**Journal of Further & Higher Education**

**Towards graduate employment: exploring student identity through a university-wide employability project**

Sally Smith\*, Colin Smith, Ella Taylor-Smith and Julia Fotheringham

*Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh.*

\* Corresponding author: School of Computing, Edinburgh Napier University, Merchiston Campus, Edinburgh EH10 5DT, UK. Email: s.smith@napier.ac.uk

# Acknowledgements

The Graduate Employability Project was funded by the Scottish Funding Council.

The authors thank Amrit Dencer-Brown and Dr Bruce Ryan for their help in administering survey data.

**Towards graduate employment: exploring student identity through a university-wide employability project**

Students have expectations of their university education leading to graduate careers, with universities investing considerable resources in institution-wide initiatives designed to enhance opportunities for student work placements and work-related learning. However, there are large variations between courses and disciplines in student uptake of these opportunities, with limited evidence explaining why this might be the case. Recognising recent approaches which consider student identity in transitions, this study explored student attitudes to work-related learning across a range of subject disciplines. The first phase of the study used in-class surveys (n=199) to focus on students’ self-identification and perceptions of employability initiatives. Follow-up interviews were conducted to further explore themes emerging in the survey data. The study found that, while some students drew on resources for identity work in their recognition of and approach to work-related learning, access was limited, and university resources were not always recognised or effective. The findings have implications for the design of effective graduate employability initiatives.

***Keywords*:** employability, work-related learning, student identity, graduate identity, professional identity

# Introduction

Students have understandably high expectations of universities equipping them with the necessary skills, experiences and attributes to enable their transition to graduation and into a graduate job (Moore, Sanders, and Higham 2013). In the UK, student funding models, combined with challenging times for the economy, have ‘placed graduate employability at the centre of the Higher Education agenda’ (Pegg et al. 2012, 4). While accepting Yorke’s (2004) definition of employability as ‘a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations’ (p.7), the challenge of measuring employability remains. Graduate employment rates are routinely published, but data is generally collected six months from graduation (e.g. by HESA Higher Education Statistics Agency), whereas many people take longer to secure their preferred graduate job (Behle et al. 2015; Elias and Purcell 2004) and subject disciplines fare differently across the UK. Furthermore, a university’s place in the status hierarchy (Raffe and Croxford 2015, Marginson 2017), together with ethnicity, mobility, location, and being the first-in-family to go to university, all affect employment outcomes (Harvey 2001). These are factors outside the university curriculum developer’s sphere of influence. Where curriculum developers seek to influence graduate outcomes, interventions have been led at local (Smith et al. 2014), university-wide (Dacre Pool et al. 2014) and national levels (Bennett et al. 2015; Knight and Yorke 2006).

Between 2012 and 2015, a £1.3m graduate employability project, aimed at improving graduate employment rates, ran across undergraduate courses in a UK university. The project resulted in both curriculum development to introduce new work-related modules (or embed work-related learning in existing modules) and centralised support activities, including the establishment of placement and employer liaison units. Academics reviewed curricula to embed employability into key modules to produce positive and sustainable employability outcomes, contextualised to disciplines. The vocational nature of the courses resulted in modules aligned with specific professions, including IT, film, and vet nursing. While employment rates overall improved (from 90% in 2012–2013 to 93% in 2014–2015), students’ situated perspectives were not captured in the project reporting. For example, it was not clear whether students experienced any barriers to engaging with the new modules, nor how their self-identification (e.g., as ‘students’ rather than as ‘practitioners’) influenced their approaches to the modules and affected personal outcomes. This study was designed to consider students’ self-concept, or identity, in relation to the employability opportunities brought about via the project, and to examine the social processes which support agency in students’ self-identification as skilled practitioners. In other words, the research was conducted to explore the extent to which work-related learning impacts on student identity.

## At the intersection of higher education and employment

Universities have adopted various approaches to integrating aspects of the workplace into the student learning experience, including work-based learning (such as the one-year sandwich course, the North American co-operative education model and the German dual model) and work-related or work-integrated learning. Specific examples of developing work-related modules include: studying major industry cases and hearing from ‘diverse perspectives’ (Loui 2005, 388); drawing upon role models to bring discipline exposure (Pierrakos et al. 2009); simulating workplaces (Beach 1999); portfolio development (Smith et al. 2014); and soliciting contributions and feedback from industry professionals (Dannels 2000). Each brings potential for students to develop an understanding of how their discipline of study is deployed in the workplace. However, a lack of student engagement has been observed in employability initiatives (Sin and Neave 2016; Tymon, 2013) and there is some evidence that centralised models suffer from patchy student participation (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Oliver 2013). Furthermore, Tomlinson (2010) argues that some employability approaches have insufficiently engaged with the limiting effect of structures, such as access to funding.

Recently the ‘skills development’ approach to employability has been challenged (Holmes 2013; Jackson 2016; Tomlinson 2010; Martin et al. 2014; Daniels and Brooker, 2014) by a ‘graduate identity’ approach which places students’ sense of self in the centre of the nexus between study and work. This leads to questions about how students recognise, access, and experience the benefits of work-related learning.

