

Employability and Marketing Education: Insights from the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The importance of developing employability attributes within university graduates is gaining rapid momentum in the UK. One reason for this is that employers in the UK are disappointed by the quality of graduates moving into the workforce; this sentiment has also been echoed by the UK Government. With this in mind, attempts have been made to identify general attributes that lead to employability. However, to-date limited research has been undertaken to identify the key employability attributes for marketing graduates. Consequently, this study explores and identifies the key attributes for marketing graduates from an employer's perspective. Further, in-depth interviews with marketing educators and experts in the field of employability were utilised to identify how these attributes can be successfully embedded into the marketing curriculum. Eight employability attributes emerge from the data; being (1) Communication; (2) Teamwork; (3) Problem Solving; (4) Work Ethic; (5) Desirable persona; (6) Customer focus; (7) Core Skills; (8) Leadership. These are discussed and potential employability enhancing strategies presented.

Keywords: Employability, marketing education, skills, knowledge

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Introduction

Throughout the world the market for higher education is growing. In the UK, there were over 2.3 million students studying at higher education institutions during the academic year 2006/07. (UniversitiesUK, 2008). With the increase in student enrolment, the subject of *employability* has become a central issue for Government policy makers. It is generally accepted that a highly qualified, flexible, and continuously updated labour force is significantly correlated with a country's economic performance (Knight, 2001). As such, it is widely felt that the responsibility for training employees capable of operating in a global economy falls at the feet of higher education institutions (HEI). The importance afforded to attaining an *employable* nation of workers has therefore been evidenced by the provision of reports such as the Dearing Report (UK National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) in the UK, the key objective being to increase the number of skilled and employable graduates entering the industry marketplace. However, a current concern is that employers in UK are disappointed by the quality of graduates moving into employment. The ESECT report, *Learning and Employability*, cited the reason for the shortfalls in national productivity to the failure of the UK to develop employable people in universities (Yorke, 2004). Further, the rapid rate of change in many sectors of the economy has meant that discipline based knowledge is no longer seen as sufficient to develop the 'whole' graduate, as this knowledge can be quickly outdated. Consequently, there needs to be a shift in focus from knowledge generation to skill development (Rundle-Thiele, Bennett and Dann 2005).

Within this context, the imperative questions to be answered are: *What enhances a student's employability?* And *What do educationalists need to do to improve the employability of their graduates?* Whilst these questions have begun to be addressed in the general context of education, as of yet, little attention has been afforded to the more specific employment of graduates entering the field of Marketing. Consequently, the theoretical contribution of this paper will be the emergence of a list of employability skills important for marketing graduates to own and a starting point on how to enhance these skills.

Literature Review

In the UK, the market for higher education has seen a rapid expansion in the last thirty years. Following the conversion of many former Polytechnic colleges into 'modern' universities, the UK now hosts 161 degree level institutions. It has been suggested that the stimulus for the influx of students into universities commenced under the leadership of the Conservative Government (1979-1997) (Oldfield and Baron, 2000). However, it was under the Labour Government between 1997-2010 that, following a report by Sir Ronald Dearing, Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, attention was given to increasing the number of British people in education. The findings of the Dearing Report showed evidence in favour of an expansion of the university system. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair unveiled his leading strategy to focus on "Education, Education, Education" and to this end, the Government aimed to achieve one in two attendance of higher education across the population. Coupled with this growth in student numbers at universities are the calls to make graduates more employable to help the shortfall in national productivity (Yorke, 2004). Consequently, the employability of graduates is a key political and social issue that has been emerging in the UK.

The concept of employability dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. At this time, the term was developed predominantly in the USA where it was initially defined in terms of the availability of able bodied workers (de Grip et al, 2004). Over time, this definition has evolved in meaning. Since the 1960's, employability has taken on a more personal context accounting for the relative qualities that separate people competing for jobs. However, employability is not about getting a job. Mantz Yorke unequivocally demonstrated that employability is more about the capacity of a person to do a job (Yorke, 2004) rather than get a job. Similarly, Harvey (1999) described employability as "being equipped for a job" (p.98). These notions suggest that employability is more to do with the personal qualities owned by a person, beyond and above the actual acquisition of employment. Therefore, the definition for employability used in this paper will be the one provided by the 2003 ESECT report ((Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team (ESECT), 2003, p.4):

"a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy".

