**Employers and Universities: conceptual dimensions, research evidence and implications**

Human capital; signalling; institutionalism; recruitment, employability

***Abstract***

*The relationship between universities and employer organisations has been given significant attention in the context of a changing graduate economy and the policy imperative to enhance post-university returns. This article presents a conceptual analysis of this relationship in the context structural changes on both sides and its bearing on the nature, form and outcomes emerging from this relationship. Three key conceptual domains relating to theories of human capital, signalling and institutionalism are outlined to show the dynamics of the university-employer interplay and employer behaviour towards recruiting graduates. This is then further illustrated by an outline of salient research evidence from employers’ perceptions of graduate employability and approaches to recruitment. The article shows that a largely contextual and set of cultural dimensions underscores much of this relationship and this transcends the supply-demand and skill mismatch accounts which pervade policy approaches on how this relationship should operate in practice. Implications for higher education institutions and key stakeholders in this relationship are further highlighted.*

**Introduction**

The nature of the relationship between employer organisations and universities is characterised by significant conceptual challenge and contestation over its nature and form. It also raises some important sociological, human resource and philosophical issues concerning how this interaction should be organised and reflected in practices on both sides. In the context of discernible shifts in both higher education and the professional labour market, this relationship has been reshaped and become more complex. At the university side, processes of massification and increasingly diverse modes of student experience and programme structures have resulted in a rethinking of what constitutes graduateness and the modes of university knowledge and curricula upon which this is formed (Scott, 2017). At the labour market side, the erosion of traditional occupational structures, more globally fluid labour patterns and processes of work intensification have considerably reshaped individuals’ experiences of contemporary work and career movement (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017; Sweet and Meiskins, 2016).

Much attention has focused on how the relationship between higher education and the labour market can be better co-ordinated. An overarching narrative has emerged on the ‘role’ which universities need to play in supplying the labour market with suitably skilled graduates who can adapt and add productive value to workplaces. A sub-narrative is the purported skills mismatch between what universities provide and what employers demand, invariably leading to charges of structural misalignment between the two institutional fields. Relatedly, policy in this area is largely orientated towards developing modes of provision and learning which equip graduates for the changing demands of the labour market. The future employment outcomes of graduates are taken to be a significant marker of institutions’ quality and effectiveness (DBIS, 2016). In market-driven HE systems, this has come to define an institution’s perceived market value upon which prospective students are encouraged to base their choices.

There has been no shortage of research and analysis on how employers perceive graduates entering the labour market and the role of higher education in their preparation. Inevitable variability has emerged, not only in the depth and conceptual foci of this research but also the criticality and intellectual framing of how the relationship between universities and employer organisations should evolve. Less research has examined what employers do with graduates over a longer course of their working lives. In particular, how the human resource mechanisms employers put in place, including effective training, professional development and career progression incentives, can influence graduates’ employment outcomes. Invariably, much of the focus has been on the role of HE providing effective supply-push mechanisms that add value to the graduate labour market in advance of graduates’ employment entry (Keep and Mayhew, 2014). There is a concern amongst such critically-inclined scholars that the problem of enhancing labour market outcomes has become ‘hollowed out’: much of the focus has been ostensibly framed around individuals’ and institutions’ own efforts in maximising post-university prospects rather than wider mediating factors within the labour market.

This article first examines a range of conceptual accounts which explain the dynamics of the employer-university relationship – more so, how this relationship can be understood through a range of specific institutional, educational and cultural mechanisms which account for the way in which employer organisations regulate the selection and appraisal of graduates entering the labour market. Three key conceptual perspectives are developed to highlight this relationship - human capital, signalling and institutionalist perspectives – as these offer specific conceptual explanations for both employers’ continued propensity towards graduates and, more significantly, specific types of graduates. They also explain various structural dynamics at work in the (dis)conjunction between universities and employer organisations. Whilst this article does not develop a systematic literature review of this area, it illustrates some key empirical highlights of the research on employers and graduates, focusing principally on employers’ perceptions of graduates, their recruitment approaches and decision-making and wider conceptions of graduate ‘talent’. Such research is important in demonstrating how the wider relationship between universities and employer organisations is enacted in practice, particularly through recruitment.

The article finally examines the implications this has for both sides of the debate. The existing evidence base can be potentially informative for conceiving meaningful and efficacious provision in so far as they have capacity to enhance future outcomes for a diverse graduate population. However, the article guards against continued reliance on prescriptive and under-contextualised ‘skills’ recipes which do not meaningfully advance understandings of how and why graduates succeed beyond university. What employers also contribute to this bargain has significant implications for the enduring challenge of equity and effectiveness in employer recruitment; in particular pertaining to approaches which help realise the diversity of graduate talent and enable economically beneficial and equitable graduate outcomes amongst a wider body of highly qualified individuals.

***Human capital, skills bias and the matching of graduate supply to demand***

The current policy framework in many liberal economies is strongly informed by human capital theoretical thinking, predicated on the core premise that higher levels of education increases individuals’ productive capacity, and consequently, overall returns in the labour market. Essentially, the human capital framework works from the understanding that there is a productive and synergistic inter-relationship between educational systems and labour markets which generates mutual benefits for individuals and employers. Both individuals and employers essentially make a rational ‘investment’ in the human capital of a university education and this investment continues to drive demand for higher qualifications. In effect, higher education qualifications carry valued forms of knowledge and skills which are directly transferable in the labour market. According to some of the theory’s principal exponents such as Schultz (1961) and Becker (1993) educational qualifications are able to generate a so-called ‘marginal product’ to workplaces which has the self-reinforcing effect of enhancing the wider workforce output. This productivity gain enables graduates to command higher wage returns as a result of their stronger level of human capital. In this sense, an employee’s earnings and productivity are closely associated as the added productive value of those who are more qualified carries its own incentive mechanism for employers to further invest in, and then financially reward, those who have most formal education.

