

Michael Tomlinson
University of Southampton
School of Education
University Road
Southampton, SO17 1BJ
+44(023)80597251
M.B.Tomlinson@soton.ac.uk

Valerie Anderson
University of Portsmouth
Faculty of Business and Law
Richmond Building, Portland Street,
Portsmouth, PO1 3DE
+44(0)2392844029
Valerie.anderson@port.ac.uk

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Employers and Graduates: the mediating role of signals and capitals

Abstract

This article provides evidence and insight on the demand-side of graduate employment and selection through an investigation of employers' conceptions of what constitutes hireable and employable graduates. Drawing on evidence from a qualitative study with a diverse range of employers in the UK, the article shows that employers understand graduates' employability to encompass a complex mix of key resources, understood here as capitals, that enable graduates to present a compelling narrative of employability. Departing from conventional graduate skills approaches, the article integrates signaling and socio-cultural approaches for examining the ways in which capitals operate as signals that inform employer conceptions of which graduates are perceived to be most hireable and ultimately employable. A range of human, organisational-cultural and identity capitals enhance the value of graduates' profiles and provide signaling information that enables employers to screen graduate potential in competitive and crowded labour markets.

Keywords

Employers; graduates; employability; signaling; capitals

Introduction and context

The pressures have increased for universities to generate favourable labour market returns for graduates who, in many countries, are making significant personal economic investments in

higher education. Considerable attention across national economies has been given to the role of higher education in best equipping graduates for the challenges of a competitive global labour market (Mok, 2015). One of the overriding concerns, evident in public policy discourse for some considerable time, has been the ways in which higher education institutions (HEIs) can produce an adaptable and appropriately ‘skilled’ graduate workforce (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017; Wilton, 2011). Policy discourse in the UK has continued this theme in the context of a stronger market-driven policy framework as evident in the 2016 White Paper: *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (DBIS, 2016) and the subsequent ‘Augar Review’ (DfE, 2019). UK HEIs are called upon to deliver public value responsiveness to students’ immediate educational and future employability needs.

A prominent issue for graduates seeking to enhance their labour market outcomes is being able to manage, market and demonstrate their employability to employers. This is significant given that employers ultimately gate-keep graduates’ entry to the labour market and need to distinguish between which types of graduates they wish to recruit, even if this is not always equitable or efficient (Ashley and Empson, 2017). This is particularly salient in mass higher education and the sheer volume and diversity of graduate profiles. Employers represent only one stakeholder dimension and their views often convey ideological and cultural biases around how educational provision should be formally organised (Sin & Neave, 2016; Keep & James, 2010). However, their perspective provides important insight on how graduates’ employability is negotiated and played out during critical stages of labour market transition, in particular, job application and recruitment. This article contributes to the analysis of graduate employability through the perspective of employers; most specifically, how they conceive what constitutes desirable graduates and how this informs their selection decisions.

This article reports a study exploring employers' construction of what constitutes employable graduates and, related, how they use signals to discern graduate's potential future value in workplaces. It contributes to the theorisation of graduate employability through integrating signaling and socio-cultural approaches in exploring the qualities employers discern about the most suitable and desirable graduate job candidates. Specifically, the paper addresses the following questions. First, how do employers describe the resources, or capitals, they look for in making decisions about the calibre and future performance potential of graduate recruits? Second, what cultural, behavioural and identity signifiers are important for employers' perceptions of graduate employability?

The empirically-based conceptualisation of employability developed here depicts this to be constitutive of the development and deployment of key resources; namely forms of organisational/sectoral-related cultural, social, identity and psychological capital. We show, via qualitative data, that employers' conception of an 'employable' graduate encompasses a complex mix of personal qualities, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experiences to develop a narrative of employability. These convey forms of identity that largely enable the presentation of an employable self and modes of interactional styles that convey future organisational fit within specific workplace contexts. Our conceptualization has important implications for graduates and higher education institutions. In an overcrowded graduate labour market, students' strategies and opportunities to capitalise on experiences that demonstrate their attractiveness and potential to employers form the basis for initial graduate employment outcomes.

In this paper, we first present conceptual perspectives in employability policy and scholarly literature concerning the relationship between higher education institutions, students, and

employers. We then outline the methodological approach and then present empirical data and analysis to discuss the above framings.

