Exploring Student Identity through a University-Wide

Graduate Employability Initiative

Sally Smith
s.smith@napier.ac.uk

Dr Colin Smith
Cf.smith@napier.ac.uk

Ella Taylor-Smith
e.taylor-smith@napier.ac.uk

Julia Fotheringham
j.fotheringham@napier.ac.uk

Imi Dencer-Brown
amrit.dencerbrown@aut.ac.nz

Edinburgh Napier University

Merchiston Campus

Edinburgh
UK

Abstract

Universities are adopting institution-wide projects designed to enhance opportunities for student work placements and work-related learning across all subject disciplines, as inclusion and graduate employability are increasingly expressed as university core values. However, there are large variations between programs and disciplines in uptake, with limited evidence explaining why this might be the case. Furthermore, disparate routes to higher education, for example through direct entry to advanced stages of programs, provide further variation of experience. This study uses identity theory (Stryker, 1980) to explore student perceptions of placement and work-related learning. Students involved in an institution-wide graduate employability project, designed to increase the availability of placements and work-related courses on degree programs, were invited to express their attitudes to work-related learning through in-class surveys. The survey was distributed to 103 students across three different programs. Students drew on resources for identity work including role models and imaginings of themselves in a working environment. However, while they were found to have used developmental networks to support decisions about university courses, many had limited access to networks that could support their career decisions. Finally, the study highlighted that many students lacked awareness of the new courses as opportunities for work-related learning.

Keywords: employability, work-related learning, student identity, professional identity, work placement, transitions

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Students have understandably high expectation of universities equipping them with the necessary skills, experiences and attributes to ease their transition to graduation and beyond into a graduate job (Moore, Sanders & Higham, 2013). Recent re-formulations of human capital theory suggest an unproblematic alignment between education, work and earning, with higher education being seen by successive governments as a tool for upward social mobility (Marginson, 2015). Indeed, in the UK, divergent student funding models combined with challenging times for the economy have "placed graduate employability at the centre of the Higher Education agenda" (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac & Lawton, 2012, p. 4). Of course the precise definition and measurement of employability is hard to pin down. Employment rates are routinely published but data is generally reported six months from graduation, whereas many students take longer to secure their preferred graduate job (Elias & Purcell, 2004). Furthermore, the prestige of the university, together with ethnicity, mobility, and geographical location all affect employment outcomes (for example, Harvey, 2001). These factors are outside the university curriculum developer's sphere of influence. High profile university interventions, such as the Career Edge model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007), have been used, for example, to try to help students identify areas for further self-development (Dacre Pool, Qualter & Sewell, 2014).

With public money from the Scottish Funding Council, a three year £1.6m Graduate Employability Project ran in a UK university between 2012 and 2015. The overarching aim of the project was to increase graduate employment rates. The project resulted in both faculty curriculum development and centralised support activities. Curricula were re-visited to look for opportunities to embed employability into existing courses and to create new courses with a view to sustaining the outcomes. While employment rates overall improved (from 90% in

2012-2013 to 93% in 2014-2015), what was less clear was whether students felt differently about themselves, felt employable. This study was designed to consider the students' self-concept, or identity, in relation to the new courses, and in particular, to look at the social processes which support agency in students' self-identification as skilled practitioners.

Identity Considered

Arising from symbolic interactionism, identity theory provides an overarching view of our self-concept as we enact our various life roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In our social interactions we are challenged to resolve identity conflict through notions of identity commitment and salience (Serpe & Stryker, 2011). For example, in an educational context, students have been found to balance a student identity with an emerging professional identity as their skills develop towards graduation (Daicoff, 2014; Smith, Sobolewska & Smith, 2014; Wong & Trollope-Kumar, 2014).

Identity is said to be *constructed*; however the construction of an identity is not considered to be solely an act of agency and self-determination. Alvesson (2010) claims that identity construction, as considered at the extremes, is either entirely due to the individual constructing an identity through "effort and capacity" or the "outcome of social forms and discursive forces" (p.211). In an educational context, and through institution-wide initiatives, university interventions (including, for example, discourse of graduate employability and pre-placement preparation events) can be surfaced to act as a possible resource for identity construction.