The ESECT report - *Are Your Students Employable*, used the work of Hawkins (1999) and Harvey (1997) to build a 'pool' of employability attributes considered as important to employers of graduate level candidates. A total of fifteen attributes were considered as salient and provides a basic yet useful insight into the components of employability. These are: Team Working; Leadership; Interpersonal skills; Customer orientation; Communication; Foreign Language; Self promotion skills; Networking skills; Problem solving; Action planning; IT Literacy; Flexibility; Numeric skills; Business acumen; Understanding of commercial goals. A number of other groups of employability skills have been proposed; for example DEST (2002) identified; communication; teamwork; problem-solving; initiative and enterprise; planning and organisation; self-management; learning; technology (DEST, 2006). However, these 'pools' of attributes tend to be generic across all graduates. Consequently, it is timely to access the employability attributes needed by employers of marketing graduates. One study that was conducted identified willingness to learn; interpersonal skills; written communication and problem solving as the four key employability skills for marketing graduates to contain (Gray, Whiten and Knightbridge 2002). Thus, this research builds upon this work by examining marketing managers in the UK; with this in mind, the first research question is proposed:

RQ1: What are the attributes that will enhance a marketing graduate's employability?

Further to the needs of identifying the marketing graduates employability attributes, this research also investigated how these traits could be implemented into the marketing curriculum. Consequently, the second research question is proposed:

RQ2: How can the development of employability attributes of a marketing graduate be embedded into the marketing curriculum?

Methodology

In addressing the above research questions, a three-stage research strategy was implemented, conducted sequentially to allow for the findings of the first stage to feed into the second and the second into the third stage. In adopting this approach it was imperative that a rich and

broad understanding of the phenomena was analysed. This is especially important in exploratory studies where the goal is to gain insight into unknown areas of the social world (Creswell, 1998); therefore an entirely qualitative approach was applied (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Stage One involved 15 in-depth interviews conducted with employers responsible for recruiting marketing students into their organisations. Interviews were analysed using the NVivo software package which assists in sorting emerging themes into latent codes. On completion of the analysis, each emerging employability attribute desired by employers was sorted and placed underneath a wider more general category. These categories represent the expectations of skills and capabilities that employers expect of recruits. Stage Two identified relevant strategies that educators and policy makers could apply in their university courses, and/or modules. Interviews were conducted with marketing educators. It was felt that the experience of lecturers in delivering strategies (in various levels of innovativeness) would be a good method for collating a “shopping list” of ideas. Resources and documents were also collected and analysed at this stage. Eighteen respondents were interviewed at this stage. In the third and final stage, experts ($n=8$) in the area of employability were interviewed to examine the strategies to enhance employability suggested by the lecturers (at stage two) and to identify other possible avenues for enhancing employability. In general, these experts were from universities in the UK with the task of improving the employability prospects of graduates. Further, a document analysis of approaches used by various universities was undertaken. Quotations from respondents will be weaved through the findings section (shown in *italics*).

Findings

From the research a total of eight themes emerged relating to the skills and capabilities expected of graduates in the marketing arena. These were (1) Communication; (2) Teamwork; (3) Problem Solving; (4) Work Ethic; (5) Desirable persona; (6) Customer focus; (7) Core Skills; (8) Leadership. These will be discussed below along with potential strategies to be utilised by the marketing lecturer to enhance student employability.

Communication, both written and verbal, is considered to be the most important attribute for a marketing graduate. *“The marketing / commercial graduate needs to be very presentable, very communicative, and a very very fast learner.”* There were three sub-attributes of communication that were seen as important; Information Transfer, Networking Skills, and Foreign Language ability. *“A good marketing person has the ability to pull in the right people when they need them”*. Potential employability enhancing strategies were identified as: (1) In-class presentations; (2) Role plays; (3) Real life consultancy projects; (4) Guest lectures from respected practitioners; (4) Employer ‘question time’ (5) International ‘buddying-up’ systems.

The ability to work as part of a team is clearly valued, marketing graduates are seen to be the building blocks for senior positions. The ability to move things along within the business, and externally, is extremely important. *“Team working is very high – they are expected to lead the development of marketing strategies”* Potential employability enhancing strategies were identified as: (1) Team-based simulation games; (2) Team-working residential courses (e.g. commando, team activities, sports etc.); (3) Extra-curricular team consulting projects.

Marketing professionals placed a high price on the student being able to demonstrate critical thinking and problem solving skills. Marketing graduates are expected to have a very high level of problem solving ability – possibly because of the nature of the industry and the speed at which it progresses. This includes applying appropriate methodologies to find a solution.

Typical comments included: *“Problem solving, again you automatically expect that from a graduate”*; *“They need to be aware of the steps to go through to solve a problem”* Potential employability enhancing strategies were identified as: (1) Short term internships; (2) Working case studies/stories where the student is expected to formulate a solution to a real-life marketing problem experienced by an organisation. (3) Time pressured exercises to solve a marketing scenario.

The fourth attribute to emerge was the work ethic of the marketing graduate. Firstly, employers stated that they needed to be motivated: *“We look for people who are highly motivated with a lot of self belief”*. Secondly, they need a willingness to learn. *“Especially with marketing you have got to be flexible – you can’t assume that what you used to market a product a year ago is going to work today.”* *“Willing to learn – that’s very important”*. Potential employability enhancing strategies were identified as: (1) Using elements from student centred learning theory to encourage the students to take the lead in their learning. (2) Competitive (group based) projects where students are able to compete against each other. Students are motivated to be the best team and therefore exercise a willingness to learn in completion of this goal.