The logical extension of this is to see the relative value employers place on certain qualifications like university degrees as essentially rational and based on fairly accurate information and consequent decision-making about their value to a workplace. The decision to invest in graduate labour is strategically aligned to a rational demand for higher level knowledge and skills which help optimise their productive advantage. Accordingly, higher education equates to the development of higher level skills, which in turn greatly enhances organisations’ outputs. As such, employers have a crystallised understanding of required workplace demands. Employer recruitment decisions are founded on largely clear and accurate labour market information of the investment value graduates bring in terms of optimised productive advantage.

In terms of the university-employer relationship, human capital largely depicts universities as being effective supply-side catalysts of valued forms of knowledge and skill which closely match employer demand. This carries a number of expectations around universities’ demand responsiveness in meeting human capital specification, although the effects of university education have often been seen in terms of generic aggregate benefits which place graduates (typically versus non-graduates) at an advantage. The supply-centred notion is closely associated with skills bias and new growth approaches which have depicted universities as being at the apex of advancement in knowledge-driven employment (Peters and Bulut, 2011). Post-industrial modes of production have ushered in a new body of skills demands which are most appropriately met by higher education.

Overall, therefore, employers are propended to invest in highly qualified graduates on the basis that they best fulfil workplace demands. Two forms of educational experience appear significant in boosting an individuals’ human capital. First are specialised skills which have alignment with the demands of a given labour market, even though these may be further acquired in a given workplace. The second are more generic forms of skills and knowledge which may be applicable across a wider spectrum of occupational fields. In certain labour markets, namely flexible liberal labour markets such as the UK and US, this can be advantageous: in the main, graduates do not work in the fields in which they are trained and much graduate work is generic in nature. This is not necessarily an abnormality but more a reality of the way the labour market operates in liberal economies with less attachment to internal labour market structures. This enables employees to transfer skills across a number of job areas, enabling their human capital to be attractive to a potentially broader range of employers. Conversely, in occupational markets the specificity of human capital more formally regulates access to a given occupational range.

One of the challenges of the human capital perspective is explaining the variable returns on investment which have been shown to characterise the graduate labour market in most economies over time (IFS, 2016; MacMillan *et al.,* 2015). Human capital perspectives account for graduates being unemployable or under-employed because they have either not invested in the correct human capital, have not based their labour market decisions upon the correct available market signals, or have failed to demonstrate the value of their educational credentials to employers. However, variable rates of return are affected by a wide range of contingent mediating factors, including but not exclusive to, their socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender, which shape how people are positioned within occupational structures above and beyond their capacity to rationally control such outcomes.

However, human capital approaches have difficulty explaining what may be structural misalignment between the supply of highly-qualified labour and actual demand leading to the problem of over-education and potential occupational displacement. One of the key motifs of much public policy at a global level has been the attribution of labour matching to be a problem of appropriate supply and the attendant need to plug purported skills gaps. Such a narrative has coincided with a related public policy concern around the professional and market accountability of universities in the context of heightened market competition (Olssen, 2016). In market-driven systems such as the UK, expenditure towards HE comes both publicly from the state but also, increasingly, from students’ private contributions in the form of tuition fees. This generates pressures to ensure that a sound return is achieved on such investment.

This policy context has significant implication for universities given the growing pressure to ensure that they provide a sound future return for both graduates and employers. Whilst employers are the main beneficiaries of graduate qualifications it has become increasingly imperative for individuals to make meaningful investment decisions, as well as taking purposive actions towards further enhancing subsequent returns. There is clearly a policy push to encourage student investment decisions to be based on which institutions can demonstrate stronger links to future employment returns.

A related policy lever has been the attempt to ensure that formal learning in universities is more appropriately aligned to labour market needs, mainly under the remit of ‘skills’ enhancement. Invariably, a stronger focus on labour market preparedness and meeting employers’ skills demands has been high on the national and institutional policy agenda. Skill is a sub-component of individuals’ human capital in the sense that whatever skills are acquired have a utility value for which there is clear demand. In policy terms, these are taken to be a panacea to meeting employer demands beyond the existing level of academic knowledge possessed by graduates. This agenda clearly has some relevance to current interpretation of the employer-university relationship and the extent to which the two areas of activity are seen to converge. If universities are able to decode the kinds of skills required by employers, and build these formally into provision, this will go some way into further enhancing graduates’ attractiveness to employers. This has been avidly embraced by the university sector which has generated a vast skills lexicon and seen an upsurge in initiatives to boost graduates’ skills development. However, this often presupposes that employers have a clearly and commonly defined set of organisational demands which can be met by well-orchestrated provision within universities (Mason *et al.,* 2009).

Overall, the human capital interpretation provides a generic account of the university-employer relationship and why a university education is seen to generate value to the economy and, therefore, be sought after by employers. It follows the technocratic logic that the supply of graduates generates further demand for enhanced human capital, which in turn leads to widespread societal investment in higher education. However, the model works on an aggregate level and does not account for dispersion in employment outcomes. Nor does it account for the limitations of formal qualifications for securing sought-after employment and how employers interpret, and act upon, their differential value. Other conceptual accounts have offered further explanations as to how qualifications and other assets are exchanged in the labour market, to which we shall now turn.

***Signalling and the relative positionality of graduates***

Until employees are routinely applying whatever skills they have acquired in education and the workplace, their qualification continues to function as a proxy marker of demand for such skills. Alternative conceptual approaches based on signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Arrow, 1973) propose that educationally-derived human capital functions more as a signal rather than a true measure of how economically productive a graduate will be in a workplace. This account of the employer-university relationship also derives from labour economics but offers a different understanding of the value of educational credentials. Like human capital theory, it posits a beneficial trade-off from higher level qualifications: degree-level qualifications carry a significant labour market value given their usage by employers. However, signalling approaches depart from the rationalistic human capital approach by conceiving employer behaviour as only partially rational and based on imperfect information. Accordingly, qualifications work more as positional goods that provide a positional, if not productive, advantage for job seekers. As such, credential holders gain access to areas of the labour market partly through the exclusionary function of credentials, but also because they signal higher potential value of a prospective employee.

Employers need to decide which individuals to invest in and can only infer the productive potential of a job seeker when making recruitment decisions. Therefore, they use signals less as an accurate marker of future value; instead, they become surrogate measures of a prospective employee’s potential in the labour market (Connelly *et al.,* 2011). Past precedent clearly has some bearing on what kind of signals employers utilise, so it is likely that the signals work best when they convey employment qualities that are most likely to predict advantageous employee performance. However, a degree-level qualification only functions as a generic signal, denoting job-related potential rather than a firm evidence base of likely productive outcomes, and employers often have to work with more extensive signals.

Wider labour market conditions determine to no small degree the relative value of qualifications and the extent to which human capital in the form of qualifications can be convertible into positive employment outcomes. In periods of relative employment scarcity and over-supply, differentiating factors come to bear upon the relative success job seekers have in accessing sought-after work. The structural job queuing effect then comes into play: when labour supply outstrips demand, employees stand in a relative hierarchy of job seekers, often having to compete in terms of accumulating and then marketing employment assets which are used to signal to prospective employers (Thurow, 1975). In tighter labour market conditions, employers become more discriminate about who they seek to recruit. This situation potentially empowers employers more than employees; and in many instances the former can resort to stringent approaches in screening out a large pool of potential applicants. This can be manipulated by employers as in when they raise the markers in demanding higher credentials and work-related experiences for a given position. It also means that many otherwise suitably qualified applicants are screened-out through not conveying particular signals which have given successful job-seekers a positional advantage (e.g. a high-grade degree, a research-intensive graduation institution, a traditional ‘academic’ subject).

Two related effects follow: one is the displacement of lower qualified employers by more highly qualified individuals, even though the skills demands of the position may not be congruent with what the latter group possess. This potential ‘bumping down’ effect means that less qualified are ousted out of appropriate employment by more qualified who may be over-qualified for their current position (Mann and Huddleston, 2017). This can cascade into traditional segments of the youth job market, leading to significant challenges for non-graduates finding requisite employment. The other effect is that a prospective employee has to go an extra distance to signal their potential and convey a much larger range of signals beyond educational qualifications. Consequently, formal qualifications no longer become the principal screening tool for employers and therefore other credentials enter the mix.

This situation raises significant implications for the university-employer relationship. In signalling terms, universities continue to supply employers with credentials which serve as valuable signals upon which they base their investment decisions. Employers’ continued propensity to hire graduates over non-graduates affirms socially and economically valued qualifications which convey, or at least reproduce, advantageous qualities. Rather than there being any firm organisational specificity between qualifications and job demands as depicted in human capital approaches, higher education qualifications instead signal productive potential and a range of desirable attributes on the part of their holders. This explains at one level the continued social demand for higher education, particularly amongst the middle classes who have traditionally used educational credentials for positional advantage.

However, the situation of over-supply has been compounded by mass higher education as more young people acquire degree-level credentials. The distinction of these credentials, their ‘sheep’s coat’ value, diminishes. Job seekers therefore have to convey other signals to differentiate themselves and convey their value-added. Technical signals from formal qualifications which are strongly emphasised in human capital approaches have less purchase. Increasingly significant are signals which convey wider dimensions of a graduates’ profile and related advantageous information about their future potential. These will include, but are not exclusive to, a range of social, interpersonal and experiential signals which set a graduate apart from others in the labour market. Work experience is one such example of a positive market signal which helps distinguish graduates from others; largely because it conveys some degree of work readiness and proven capability (Jackson and Wilton, 2017). Graduates face the task of enhancing and then successfully signalling whatever educational and, increasingly, non-educational credentials they acquired within and beyond higher education to maximise their chances of being favourably screened by prospective employers. For institutions, the challenge is ensuring that graduates are in a favourable position to acquire further credentials and present the higher education experience as positive signals which are likely to be attractive to potential employers.

At a conceptual level, a signalling perspective places the university-employer relationship in a wider educational and labour market context which entails greater complexity in the ways in which university credentials are validated and legitimised. Mass higher education has effectively challenged the status-affirming functions of university credentials and the ways in which employers screen a surfeit of highly qualified candidates. Like human capital approaches, however, it largely downplays the actual social and cultural context of the recruitment process itself, which works beyond the elementary screening of largely similarly qualified graduates. The next level is to explore how recruitment decisions are situated in more cultural dynamics within the hiring process itself. Such processes are themselves intimately connected to the institutional context of specific organisations, which serves as a dominant frame through which recruitment is negotiated.