Higher education and employment: the employer perspective

The relationship between higher education and employers has traditionally been problematic partly due to the apparent institutional schism between the activities of higher education and employer organisations (Behle, 2020). Higher education is not, nor has historically been, a training provider that meets very specific employer demands. Whatever skills graduates acquire prior to entering the labour market are absorbed into workplaces in complex and differentiated ways. However, higher education in the UK, Australia and US - and increasingly other contexts - operate via more market-driven and demand-responsive principles whereby the value of a student's experience is strongly equated with their future economic returns (DBIS, 2016).

Much of the dominant understanding of graduates' future employment outcomes is framed strongly in supply-side terms. The more HEIs are responsive to demands of employers through developing provision which best match these, the more individual graduates and employers stand to gain (Wilton, 2011; Nilsson & Ellstrom, 2012). Supply-side orientations to graduate employment outcomes largely follow the logic that the more aligned graduates' formal education and training is to workplace demands, the more attractive graduates will be to employers. The demand-side, namely what employer organisations expect from employable graduates and the effect this has on employability, has been significantly less of a focus within such policy discourse.

Human capital and signaling

The supply side approach has been largely informed by human capital theorising which conceives employability as an aggregation of knowledge and skills formally acquired through education and then exchanged and translated into workplace productivity (Berglund & Wallinder, 2015). Human capital theory proposes that enhanced human capital is ultimately the key determinant of graduate labour market outcomes. Employers are willing to recruit individuals with higher qualifications, such as university graduates, on the assumption that their higher levels of education match workplace demands and translate into more productive outcomes. Employers' investment decisions are essentially rational ones, based on fairly clear information about the value of graduate credentials and how they can be utilised within their workplaces. This, however, is predicated on there being close correspondence between the advanced knowledge and skills acquired in higher education qualifications and performance specification of different workplaces.

One of the principal challenges to this approach is that the supply and demand for skills and qualifications has been complicated by mass higher education and the potential surfeit of similarly and suitably qualified graduates (Figueiredo et al., 2017). An immediate consequence is that norms of recruitment are subject to change, particularly as employers have to discriminate between a greater and equally qualified graduate pool in order to recruit those they conceive of as 'the best' or most 'talented' (Nilsson and Ellstrom 2012; McCracken et al., 2016). In mass higher education systems, there is likelihood of an overshoot of well-qualified and skilled graduates rather than a shortage (Keep and James 2010). A related consequence is that greater significance is ascribed to other forms of labour market signals beyond formal qualifications.

Signaling perspectives conceive qualifications as markers of employment potential rather than an accurate measure of a future employee's likely performance, output and longer-term value. Unlike human capital, signaling theory posits that qualifications alone do not provide sufficient confirmations about the future workplace potential of job seekers (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al, 2011). Given that employers have imperfect or incomplete information about the performance potential of a graduate, in order to make effective recruitment decisions, they utilise other signals to differentiate between graduates who they feel will add organisational value. In order to overcome this 'information asymmetry' employers work from an alternative set of signaling information, for example, status of awarding institutions, work ethic, motivation etc. However, this may have only tangential relationship to the performance potential of graduate job seekers.

The key to signaling is the levels of information employers work with in order to inform selection decisions and the two-way exchange between a job candidate and employers in providing evidence of potential occupational fit. This will typically work through various stages. Firstly, a primary level of job-person matching based on cognitive and technical signals denoted by formal educational qualifications. Secondly, the further differentiating of signals, especially in crowded market conditions, that convey work readiness and productive potential. Finally, a set of less observable signals that carry important additional insight into the suitability of a job seeker (e.g. motivation, values, interests).

A significant component of employability, therefore, is the presentation of job market information at the point of entry. Much rests on how the job seeker presents this and how employers receive it. Research literature on employer signaling (Bol and van de Werforst,

2011; Di Stasio, 2017) suggests that employers are propended towards extra screening to minimise the ‘lottery’ of basing future productivity on degree credentials. This is especially so in contexts where the relationship between formal education and jobs is less coordinated through direct vocational training, often the case with UK HE. Job candidates also need to decode employers’ signals about their expectations, including ‘image’, qualities they value, and what candidates can anticipate about working in a targeted workplace (Rodrigues et al, 2020).