# Student identity considered

Identity theory provides an overarching view of self-concept as we enact various life roles (Stryker and Burke 2000). In our social interactions, we are challenged to resolve identity conflict through notions of identity commitment and salience (Serpe and Stryker 2011). In an educational context, students balance a student identity with an emerging graduate or professional identity, as skills develop towards graduation (Daicoff 2014; Jackson 2016; Smith et al. 2014; Wong and Trollope-Kumar 2014). Identity is said to be *constructed*; however, the construction of identity is not considered to be solely an act of agency and self-determination. Alvesson (2010) claims that identity construction, as considered at the extremes of agency and structure, is either entirely due to the individual constructing an identity through ‘effort and capacity’ or else is the ‘outcome of social forms and discursive forces’ (p 211). In the university context, it is clear that effective employability interventions should offer access to resources (Beech et al. 2008) for identity construction and adaptation.

## Identity work and adaptation

Identity work, leading to identity consolidation or adaptation, can be defined as the construction of identity through interaction with others, in particular ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence or distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003, 1165). According to Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010, 14), the ‘primary function of identity work is compliance with role requirements and their display rules’, where display rules, in their study, are the external projections of professional identity. Identity work is reliant on the nature of relevant social interactions and the extent to which the environment fosters productive interactions and prototypes; each of which can be influenced by institutional cultures and infrastructure.

Student transitions have been explored widely, with a view to supporting individuals as they move from school or college to university (e.g. Beach 1999; Gale and Parker 2014). Beach argues that mediational transitions can ‘occur within educational activities that project or simulate involvement in an activity yet to be fully experienced’ (1999, 118). This conception is particularly apt where the educational activity occupies a middle ground between where the students are now and where, developmentally, they are aiming to be. Gale and Parker (2014) suggested a typology of three types of student transition: transition as induction, development, and becoming. The third perspective, that of transition as becoming, is supportive of the idea that universities facilitate the emergence of diverse identities. Work-based learning can involve a temporary transition from university into the workplace, with the potential for consequent disrupted identities which have been found to lead to identity work (Beech and Johnston 2005). The impact on student identity of work-related learning is less clear. Identity theory has been used to explore transitions from student to graduate (Holmes 2013; Smith, Sobolewska, and Smith 2014). In a study of students transitioning to their first teaching job, Ronfeldt and Grossman (2008) found that students on placement negotiated how they saw themselves in comparison with the image of the professional projected through their university programmes. These studies provide insights into identity construction and adaptation, not restricted to a current role, but as part of a process of ‘outduction’ (Perry, 2013), an introduction to life beyond university.

Beyond gaining skills and capabilities, social processes have been identified as important in identity construction and adaptation, such as the use of role models, developmental networks and experimenting with possible selves. *Role models* have been identified as a resource for identity adaptation through enabling observation of prototypical behaviours (Higgins and Kram 2001; Ibarra and Petriglieri 2010; Singh, Vinnicombe, and James 2006). Interaction with *developmental networks* has also been found to impact on identity adaptation (Dobrow et al. 2012; Dobrow and Higgins 2005; Sweitzer 2009). Dobrow et al. (2012) define developmental networks as people and groups who take an active interest in an individual’s career, such as mentors, tutors, and family members. Acceptance and confirmation of abilities, as initiated by a mentor, have been found to lead to an improved self-image due to self-verification (Swann 1983; Wright and Wright 1987). Finally, identity transition research has focused on *possible selves* – imaginings of whom one might become (a new self-identification) (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). In this study, those social processes productive of identity transition (role models, developmental networks and possible selves) are considered as identity adaptation resources in the wider context of work-related learning.

Holmes (2013) introduces a claim/affirmation model of identity adaptation which situates the student in an indeterminate identity zone until claims on identity are affirmed by academics or work. For a student, the perceived need to self-identify as a professional (for example complying with the norms of dress and self-presentation) in order to secure a graduate role, might involve the risk of deconstructing a consolidated and cherished student identity (Berg et al. 2017). Using Holmes’ (2013) graduate identity approach, the aim of work-based and work-related learning is to provide students with resources for identity adaptation to support consequent identity transition to an ‘employable’ self. A lack of resources for identity work could constitute a barrier to meaningful engagement, in turn, impacting role behaviour. If a student’s ability to enact a professional self positively influences engagement with opportunities for work-related learning and subsequently career development, then those without sufficient resources may be less able to adapt. The overarching research question to emerge from the literature is: to what extent does work-related learning impact on student identity?

**The study**

The study explored the extent to which work-related modules might provide opportunities for identity work, resulting in a change of self-identification for students. Curriculum development of work-related learning modules in each faculty was identified through the central project team and students were drawn from the subject areas detailed in Table 1 to participate in an in-class survey and some follow up interviews. In each case the sample size related to the class sizes of the newly developed courses as surveys were distributed in-class.

