

***Employability – from a game no  
one can win, to meaningful  
dialogue***

Ewart Keep  
Centre on Skills, Knowledge &  
Organisational Performance,  
Oxford University

# A dis-functional UK debate?

- Central proposition = at present, in much of the UK at least, debates about skills and employability are often set up in a way that ensures that the problem can never be 'solved'.
- Measures of employability are not defined, reciprocal responsibilities are never properly discussed. We need to change the terms of the debate.

# Things that we have got right

- After years of experimentation and practice we know in broad terms what the bulk of employers want by way of the generic skills graduates need.
- We also know how to create these within the HE curriculum across a very broad range of subjects.

# Research suggests

There are two key features to employability creation in HE:

1. Curriculum and activities that encourage generic skills (team working, communication, problem solving, etc)
2. High quality work experience or work projects. The main criticism of young people entering the labour market (at all levels) is lack of workplace experience. **The answer is simple, but it requires employers to step up to the plate and provide high quality work placements.**

# Rocket science is not involved

- We know what to do, we know how to do it. If we have the will and resources (and time, as instant transformation is rare) we can move forward inside HE.
- The bigger, long-term problems, to which I will now turn, lie elsewhere.

# Work ready or job ready?

Many of the complaints that come from some employer surveys are rooted in the fact that they do not want people who are employable, they want people who are job ready (for a specific job in their own organisation).

This is deeply problematic. Organisational cultures and routines can only really be learned inside the organisation that possesses them. **Expecting job readiness simply sets education up to fail** (unless it is a specific, company-sponsored degree).

# An underlying economic rationale

It is economically rational for employers to want to reduce the amount of initial training they have to do, and push as much as possible back into the education system, where its costs are met by general taxation or by students.

Employers have been socialised into moaning, knowing that government will react, usually via expanding f-t further and HE

This sometimes leads to too much stress on f-t HE routes, and not enough on apprenticeship and p-t, work-based HE models.

# Too many eggs in the degree basket?

- In the UK, driven by government participation targets and the small size and weakness of the apprenticeship route, it is a case of 'Uni or bust'.
- Rolls Royce Aerospace and BT get 200 applicants per apprenticeship, meaning they are harder to get than a place on an Oxford undergraduate degree.



# The tragi-comic story of life science graduate lab technicians!

- Life science graduates emerge from a degree lacking the practical lab skills to work as lab technicians
- Life science firms are using grads in technician jobs because they don't train their own technicians
- The Scottish taxpayer ends up paying to send life science graduates to an FE college to acquire the lab skills that will allow them to do a technician job.
- **This story is wrong on every level!**

# New thinking on PTE in England

- Spurred on by the OECD's *Beyond School* report, a major new drive on Professional and Technical Education (PTE) at sub-degree level is now planned, with new National Colleges and Institutes of Technology, "to fill the polytechnic shaped hole in our system". The problem is that all of the students qualified to move to post-secondary level in STEM currently go into HE, so there is no 'feedstock' of students for the planned new provision
- Scotland is ahead in this area. It has kept better 'articulation' links between FE and HE, and a bigger sub-degree route.

# The wider STEM 'crisis'

- We have had an intermittent STEM crisis since the late 1970s. The argument is often that we fail to produce enough STEM graduates and schools and the HE system fail students on employability by 'directing' them into other courses.
- The reality is STEM numbers have climbed, but that in some cases less than 10% of STEM graduates go into occupations linked to their degree subject.

# Apprenticeship

- Still quite small.
- Expansion beyond traditional 'craft' heartlands into service sectors has created a lot of short, low quality provision at lower secondary equivalent level.
- Plans to expand Higher Apprenticeships (sub-degree and degree level) – some firms keen – engineering, and accountancy.

# Pathways (flavour of the month)

- Across the OECD, there is a lot of talk about building pathways (in education and the labour market).
- Policymakers in England have bought into this, but have no idea what it would entail – it just sounds nice! Tradition in UK is for narrow, very job specific initial vocational training, and this has spread into HE and some degrees. Progression routes in work are often lacking, with a lot of dead-end jobs.