Additional forms of capital and employability

Whilst pertinent to understandings of employer decision-making, often missing in human capital and signaling perspectives are more finer-grained details concerning employers’ rationales for making selection decisions, the types of characteristics of candidates; or indeed how this is captured through the relational exchange between graduate, employer, and employability. Much of the recent analysis of graduate employability has conceptualised this problem more broadly in terms of the interplay between a wider range of employment-related resources, acquired through multiple domains, which help facilitate, or inhibit, graduates’ entry to targeted employment. Increasingly prominent here has been the concept of ‘capitals’, which serve to build work-related profiles and therefore attractiveness to employers (Peeters et al, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017).

As crucial resource assets which represent a repository of significant educational, socio-cultural, embodied and personal dimensions, the formation and deployment of capitals empowers individuals and enables them to negotiate the demands of different social fields, but also enables them to signal value within the organisational fields in which they are deployed. This has been shown to operate in graduates’ own career decisions, self-perceived employability and career readiness, as well as how they decode opportunities and develop

strategies in negotiating job market entry (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Clarke, 2018). The development of social and cultural capital enables graduates to harness significant social relations that enhance their perceived employability. The development of network ties enhances individuals' access to formal employment openings and gatekeepers, helping open up important informal channels (Granovetter, 1995, Bourdieu, 1986). Effectively, powerful network advocates are likely to validate the signaling potential of credentials and provide a basis from which employers can discern between differential signaling information based on *a priori* knowledge of a given candidate.

Bridging activities further develop cultural insight (cultural capital) that enables graduates to better decode an organisation's field dynamics, including important dimensions of a workplace's cultural make-up. Research has indicated that recruitment practices often reflect broader demand-related factors pertaining to the social and cultural make-up of a workplace, including their organisational form, strategic business focus, work culture, value systems and interactions with stakeholders within and beyond a workplace (Hora, 2020; Cai, 2013; Mullen, 2019). This means that person-organisation fit criteria can be read as social fit via a process of cultural screening to discern the appropriateness of a job candidate in meeting a range of significant, yet not easily codified, cultural criteria (Brown et al, 2011; McCracken et al., 2016). The formation and embodiment of organisationally-related cultural capital that signals a graduate's potential integration, adaptability and enhanced relationality within workplaces appears to be significant in how employers appraise their employability. Important are the ways in which graduates are able to develop and enact an identity (Holmes, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017; Nicholas, 2018; Fugate et al, 2004) that conveys compelling future selves as employable subjects. As Holmes (2015) argues, when graduates enter the labour market they need to

present an identity to a prospective employer as suitable for employment which may, in turn, be warranted (or otherwise) by employers.

Overall, capitals perspectives capture the socially relational processes between employers and graduates. This perspective brings into focus the kinds of resources necessary for graduates to exchange in the process of gaining access to the labour market and early careers. The key issues, from a demand-side perspective, is how employers, as key boundary keepers in the relationship between higher education and labour markets, understand such resources as signals of a graduate's suitability to being employed, as well as their role in transducing the connection between a candidate's potential to realisable employability within the contexts they operate.

The present study aimed to investigate the extent to which employers were using such frames to inform their perceptions of employable graduates. We specifically examined the criteria employers across a small, yet diverse cohort of employer organisations, used to describe employable graduates, how they understood what kinds of resources, or capitals, they looked for in making decisions about the calibre and future performance potential of their recruits. We sought to explore cultural, behavioural and identity signifiers that underscored their perceptions and potential selection decisions. Following the methodological approach to this study, the article then details empirical evidence that cut across the employer data and reveals the factors underpinning their recruitment decisions. It finally discusses implications for policy.

Methodology

The main focus of the study was to get beneath the judgements employers made about the graduates they recruited, or otherwise, and examine a range of verbal and behavioural encoding

that employers expect from a graduate worthy of being considered as having an ‘edge’ over other equally qualified candidates. It focused on employers’ conception of which graduates were seen as ideally hireable and employable relative to other graduates. It aimed to reference such understandings in relation to a set of behavioural, cultural, contextual and inter-social/inter-personal dimensions through which employers described ideal, or at least organisationally-suitable, graduate candidates. A salient concern was to uncover the kinds of markers, signals and forms of capital used by employers to inform their judgements of which graduates they wished to employ within their organisations.