[Table 1 about here]

The approach to embedding employability varied across disciplines. In Computer Science, all students had access to a long-established one-year paid placement, and module development focused upon embedding new work-related professional practice modules with project briefs supplied by external organisations. Both Film and Graphic Design courses had introduced an embedded employability semester featuring placement, study abroad, work-related project work or entrepreneurship opportunities. The students participating from Vet Nursing were at an early stage of their course but had all been made aware of future opportunities for work-based projects. Finally, the Law students were active in running a law clinic with external clients.

An exploratory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell 2013) was deployed, with survey data collection and analysis, followed by interview data collection, to investigate the survey results in more detail. Student identity has been explored elsewhere using surveys (for example, Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker 2014; Smith, Sobolewska and Smith 2014). Survey data created opportunities for conceptualising variables (for example, role models and developmental networks), tracing trends using demographic data, and identifying relationships. Interview data enabled a more nuanced understanding of students’ engagement with identity work from a smaller sample.

Survey questions were designed to uncover students’ attitudes to the new modules, including perceived advantages or drawbacks in undertaking work-related learning and work placements, and to elicit perceptions of work experience and resources for identity work. Specific questions explored the impact of role models, developmental networks, and whether students could imagine a possible ‘working self’.

Based on the survey data, twelve follow-up interview questions were developed to elicit deeper, personalised information about identity and the social processes involved in identity adaptation. Participants were asked about their role models and developmental networks, and were invited to picture and describe their current student-self and future professional-self. They were asked about the influence of role models, mentors, and previous experience. They were also asked who they talked to about their courses and careers, and about activities beyond university such as work experience and volunteering. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes, was audio recorded, and then transcribed. The interview data was used to illustrate and elucidate personal examples during the analysis of the survey data.

# Results

Identity theory recognises a relatively stable identity position where transitions require some kind of identity work, and so the study explored the extent to which work-related learning impacted on student identity, for example, through recognisable identity work. In particular: the ways in which participants constructed their identities and the nature of associated identity work in the context of these new modules.

## Factors relating to course choice and placement awareness and intentions

To determine how work experience impacted on course choices, the survey asked about the factors which motivated their overall course choice (Table 2). Respondents could choose multiple motivations.

[Table 2 about here]

Interviewees were asked what factors helped them to decide to study their course and how previous experience influenced this decision. Most described a long-standing interest in or enjoyment of their subject, for example ‘I’ve always been big into computers’ (Computing student) and ‘I’ve just never been able to see myself doing anything other than this’ (Design student). However, some students had balanced out the relative merits of a potentially stable career versus following their dreams: ‘It took me some time to figure out that I actually wanted to do it, because it’s like not the easiest career path’ (Film student).

Survey participants were asked about their work placement and work-related learning intentions. This was important to students throughout their course: 82% of survey respondents agreed that ‘From the time I first joined my course I knew that I wanted to gain relevant work experience’; while 93% of students agreed that, as their studies progressed, they came to realise that gaining relevant work experience would be useful. However, the opportunity to gain work experience had directly influenced the course choice of only a quarter of students, and only 26% of these reported that they had applied for a work-related opportunity, while 22% had not. This may indicate lack of information or understanding about work-related elements of their courses at the pre-application stage. No interviewees mentioned work experience when asked what factors helped them decide to study their course.

Survey respondents were asked if they had attended any placement or careers talks. Over a third (37%) of respondents reported not attending *any* events. Those who had attended events were asked how these had helped. The following, which highlights gaps in knowledge, is representative of responses:

They have taught me what people in the industry are looking for in interns but I wish there had been more mandatory meetings to help me further prepare and find placements. I don’t know if I am meant to have one by now or not. (Film student)

Interviewees who had started or completed placements found them extremely valuable: ‘I think, so far, the best source of information was actually working’ (Business student). However, participants did not always recognise that work-related elements were available within their courses. Of those who had applied for external work experience, 70% recognised that it was part of their course; of those who had not applied, 61% recognised it as part of their course. For Design students, the semester following the survey offered three employability activities: study abroad, work placement or a studio-based live project. Yet 29% of these students said that a ‘work-related or work-based module’ was not available; and 10% did not know whether this was part of their course or not. In interviews, Design students described the difficulties and challenges of getting work placements. Some reported receiving help from the university. Students who had secured a placement were enthusiastic about its role in their development. Students from Design and Computing courses described how they had found useful contacts and career information through searching for companies to intern with. One employability intervention for Design students was a module focusing on portfolio development and this was recognised as a useful and enjoyable aspect of the course.

## Identity work and adaptation

As resources for identity work, the study explored the identity adaptation themes of role models, developmental networks, and possible selves.

**Role models:** Survey respondents were asked if they had any role models in the industry they wanted to work in: 53% said ‘Yes’, while 47% said ‘No’. Those answering ‘yes’ were asked if they had met them or knew them to speak to (‘near’) and 33% said ‘Yes’ and 66% said ‘No’. Interviewees were asked about how role models and mentors influenced their picture of their future professional life. Six participants talked about practitioners and a similar number mentioned teaching staff, including lecturers with successful commercial careers. While some students described the qualities they admired in these people, others specifically recognised their importance as examples in work contexts. Interviewees who had come to university from continental Europe had more extensive work experiences and were more conscious of the influence of role models on their lives and careers, for example:

You’re influenced by every single person around. Even the guy who, you just see him in the office, he’s just around. Somehow, he’s an example of what you have to do or don’t have to do (Computing student).

