

# Are 'Employable' Graduates 'Work Ready'?

By Stephanie Lambert and Ian Herbert

In the tailwind of Theresa May's new 'sharing society', there are growing concerns about how the 'rich' older generation, with their 'gold-plated pensions and second homes', are 'pulling up the wealth ladder behind them'. The new term in town is 'intergenerational conflict', rooted in a range of social and economic issues notably: high housing costs, lower life-time earnings, high student debt and reducing social mobility (Burns, 2016; Kirby, 2016; Social Mobility Commission, 2016).

Currently, the cost of a three-year long Bachelor degree is around £45k (with rises pending) without considering maintenance so what opportunities can students expect after such an expensive education? And does this education really prepare students for work when competing against people undergoing the apprenticeship route? Or working in off-seas offices where costs are much lower

The Global Sourcing Research Interest Group for Global Sourcing and Services at Loughborough University has observed that 'white-collar' middle-office, work in business support functions is being systematically reconfigured and re-engineered through internal Shared Service Centres (SSC) and external business process outsourcers (BPO). As a consequence, professional work is becoming deskilled and commoditised such that it can be moved to cheaper locations offshore. Currently the UK is still home to around five million of these middle-office jobs, and these provide valuable entry roles for UK graduates. As entry-level training roles are moved offshore and away from the main business, a skills/experience gap is created preventing young workers from getting a foot on the career ladder. Perhaps this is a factor in an 8% fall in graduate recruitment to top organisations in 2016 (data from the Association of Graduate Recruiters). Moreover, with the work force training levy coming into force in April 2017, employers are expected to take on greater numbers of non-graduate apprentices in the entry-level roles that remain.

It is perhaps not surprising that there has already been a significant drop in university applicants; around 5% drop on an average. Sectors such as nursing have blamed the removal of bursaries (BBC, 2017). "Uncertainty around increases in tuition fees, loss of maintenance grants and the rising costs of living and studying at university are too much of a risk to some potential students," says Sorana Vieru, vice-president of the National Union of Students (BBC, 2017).

Whilst, there will likely be ever more exciting work opportunities in, say, disruptive technologies for the talented/lucky few (Goos and Manning 2007), the challenge for the majority of young people will be simply to get a foot on the professional training ladder.

Our research in Europe and Asia has highlighted the need for work-readiness as a distinction made by employers between attributes of long-term employability and the experience necessary to *actually do the job without further supervision and training*; i.e. getting the work *passport stamped* (Rothwell, Herbert and Seal, 2011). What some executives charmingly refer to as passing through the corporate 'sheep dip'.

Many universities in the UK offer students advice so that they are able to tangibly demonstrate transferable skills learnt on their programme and thereby market themselves as ‘employable’ to potential employers. For example, Loughborough University encourages students to develop a range of skills and attributes in their students over the course of their degrees (see figure 1).

Figure1: The Loughborough University Graduate Attributes



Students can also opt to complete a 'Loughborough Employability Award' to recognise and articulate the skills they have gained at University. Such resources and commitment to developing graduate employability are invaluable and showcase the effort that Higher Education institutions are putting in to make degrees continually relevant and valuable to the future careers and work life of graduates.

While this is great news for students and their personal development ‘employability’ does not necessarily supply or provide ‘the skills needed on the job’ or guarantee that a graduate is work ready. In a globally competitive world, work readiness is a term used synonymously with employability but we believe that this can be misleading. There are three reasons for our case:

- 1) He cannot fully replicate the experiential learning of working from a classroom;
- 2) Some work readiness skills and behaviours are not consistent with the culture of Higher Education Learning;
- 3) Work readiness skills are perhaps not as complex as wider graduate employability attributes;

An ongoing project by the authors is investigating the skills, knowledge and behaviours that graduates typically need to develop during their first graduate job. The participants in the study are graduates working as recruitment advisors based in the South-East of the UK. The learning process around telephone dialogue, email etiquette and time management are elements that are imperative in this sector, and disciplines that can really only be forged in employment. Many felt they had strong communication skills from university but believed the actual experience of completing tasks at work, in a professional setting, was the only way to truly understand and apply them. Many reported ‘mimicking’ their seniors and peers as a way of learning these seemingly simple (but essential) tasks, and also as a method of refining their own style at work.