In order to analyse employers’ expectations of the employable graduates, semi-structured interviews were chosen to acquire both retrospective and real-time accounts by employers involved in graduate recruitment. Interviews provided participants with some flexibility to expand on their graduate employability expectations and enabled a recursive movement between participants’ data and theoretical explanations. Participants were recruited through a purposive process of contact with organizations known to engage with four different universities (one research intensive ‘Russell Group’, one ‘Post-1992; one specialist Arts university and one research intensive Post-94) for graduate recruitment purposes. Following initial email contact, one-to-one interviews were arranged with those who responded positively, conducted either face-to-face or by telephone. The resulting sample (Table 1) included nineteen organizations: nine small, three medium-sized and seven large companies from public, private and not-for-profit sectors operating in a range of sectors such as sales; recruitment; logistics; engineering and construction; creative industries and services.. Small companies had fewer than 50 employees, medium between 51-500 and large over 500. Participants occupied either a specialist or non-specialist role regarding selection, either having a direct HR or graduate recruitment specialist role or a senior operational management role in the company and some

involvement in selection. Companies also varied between those where graduate recruitment is a regular feature of HR planning or more occasional recruitment to fill specific graduate vacancies as and when they arise.

An interview guide with three sections was developed and the interview structure drew on the research questions addressing: characteristics employers look for when recruiting a graduate; the processes of selection used; and advice for students seeking graduate level employment. Open ended questions were used and pertinent avenues of conversation deemed important to the research questions were probed. For example, probing questions used in the first section of the interview invited interviewees to reflect on skills and competency expectations as well as personal qualities. In addition, employers were invited to share their expectations about the 'reputational value' of different types of university; graduate marketability, and the value of degree-related knowledge, skills and attributes. In the second part of the interview, we focused on the processes of selection. Employers were also asked to elaborate, where appropriate, on how their methods of selection provided the opportunity for students to demonstrate personal qualities such as confidence and social fit.

The analytical approach entailed a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) utilising a combination of both inductive and deductive approaches. This approach allowed for a concept-driven analytical strategy whereby indicative codes were extracted from the raw data and then framed through a broader theoretical lens. Initial coded data were semantically interpreted around the surface meaning represented within the structure of the data (e.g. "it's important that they come with the right attitude"). These were then complemented with more latent and abstract thematic clusters which drew out deeper and more conceptual meanings (e.g. experiential signals, person-organisation dynamics, identity enactment).

Table 1 positioned around here

Findings and discussion

Human capital and graduate-level skills – qualifications and credentials

A common theme across all the employer interviews was the continued value of higher education-derived human capital, perceived largely as a foundational aspect of graduates' employability and a marker of their relative talent. Higher education qualifications were perceived as threshold qualifications for entry into higher skilled employment which provided graduates with a platform. As such, higher education qualifications remain a significant employer signal, which they remain keen to invest in. The extent to which this remains a prestigious "value-added" in the context of graduate oversupply continues to be debateable, although the majority of employers indicated that graduates bring forward tangible benefit, which made them preferable over non-graduates.

Two specific variations were evident in employers' appraisals of higher education-derived human capital value. One concerned the specificities of technical knowledge, derived from specific subject disciplines, which were fundamental to meeting a range of technical job-specific demands. Whilst also acknowledging that many of the technical skills would be acquired in the work context, employers described the value of degree-level learning as equipping graduates for the demands of higher-skilled employment. In just under half of the organisations, recruiters referred to specific subject knowledge as being a prerequisite for undertaking an occupational role; particularly in cases where this related to technical

requirements within their area. In some cases, employers alluded to the pre-occupational socialising function of various degree programmes in further validating HE qualifications.

Another variant of human capital, connected to, but somewhat distinct from, formal knowledge, are the perceived skills sets which graduates are understood to possess and further acquire in their employment. The closer aligned these are to perceived performance requirements the more desirable they were perceived, but in most of the employer organisations in this study these were seen to be more generic in nature. Whilst employers referred to specific sets of hard and organisationally-relevant sets of skills which may be directly applicable (*“individuals who’ve demonstrated a bit of technical competency during their studies to take on those roles, Engineering company*), in the main the most valued forms of skills were based on ‘soft’ skills and allied sets of behavioural competences. As with previous studies, there was widespread reference to the importance of non-technical or non-cognitive skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008) as being crucial components of the activities graduates would need to utilise within many of the task domains in which they would be operating.