# Scarcity amidst plenty – the war for talent

- McKinsey and others have promoted the notion of a global ‘war for talent’, predicated upon the scarcity of truly ‘talented’ graduates.
- How come – in a world where we have never had so many graduates, how can talent be scarce?
- ANSWER = ‘talent’ (as defined by those who run this debate) is confined to a tiny sub-set of graduates who attend a tiny sub-set of elite global institutions – see *The Global Auction* (Brown, Lauder and Ashton).

# Deeper problems

- The preceding slides have outlined some micro and meso-level problems with the way we sometimes approach employability.
- The presentations ends with some deeper, macro-level issues that will need to be addressed sooner or later.

# The flip side of employability?

- Employers have a legitimate interest in wanting people coming out of the education system to be **'employable'** rather than **'unemployable'**
- **BUT.....**
- Students, government and society have a legitimate interest in skills created at public or individual expense being **utilised**, and jobs being **'do-able'**.



# **Skill utilisation – a massive educational investment being wasted?**

The UK has massive problems with the under-utilisation of skills. The OECD's PIAAC survey of adult skills suggested that we had the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest level of over-qualification (after Japan), running at 30% of the workforce.

48% of employers themselves admit (UKCES NESS survey) to skills under usage, with 4.3 million workers (16% of workforce) seen by their employers as BOTH over-skilled and qualified for the work they currently do.

# The story for graduates

- In the UK, by 2014, **21%** of admin jobs, **13%** of sales and personal service jobs, and even **8%** of elementary occupations were undertaken by graduates.
- European social survey indicates varying degrees of graduate over-qualification across Europe (the % dropped in Ireland between 2004 and 2010), but rose in many other countries (Romania stood at over 50% by 2010).

# Narrow job design – findings from a Microsoft survey

- Process driven tasks dominate many workers' lives. 71% thought 'a productive day in the office' meant clearing their e-mails.
- 51% of 18-25 year olds believe that attending internal meetings signifies 'productivity'.
- When asked, 'when was the last time you felt you made a major contribution to your organisation?', 23% responded that they believed they had never managed this. Only 8% thought they had made a major contribution in the last year.

# The 'space' for workplace innovation absent

- 45% said they had less than 30 minutes day to think without distractions
- 41% did not feel empowered to think differently
- 42% did not think they had the opportunity to make a difference at work
- 38% said, 'the business is very process-driven and spends little time on doing things differently or being innovative'.

SOURCE: Microsoft, 2013 *The Daily Grind*

# **Making jobs 'undo-able' – the cost of poor HR and job design**

- Last year in England, 50,000 teachers left the profession. 40% of newly-qualified teachers quit within their first year after training. There are 300,000 qualified teachers not working in schools.
- Workload pressures, government 'reform' (incessant) and a high-stakes inspection regime largely to blame.

# Does the debate move forward?

- This presentation has flagged up a range of issues.
- Many of them need to be debated
- Not all the signs are positive (see final 2 slides)

# Michael Davis, chief executive, UKCES, 2015:

*Skills policy has for too long laboured under the false paradigm that education providers are responsible for providing oven-ready skilled labour to the workplace, that qualifications are a proxy for skills and that the role of business is to submit timely requisition forms to get the employees with the skills they need.*

*This simplistic and yet compelling narrative sets impossible expectations for everyone. Employers can be blamed for not clearly articulating the skills they need in a timely manner, awarding bodies and those responsible for setting standards for failing to translate skill needs into standards and qualifications, and 'providers'...for a failure to follow the 'recipe' given to them by the qualification and/or a failure to deliver the skills needed.*

# Unfortunately, the message has not got through.....

*“I think the most important point I would offer you in terms of this is that the general feeling was people come out of the FE system work-ready rather than job-ready, which is a bit of an indictment of the current and the past qualifications system you are working to I think. We want more than that”.*

Neil Robertson, chief executive, Energy and Utility Skills Group, 2015