from her courses relating to a history degree to her job role:

Isabelle: Well, I have to analyse a lot of artwork to be able to put it into, I don't really know how to explain it. Basically what I have to do is I have to produce my own work related to our company but then at the same time I need to get ideas from other people. And I think, (...) what I found with one of the courses was that it was analysis of art which is really relevant to this.

Trisha did not identify her courses as providing a skill that could be immediately used, but suggested that her language skills would be of use in the future within the wine import/export business that she was involved with.

Interviewer: Do you think your courses help you in any way in the work that you do here?

Trisha: At the moment no, but we do a lot of work with champagne and wine and that kind of thing and we're hoping to go to France and Germany to source the wines and the champagne, so hopefully it will then.

Each of the interviewed students indicated that they had been free to choose their degree modules, and the interview with the facilitator for the scheme indicated that other employers had also given the students a great deal of choice in their study modules. It seemed that supporting the Graduate@Work scheme did not prevent employers from training these workers in other ways. Daniel and Ulrich had both undertaken in-house training with their companies and Isabelle was undertaking an internal management training course. She described this as "just part of the work programme" and did not describe skills gained from this, saying it was more about how to do the job. This did not seem to be viewed as "learning" in the same way as formal study towards a degree.

It was particularly interesting that three of the nine student participants were working for family businesses, but not necessarily with the intention of remaining there after their studies. The personal circumstances mentioned as an aspect of employability by McQuaid and Linsay (2005) were significant for these students in terms of their reasons for remaining at home and in work whilst they studied. Ulrich identified his reasons as primarily social ones:

Ulrich: I was happy round here with all my friends and a good social life and that, and I didn't want to leave that to go away to university. (…) I was happy round here.

Whereas Isabelle and Trisha identified family and economic reasons:

Isabelle: Well I finished school and then I didn't really know what I wanted to do, I'd got into university and I was like well, I'll take a gap year. I deferred my entry and then I started working for my Dad, and I realised that I enjoyed working, and to be honest I didn't want the student debt because I'm not very good with money. So I didn't want that debt and I didn't want to leave home, and this project came up and I was just, well I want to study and it's a great way of studying, and I get to work and stay at home with my family.

Trisha: I did go to university for a year – I did French and German at Nottingham but I thought it was quite expensive so I thought I'll come and work and study at the same time.

These students had clear ideas about where their degree studies might take them in the future, Isabel and Ulrich both wanted to become teachers and Trisha to take modern language studies. The issue of the local was again important here, and Trisha in particular articulated the tensions between what might be described as local security and the possibilities for the future that would involve moving away. Asked about her career plans Trisha responds:

Trisha: I want to do something with interpreting, so nothing really <u>here</u>.

It was Trisha's emphasis on the "here", the local environment, and the assessment of local opportunities as unlikely to provide the career opportunities that she desired, that meant that she saw the future as one in which she might have to move away. In a similar way it was possible that the plans for teaching as a career for Isabelle and Ulrich were a realistic assessment of the local employment opportunities for graduates in this area.

Discussion – working in the present, looking to the future

Investigating the relationship between the university and individual employers highlighted how their views about degrees might differ from those gathered, distilled and presented to policy makers by employer representatives for a particular business sector. The views of these employers about learning for a degree and employability were broader than expected. Two of the SMEs were family businesses, and in the UK 58 per cent of small firms (between 10 and 49 employees) and to 45 per cent of mediumsized companies (with 50 to 249 employees) are family businesses (IFB 2008). It might be expected that this would create

additional tensions about degree choice, the parent's desire for their child to be happy in their choice of subject and some acknowledgement that their child's ambitions might not be to follow them into the family business. Degree choices at these workplaces were never going to be limited to balancing organizational and student aims as we had thought might be the case. However, it was significant that the pharmaceutical company, which was not a family business, also had this approach to choosing a degree, as did other employers discussed by the facilitator in her interview. Employer interest in staff retention meant that they were willing to support the student in choices within a broad range of degree areas.

There seemed little need for employers to link employability skills with these degree level studies as in-house training and proven competencies at work offered a more immediate return to the business from the workers in terms of day to day work. For the employers, but not the students, the rewards from degree level study were regarded as more intangible and reflected the general calibre of the worker rather than bringing specific knowledge or skills into these businesses. Despite efforts to develop a closer relationship with employers it seemed that the boundary between the domain of university study and "the world of work" remained in place. This assumption of a disconnection or boundary between what employers perceive as academic knowledge and vocational or practical knowledge required to run the business, is similar to that recognised in policy documents urging a closer relationship between employers and universities. However, as Reeve and Gallacher (2005) point out in relation to work based learning there seems to be little evidence that employers are seeking to grow higher level skills through partnerships with universities, and "many employers still seek relatively short, highly focussed courses for their employee training" (2005:231). The employers interviewed here had realistic views of the limited opportunities for those developing higher level skills to progress within the company, or even the local area, to graduate level employment. The opportunity to engage with a university seemed to have been taken up to retain and motivate staff rather than to enhance the capabilities of the companies.