***Institutionalist perspectives: cultural context and inter-cultural dynamics***

Another way to understand employer decision making around graduates is through the lens of institutionalism. The main premise of this approach is that employer decisions are referenced against an organisational context in which an individual exchanges their employment value. Such decisions are therefore intimately related to the organisational and demand-side features of a workplace, the indigenous work culture it represents and the work-related processes it entails. Thus, an institutionalist perspective involves an understanding of work organisations as dynamic ‘social fields’ which is associated with the work of Powell and DiMaggio (1991) and Bourdieu (1984; 1989). Organisational fields are conceived by these theorists as bounded social environments constituted by sets of rules, value systems and behavioural codes which determine actors’ relative positioning within a given cultural environ. Internal field rules determine to a large extent the dynamics of social organisation and what kinds of socially instituted behaviour helps an organisation to maximise its own field position. However, social fields such as work organisation do not exist in isolation from other social fields, which not only include other organisation but also fields within the economic and political domains. A work organisation is affected by exogenous factors in the wider labour market field, which include broad macro-level shifts, but also more immediate forces in its local milieu, including immediate sets of institutional relations within its local environment.

Institutionalist perspectives conceive employers’ perspectives as reflecting institutional relations within an overarching social infrastructure, encompassing its cognitive-cultural constitution and related set of value systems, practices and behavioural expectations. These factors influence the relative value attached to different job candidates and how much they are seen to enhance a workplace’s existing output. Unlike human capital and signalling perspectives, this approach sees employer-graduate relations as entailing a range of interpersonal, cultural and interactional dynamics which are inextricably connected to the organisational field in which the graduate is going to be employed. Signals through credentials or allied achievements are insufficient alone to determine selection decisions. They also need to be conveyed through the interactions between graduate and employer. Such an account therefore presents a less decontextualized account of employer recruitment strategies. Instead, it conceives this as a social and cultural process, referenced principally against what is more generally conceived as an organisational culture. Employers are powerful institutional actors within a given organisation whose role it is to ensure incumbent members of an existing institutional field help reproduce a dominant social order. Accordingly, there is need to ensure that some convergence is maintained between the identities and social behaviours between dominant and incumbent institutional actors.

This can be understood at a micro-level reflecting the beliefs and cognitive schemas employers have of different graduates (Bailly, 2008). Employers’ perceptions of who is most suitable for their organisations entails an interactional exchange between graduate and employer through which employers form implicit beliefs and cognitive schemas about which kind of graduate is desirable. The recruitment process is the arena through which individuals not only present their technical abilities but also their personal make-up. Assessment centres are one such device which enable employers to assess a broad array of personal, interpersonal and behavioural competences. Whether or not employer recruitment decisions are construed as subjective, biased or skewed towards a particular ‘type’ of person, it is likely that employers develop a particular idea of who they want in their organisations.

However, conceiving recruitment as an ostensibly micro interactional process underplays wider contextual dynamics which exist beyond the immediate interaction between graduate and employer. Judgements about the make-up of employees are ultimately judgements pertaining to an organisational context. This clearly has implications for recruitment processes. The issue of system structuring comes into play when employers make decisions which accord with dominant field logics. At its basic level, this will shape the kind of skill demands which employers specify, potentially resulting in a closer fit between some candidates and organisations than others. This accounts for why much of the recruitment literature has highlighted the significance of personal-organisation fit rather than person-job fit as being a major recruitment criteria (Bryson *et al.,* 2013). The latter pertains to largely technicist criteria (i.e. how well the employee will execute a specific occupational task with due competence) whereas the former concerns broader dispositional and behavioural factors which come into play across a wider spectrum of organisational activity. Person-organisation dimensions not only refer to specifics of a role, which may include having the appropriate personality or behavioural disposition to undertake what might be seen as increasingly communicative transactions with key stakeholders. These will also entail the inter-professional or inter-organisational dimensions which accord to the field dynamics and processes of a given workplace.

An institutionalism perspective views the employer-graduate interactions to be highly contextual whereby the signals which graduates convey are not merely technical but also cultural and interpersonal in nature. This perspective also acknowledges that employer organisations do not represent a homogenous group and instead considerable organisational variability. Different organisational fields constitute different field rules and ways of structuring employee behaviour which may be more or less conducive for different types of graduate disposition. A marketing and sales field may require a different set of inter-cultural and behavioural qualities and identities than one in the accountancy, for instance. This will impact on how they are appraised in terms of their suitability and likely future value. Therefore, employer behaviour around recruitment is wedded to institutional processes and encompass implicit sets of judgements and field rules based on specific cultural conditions of a given workplace.

In institutional terms, the relationship between universities and employers has traditionally often been characterised as relatively loosely-coupled with fairly limited isomorphic interplay between the field activities of both. This interpretation however underplays some key mechanisms by which this relationship has both historically operated and presently operates. Firstly, universities have played some role in regulating individuals to advantageous labour market positions and helping further reproduce socio-cultural dispositions which are desired by employers. In this sense, traditional graduateness has become synonymous with a corpus of intellectual and behavioural advantages, even though these may be more prevalent amongst different types of graduates (Walker and Fongwa, 2017). Secondly, and related to the above, are the latent inequities which the university-employer relationship has entailed for HE mass systems operating in more liberal economies. Research on elite selection has shown the dalliance between some universities and employers organisations under the remit of strategic ‘talent management’ (Brown et al, 2011; SMCPC, 2015; Nilsonn and Ellstrom, 2012). Significant here is the selective bias some companies have towards particular universities, perceived to be a breeding ground for the most talented and high-performing graduates.

