



Employability and human development

Melanie Walker

2017

About this brief

A good university education can make a dramatic difference to human ability and achievements, transforming individual lives and contributing to social change. This research brief therefore considers what university education can do, drawing on a three year (2013-2016) South Africa case study of university contributions to the employability of their students. It was part of larger British Council funded study across four African countries. The brief is addressed to university practitioners, researchers and policy makers who are concerned about equality of opportunities and outcomes for all students with diverse backgrounds. The full report of the South Africa study can be found in M Walker and S Fongwa (2017).

Research problem

The project addressed this question: Given the increasing global importance attached to employability, how have universities in the five countries contributed to the preparation of graduates for work and participation in society, with what outcomes and why?

Methods

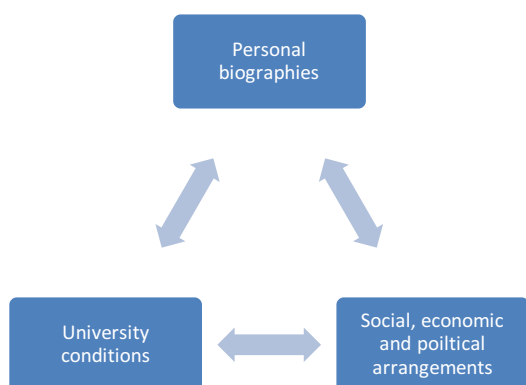
The project drew on national statistics, conducted a comprehensive literature review and undertook case studies in four universities. Relevant stakeholders at the national and university levels were interviewed, including policy makers, employers, lecturers, university managers and students. In all 90 students, 67 lecturers, 8 support staff, 17 employers, 4 university managers, and 3 policy makers were interviewed. 1 618 (17.5 per cent) of final year students in the four universities were also surveyed.

Key findings

Inequalities in society (captured in student backgrounds and choices) and in types of universities, access, participation and outcomes requires a multi-dimensional and intersectional employability framework based in human development which says that the ends of development are the well-being and agency of people. People's 'capabilities' (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011) to be and do what they value should therefore

be expanded (including in and through higher education).

Figure 1 Intersecting employability factors



For example, less than 10 per cent of students at Univen matriculated from former Model C or private schools compared to more than 60 per cent of Wits students who came from private or former Model C schools. Choice-making processes are not neutral. We found students had access to uneven amounts of information in making their choices and were constrained also by geography and access to funding. Thus 8 per cent of students had chosen the University of Venda, compared to 100 percent at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Social capital matters in having opportunities for vacation work and access to employment opportunities. As one student explained: *'If you are from a poorer background and probably black or previously disadvantaged, then the likelihood of you having strong contacts is unlikely. If you are from a wealthier white or advantaged background then it's ten times easier....you can just tell that certain people are set from the get go. Irrespective of what they are studying they can always land on their feet. So you may be lucky and have a contact or two in a very influential position, it's not impossible, it does happen, but the likelihood isn't strong [if you are from a disadvantaged background]'*.

Good quality teaching and the encouragement of diversity in classrooms is very important. But students across all the case study universities noted the mis-alignment of theory and the lack of opportunities to put theory into practice. As one student explained: *'When we then have to seek for employment, the only thing we know is what was in the book, and when you get to the work environment there is no book'*.

The perceived reputation of the university makes a significant difference to employment opportunities,

Field of study makes a difference, with students in science, technology and engineering having better opportunities. But humanities students value highly

the critical knowledge they acquire and this ought to be considered by employers

Recommendations

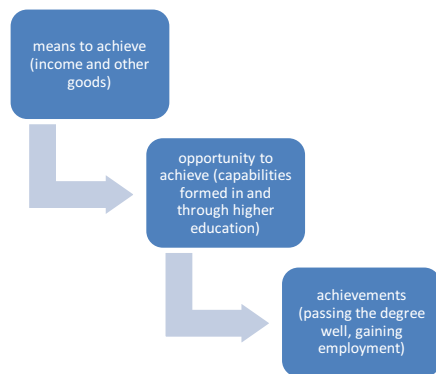
Based on the research findings, this brief makes the following recommendations:

1. Students have agency but this is enabled or constrained by context and intersecting conversion factors. Thus employability interventions must take into account the intersection of personal, university and social factors and the context. Inequalities in the wider context affect access, participation at university and employment outcomes. Universities need to consider what inequalities they can do something about in enhancing the employability of all graduates.
2. Undergraduate education ought to prepare students for employment, even if that is not all it should be doing. For low and even middle income students, employment is likely to be the most basic economic advantage of a university degree because the benefits of critical and creative knowledge and understanding are harder to enjoy without basic economic security.
3. Good quality in teaching and learning matters but that this was uneven across the four case study universities. Yet good academic grades are the baseline for employability and universities should provide opportunities to achieve for all their students.
4. Students want more practical experience and experiential, work-based learning – this has implications for social capital as those with good networks have opportunities open to them. Employers want this too; they identify a weakness in the lack of business awareness. Universities should address this gap.
5. The project found that student participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) builds the social capital of students, and is looked for by employers if choosing between two candidates. But we also found far less ECA opportunities at less resourced universities and far less participation by poor students. We also found very uneven amounts of social capital for different students. Universities can and should intervene.
6. Employers look for 'go to', 'well-rounded' candidates with qualities which are primarily middle class. Yet employers also value diversity in the workplace highly. Employers themselves therefore need to be educated about providing opportunities for a diversity of graduates. Employers also need to be persuaded by universities of the value of a high quality humanities degree.

7. The majority of students in the project saw themselves as making contributions to society. however, the development of citizenship capabilities was uneven across different university cultures.

8. Students are aspirational but achieving aspirations requires resources and opportunities and both public policy and university policy and action can and should help in making a difference.

Figure 2: Aspirations



Useful References

Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating Capabilities*. Harvard University Press.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Walker, M. and Fongwa, N. (2017) *Universities, employability and human development*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan