An employability perspective

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IN HIS article *Psychology in its Place*, Radford (2008) argues that psychology as a discipline, subject and profession needs to be debated to ensure we are not disadvantaging students, society and the professions themselves in focusing on elements, systems or content which are outdated or irrelevant now or in the future. I would argue that employability should be a major consideration in this debate and that we have tools already at our disposal to make the necessary changes.

Too often employability is conflated with employment, and the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) surveys are utilised by institutions and courses to demonstrate their students were successful after graduation (e.g. University of Bradford, 2008). These first destinations can be highly misleading and without careful analysis the differences between graduates stuck in non-graduate roles and those in stepping stone jobs cannot be seen. The majority of psychology graduates first destinations are not into psychology related jobs however (AGCAS, 2007) and so Radford's argument about the value of GBR status cannot be disputed. It should also be noted that the many employers do not specify particular degree subjects (Dearing, 1997) and psychology graduates can have skills and knowledge which equip them for careers far removed from psychology (e.g. Costa-Gomes & Crawford, 2006, report psychology graduates ability to outperform other graduates, including economics graduates in predicting stock market behaviour). Therefore it should not be overly worrying if they do not progress on with psychology. However in order to be successful in their long-term career graduates need many transferable skills (see Knight & Yorke, 2004 for a summary) which are assessed by the majority of graduate level employers by competency based selection processes (Wolf, 1995). Graduates need to evidence that they have the appropriate skills or competencies, which means they need to be both developed whilst at university and students need to be taught to recognise and articulate them. Being able to articulate, and sell those skills to an employer is an employability skill in itself. These are the same skills required to 'serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge based economy' one of the four purposes of higher education according to Dearing (1997). Helpfully for tutors these same employability skills are also those of greatest benefit for good learning (Yorke, 2004). So how might students develop these skills?

Developing skills whilst at university does not necessarily mean that they must be brought into the curriculum. The traditional route has been for students to participate in extracurricular activities and develop skills, contacts and self awareness in this way. Personal Development Planning (PDP) was introduced with the intention of allowing students to reflect on these external activities and the learning from the whole student experience, not just the course content. Radford in a couple of lines writes off the PDP initiative as only replicating something that 'Psychology graduates ought, in principle to be good at' before moving on to argue that the knowledge students gain on psychology courses are divorced from historical context and therefore do not allow students to understand themselves and the current situation they find themselves in as individuals and citizens. Were courses to embrace PDP as a process, rather than in the tick box approach it is often implemented with then it can act the contextualising agent necessary

to give personal meaning to the knowledge which students can gain on courses: it can act as a system both to increase employability and self knowledge/personal wellbeing by helping students contextualise their learning. PDP allows students to draw on their experiences from outside of the course and reflect on extracurricular activity and how that is related to their longer term employability, including paid work, work experience and volunteering amongst other things.

In psychology education as in all higher education, students may feel they are purchasers of services, and one of their primary requirements from higher education is to improve job prospects (Connor *et al.*, 1999). As purchasers their needs should be considered, though there is a paradox with employability considerations in that students may not know what their needs are and consequently may not take part in opportunities extra curricular to develop these skills. In particular non-traditional students are less likely to access services which are not embedded in the curriculum (Rowley & Purcell, 2001) and so with the exponential growth in non-traditional students more employability development needs to take place on-course, whilst still referencing external learning. Work related learning can do this.

Work related learning, defined by the QCA (2003) as 'Planned activities that use the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work' can incorporate a broader range of activities than work experience for example: work shadowing, and simulations. For although the benefits of work experience for developing employability skills and competencies is well documented (e.g. NCWE, 2003) it is not always possible for students to access relevant placements due to the costs involved in doing free or low paid work and the competition for good opportunities. Work related learning (WRL) has been successfully adopted on a range of non vocational undergraduate programmes which are comparable to psychology, for example law and media studies. These programmes, like psychology, focus on subject specific skills (i.e. research for psychology), do not provide graduates with direct entry into the professions, and are in occupational areas which are highly competitive. Simulated work experience can provide students with the opportunity to work with professionals in a real world context in a way which is not always possible for large numbers of students because of the availability of opportunities and the costs to the student, and the lack of student awareness about the importance of these opportunities. In Dean (2007) I document the benefits students derived from taking part in a compulsory level two work simulation, run by real employers, including the increase of 120 per cent in the numbers of students in graduate level or 'stepping-stone' jobs at the time of the DLHE census.

Incorporating work-related learning and embracing personal development planning as a tool throughout the undergraduate degree which recognises all the student's life are two simple mechanisms for radically improving psychology graduates employability within the confines of the current HE funding regime and other drivers. PDP and WRL are also continually responsive to the changing nature of the graduate labour market. Changes in employers' requirements are reflected immediately in the WRL aspects of a course, as employers are directly involved in both their design and their delivery. PDP allows students to reflect on the changes they experience in their part time work: the growth in employee-student numbers means there is an opportunity for windfall learning in all student activities, if students are encouraged to reflect on, acknowledge and plan for these learning opportunities.

Whilst we might hope for, and promote major re-evaluation of both the nature of psychology education, and of higher education as practitioners we should also acknowledge the tools which are already available for radically changing the student experience.

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