Identity Work and Adaptation

Identity work, leading to identity consolidation or adaptation, can be defined to be the construction of identity through interaction with others, in particular "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence or distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1165). According to Ibarra

& Petriglieri, the "primary function of identity work is compliance with role requirements and their display rules", where display rules, in their study, are the external projections of professional identity (2010, p.14). Ibarra & Petriglieri observed identity work as employees sought to "convey images that conform to prototypic characteristics of those roles" (ibid, p.14). Each definition of identity work is reliant on the nature of relevant social interactions and the way the environment fosters productive interactions and prototypes; each of which can be influenced by institutional culture and infrastructure.

Student transitions have been explored widely, with a view to supporting individuals through times of personal change as they move from school or college to university (for example, Beach, 1999; Gale & Parker, 2014). Beach's (1999) mediational transitions offer an interesting possibility for framing some types of work-related learning, particularly where the educational activity occupies a middle ground between where the students are now and where they are going developmentally. Gale and Parker (2014, p.735) suggested a typology of three types of transition; of which one is a perspective on "transition as becoming" which is supportive of the idea that universities facilitate the emergence of diverse identities. Work-based learning can involve a temporary transition from university into the workplace, with the potential for consequent disrupted identities which have, in turn, been found to lead to identity work (Beech & Johnston, 2005). Identity theory has been used to explore transition, for example transitions from student to graduate (Smith et al., 2014), transitions during a professional life (Slay & Smith, 2011), and the transition from being employed to retiring (Birkett, 2011). These studies provide insights into identity construction and adaptation, not restricted to a current role, but as part of an overall life narrative.

Aside from gaining skills and capabilities, social processes have been identified as important in identity construction and adaptation; social processes such as the use of role models, developmental networks and experimenting with possible selves. In terms of **role**

models, various studies have found that they act as a resource for identity adaptation through the observation of prototypical behaviours (for example, Higgins & Kram, 2001; Singh Vinnicombe & James, 2006; Wright & Wright, 1987). Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy & Kram (2012) define **developmental networks** as those people and groups of people who take an active interest in an individual's career. Interaction with developmental networks has also been found to impact on identity adaptation. Wright & Wright (1987) found that acceptance and confirmation of abilities, as initiated by a mentor, led to an improved self-image, suggesting that this was due to self-verification (Swann, 1983). Sweitzer (2009) explored the developmental networks of doctoral students to find that both networks and discourse led to a change of self-image and consequent success or otherwise. Finally, studies such as Markus & Nurius (1986) have focused on the use of "**possible selves**". Markus and Nurius introduce the term to describe *imaginings* of whom one might become: in other words, a new self-identification. In a study of students transitioning to their first teaching job, Ronfeldt & Grossman (2008) found that students on placement negotiated how they saw themselves in comparison with the image of the professional projected through their university programs. Ibarra (1999) conducted a study into professional identity to find that participants drew on role models to enact a *provisional self*, followed by reflection and adaptation, until identity was consolidated in new roles. These three social processes (role-models, developmental networks and possible selves) are of interest in exploring student transitions from the classroom to the workplace.

Beech, MacIntosh, & McInnes (2008) considered identity work within situations of organisational change, developing a conceptual model which recognises both opportunity and risk in undertaking identity work. Here, opportunity and risk refer to an individual's motivation. They are two sides of the same coin: different perspectives, rather than separate factors. Opportunity describes the perceived benefits of achieving positive professional

identity outcomes, for example, a chance to gain status. Risk, for a student, could be the perceived need to self-identify as a professional, rather than a student, if the student has doubts about performing as a professional. Beech et al.'s model combines motivation with resources for identity work. Resources include skills, capabilities and status that can be used to establish or maintain an identity position. In the context of graduate employability a lack of resources for identity work could constitute a barrier to engagement with work-based activity.

