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Critical perspectives

## 'Am I employable?': Understanding students' employability confidence and their perceived barriers to gaining employment



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### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses employability among undergraduate Marine Sport Science students' at a post-92 HE Institution in the UK, focusing on perceptions of their own employability and their confidence in gaining graduate employment after having careers education embedded within their programme. Mixed method surveys (69% of cohort/n=57) produced results that showed that Marine Sport Science students' perception of their employability increased year on year whilst conversely, confidence in gaining graduate employment decreased year on year. This was due to seven perceived barriers: competition, experience, location, degree quality, qualifications, economy and confidence. The 'diving board theory' was established explaining the juxtaposition of improving perceived employability alongside decreasing confidence in gaining employment.

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## 1. Introduction

According to [Rees, Forbes, and Kubler \(2006\)](#) Graduates in Sport programmes in the UK are well prepared for the wide range of professional and vocationally orientated careers in what is described as a growing and maturing sector, due to capabilities such as independent judgement, initiative, empowered decision-making, team working and interdependence. However, there are concerns expressed about the employability of sport graduates in the UK 'fuelled by the rapid growth of undergraduates studying sport' and concerns over 'the appropriateness of those graduates to employers' needs' ([Minten, 2010, 67](#)). More generally, Margaret Dane (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service) highlights that there is a need for employability to be 'right up there on the agenda, especially in the light of increased tuition fees [in England] that have raised student and parent expectations' ([Anyangwe, 2011, website](#)).

This paper therefore focuses on the continuing issue of employability within Higher Education (HE) in the UK through an examination of students' perception of their own employability and their confidence in gaining graduate employment after they have had careers education embedded within their programmes. Our paper presents the results of a 2012 case study of Marine Sport Science students' at a post-92 HE institution in England. The action to embed careers education within their programmes was taken in 2010 in recognition of the growing concern of employability within HE in the UK, and through guidance from the QAA that stated that 'Careers education can be taught via discrete modules ... or embedded across a programme of study' ([QAA, 2010, 11](#)).

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## 2. Why focus on employability?

Employability is a persistent and significant theme in HE in the UK (Wilson, 2012), and has been a topic of concern for many academics (Blasko, with Brennan, Little, & Shah, 2002; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Holmes, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2002; Pierce, 2002). In particular the enhancement of student employability has become significant due to the pressure of stakeholders including government (BIS, 2011; Dearing, 1997), employers (Archer & Davison, 2008), and students (CBI/NUS, 2011).

Known as ‘massification’, there has been a rapid enrolment growth in HE (King Alexander, 2000) leading to increased competition for traditional graduate employment and accordingly, a reduction in the currency of a degree (Palfreyman, 2012). Whilst this has been partly compensated for by the expansion in the variety of graduate employment available (Elias & Purcell, 2004), because the supply of graduates is large, competition for graduate jobs remains strong. This is evidenced by studies such as the UK Graduate Careers Survey 2014, which reports that ‘the average number of graduate job applications made by finalists has increased from 5.7 applications per student in 2009–2010 and 6.9 applications per student in 2011–2012 to an all-time high of 7.5 applications per student in 2013–2014’ (High Fliers, 2014: website). As an outcome, graduates find that possessing a degree is merely a pre-requisite for their employment - they must also deliver other ‘value added’ experience, skills and qualities. The troubled economic situation of recent years has further contributed to the instability and imbalance between graduate supply and demand. As ‘the relationship between higher education and the economy is longstanding’ (Yorke, 2006, 2) the recent turbulent economic climate of the UK has placed renewed emphasis on this aspect of HE provision.

Increased competition in the graduate labour market combined with the recent increase in tuition fees, means that employability is one of the most significant factors that affects a student's choice about where to study (Diamond, Vorley, Roberts, & Jones, 2012). Significantly, the 2014 Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey reported that 76% of students who took part felt their main reason for attending university had been to improve their job prospects (Sodexo, 2014). Institutional reputation, as well as employment opportunities are both components of the ‘employability’ choice being made by students (Palfreyman, 2012) and in the UK, increased transparency of data on graduate employment prospects through mechanisms such as the Key Information Statistics (KIS), assists students in making informed choices about the anticipated return on their degree investment.

## 3. Embedding employability within HE programmes

HE Institutions and academics have recognised and acknowledged ‘the employability issue’ for some time (Blasko et al., 2002; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Holmes, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2002; Pierce, 2002, Wilson, 2012). For example, in 2002 The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) to help the HE sector engage with employability policy and practice. Whilst many staff then, and even some now, do not see developing employability as being a purpose of HE, what Sarson (2013) terms as ‘education for employment’s sake’, the progression of the ‘employability agenda’ cannot be denied. Career motivations (to improve job opportunities and to improve salary prospects) are top of students’ agenda for undertaking a degree (Sodexo, 2014), consequently many universities include statements about employability in their strategic mission, and HEFCE retains a strong emphasis on the importance of developing and integrating careers and employability. Actions fall into three broad areas: encouraging students to make the most of extra-curricular opportunities; making available and promoting co-curricular activities (i.e. activities that sit outside the curriculum but which operate in tandem and are supportive of the curriculum); and embedding employability within the taught curriculum (Reference Authors Paper, [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process](#)).

Of these three areas, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) have highlighted the relevance of embedding employability within the taught curriculum. The QAA’s revised code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards (2010), contains a section entitled ‘Career Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG)’. In this section they suggest that employability can be embedded in to the curriculum, either as discrete modules or across a programme of study. Programme designers are asked to think about ‘joined up’ implementation and to ‘consider how staff and resources within the careers service, including career information and destination data, can be used to facilitate student learning’ and to provide ‘clear links between subjects and career planning’ in order to assist students in engaging with CEIAG provision (QAA, 2010, 12). HEFCE states that;

Embedding employability into the core of higher education will continue to be a key priority of Government, universities and colleges, and employers. This will bring both significant private and public benefit, demonstrating higher education’s broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development

(HEFCE, 2011, 4).

Despite the substantial drivers outlined above, the reality is that a limited number of degree programmes incorporate substantive, curriculum wide, integrated support for the development of employability. Studies looking at employability perceptions and outcomes from programmes which have embraced wide-scale curriculum change are rare and are therefore

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