Overall, at a primary level of signaling, higher education qualifications are seen as significantly constitutive of graduates’ productive capacity and outputs within workplaces and identified as a primary component of graduates’ attractiveness.

The signaling value of experience: self-marketing and positional advantage

Despite the continued value placed on graduates’ specific and general human capital, all employers in this study referred to its limitation beyond fulfilling core technical job demands and serving as an elementary signal of organisational value. The relative positioning of large volumes of graduates in possession of similar credentials reinforced the need for stronger

forms of signaling amongst graduates through a range of non-academic experiences, preferably employment-related. Significant value was accorded to wider facets of graduates' resumes, principally in terms of aligned work experience, general work experience, extra curricula activities and symbolically valuable achievements.

The data indicated the double-filter function of such experiences in the appraisal of graduates' profiles: first to screen-out a surfeit of graduates with similar cognitive capability and human capital; secondly to gain more salient job potential information on their likely future value to an organisation. Beyond differentiating between similarly qualified graduates in a mass credential market, experiential signals provide salient information around how a graduate's potential, job-entry employability may translate to realised and situated employability. Upon this basis, employers felt able to infer future performance and the organisational value a graduate may carry forward. Experience-based signals were perceived to provide information on a candidate's potential work readiness and performance potential, particularly when there was alignment between their experiences and anticipated job demands:

To give you an example, the last time I offered a trainee position in the department for one post I had 206 applicants. Every single one of them had a degree from a 'good' university, many of them from Russell Group universities; the vast majority of them had 2:1s or above. The thing that we shortlisted on in the end was work experience, and experience not just in the public sector but a mix. (Legal Services, Senior Manager).

As this employer reveals, stronger interaction between prior experience and organisational context was valued in terms of providing an indication of performance potential and organisational understanding. This appears to denote firmer evidence of proven ability to negotiate and a level of preparedness, which was viewed as a crucial aspect of job-entry

employability. Previous work experiences which placed demands on graduates were perceived to be advantageous and to reflect proven worth and performance. The more context-specific and aligned to organisational demands the work-related experiences were framed, the more value they were accorded.

Employers in the main were also receptive to tangential work experience that did not align to specific organisational demands; particularly if this was presented in ways which signaled initiative, openness to experience and some responsive to immediate challenges. The ability to capitalise on fairly mundane experiences and present these as evidence of proactivity and initiative clearly carries advantages in terms of extending the scope of emerging employability narratives:

I always look for what have they done outside of their course. What have they learnt? What are they doing that's self-disciplined? So for example in technology business I would be looking for have they built their own PC, have they been in customer-facing roles, so whether working in a bar or in a shop. That's really important for us (Data Management, Head of Recruitment).

Employers in this study made explicit connections between a graduate's wider experiential exposures and achievements and their motivational sets, proactivity and willingness to embrace organisational challenges. The views below revealed the appeal of fairly distinctive experiential episodes as part of a wider personal narrative a graduate could potentially bring forward, demonstrating the appeal of vivid and almost incongruous work or life experiences. The trick appears to be for job candidates to elevate these into more compelling chronicles that signal marketability via profile distinctiveness.

I had an interviewee the other day, he used to work on an eel farm and that was the best interview because it's just so interesting and unique (Fashion, Senior HR manager).

We get the best insights from the nuggets, and usually it's the little comments between stories about something they did outside of uni or their summer job or when they were a ski chalet host between college and uni. Those experiences are far more – it's going to sound awful – grounded in 'reality', whose context is more relevant and more real I suppose (Data Management, Senior recruiter).

The more reflective and articulate graduates are in conveying personal and social qualities valued by employers, the better chance they appear to have in convincing employers that they have an edge over others. A further important dimension in the area of experiential signaling was the ability of graduates to present and package these in dynamic ways that articulated the experiential, and subsequent labour market, value of these episodes. Making explicit connections between experiences and anticipated employment activities and outputs provides employers a clearer evidential account of how such experiences translate into future performance.