Local students were more likely to describe members of their family as role models.

**Developmental networks:** To reveal developmental networks and to explore how students reached decisions about participating in work-related learning opportunities, the survey asked who gave them encouragement to gain relevant work experience. Lecturers were most influential, followed by friends and family, placement and careers staff, then other students on the course and finally ‘others’, including people in industry, students’ partners, tutors, and ‘myself’ (Table 3). Respondents could identify multiple sources of encouragement.

[Table 3 about here]

Interviewees were asked to identify people, modules and events that helped them to prepare for their next step. Students mentioned placements/internships, group projects with external clients, talks and masterclasses given by professionals, mentoring schemes, interview training and portfolio development. Some required more effort from the students to take part; others were embedded within modules. Also in the context of developmental networks, the survey asked who students tended to approach for advice about careers, as an open question. Responses are summarised in Table 4, counting the number of times each category of ‘advisor’ was mentioned. The table shows the breakdown according to whether students said they had selected or completed a work-related or work-based module (‘Yes to placement’ or ‘No to placement’).

[Table 4 about here]

Students were asked if they would know who to approach for additional information or advice on gaining relevant work experience: 48% said they did not know where to go. Of those that knew where to go, 14.5% said the careers service and 7% said their course team.

Interviewees were asked who they talked with about their course and whether they talked with the same people about their future career. Most discussed their courses with other students, especially their classmates; over half discussed their courses with their families; and over a third discussed the course with lecturers, especially module leaders. There was overlap between the groups used as sources for career development, as people followed family members into similar industries, and lecturers (especially in design) also worked commercially. Most participants talked about study options with family members and friends (45%) and university staff (45%), respectively. Regarding these developmental networks, there was very little difference between those that answered ‘yes’ to work-related learning and those that answered ‘no’. However, analysing the data by department and course, Computing students were less likely to talk over career options with friends, family and other students (35%) than Design students (66%). Computing students were far more likely to speak to lecturers (82%) and placement staff (81%) than Design students (65% and 37%, respectively). These findings are suggestive of discipline-specific signposting with associated role interpretation and access rules.

**Possible selves:** To explore whether respondents could imagine a possible working self, the survey asked if they could easily imagine themselves in a work environment: 87% said ‘Yes’, 13% said ‘No’. They were then asked ‘Where do you see yourself in 10 years’ time?’ 54% replied with a career in the area of their degree topic. One student clearly envisioned a future working self, responding: ‘In an office with big windows editing films’; 33% replied with a more general indication of working (e.g., ‘working’; ‘a good job’); 5% replied that they had no idea. Students were asked if they had applied for a work-related project and 43% answered positively (the ‘Yes to placement’ group above). The survey prompted for more detail about these working images and many cited their previous work experience; indeed, the extent to which undergraduates come to university with some measure of professional identity should not be underestimated. Other responses included: ‘I feel like I am growing out of education’; ‘I am passionate about my field’ and ‘I work hard and believe I can find a relevant job.’ For those that couldn’t picture themselves in a work environment, reasons included ‘I don’t feel very confident’; ‘I don’t know what I want to do’; ‘I don’t feel qualified enough’ and ‘Not been taught enough practical knowledge.’

Interviews explored visions of future selves and how these integrated with students’ experiences. Many interviewees also described previous selves in narratives about choosing their courses and future directions, and most interviewees described identity transitions. Interviewees were encouraged to focus on their current student-self, through choosing three words that describe how they see themselves as a student or approach university life and work. Most students chose at least one word related to being hard-working, conscientious or focused, and most chose a word that expressed enthusiasm and enjoyment in their studies. Two Design students were finding their placements (a day or two per week) very rewarding and described themselves in rather professional terms: ‘confident’, ‘professional’, ‘organised’, with attributes such as ‘independent’, ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘curious.’ Three students who seemed to lack confidence in their future careers struggled to complete the task, for example:

I’m trying to take as much learning with me as I can, in uni. So, if you can compact that to one word, you’re welcome. So, I approach it, yeah, just for learning (Design student).

In the interviews, students were asked how they pictured their future professional life, as well as about any plans or dreams for beyond university. Students who had clear pictures of their future career had, in general, observed or experienced certain aspects of their (potential) professional life, either through work placements, volunteering or in other contexts. Students who did not have placements tended to be more reticent about providing a picture of their future career, for example:

It’s difficult if you haven’t been to an internship, and you don’t know exactly how you fit in, you know, or if you are useful in what you do. It’s difficult to kind of picture or see yourself; you don’t know if you’re prepared or not (Design student).

Other interviewees had some relevant experiences, but wanted to keep their options open:

You never know what opportunity’s going to come up or what job needs you to relocate and just go and travel and see places, or who you’re going to end up working with or what projects you’re going to end up working with (Design student).