“You don’t have that confidence until you go out to work - I think university kind of prepares you for work, but being in the environment and doing the job builds up your confidence, you can’t be taught that.”

Emma, Recruitment Advisor

Whilst formal education had given them the confidence to know that they were capable of learning these more specific skills, knowledge and behaviours, it did not directly ‘teach’

them these skills. Of course there is a specific way of 'doing things' and 'communicating' in recruitment that may be particular to the sector, yet, these otherwise taken-for-granted tasks are equally applicable in a wide range of organisations. Receiving constructive feedback as an opportunity for learning is important for graduates and demonstrates how university education, in some instances, is not always consistent with work-readiness skills. For instance, 'The Work Readiness Scale (WRS)' formulated by academics from Deakin University Australia assesses the construct of work readiness through four factors: personal characteristics, organizational acumen, work competence and social intelligence (which includes communication skills). These include items relating to attitude to work, managing new social situations, learning from your colleagues and feedback as an opportunity for learning – all part of the first job 'rite of passage'.

Our research has found that some graduates find it difficult to speak up if they are struggling with their work. One interviewee described how at university you only have one, and no more than two, chances to get something right. At work you are expected to get things wrong and to take this experience and learn from it. Work is not as transparent and deterministic as university learning and making mistakes and experimenting is indeed part of the 'dip'. On the other hand, work outside of university has to be done 100% right. It is no good saying to a paying client, 'OK, the job was 35% wrong but that's still 65% right and that's a 2:1 at university'.

"Resilience is important. In this job it's OK to have a bad day, you just have to learn from it, pick yourself up and do a better job tomorrow. At university you only have a few chances to do your best." *John, Recruitment Advisor*

"Graduates don't want to be seen to make mistakes. If you've made a mistake or you need to escalate something, having the confidence to actually do that is so important in the finance sector. We spend a long time teaching graduates to speak up - we'd rather you stood up and shouted than not say anything because you can lose millions by staying quiet. And that comes down to confidence learnt on the job." *Hayley, Management Accountant*