If they're claiming team working, we're not really looking for 'when I was a boy scout'; they're looking for something that says 'I was a member of the team delivering this project and the outcome of that was X and my role in that was Y.' It's more focused on what the employer is likely to be looking for. And if we've said it's a lone-working job then no-one's going to look at the team-working part so you do need to tailor your applications a little bit (Legal Services, Senior Manager).

Culture, context and person-organisation dynamics

Once employers have utilised a variety of resume-based and experiential signals, socio-cultural dimensions come into play concerning the inter-cultural and inter-personal dynamics between graduates and employer organisations. The data revealed that once threshold levels of

graduateness have been gleaned and additional experiential signals have been utilised, finer-grained judgements on graduates' organisational potential and value significantly framed employers' appraisals of their employability. Accordingly, the cultural context of an organisation provides a significant institutional lens to employers' perceptions of graduates' calibre and suitability. All employers in this study referred to their organisational contexts, its value systems, ways of working and expectations around intra- and inter-organisational relationships. Significant here are the ways in which graduates would be able to mould into a given work environment: this mediated employers' judgements not only of skills but also how a candidate's potential employability may be enacted in practice.

The evidence of this study supported the notion that person-organisation fit was a strong recruitment criterion: the cultural context in which this was set informs perception of graduates' suitability for employment in a given organisation. Perceptions of how well graduates can decode the culture in which they were aiming to be employed, encompassing often implicit cultural rules and scripts of an organisation, as well as its modes of practice and values are an important framing dimension. Significant here is alignment with the field dynamics of organisations, built on the perceived cultural fit between the graduate and employer organisation:

So our top graduates, we will always recruit on attitude because, for us, I think it's the only company I've worked in, especially as a HR professional, that I can see that every office I go to, the culture is exactly the same. It's one that we're very proud of.... so our number one attribute is attitude (Fashion, Senior Recruiter).

Employers in this study were largely upfront about the importance of cultural fit; that is, the extent to which they discerned a synergy between the graduates' socio-cultural make-up and that of their organisation:

It comes down to cultural fit. How's this person going to fit in with the team? So that's a big part of it. So if I'm going through an interview process, I'm actually by this point, yeah we'll test them on how qualified they are, but we'll be looking more to challenge what their personality is like. Particularly within our company is are they kind of aligned to our company values? (Leisure, Senior Manager).

Because it's very operations specific we're looking for people that are confident because they'll be managing a large team of people. So definitely confidence is key and the ability or desire to manage a team of people. But then someone that's also analytical. So someone that uses data in their examples and that is comfortable working with data (Logistics, HR Lead).

A core component to such cultural and contextual judgements is, therefore, the demonstration of appropriate kinds of embodied and behavioural dispositions that convey significant, yet sometimes invisible, markers of a graduate's value. Whilst employers were often prone to couch these in terms of sets of soft skills, often beneath such generic descriptors are sets of behavioural, interpersonal and inter-social dispositions and competencies that appeal to a given field environment. Largely at play were a set of less codified and invisible criteria, often underpinned by embodied cultural capital that transmitted a graduate's organisational suitability. This supports other research in this area which has spoken of 'x factors' or 'the edge'; tacit qualities that conform to an idealised notion of what might be a talented or high-performing future employee (Morley, 2007; McCracken et al., 2016). This not only appears to rest on how easily a graduate can become acculturated into the dominant mode of practice within a given workplace culture and chemistry with incumbent organisational members, but also how such embodied capitals might play out in more transactional terms. All employers made references to internal and external institutional dynamics, including negotiating with

clients, customers, partner companies as well as building effective relations with colleagues and managers:

Team player. No ego. It's team work. I mean, it's, you know, it's team work. It's also very personable to clients, that's really important. Client relationship is probably the most important thing, so somebody who's actually happy and cheery and personable to clients, even if they have to fake (Design, Senior Partner).

So customer service is absolutely paramount...and I think that's the one thing that we really, really need to see on somebody's CV is good customer service. I think for an organisation that is so customer service-focused, it is the one area that we don't train people in particularly much. (Sales, Head of Recruitment).

The data, therefore, show processes of cultural screening and matching based on principles of person-organisation fit. Embodied forms of cultural capital are potent in shaping employers judgements and this places some graduates at an advantage. For those seeking employment in elite firms, this can become even more class-loaded and discriminate given the socially constructed framing of talent in these contexts (Ashley & Empson, 2017). However, given the fluidity and heterogeneity of the graduate labour market field, including that represented by our study, there is scope for graduates to play out different cultural scripts which have relative value. The important task in such cultural signalling is ensuring that they must be compatible with that of their target organisations and presented in ways which accord to the cultural dynamics of a given workplace.