Interviews provided opportunities for students to consider transitions and the salience of their student and emerging professional identities. A few students were confident and ready for this step: ‘I think I’m prepared mentally to approach what is professional life, but I do still think that in terms of a skill I still need quite a lot more practice’ (Design student). Others were more apprehensive, and acknowledged that their first step in this transition would be gaining relevant work experience.

Subject-specific findings

Breaking participant responses down according to their subject disciplines, the results are summarised in Table 5:

[Table 5 about here]

# Discussion

Students’ general dispositions led in the main to selecting their courses based on interest in their discipline. Specific modules on these courses had been designed to create resources for identity adaptation: to create conditions whereby students would ultimately ‘act in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed’ (Holmes 2013, 549). In general, the modules granted students ‘examples to draw on’ (McMurray et al. 2017, 282). Students were largely found to have the motivation to undertake identity work (Beech et al. 2008), as evidenced by their strongly positive response to the question of work experience being useful to them. In practice, many participants in this study were observed to recognise the rules of the game (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013) through looking for internships, engaging with careers services, and seeking advice. However, some of the rich resources for identity work were not readily accessible.

Role models have been found elsewhere to provide a valuable resource for identity work, for example, by modelling new behaviours (Ibarra 1999). Just over half of the students had role models in the industry, however most were not known to them. Students also cited academic staff, who exhibit the discipline-related habits of speech and gesture, as role models. Gibson (2003) found that ‘near’ role models were most widely used amongst early career employees, while in later stages ‘distant’ role models were used to affirm individuals’ self-concept. For most undergraduate students, ‘near’ role models included family members and offered limited resources for identity adaptation in terms of modelling professional behaviour or as resources for imagining a possible professional self (Berg et al. 2017). Most students could, however, imagine themselves in a work environment and were able to articulate this imagining.

Many students’ developmental networks were overly-reliant on family and friends, rather than more diverse networks which would represent stronger resources for identity work (Gibson 2003; Wright and Wright 1987). Dobrow and Higgins (2005) found that dense networks, where individuals in the network were themselves interconnected, impacted negatively on clarity of identity, suggesting that this was due to a lack of resources for experimenting with possible selves. Furthermore, Archer (2007) found that reliance on close family networks was less likely to lead to self-development and social mobility.

Access to wider networks, as a factor in capitalising on employability opportunities, was not uniform across student groups, particularly those who were the first in their family to attend university. University-led activities as attempts to expand networks, such as inviting alumni to present or mentor, did not appear to have much impact on study participants. The new employability modules had been designed to support students’ capacity for identity work, through increasing opportunities to experience professional identities. However, in some cases, a lack of resources was still observed. Not all students recognised the language that academics adopted to associate work-related learning with employment; thus, agency was restricted by a lack of symbolic recognition. There was evidence that many students believed internships or work experience were something that was either going to happen *to* them or had passed them by, reflecting a lack of agency. In the main, participant responses revealed a lack of understanding of course approaches to employability. Using the modules to frame identity claims was not routinely observed, beyond students realising that work experience would be beneficial to them. The opportunity to initiate identity claims (Holmes 2013) in these modules was therefore lost for these students. Nor were the new modules clear sources of identity affirmation, even though most students looked to lecturers for guidance. As universities increasingly value research excellence in staff (for example, van Winkel et al. 2017) there may in the future be fewer academic practitioners with work experience outside academia. More generally, not all students could be provided with placements and the alternative employability elements were not necessarily recognised as such, limiting their bases as resources for a pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016) and students’ agency in exploiting them. Students’ recognition of a module as an employability experience may be dependent on the extent to which it involves them in overt workplace exposure, for example, Thompson’s (2017) study found short-term placements to be ‘meaningful and productive experiences’ (420).

The new modules provided social and educational structures within which students could explore their subject discipline at the intersection of professional practice. Practices and resources were designed to influence and inform the students’ ‘immediate horizons’ for action (Aldous, Sparkes and Brown 2014, 193). Some students remained unaware of the employability modules as opportunities for work-related learning, leaving them less able to develop new self-narratives as skilled and employable. The one exception was Computing. This department promotes placements and work-related learning at the application stage and at each year of the course. Over half of the academics in Computing act as work-based learning tutors and there was greater contextual awareness of work-based and work-related experiences among these participants.

Conversations about careers and the importance of work experience (e.g. over paid work not related to their course) with family members were found to influence student attitudes, with some students who had not experienced such discussions left at a disadvantage. Access to cultural capital has been found elsewhere to influence success in higher education and future careers (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Childs, Finnie, and Mueller 2016). Elsewhere, students have reported acquisition of social capital, confidence and networks (Thompson 2017); so the way these modules are articulated to students and embedded may have a significant impact on outcomes.