Drawing together the social processes of identity adaptation with the risk/ opportunity/ resource conceptual model leads to the research questions posed by this study:

- In the context of an institutional imperative to increase work-based and work-related activity, with a view to improving graduate employability, what is the nature of identity work observed in students?

- Do the new work-related courses lead to recognisable student identity adaptation social processes?

Bearing in mind the widely varying nature of curriculum development in the three different programs in the sample, combined with the different student learner journeys, the research questions are designed to explore student approaches to and experiences of different models of work-based and work-integrated learning.

Method

An initial survey was developed with questions designed to elicit self-identification, mixing open responses with prompts to provide explanation. The survey questions attempted to explore self-identification and resources for identity work for students on programs where courses had been designed to enhance graduate employment outcomes. Questions were designed to uncover their attitudes to the new Graduate Employability Project courses,

including the perceived advantages or drawbacks in undertaking work-related learning and work placements. The questions were designed to elicit perceptions of work experience and resources for identity work. In particular, specific questions were designed to explore the impact of role models, developmental networks, and whether students could imagine a possible working self. Three programs from two different schools were identified for this initial study: Film and Television (n=14); Graphic Design (n=61) and Vet Nursing (n=28). In all, 103 participants responded to the survey which was distributed in-class. In terms of demographics 84% were aged between 17 and 22 years old; 76% were female and 81% were white UK.

Results

Identity theory recognises a relatively stable identity position and the first research question was explored through observing how participants had constructed their identities, and, in particular, self-identification as a student as revealed by their motivations to study and agency in respect of life beyond university. Participants were asked whether the overall goal of graduate employment played a factor in their motivations for programme choice and invited to select any number of options from a list: interest in the subject was selected by 30% of respondents; following a specific career path was selected by 24%; enjoyment of the subject by 15%; and opportunity for personal development by 13%.

Students were asked about their work placement and work-related learning intentions. This was clearly important to students throughout their program: 91% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that "From the time I first joined my course I knew that I wanted to gain relevant work experience"; while 94% of students agreed that, as their studies progressed, they came to realise that gaining relevant work experience would be useful.

In terms of developmental networks, and to explore how students reached decisions about participating in work-related learning opportunities, they were asked who gave them

encouragement. Family and friends were most influential, followed by lecturers, other

students on the course, then placement and careers staff. The responses are provided in Table

1. Students were able to select any options that applied. Of the "others" students' responses

included: people in the industry, students' partners, and tutors.

Table 1			
Sources of encouragement to gain relevant work experience			
	Total agree	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Total Disagree**
My friends and family members	77%	17%	5%
My lecturers	74%	18%	7%
Other students on my course	72%	19%	7%
Placement and careers staff	51%	34%	7%
Others – please let us know who:	22%	24%	

To determine agency, participants were asked if they had attended any placement or

careers talks. Only 3% of respondents had not attended *any* events. Participants were asked

how these had helped. Five students provided responses of more than one word. The

following, which highlights gaps in knowledge, is representative:

"They have taught me what people in the industry are looking for in interns but I wish there

had been more mandatory meetings to help me further prepare and find placements. I don't

know if I am meant to have one by now or not."

Identity work and adaptation

The second research question involved exploring the nature of social processes used

in identity adaptation. As resources for identity work, the identity adaptation themes of role

models, developmental networks, and possible selves were explored through the survey.

Respondents were asked if they had any role models in the industry they wanted to work in:

64% said "Yes", while 36% said "No". Those that had identified role models were asked if

they had met them or knew them to speak to and 21% said "Yes"; 79% said "No".

To explore students' developmental networks, the survey asked students who they tended to approach for advice about careers, as an open question. Responses are summarised below in Table 2, by counting the number of times each category of advisors was mentioned. The table also shows the breakdown between those who answered positively to the question of whether they had applied or secured a place on a work-related learning or work placement course ("Yes to placement") and those that had not ("No to placement").