Having outlined the theoretical salience to the employer-university relationship, the article now examines evidence on how this is played out in practice through research on employers’ perceptions of graduate employability; firstly by exploring the problematic notion of skills and then employers’ behaviours in relation to recruiting graduates.

***Employers’ perceptions of graduates and the role of universities: research evidence***

A common feature of much of the research on employer perceptions and recruitment approaches is the attempt to get beneath what employers look for amongst graduates and why this is ascribed such significance. Much of this concerns employers’ perceptions of the skills, competences and attributes which they value and demand from graduates, although the evidence is far from conclusive in this regard. Related questions centre on whether there are any identifiable skills gaps amongst graduates leading to employers being reluctant to hire them, which in turn may account for problems around graduates’ unemployment or under-employment. The picture is a mixed one concerning employers’ perspectives of graduate skills. Some evidence points to mismatches between what is supplied through HE and what is demanded by employers whilst others indicate general satisfaction. The more favourable surveys therefore suggest that universities provide a beneficial corpus of disciplinary and technical knowledge as well as more generic skills that make graduates attractive to employers (AGR, 2016; UKCES, 2014). Areas of shortfall such as commercial awareness and leadership are less surprising given that such skills have not been the preserve of HE and are likely to be demand-generated, that is, the sorts of skills that are acquired through being actively involved in working practices. Much depends on the types of employer survey used, how one interprets skills deficits and whose responsibility it is to plug them (Suleman, 2018; Holmes, 2013).

One of the main challenges of employer surveys is the sheer volume of groupings of skills – ranging from technical, non-technical, transferable, non-cognitive, social, interpersonal, soft, emotional (Jackson, 2015). Once these boxes are unpacked, a vast vocabulary emerges of ambiguous terms whose general economic and social value is often presented as self-evident. The semantic melange of skills categorisations is further compounded by the general interchangeability of skills, competence and ‘attributes’, each of which describe a range of behaviours which yield productive advantages. A key challenge for research in this area is providing a stronger contextualisation of how and why identified skills are of specific value to organisations and whether it is actual possession of skills or their articulation into a narrative which makes most impact in recruitment (Tymon, 2013; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). Thus, whether the main issue at stake is how potential employability at the level of job entry converts to realisable employability longer-term. A unifying theme across research, both academic and commercial, is the importance of so-called ‘soft’ skills as manifested through a variety of personal, interpersonal and communicative abilities which have a strong behavioural and attitudinal component.

The importance employers ascribe to soft skills was shown in Andrews and Higson’s (2008) research on employers across Europe which showed the relatively high value placed on these types of skills as a complement to the ‘hard’ skills developed through disciplinary-based learning. Related research, such as Lowden *et al’s* (2011) research based on case studies with a diverse cross-section of employers showed that soft and more transversal skills such as communication, problem solving, independence and leadership were routinely identified as the ones that needed to be conveyed by graduates. Their research found that employers understood such soft skills to be best acquired through work-related experience such as internships and part-time employment, as well as extra-curricula activities, than formal study. At a basic level, wider work-related experiences serves as a screening filter when large numbers of graduate apply for single jobs. However, it also signals to employers an enhanced work readiness and proven capacity to meet initial employer demands, as well stronger ties with employer organisations. The link between skill demand and occupational area appears to ultimately mediate what, and how much, specific skills are valued. In specialised, technical occupational areas, for example STEM professions, there appears to be clear evidence of short-falls. This contrasts somewhat with less bounded service and communication-based sectors where horizontal substitution between degree qualifications and future work is more seamless and generic skills are ranked highly (Purcell et al, 2002; CBI, 2013).

European-level research by Humburg *et al.,* (2013) which surveyed and interviewed employers across twelve European countries across six main occupational fields supports such findings. As with previous research, this research found that professionally-orientated expertise and expert knowledge is given significant value, although this needs to be complemented by what these researchers termed ‘interpersonal’ skills. Their research also illustrated the most potent signals which employers draw upon from candidate resumes in initial selection, which included the match between study and occupational activities, work experience, international experience and the prestige of their study university. It is worth noting that the labour market context may significantly determine the value ascribed to formal credentials and their measured performance. Such research tends to support the idea that in occupational markets, subject specialism is a strong human capital marker: the body of knowledge graduates acquire has professional salience and enables a graduate to access given occupational areas. In flexible markets, there is a looser-fit which means that other signals beyond formal qualifications have a stronger purchase and therefore other experiences and profile factors have a more prominent bearing. In countries like the UK, this may account for why around 70% of employers are prepared to recruit from general degree programme (AGR, 2016)

Overall, skills-orientated employer research has tended to confirm common-sense notions that more is required from prospective employees beyond disciplinary technical knowledge. It is clear from much of the research that employers see qualifications as proxy markers of future potential and performance and expect these to be complemented by more generic skills in making connections between potential and realisable employability. However, much of this is survey-based and does not particularly capture how employers assess profiles in context and the social and cultural processes this engenders, including the inter-dynamic between graduates and employer organizations.