Academic staff were found to influence decision-making through encouragement to gain relevant work experience; however, they came second to family as a source of careers advice. As mentioned, Holmes (2013) has previously called for a graduate identity construction rather than ‘positional’ approach to employability. The positional approach recognises situational factors such as social class, ethnicity and university status (Archer, Hutchings and Ross 2005; Bathmaker et al. 2013; Boliver 2013; Connor et al. 2004). Our study suggests that the limitations imposed by social structures should be recognised by curriculum designers, and in turn influence the creation of resources for identity adaptation, including creating the conditions for student identity claims and discipline-specific episodes of affirmation.

The results show that the aspiration to introduce employability initiatives through curriculum development was only partially successful. Student responses showed a positive attitude to gaining work experience, but not all work-related learning was recognised as such. Students, despite evidence of agency, had limited access to resources for identity adaptation. Of course, dynamic labour market structures, in the context of expansion of higher education leading to more graduates than graduate jobs, undermine agentic efforts at career planning; so, challenging students to consider who they want to be, rather than what they want to do, opens up the possibility for lifelong reflexion and adaptability.

# Conclusion

By focusing on student identity in transition, this study reveals student approaches to recognising and engaging with work-related activities. Curriculum development of work-related learning alone is insufficient to ensure meaningful student engagement with employability initiatives. The important influences on students’ identity work in the context of employability were found to be: students’ life experiences before and outside university; their routes into their courses; and the ways employability initiatives were supported within their different departments. Students who had work experience, either through the university or organised independently, were more confident in expressing aspects of a professional identity. However, existing self-confidence may have paved the way to gaining this work experience, especially in highly competitive fields where the university could not arrange placements for all students. Strategic development of the curriculum to enhance graduate employability should acknowledge the intersection of student identity, graduate/ professional identity, social and cultural factors together with the vagaries of the labour market. Beyond their teaching roles, the study revealed academics as a resource for student identity adaptation, from identity affirmation to acting as role models. University employability development initiatives can make identity adaptation resources more widely accessible, through creating further opportunities for meaningful interactions, with coherence across courses – as long as they are well understood by both students and academics. Targeted, student-focused employability elements, with clear messages designed to signpost advice and mentoring provided by the university, could align initiatives with student aspirations and partially counter limiting social factors, providing students with resources for identity adaptation to employable graduates.

# References

Aldous, D. C., A. C. Sparkes, and D.H. Brown 2014. “Transitional experiences of post-16 sports education: Jack’s story”. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 35 (2): 185–203.

Alvesson, M. 2010. “Self-Doubters, Strugglers, Storytellers, Surfers and Others: Images of Self-Identities in Organization Studies.” *Human Relations* 63 (2): 193–217.

Archer, L., M. Hutchings, and A. Ross 2005. *Higher education and social class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion*. London: Routledge.

Archer, M. S. 2007. *Making our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility*. Cambridge University Press.

Bathmaker, A.M., N. Ingram, and R.Waller. 2013. Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 34(5-6), 723–743.

Beach, K.D. 1999. “Consequential Transitions: A Sociocultural Expedition beyond Transfer in Education.” *Review of Research in Education* 24: 101–139.

Beech, N., R. MacIntosh and P.McInnes. 2008. Identity Work: Processes and Dynamics of Identity Formations. *International Journal of Public Administration* 31 (9): 957–970.

Beech, N., and P. Johnson. 2005. “Discourses of Disrupted Identities in the Practice of Strategic Change: The Mayor, the Street-Fighter and the Insider-Out.” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 18 (1): 31–47.

Behle, H., G. Atfield, P. Elias, L. Gambin, A. Green, T. Hogarth, K. Purcell, C. Tzanakou, and C. Warhurst. 2015. Reassessing the employment outcomes of higher education. *Researching Higher Education: International Perspectives on Theory, Policy and Practice*, 114.

Bennett, D., H. Coates, P. MacKinnon, P. Poronnik, S. Richardson, L. Schmidt, L., and M. Mahat 2015. “Navigating Uncertainty and Complexity: Higher Education and the Dilemma of Employability”. In *Research and Development in Higher Education: Learning for Life and Work in a Complex World Vol. 38, edited by* Thomas, T., E. Levin, P. Dawson, K. Fraser, and R. Hadgraft, 1-10. Milperra, Australia: HERDSA: 1–10.

Berg, T., T. Bowen, C.F. Smith, and S. Smith. 2017. Visualizing the Future: Surfacing student perspectives on post-graduation prospects using Rich Pictures, *Higher Education Research and Development*, In press.

Boliver, V. 2013. “How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities?” *The British journal of sociology* 64 (2): 344–364.

Brenner, P. S., R.T. Serpe, , and S. Stryker. 2014. The causal ordering of prominence and salience in identity theory: An empirical examination. *Social psychology quarterly*, 77(3), 231-252.

Childs, S., R. Finnie, and R.E. Mueller. 2016. Assessing the importance of cultural capital on post-secondary education attendance in Canada. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 1–35.

Connor, H., C. Tyers, T. Modood, and J. Hillage. 2004. “Why the difference? A closer look at higher education minority ethnic students and graduates” Department for Education and Skills Research Report. Nottingham: DfES.

