CREATING EMPLOYABILITY

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Employability is a process requiring commitment from three main entities: the individual, universities and employers.

Universities are increasingly aware that graduate employment is a critical measure of success, scrutinized by students, graduates, parents and employers. In this context, graduate employment incorporates students who become entrepreneurs as well as those who join professional firms or engage in further study. Some accreditation agencies require that universities seeking accreditation provide data on employability, as measured by salaries of graduates three months after graduation, as an indirect measure of quality (Hunt, 2015). This data is considered as complementary to more direct quality indicators such as programme design, assurance of learning and faculty qualifications (Kelley, Chong and Toi, 2010).

Prominent researchers (Defillippi and Arthur, 1994; Ghoshal et al., 1999; Baruch, 2001) believe that employers should focus on creating workplace conditions which maximize *employability*. Employability is defined as "having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required" (Hillage and Pollard, 1998).

Even though employees are considered as the key strategic asset within organisations, especially within the knowledge economy (Fulmer and Ployhart, 2014), in developed economies, guaranteed lifetime employment has largely been replaced by the notion of the flexible workforce. Individuals may engage with their employer through short term contracts, part time work, work from home, virtual team work, work on commission and a range of other alternatives. These varieties of modes of engagement require employers and employees to be agile, creative, curious, and entrepreneurial and to have integrity. These attributes need to be actively developed by universities.

Nearly four hundred students graduated at our first graduation ceremony in June, 2015. Assuming an average age of 22, and the likelihood of a life span of 82 years, and a potential retirement age of 72, our students will have a fifty year career span until they retire in 2065. Some of them may be working professionally beyond 2070. Our current Foundation Year students may be in the workforce until 2075. This prompts the question: "How do employers and universities work together to create opportunities for students to be successful not only next year but also in 2050, 2060 and 2070?" In other words, how can individuals "outperform their potential" (Sander, 2015) over the lifecycle of their career?.

Researchers such as De Fillippi and Arthur (1994) remind us that our students are likely to have *boundaryless careers*. Careers which were once clear and static are likely to be blurred due to technology, economic and social changes. Careers have become "more open, more diverse and less structured and controlled by employers. The management of such careers require individual qualities that differ considerably from those that were sufficient in the past" (p. 61).

Because of this complexity, it is not surprising that the careers literature is replete with a range of metaphors, which take us well beyond the traditional concept of the "career ladder". Baruch (2004) uses the metaphor of the *career landscape* as a way to reframe the career ladder. He believes that the *linear* or ladder model of careers is similar to mountain climbing: there is only one summit. Many individuals reach a career plateau and fail to reach the summit. This model implies that there are winners and losers. It implies there is one way to be promoted and to be successful and that is through a rigid hierarchy. The career path is established for the climber. There is only one mountain and there are clear external definitions of success.

He contrasts this with the *multi-directional* career model, which infers that the individual can have a metaphorical experience similar to a climber who can choose to climb a particular mountain, or choose another mountain, or walk over hills or wander along the plains and plateaus.

In this model, success is defined by the individual, not by the organization, and not by government or society. Individuals navigate their own career. They create new paths and select their own directions, based on their own personal development preferences and individual definitions of career success.

This career landscape view is comparable to the *protean career* (Hall, 2004). Proteus was a Greek god who could change shape at will. The protean career is one in which the individual changes to suit the environment. Alternatively, the individual potentially changes their environment to suit their changing career needs. Protean careers are managed by the individual, not the organization. Not surprisingly, this approach to career management is positively related to a high level of agency or proactivity and a high tolerance for ambiguity (Briscoe, et.al. 2006). These attributes are valuable for students and for employers within a changing labour market.

Other contemporary concepts include universities and employers developing "ecosystems" in which all different players make a contribution towards employability (Sanders, 2015).

What are the implications of this for universities and for employers?

Firstly, universities need to ensure that students are embedded in rich, immersive learning experiences, which help them to build a bridge to their professional lives. Universities need to be explicit about defining and developing career-oriented graduate attributes. One illustration is seen in the graduate attributes of Nazarbayev University:

"The graduates of our programmes will demonstrate the following eight attributes, the achievement of which will prepare them for local, national and international leadership roles:

1. Possess an in-depth and sophisticated understanding of their domain of study.
2. Be intellectually agile, curious, creative and open-minded.
3. Be thoughtful decision-makers who know how to involve others.
4. Be entrepreneurial, self-propelling and able to create new opportunities.
5. Be fluent and nuanced communicators across languages and cultures.
6. Be cultured and tolerant citizens of the world.
7. Demonstrate high personal integrity.
8. Be prepared to take a leading role in the development of their country." (Nazarbayev University Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2015).

Secondly, in practical terms, Hoekstra and Crocker (2015) found that academic faculty use several techniques to help them to reflect on their own practices as educators striving to build employability capabilities in students. Universities increasingly develop industry advisory boards and listen to their advice on curriculum. Students engage in paid and unpaid internships, locally and internationally and then systematically reflect on their internship experiences. Students and faculty engage in community work as volunteers and transfer their skills to their academic environments, so that everyone is better for the experience. Some disciplines employ professors of practice, such as in Medicine, Engineering or Business, so that students hear real world experiences first hand. This allows students to build bridges between theory and practice and to critique both. Other disciplines which are less focused on specific professions, such as philosophy, literature and sociology are increasingly aware that students are keen to develop skills, knowledge and attributes which will place them in a "winning game" in their professional lives.

Thirdly, for employers, investing in their people is essential, especially in their ongoing employability. As graduates enter the workforce, they and their employers benefit from access to learning opportunities – learning from peers, from competitors and from ongoing research

in their fields and in related fields. This investment pays dividends, both metaphorically and literally (Bassi and McMurrer, 2008).

In summary, individuals can create unique definitions of career success and navigate their own career paths according to their own preferences. Universities can clarify the graduate attributes required for success in a multi-directional, non-linear and protean work environment and then embed those attributes in all academic activities. Employers can focus on developing employees through investing in myriad learning experiences for their employees, generating tangible and intangible benefits for both the individual and the organisation. Employability is enhanced when individuals, universities and employers work interdependently to achieve common aims.

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