***The recruitment process: culture, context and the employer-graduate dynamics***

The research done on graduate recruitment, including assessment centres, often provides the most detailed and qualitative insight on the social and organisational mediation of employers’ perceptions of the graduate candidates. This has been important in showing how employers conceive graduate talent, or at least their potential to make a discernible organisation contribution, in what is largely an interactional social process. Essentially, when graduates enter the market they have to present themselves to prospective employers as suitable for employment, which employers in turn have to appraise, affirm or disaffirm. This approach takes the focus beyond indicators of desired behaviours (i.e. the skills list approach) and the initial signals which complement them. Research in this area has scrutinised employers’ rationalisations on how and why they recruit graduates, their conceptions of talent and the broader connections made between graduates’ profiles and their likely organisational potential and deliverable performance.

A paradox emerges between what appears to be at one level a process of complex and elaborate screening of diverse sets of qualifications, skills and personality traits and, at another, a fairly clear-cut selection process based on intuition and subjective bias. Essentially, when forced to make investment decisions on future potential, employers sometimes default to what they perceived to be the most suitability ‘talented’ candidates (Nilsson and Ellstrom, 2012; SMCPC, 2015). Employers’ constructions of ‘talent’ reveal much about their engrained and institutionally-derived schemas about what talent looks like and how this is personified and organisationally located. Much of the research on the recruitment process supports institutionalist thinking in that the organisational context in which a future graduate will work is a significant frame through which judgements are made. This introduces an opacity to employer judgments of appropriately hireable graduates given the complex synergies between the values, cultural profiles and identities of graduates and those of employers and the workplaces they represent. The research evidence points to employer decision-making based on often intangible, invisible and coded behavioural qualities which supersede simple delineations of skills and technical capability.

A number of research examples illustrate this. The research by McCracken *et al.,* (2016) focused more specifically on employers’ construction of graduate ‘talent’ and how this was positioned as a primary organisational asset which would add firm advantage. Their research confirmed the continued identification employers have with self-evident skills and attributes, although actual recruitment decisions tend to be based on more nuanced and finer-grained judgments about which graduates are more intrinsically talented. The association between talent and employability is framed around largely intangible dimensions, what these researchers refer to as ‘the edge’. Overall, employers continue to perceive this as largely possessional in terms of inherent qualities which graduates have at their disposal and can draw upon to productive effect.

Clearly, graduates with ‘the edge’ are at a positional advantage when they compete for jobs. Yet, as such research has shown, whilst employer perceptions tend to be subjective, intuitive and not necessarily codifiable, there is a need to probe further into the socio-cultural and institutional factors behind such judgments. Possessional criteria in decision-making speak largely to job-person fit and performance-based imperatives; specifically, how successfully the candidate is likely to execute a job role. However, evidence suggests that when employers make judgements about calibre these are framed around the personal and social make-up of graduates and how this may be manifest in multiple areas of working life, not least intra- and inter-institutional relations. Accordingly, person-organisation fit criteria pertaining to how well a graduate’s personal and socio-cultural make-up aligns to an organisation’s own (largely tacit) cultural constitution is a crucial dimension in framing hiring decisions.

This resonates clearly with previous work done on graduate recruitment (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Morley, 2007; Harvey *et al.,* 1997) which uncovered the inter-cultural and inter-personal dynamics underpinning selection processes and its implications for parity and access to high-profile jobs. This research has shown how a prevailing ‘science of gut feeling’ largely informs employers’ constructions of talent, based on an overarching recruitment principle of organisational ‘acceptability’. Judgements of prospective employees’ calibre are essentially social and cultural in nature, often predicated on an intuitive sense of how well aligned a candidate’s personal make-up is to the given organisation: their likely ‘social fit’. As a key recruitment anchor, the perceived acceptability of a candidate serves as a legitimising device for framing decisions on which candidate is most suited to an organisation’s extant cultural practices and often tacit cultural script.

Research done in the UK subsequently by Wilton (2014) confirmed much of this earlier work, also showing the role of cultural synergy and bias – the ‘invisible criteria’ – in recruitment. This research covered a wider span of organisations, many within ‘modern’ or ‘niche’ graduate occupations so the appraisal of different educational and cultural profiles was more fluid and less confined to traditional elite markets. The importance of context-specific dimensions in recruitment was also shown in this research, mainly in terms of how behaviour conveyed in recruitment was understood to reflect future situated performance, formally and informally. The informal dimensions to such preferences (‘having a beer’ with a future candidate) reveal cruder processes of interpersonal and cultural discrimination than is captured by more codified skills descriptors such as ‘team-working’ and ‘communication’. Within a heterogeneous and fluid graduate market, there is scope for diverse profiles and behavioural competencies to be appraised according to different institutional rules and protocols. Many of the employers in this study were from ‘newer’ graduate occupations, including sales and hospitality.

Other context-sensitive research from the UK by Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) exemplified the correspondence between employer organisational context and the appraisal of graduate profiles. Their study, based on extensive analysis of employer attitudes across diverse sectors, revealed the significance of more experiential and practice-orientated foundations by which graduates are appraised. Employers in their study were found to make explicit reference to broader dimensions of graduate capabilities, which the researchers conceptualised in terms of an overall dimension of graduate identity. It is from this basis that employers understand how a graduate’s profile may transfer into organisational value and impact, which effectively warrants selection decisions. Whilst this research identified four core elements to practice-orientated identity (values, intellect, performance delivery and engagement) – all of which are indicative are a broader set of capability functionings – its overarching message is that employers work from broader conceptions of what value graduates bring to workplaces and how this may impact on their likely employment outputs. The importance of organisational context as a mediator in the appraisal of graduates’ profiles and potential has been also been found in US-based research (Horra, 2018; Rivera, 2012) which confirmed the notion of recruitment as a form of ‘cultural gatekeeping’. This research found discernible evidence of socio-cultural fit processes based on the alignment between cultural signals conveyed by applicants (e.g. ECAs, interest, personal dispositions) and the indigenous cultural profile, values and history of organisations.