Creswell, J.W. 2013. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches.* 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Dacre Pool, L.P. Qualter, and P.J. Sewell. 2014. “Exploring the Factor Structure of the CareerEDGE Employability Development Profile”. *Education + Training* 56 (4): 303–313.

Dacre Pool, L. and P. Sewell. 2007. “The Key to Employability: Developing a Practical Model of Graduate Employability”. *Education + Training* 49 (4): 277–289.

Daicoff, S.S. 2014. “Lawyer, Form Thyself: Professional Identity Formation Strategies in Legal Education, Professional Responsibility, and Experiential Courses”. Accessed 5th August 2016. <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2530736>

Daniels, J. and J. Brooker. 2014. Student identity development in higher education: Implications for graduate attributes and work-readiness. *Educational Research,* 56(1), 65-76.

Dannels, D.P. 2000. “Learning to be Professional, Technical Classroom Discourse, Practice, and Professional Identity Construction”. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 14 (1): 5–37.

Dobrow, S.R., D.E. Chandler, M.W. Murphy, and D.E. Kram, 2012. “A Review of Developmental Networks Incorporating a Mutuality Perspective”. *Journal of Management* 38 (1): 210–242.

Dobrow, S.R. and M.C. Higgins. 2005. “Developmental Networks and Professional Identity: A Longitudinal Study”. *Career Development International* 10 (6/7): 567–583.

Elias, P. and K. Purcell. 2004. “Is Mass Higher Education Working? Evidence from the Labour Market Experiences of Recent Graduates”. *National Institute Economic Review* 190: 60–74.

Gale, T. and S. Parker. 2014. “Navigating Change: A Typology of Student Transition in Higher Education”. *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (5): 734–753.

Gibson, D.E. 2003. “Developing the Professional Self-Concept: Role Model Construals in Early, Middle, and Late Career Stages.” *Organization Science* 14 (5): 591–610.

Harvey, L. 2001. “Defining and Measuring Employability” *Quality in Higher Education* 7 (2): 97–109.

Higgins, M.C. and K.E. Kram. 2001. “Reconceptualizing Mentoring at Work: A Developmental Network Perspective”. *Academy of Management Review* 26 (2): 264–288.

Holmes, L. 2013. Competing perspectives on graduate employability: possession, position or process?. Studies in Higher Education, 38(4), 538–554.

Ibarra, H. 1999. “Provisional Selves: Experimenting with Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation.” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44 (4): 764–791.

Ibarra, H. and J.L. Petriglieri. 2010. “Identity Work and Play.” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 23 (1): 10–25.

Jackson, D. 2016. “Re-conceptualising graduate employability: the importance of pre-professional identity”. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1–15.

Knight, P. and M. Yorke. 2006. *Embedding employability into the curriculum*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Loui, M.C. 2005. “Ethics and the Development of Professional Identities of Engineering Students.” *Journal of Engineering Education* 94 (4): 383–390.

Marginson, S. 2017. Higher education, economic inequality and social mobility: Implications for emerging East Asia. *International Journal of Educational Development*.

Markus, H. and P. Nurius. 1986. “Possible Selves.” *American Psychologist* 41 (9): 954.

Martin, L., G. Spolander, I. Ali, and B. Maas. 2014. The evolution of student identity: A case of caveat emptor. *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 38(2), 200–210.

McMurray, I., C. Rafferty, C. Sutton, and S. Patel. 2015. Using dissertation projects to facilitate transitions to university and employment: an exploratory case study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 41(3):273–285.

Moore, J., J. Sanders and L. Higham. 2013. *Literature Review of Research into Widening Participation to Higher Education*. London: HEFCE.

Oliver, B. 2013. "Graduate attributes as a focus for institution-wide curriculum renewal: innovations and challenges." *Higher Education Research & Development* 32 (3):450–463.

Pegg, A., J. Waldock, S. Hendy-Isaac, and R. Lawton. 2012. *Pedagogy for Employability*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Perry, A.L. 2013. Preparing to leave, graduation and beyond. In: Morgan, M. ed. *Improving the Student Experience: A Practical Guide for Universities and Colleges*, Routledge, Oxon,126.

Pierrakos, O., T.K. Beam, J. Constantz, A. Johri, and R. Anderson. 2009. “On the Development of a Professional Identity: Engineering Persisters vs Engineering Switchers.” In *Proceedings of 39th Frontiers in Education Conference, 2009 (FIE’09).* IEEE: 599–605.

Raffe, D and L.Croxford. 2015. “How stable is the stratification of higher education in England and Scotland?” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (2): 313–335.

Ronfeldt, M. and P. Grossman. 2008. “Becoming a Professional: Experimenting With Possible Selves.” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 35 (3): 41–59.

Serpe, R. and S. Stryker. 2011. “The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective and Identity Theory.” In *Handbook of identity theory and research, edited by* S.J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, and V.L. Vignoles. New York: Springer.

Sin, C. and Neave, G. 2016. Employability deconstructed: perceptions of Bologna stakeholders. Studies in Higher Education, 41(8), 1447–1462.

Singh, V., S. Vinnicombe, and K. James. 2006. “Constructing a Professional Identity: How Young Female Managers Use Role Models.” *Women in Management Review* 21(1): 67–81.