Identity warranting: presentation and performance of an employable self

A theme underpinning most of the employer interviews, and one which unites allied themes of experience, articulation and cultural fit concerned identity, mainly in terms of how effectively graduates project and perform a version of their future selves as employees. Identity in this sense is closely connected to the claims, ideations and anticipated trajectories about the future person/employee graduates present to employers, not just via their profile but also their initial interactions. Significant to this self-presentation is the extent to which graduates can convey an overall sense that they are investing in a given future role and making sufficient warrants about how emerging identities may transfer into actual ones during working life.

Employers in this study were highly receptive to ways in which potential recruits were able to convey a strong sense that they had invested themselves in their future careers and were developing coherent relationships between their personal and professional selves. The process of articulating and warranting emerging identities appeared significant during the interactional exchanges in recruitment and the extent to which employers perceived this to form part of a narrative of their potential. As previous research in this area has demonstrated, the claims graduates make about their role as a prospective employee need to be trusted, acknowledged and actively affirmed by employers in order for such identities to become legitimated (Holmes 2015; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

Emerging work-related identities, however ideational or grounded in reality, can be enabling in terms of empowering self-concepts and self-images, which can propend graduates towards actions that aid their career development (Jackson, 2016). This study found evidence of employers looking for the kinds of identity warrants that provided evidence that graduates could successfully become the kind of employee who saw their future role as a wider part of their self-trajectory. This indicates that the extent to which a graduate can claim an active

investment in their future career and situate this in relation to future specialised roles and activities, can go some significant way towards convincing employers that they can make a transition from graduate to active employee. Accordingly, the level of identity capital they convey influences employers' perceptions of which graduates are likely to transition more smoothly from novice, emerging graduates to more formed early professionals:

So I would suggest be able to articulate as much as you can what career do you want, what is your career path, where do you see yourself – it's a very clichéd question but being able to articulate to us what you want your career to be, what you aspire to do, what you aspire to achieve (Data Management, HR specialist).

This appears to have a performance dimension, based on narration and articulation. Clearly the more graduates can cultivate a professionally facing self, or what could be understood as an employability script, the more readily this translates into conferred value. Employers in this study often explicitly referred to role-playing as an important element of these scripts and the extent to which graduates were able to narrate:

My brother calls it 'present motivation' i.e. somebody who's in the room dedicated to your role, is listening quite carefully to what you're saying about the role and adapting their behaviour and intentions towards that role. That motivation is a good sign of (a) their adaptability and curiosity, (b) their energy and enthusiasm, and nuances around understanding the skills required, their drive, interest, all of those kind of come out of that present motivation (Creative Sector, Senior Manager).

As with the case of graduates having to articulate the value of their experiences and supposed technical knowledge and the contexts in which this might be applied, a similar process was evident in making claims about the kind of future employee they might be: the presentation of their 'future self' as adaptable in terms of future employability. The issue therefore is not so

much about what skills graduates have in their possession but instead the ‘skilful performance’ of these in job seeking contexts and making tangible connections between their possession and operation in future practice. Ambiguous notions like ‘curiosity’ and ‘energy’ become another way of describing modes of identity - embodied and acculturated - through which a graduate can perform an organisationally-relevant script and practise desired ways of enacted selfhood within the institutional-cultural spaces of a given workplace.

Implications from the study

A salient message from employers in this study is that applicants need to present and frame their employability through compelling signals that capture their value and exemplify how these give them an edge over other graduates with similar human capital. The study indicates that, from the perspective of employers, employability is constitutive of a complex amalgam of resources that act as crucial currencies in how graduates are appraised and seen as being suitable for specific jobs and organisations. In this section we focus on the implications of our conclusions for a range of stakeholders groups, specifically HE institutions, career counsellors, students; employers; and policy-makers.