The importance of demand-side factors in employer appraisals of graduates was found in research by Lindberg and Rantatalo (2015) which was located in the police and medical professions in Sweden. Their research focused on managers’ selection decision as well as early professionals’ perceptions of their initial work integration. A key finding of this research was the importance of matching both performance-orientated job criteria (technical components) with social-orientated (the personal and behavioural). Employers’ conceptions of competence, and by extension employability, are based not only on whether employees can meet objective criteria of job-specific demands but also the successful execution of a range of and interpersonally symbolically-loaded performances within socially-rich workplaces. A significant further finding in their research was the importance of being able to strike a balance between performance- and socially-orientated practices, but also within the extremes of behaviours valued by employers (i.e. between assertiveness and passivity; over-confidence and circumspection). This research, as with related research, depicts employer judgements and resultant decisions not so much as appraisals of specific skills matching but of the skilful performance (via behavioural competences) in a given cultural and practice-based context.

***Discussions and implications***

The employer-university relationship continues to engender complexities which do not readily lend themselves to any straightforward mapping and modelling on how this can be better co-ordinated. A closer analysis of employer perceptions and behaviours provides fuller understanding of how and why higher education continues to regulate qualified individuals into various occupational strata. The concerns and preferences of employers in this regard reveal how and why graduates are perceived to carry value and the contributory role of universities in this regard. This, however, is not uniform across employer organisations. In broader institutional terms, there has not historically been an isomorphic harmony between universities and workplaces based on closely-coupled synergies in activities, practices and institutional logics. The inter-dynamic has been typically founded on the reproductive value of graduate-level credentials which signal higher overall cognitive and, correspondingly, productive potential. These are not necessarily tangible or domain-specific as in the case of flexible labour market contexts such as the UK.

There has nonetheless been a clear policy endeavour to better harness this relationship, particularly as universities operate less as closed systems from their wider politico-economic environments. A dominant ‘naming and framing’ of a public policy problem (Schon and Rein, 1994) has perforated much of the discourse on the current function of higher education in generate favourable labour market outcomes. This is founded mainly on a skills narrative which presents the problem of labour market efficiency to be largely contingent on the supply of suitably employable graduates. Significant ideological questions prevail over whose specific role it is to ensure economic imperatives as fulfilled. Further, where the balance lies between supply-side factors which may feed into economic benefits and what employer organisations can also do to maximise this bargain. The critiques of the competencies and skills agenda over the past three decades has questioned the educational and economic value of skills-orientated provisions and how effectively these align to economic demand (Figueiredo, *et al.,* 2017; Mason *et al.,* 2009). Related to this is its potential subversion of other important, yet non-economic, functions of universities (Collini, 2012).

A closer look at some of the evidence from employers shows that the picture is less one of marked disjuncture between universities and employers and more an inevitable ambivalence about how universities operate. Employers continue to value the human capital of university graduates and, at a primary level at least, are prepared to make investment decisions towards them. Overall, the evidence is not sufficiently strong to indicate employers suffering from discernible shortages of employable or hireable graduates deficient of the skills-sets that enable them to function effectively when employed. The circularity and crude empirical realism of skills surveys has been noted by critical researchers (Keep, 2012; Holmes, 2013) in terms how much value and validity they carry. Descriptive indicators of what employers would like more of do not inevitably amount to widespread shortages problems; also, less clear from such concerns is how sustained any skills mismatches are once successfully recruited graduates are in working positions.

A closer analysis reveals one of graduate over-supply in mass systems and a resultant social congestion. This means that traditional markers of value, namely formal degree credentials, have diminished and operate less effectively in signalling the higher cognitive value of university qualifications. In this context, employers are in an advantageous position to screen-out large numbers of appropriately qualified graduates and use a protracted range of recruitment techniques towards this end. A consequence is that in flexible labour markets graduates must do more to enhance their marketability to employers. In such contexts, often characterised by more contingent employment conditions, increasing number of graduates are allocated to positions to which they are over-educated (ONS, 2013; Green and Henseke, 2016). The leaves them with the challenging task of both decoding what the labour market demands whilst then effectively conveying back a set of marketable and competitively advantageous signals that add value to their educational profiles and make them more attractive to employers.

The employer evidence indicates that the skills which employers value most are soft in form and not always formally acquired. The evidence shows that the very essence of skills are largely contextually-driven and related to specific demand-based workplace factors and situated in intricate work processes (Eraut, 2007; Lindberg and Rantatalo, 2015). Furthermore, when employer perceptions of desirable or talented graduates is empirically dissected, often via in-depth qualitative research, what largely emerges is the significance of a range of socio-cultural and identity-based resources and assets which are exchanged in the recruitment process and referenced by employers against the organisational context in which future practice and performance is located.