Smith, S., E. Sobolewska, and I. Smith. 2014. “From employability attributes to professional identity: students transitioning to the workplace”. *Proceedings of Frontiers in Education Conference (FIE), 2014,* 1-8.IEEE. Pp. 1–8.

Stevenson, J and S. Clegg. 2011. Possible selves: Students orientating themselves towards the future through extracurricular activity. *British Educational Research Journal,* 37(2), 231-246.

Stryker, S. and P.J. Burke. 2000. “The Past, Present and Future of an Identity Theory.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63 (4): 284–297.

Sveningsson, S. and M. Alvesson. 2003. “Managing Managerial Identities: Organizational Fragmentation, Discourse and Identity Struggle.” *Human Relations* 56 (10): 1163–1193.

Swann, W.B., Jr. 1983. “Self-Verification: Bringing Social Reality into Harmony with the Self.” In *Social Psychological Perspectives on the Self. Vol. 2*, edited by J. Suls and A.G. Greenwald. 33–66. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Sweitzer, V.B. 2009. “Towards a Theory of Doctoral Student Professional Identity Development: A Developmental Networks Approach.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 80 (1): 1–33.

Thompson, D.W. 2016. “How valuable is ‘short project’placement experience to higher education students?” *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41 (3): 413–424.

Tomlinson, M. 2010. “Investing in the self: structure, agency and identity in graduates' employability”. *Education, Knowledge & Economy* 4 (2): 73–88.

Tymon, A. 2013. The student perspective on employability. Studies in higher education, 38(6), 841–856.

van Winkel, M.A., R.M. van der Rijst, R.F. Poell, and J.H. van Driel,. 2017. Identities of research-active academics in new universities: Towards a complete academic profession cross-cutting different worlds of practice. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 1-17.

Wright, C.A. and S.D. Wright. 1987. “The Role of Mentors in the Career Development of Young Professionals.” *Family Relations* 36 (2): 204–208.

Wong, A. and K. Trollope-Kumar. 2014. “Reflections: An Inquiry into Medical Students” Professional Identity Formation.” *Medical Education* 48 (5): 489–501.

Yorke, M. (Ed.). 2004. *Learning & Employability* (York: Learning & Teaching Support Network).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject discipline** | **Survey responses (n=199)** | **Interviewees**  **(n=15)** |
| Computer Science | 92 | 5 |
| Graphic Design | 62 | 7 |
| Vet Nursing | 28 | 0 |
| Film | 13 | 1 |
| Law | 4 | 2 |
|  |  |  |
| **Gender** | Male/ Female | Male/ Female |
|  | 57% / 43% | 53% / 47% |

Table 1: Subject discipline

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Motivation for course choice** | **Survey responses (n=199)** |
| Subject was of interest | 81% |
| To follow a specific career path | 57% |
| Found the subject enjoyable | 32% |
| Opportunity for personal development | 34% |

Table 2: Motivation for course choice

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Sources of encouragement* *to gain relevant work experience* | | | |
|  | **Total agree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Total Disagree** |
| My lecturers | 78% | 17% | 5% |
| My friends and family members | 68% | 22% | 10% |
| Placement and careers staff | 64% | 31% | 5% |
| Other students on my course | 58% | 31% | 11% |
| Others – please let us know who: | 6.5% | 91% |  |

Table 3: Sources of encouragement

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Mentioned as source of careers advice* | **All**  **(n=199)** | **Yes to placement**  **(n=85)** | **No to placement**  **(n=114)** |
| **Family or family member** (not partner) | 34% | 46% | 41% |
| **Lecturers/ tutors/ careers staff** | 28% | 29% | 26% |
| **Friends/ peers /** **other students** (includes partners/ spouses) | 26% | 25% | 26% |
| **No one/myself** | 10.5% | 10.5% | 10.5% |
| **Industry** | 9% | 9% | 9% |

Table 4: Sources of careers advice

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject** | **Description of module development** | **Student perceptions** | **Implications for university-wide initiatives** |
| **Computing** | External client-led projects. | Aims well-understood & signposted; good recognition of opportunity. | Ensure sufficient resources are identified to facilitate and sustain work-related learning. |
| **Design** | Semester-long initiative: design studio, internship or study abroad. | Significant confusion about how student selection was to be conducted, in spite of valuable advice from tutors. | Ensure teaching staff know the work-related learning strategy; then align messages about where and when students can participate in work-related learning. Recognise the value of industry experience to students when appointing staff. |
| **Film & TV** | Semester-long internships/ client-led projects. | Lack of clarity about how to apply for these projects, for example, how they would be advertised. | Consider equality of access to work-related learning and how this could be implemented. |
| **Law** | Law clinic | Recognised as valuable opportunity to put theory into practice. | Disseminate good practice across the institution. |
| **Vet Nursing** | Professional practice module with work experience. | Worth of this activity well understood; when and how it would happen was not clear. | Increase awareness of work-related learning amongst students. |

Table 5: Subject-specific findings