There were certain personality traits that employers wanted to see in prospective employees, consequently, this theme was titled Desirable Persona. This included a good level of self-awareness. This theme draws close parallels to their level of emotional intelligence. At the same time, they need to be confident and full of self belief. *“The qualities that stand out for me here are having self awareness and confidence”* There is a thin line between being realistic and confident. Potential employability enhancing strategies were identified as: (1) One-to-one appraisals with the course instructor to review progress and set targets for future personal achievements. This allows students to have a better understanding of who they are and where they could improve in the future. (2) End of course reflective self-appraisal for students to evaluate their own progress, their personality traits and any improvements required for the future. (3) In-class presentations undertaken by students to build confidence and self belief. Experience of speaking to audiences is felt to be important for raising the confidence of less-assured students.

To be successful in marketing, graduates need to be inherently comfortable with people at all levels, both internally within the company and externally with suppliers and customers. Depending on the marketing role in question, putting the customer first is seen as very important. *“In a marketing role, customer orientation must be high”* Potential employability enhancing strategies were identified as: (1) Consultancy assignments in which students may be expected to undertake a project with a marketing organisation as their customer. (2) Business games (e.g. flux) whereby the students are expected to operate as they perceive they would in the external environment (i.e. meeting customer needs etc). (3) Guest speakers from external organisations who can discuss their experiences of being customer focused (e.g. perhaps from a customer service background).

There are certain ‘core skills’ that employers expect graduates to have as pre-requisites of a post/graduate education. These include: Numeric, Verbal, and IT skills. Basic numeric skills are taken for granted. A level of numeracy such as that required for detailed statistical analysis is not expected. Nevertheless, some of the respondents stated that graduates need to be at a good enough standard to deal with spreadsheet level numbers. *“They need to have advanced reporting skills other than just words. A high level of IT – especially numeric and graphic representation of data is needed”*. Again, being literate is inherent in the ability to communicate effectively. This is especially true when presenting word documents and

reports. *“They have to be able to tick the basic literacy box to pass go”* Finally, the ability to use IT is seen as very important to marketers. Being able to use basic software packages is critical for the day-to-day functioning of the business. Typical comments included: *“I would expect IT literacy to be a given”* and *“IT skills are a given, someone who is comfortable with computers is important; it’s another tick in the box.”* Potential employability enhancing strategies were identified as: (1) Application of various software packages throughout the course to provide students with a good level of IT skills (e.g. Microsoft Office, Adobe, etc.). (2) Use of support technologies to supplement the course (e.g. wiki’s, blogs, etc) to encourage students to interact with computer products.

The final employability trait to emerge from the research was leadership ability. Employers wanted marketing graduates that showed signs of being future leaders. *“We look for marketing graduates of above average IQ that would be capable of becoming the managers and directors of the future”*. Potential employability enhancing strategies were identified as: (1) Group challenges in the format of the television show “The Apprentice” with revolving project managers, to give students the opportunity to put their leadership theory into practice. (2) Guest lectures from inspirational and charismatic business leaders to give students a perspective on what it takes to be a good leader, and the qualities they tend to possess.

Conclusion

This research project identified eight employability attributes important for UK marketing students to possess. These were (1) Communication; (2) Teamwork; (3) Problem Solving; (4) Work Ethic; (5) Desirable persona; (6) Customer focus; (7) Core Skills; (8) Leadership. whilst there were some similarities, these findings differed in skill development areas and in the emphasis placed on the development of the skills over the generic ESECT report. Further, in the discipline of marketing, there are some important differences from the findings of Gray et al (2002) which requires further investigation.

This research also cited a number of teaching strategies aimed to enhance these employability themes. Whilst this is not a definitive list of employability attributes, and the sample size of employers interviewed was relatively small, there was strong triangulation between the various stages of this research; enhancing the reliability of the findings identified here. Also, prudence needs to be taken in relation to the teaching strategies identified in this paper. These strategies came from research with marketing academics and professionals in the area of employability. However, they are just a subset of the possible teaching strategies that could be utilised. The best way forward in determining appropriate teaching techniques and strategies to enhance marketing students’ employability would be to (1) explore the ideas identified in the literature (as shown here); (2) consider the context; ie student numbers, level, cultural considerations and subject area; (3) then based on the previous two points, use individual creativity to develop a task appropriate to enhance the desired learning objectives identified.

In conclusion, concerns are growing from government and employers regarding the employability of university graduates in the UK, leading to a push to introduce policy to enhance the student experience to include enhanced employability outcomes. However, before this can be achieved the actual employability attributes important to specific industries need to be identified. Consequently, this paper has been an important first step in identifying the employability attributes for UK marketing graduates. Once we can articulate what the employers of our graduates are looking for, we can better attempt to include this within the curriculum.

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