The students, in contrast to the employers, did identify skills and knowledge gained from their studies that they could put into practice in these workplaces, either immediately or in the future. These skills included broad, transferable, key skills such as planning and more specific subject related skills such as analysis of art or foreign language skills. What was interesting here was the way in which students related their learning to their imagined futures. Ideas about what might constitute graduate level employment were not necessarily linked to their current employment or their family businesses. Students recognised that in order to achieve graduate level jobs it might be necessary to move away from this area,

or to identify graduate level jobs such as teaching which were available locally. They, along with the employers, assessed that local employment environment as providing few opportunities for graduate level jobs, but were pragmatic about their current opportunity to work. Kanno and Norton (2003) explain that ideas about intentionality and investment for learners, their imagined future, "must be understood not only in terms of our investment in the 'real' world but also in terms of our investment in possible worlds." (2003:248, original emphasis). These ideas are particularly important for distance learners who are rooted in their local working, family and social lives and connected to the imagined community of learners at a distant university.

The question raised was whether a closer relationship between the employers and the university had improved student learning and employability. Students seemed able to recognise areas of knowledge transfer across the boundaries between working and academic knowledge, recognising application of skills and the potential usefulness of the subject knowledge of the courses. Beach (2003) suggests that transfer of knowledge across boundaries is consequential for identity formation and it was interesting to consider here whether this transfer was contributing to the student's identities as workers, learners or as integrating the two. Beach identifies four[3] main conceptual types of consequential transition across boundaries that have impact for individual learning and identities, and here it was the collateral transitions that were significant. Collateral participation in both learning and work, even where learning is not explicitly work-related, can result in developmental opportunities and transformation of knowledge, and it seemed that this knowledge might be applied in the workplace. What was unclear was whether such a transfer of knowledge might have occurred without explicit employer support for learning. Large surveys of distance learners indicate that the majority assess themselves as improving their workplace skills regardless of sponsorship by an employer (HEFCE NSS 2009, OU 2009), however distance learning students who are sponsored by their employer are around 10 per cent less likely to complete their studies (HESA 2009). Developing a closer relationship between employers and universities might more effectively support these sponsored students in completing their studies.

Conclusion

Conducting a qualitative case study helped to surface a number of aspects about the move towards a closer relationship between employers and universities that are worthy of further investigation. Exploring more extensively at what level individual employers, particularly those who are sponsors of students, expect to influence the curriculum within degrees seems a particularly important area

[3] Beach (2003) identifies these possibilities as: lateral transition (one way), collateral transitions (two way), encompassing transitions (expansive) and mediational transitions (integrative).

emerging from this study. For both distance learners, and final year students at traditional universities, choices of module option are important in shaping the character of a degree and knowledge relevant to the workplace. Common understanding indicates that option choices have rested with the student, but there is a lack of empirical evidence to support, or question, such a view. If a closer relationship between universities and employers is to be an effective tool to enhance the relevance of learning to the workplace we need to explore employers' awareness of their potential to influence the curriculum through discussing module options with sponsored students, their level of interest in doing so and the mechanisms through which such three way discussions between the university, employer and student might take place. Reeve and Gallacher (2005) indicate the difficulties and dangers in establishing partnerships with employers in the area of new work based learning programmes; it would seem valuable to investigate a connection between universities and employers, the sponsorship of students, that already exists.

The case study identified the significant number of family businesses operating at the SME level and the importance of taking this factor into account in future work. It also illustrated the value of taking a "paired" approach to employer and student research, even though achieving such pairs proved problematic. Focussing on the workplace offered an opportunity to discuss employability skills in relation to learning and working in a specific context, and highlighted the differences in perception about knowledge transfer between employers and students. Narrow, policy level definitions of employability skills can become "decontextualised" (Boden & Nedeva 2010). Linking the participant's interviews through a specific workplace, in a specific location, illustrated the detail and rationale for the broad understandings of employability used by the employers and the students.

Employability, for both employers and students, seemed to be shaped by their reading of the local employment environment in terms of their current need to develop skills and in terms of their future working prospects. For small workplaces it was unlikely that they could provide "graduate" level employment in terms of pay and status, but they could support development opportunities for individuals which would enhance capability within their workforce in the medium term. These employers did not expect degree level study to provide skills development for the students and "employability" was not an issue where these workers were already performing their job adequately. Supporting degree level study was seen as a way of retaining workers in this rural area and demonstrating a value for workers in low wage roles. Using a qualitative case study to explore the nature of a closer relationship between the university and employers highlighted differences between policy expectations about employer

involvement in shaping the curriculum and developing employability skills and employer motivations in developing this relationship.

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