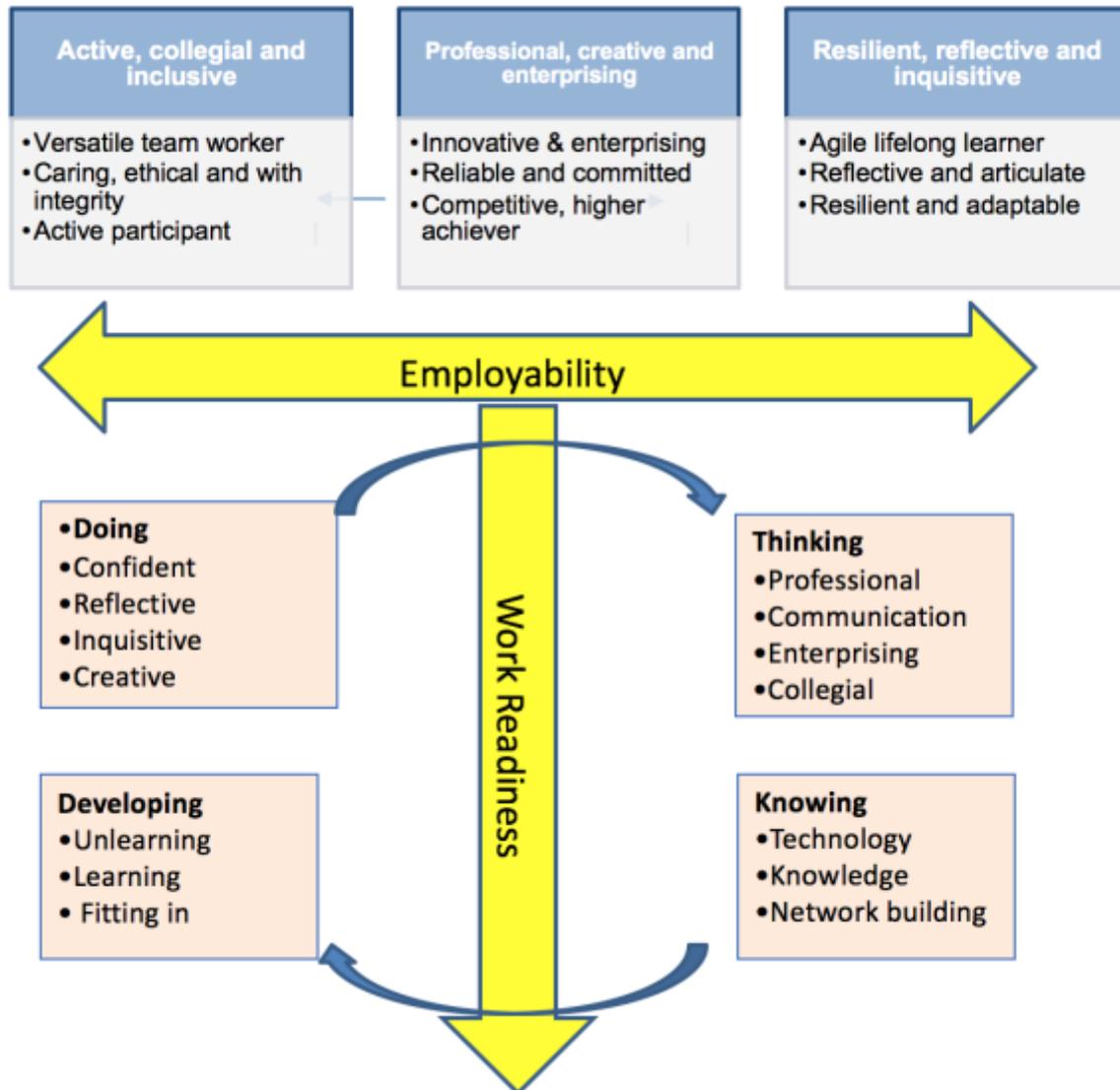
University education may be able to support work readiness through employment-based training and experience. This can have positive prospects for graduates and has been shown to support them in their transition from work to employment (Cranmer, 2006).

In reality, such a scheme runs in Scotland and is aimed at young people aged 16-19 offering a mix of work and training as part of 'The Work Readiness Certificate'. Internships are great tools for developing a workforce but sufficient, good quality opportunities, are not always available and many students will want or need to work part-time right across their degree programme.

University internship and placement schemes can play a vital role in preparation for work, although such training positions rely on a sufficient number of job opportunities remaining on-shore. Even work that can appear relatively mundane can, nonetheless, provide valuable opportunities for students to appreciate and evidence the link between theory and practice, and easing their path into a professional career if it is relevant vocational areas. Employers tell us that 'social' and volunteer work experiences, such as working in bars and with charities, are important evidence of motivation and application, and which underpin the wider attributes of employability. However, they also want to see evidence of the 'deep' knowledge, skills and behaviours, that come from 'immersion' in

organisational systems, protocols and cultures in vocationally relevant situations. Such deep knowledge is acquired through doing, thinking, knowing and developing, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 Work-readiness and Employability – two sides of the same coin**



Employability studies tend to assume that sufficient entry-level work is available, however the challenge nowadays is being to better structure the learning opportunities for internships. In the global, digital, knowledge-based economy, perhaps we are moving into a new era whereby higher education needs to take a stronger lead in helping to create and expand new forms of part-time work opportunities alongside academic studies?

The innovative ‘Earn-to-Learn’ Scheme proposed by the authors aims to offer a potential resolution to the issues around work-readiness by encouraging organisations to open up entry level roles for UK graduates on-shore. The aims of the scheme are to: 1) improve student work-readiness and employability, 2) reduce student debt on graduation, and 3) provide employers with cost-effective, flexible sourcing solutions feeding into the acquisition and development of emerging scarce talents. The project brings together organisations, consultants, outsource providers, policy makers,

educationalists and government to share alternative approaches that can encourage more sustainable labour policies in the UK.

More information can be found at: [www.shared-services-research.com/earn-to-learn-scheme/](http://www.shared-services-research.com/earn-to-learn-scheme/)

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