This resonates strongly with much of the more recent literature on graduate employability and career progression which has been conceived largely around the acquisition and deployment of a range of career-related capitals and identities, serving as key resources in shaping employment outcomes. These add significant value to both graduates’ own perceptions of employability, including how this is deployed in recruitment process, and how employers also view graduates’ potential value (Clarke, 2017; Bathmaker *et al.,* 2013; Burke, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017; Lindberg, 2013; Holmes, 2013; Fugate *et al.*, 2004). These largely operate beyond what graduates signal for initial consideration, in addition to the hard currencies of formal credentials, and have a crucial bearing on how successfully they are recruited to targeted employment. Overall, more processual and graduate identity approaches to the graduate-employer dynamic move the focus beyond fairly reductionist skills framing of employer demands. Instead, a more nuanced picture emerges of the relationship between actors and the context and practices which are constituted within given organizational spaces.

Some of the strongest research evidence based on finer-grained contextualisation of employer behaviours demonstrates that person-organisation fit dynamics are a strong guiding principle in recruitment. Employers ultimately regulate entry to a diverse set of organisational fields on far less tangible criteria than codified knowledge and technical expertise and instead attend to behavioural dispositions and the inter-cultural and interpersonal synergy between candidate and wider field demands. Cultural signals which convey wider socio-cultural value based on how well graduates can exploit career-related capital appears to be integral to the relational processes which underscore employers’ and graduates’ interactions. The heterogeneous nature of work organisations and universities based on complex sets of field dynamics across a multifarious spread of institutions makes endeavours to better align extant human capital to purported economic needs highly challenging.

*Implications for key stakeholders in this area*

Universities nonetheless need to think creatively about how to manage this dynamic and its attendant expectations, with salient implications for all stakeholders. These are both pragmatic in the sense of enabling graduates to better manage post-university transitions and socio-political in terms of raising equity amongst a more diverse graduate population. The evidence indicates that there are marked limitations in employability strategies based on reactive readings of employer claims of deficit and mismatch (Mason *et al.,* 2009; Bridgstock, 2017). One of the main features of the graduate economy is not only its diversity but inequity which appears to be influenced by multiple factors, not least graduates’ socio-economic background and gender (IFS, 2016; MacMillan *et al.,* 2015). The challenge therefore is in finding ways of enabling all recipients of higher education to be able to build the experiences and profiles which make them attractive to employers, and across a heterogeneous employment field. The latter point is significant given that not all graduates may orientate towards so-called ‘elite’ professions, but also conversely may wish to evade the potentially long-term dungeon of under-employment and de-skilling (Green and Henseke, 2016).

Career practitioners are also in a potentially pivotal role in helping graduates align their profiles, experiences and expectations towards targeted employment fields. A key component is aiding students to better understand and then further develop industry-specific signals which can be used to as part of their initial marketability and resume building. Given the importance of person-organisation factors, practitioners have a pivotal role in helping graduates assess their own career readiness and resourcefulness and how best to raise their marketability through experiential and emerging employability narratives. Connectedly, practitioners may have to work with more nuanced forms of contextual guidance derived from more cultural and organisationally-sensitive insight, including potential values and behavioural protocols so that graduates can utilise appropriate cultural signals when negotiating recruitment in different fields.

Across all institutional contexts, the task is less modelling provision on employer needs but finding other ways to forge more meaningful relationships with employer organisations in order for different experiences and related forms of capital to be enhanced. As a key boundary stakeholder, employers are clearly implicated on multiple levels. First is the proactive and constructive engagement with universities in helping co-ordinate forms of value-added work experience and curricula innovation which facilitates career readiness. In newer, often more vocationally-orientated, institutions, this has been an imperative for some while and a legitimating goal for widening participation (Mann *et al.,* 2014). Such steps can help students with lower levels of social and cultural capital who can make better connections to employers and begin the task of assimilating organisational practices and expectations. This connects with endeavours to promote more dynamic co-curricula and extra-curricula activities, often under the remit of work-integrated learning, so that graduates can develop more strongly-aligned profiles (Jackson, 2015).

Overall, in more competitive and market-driven contexts there appear to be increased expectations that more formal links are made with employers, including greater opportunities for work-integrated learning and internships. Much of the discussions and related evidence on employer-led initiatives (Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Helyer and Lee, 2014; Bolden *et al.*, 2009) has revealed a range of benefits of such developments for graduates’ early transitions to employment. These include, amongst others: formations of professional identity and greater labour market insight; early career development learning which may enable students to identify strategies to pursue their targeted profession; the development of students’ critical awareness and confidence of work practices, process and realities and how these can be improved; and the facilitation of reflection around strengths and areas of development. Whilst there appears to be variability in the quality and equity of such engagements, their level of regulation, as well as impact on graduate outcomes (Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2018), such activities are likely to gain greater prominence in the future. At the same time, future directions in employer engagement will have often have to work when in tandem, rather than in tension, with other goals and value systems within current HE. As critics have pointed out (see Collini, 2012), it is important for such a policy agenda and allied practices not to delimit academics’ agency as critical and creative pedagogues, or become overly preoccupied by an overarching economically instrumental rationale.

Second, and related, is the need for employers to provide appropriate and meaningful signals for graduates to be able to manage and align their profiles, including cultural and interpersonal values and organisational dynamics. Furthermore, this needs to be sustained during graduates’ early career development based on genuine skills and training needs and channelled further through effective forms of work-related learning, organisational design and career mentorship. It therefore requires genuine demand-led responsiveness. The final area is developing more equitable recruitment and talent appraisal practices so that entrenched inequities in accessing graduate-level employment are minimised and a broader conception of graduate potential and talent is deployed. These are core facets of future policy development and their application to practice will have a potentially substantial bearing on the way in which the university-employer relationship evolves longer-term.

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