At the level of HE institutions, relevant practitioners such as careers counsellors and educators may find that vocabulary around resources and capitals, rather than skills *per se*, is more efficacious in helping students engage in their career management and learning. Career and Employability Learning (CEL) can provide students with a more nuanced and experientially-referenced language that enhances awareness of the value of acquiring and conveying forms of capital that enable them to contextualise experiences and extant bodies of knowledge. Practitioners can facilitate ways of helping students embellish experience as part of their portfolio building as a key signals of marketability. The episodes such as the hotel chalet

hosting and eel farming (to name just a few within this study) can project an emerging employability narrative with significant signaling value linked with early professional socialisation and work readiness.

Both individually-centred career counselling and group-orientated CEL programmes can be geared towards this goal, especially in equipping students with tools and knowledge base to self-audit, reflect and act on career development behaviours (Nicholas, 2018). Personal Planning Development within curricula and co-curricular activities, particularly those connected to portfolio building and diagnostic self-evaluation, can help students build career resources and confidence and enable practitioners to identify areas for personal enhancement that may form the basis for bespoke guidance.

In terms of equity and mobility, it is imperative that less advantaged students are more empowered to acquire the social, cultural and economic resources associated with work experience, internships or other life experiences that signal their value in a crowded field through opportunities in their three-four degree programmes. This study also indicated the continued importance of bridging students' relationship to targeted professional areas via work-integrated learning programmes and structured work experience. Establishing meaningful and sustainable employer engagement with HEIs, particularly in local labour market contexts, can help develop reciprocal labour market awareness, enhanced employability resources and perceived employability, as found in previous research (Jackson & Wilton, 2017).

Employers have a significant role in making opportunities for student career development salient and explicit, not only through value-added work experience but providing meaningful and accurate signaling information back to students and institutions on how to align their

emerging profiles to anticipated employer demands. Employers are also in a crucial mediatory position in regulating the quality and impact of work-integrated learning via internships, including their delivery, design and access to genuine career development opportunities (McHugh, 2017).

The study raises significant messages for policy makers who have tended to be pre-occupied with metrics-orientated approaches to assessing institutional employability, often conflating outcome (employment) with process (employability). Policy-influencers may look to further encourage institutions to develop their own autonomy in managing the employability agenda, in ways most fitting the diverse contexts of their programme offerings, students, local demographics (including local labour markets).

Conclusions

Policy and research literature concerning employability is dominated by a supply-side perspective. This article contributes a much needed demand-side examination of graduate employment and selection from an employers' perspective. The study was limited to a relatively small, yet diverse, sample group of employer organisations. However, its insights provide a basis for future research utilising larger-scale, mixed methods that might include comparative case study investigations across different occupational sectors and examination of employers' commitment towards developing careers and internal employability during graduates' early careers.

The analysis reveals that employers' conceptions of what constitutes hireable graduates rests largely on the resources graduates are able to draw upon and convert into meaningful signals

that place them in an advantageous position in relation to employers' demand-side preferences and priorities. Employers' conceptions of employable future employees, who will add value to an organisation's profile and output, form the basis for their screening processes of the presentation and signaling of these resources by graduate applicants. The study confirms the importance of the concepts of graduate capitals and identities as these are significant signals of perceived employability. The integration of signaling with socio-cultural approaches in relation to the demand-side of employability represents an important theoretical contribution. Signaling, in addition to possession of graduate capitals, is important to understand and explain employability outcomes. Understanding of the importance of both signaling and graduate capitals and identities has important implications for institutions' strategic approaches to develop students' career readiness and perceived employability.

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Table 1: Participant Organizations

ID	Sector	Size: S/M/L	Role of Interviewer (HR specialist / non-specialist)	Regular / occasional graduate recruitment
1	Recruitment	M	Non-specialist	Regular
2	Sales	L	Specialist	Regular
3	Pilot	S	N/A	N/A
4	Engineering	L	Specialist	Regular
5	Recruitment	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
6	Construction	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
7	Data management	L	Specialist	Regular
8	Legal services	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
9	Teacher training	S	Specialist	Regular
10	Recruitment	S	Specialist	Regular
11	Logistics	L	Specialist	Regular
12	Data management	M	Specialist	Occasional
13	Fashion	L	Specialist	Regular
14	Design	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
15	Information and Communications	L	Non-specialist	Regular
16	Leisure	L	Non-specialist	Occasional
17	Charity	M	Specialist	Regular
18	Information and Communications	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
19	Creative	S	Non-specialist	Occasional