Table 2

Talking over decisions affecting future career planning

Mentions	All (n=103)	All (n=103)	Yes to placement (n=42)	No to placement (n=61)
Family or family member (not partner)	64	62%	30 (71%)	34 (55%)
Friends/ peers / other students (includes partners/ spouses)	31	30%	14 (33%)	17 (27%)
Lecturers/ tutors/ careers staff	26	25%	11 (26%)	15 (24%)
Industry	9	9%	2 (4%)	7 (11%)
No one/myself	7	7%	5 (11%)	2 (3%)

Students were then asked if they would know who to approach for additional information or advice on gaining relevant work experience: 32% said their program team and 23% said the careers service. Other responses included the placement office (9%) and the student services hub (9%).

To explore whether respondents could imagine a possible working self, they were asked if they could easily imagine themselves in a work environment: 86% said "Yes", 13% said "No". They were then asked "Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?" 66% replied with a specific career in the area of their degree topic. One student clearly envisioned a future working self, responding to this question with this image: "In an office with big windows editing films"; 25% replied with a more general indication of working (for example: "working"; "a good job"), and 8% replied that they had no idea. Students were then asked if

they had applied for a work-related project and 40% answered positively (the "Yes to placement" group above).

Discussion

Following the curriculum development described above, work-related learning was a mandatory component of these students' programme of study. However, respondents did not always recognise the work-related elements within the newly developed courses. Of those who had applied for work-related learning, 80% recognised that it was part of their program; of those who had not applied only 61% recognised it as part of their program. Over half the total respondents (61) were 3rd year graphic design students. For these students, the semester following the survey offered three graduate employability activities: study abroad, work placement or a studio-based live project. There was considerable confusion about the purpose and nature of these activities. Via a free text response 26% of the design students said that a "work-related or work-based module" was not offered: for example answering "Not been offered" or "Not given the opportunity"; and 13% did not know whether this was part of their course or not, for example answering "I don't know if there's any". However, some had accurately understood the course structure, answering: "We are doing placements next semester".

Role models have been found elsewhere to provide a valuable resource for identity work, including as a way of modelling new behaviours (Ibarra, 1999). The majority of the respondents in this study agreed that they had role models in the industry in which they wanted to work; however, of these, only 21% knew their role model to speak to. Gibson (2003) found that "close" role models are most widely used amongst early career employees while in later stages role models were used to affirm individuals' self-concept and more likely to be "distant". So, for our undergraduate students, near role models would be helpful

at this stage in their career but, for most respondents, the potential of role models as a resource for identity work was not being realised.

The respondents' developmental networks were found to be focused in the main on family members. Dobrow & Higgins (2005) found that dense networks, where individuals in the network were themselves interconnected, impacted negatively on clarity of identity, suggesting that this was due to a lack of valuable resources for experimenting with possible selves. Furthermore, Archer (2007) found reliance on close family networks was less likely to lead to self-development and social mobility. In this study, most responses to questions about who students talk to about study and career options, and who they get encouragement from, mention family, above university staff, friends, and people in their industry, respectively. For those who had applied for work-related learning or a work placement 31% had access to a wider network than just family and friends; while only 24% of those that had not applied looked beyond family and friends (and 10% of those mentioned a single person – in most cases their mothers). The university draws on alumni to speak to students about their work and it also runs an optional mentoring programme for all direct entry students. These types of activities did not appear to impact to any great extent on this group of students.

Students who replied that they could easily see themselves in a working environment in the main cited that they had previous work experience to draw on, both within and outside university. The extent to which students, including undergraduates, come to university with some measure of professional identity should not be underestimated. Other responses included: "I feel like I am growing out of education"; "I am passionate about my field" and "I work hard and believe I can find a relevant job." For those that couldn't picture themselves in a working environment, reasons included "I don't feel very confident"; "I don't know what I want to do"; "I don't feel qualified enough" and "Not been taught enough practical knowledge."

Returning to Beech et al.'s (2008) conceptual model of identity work, students were largely found to have the motivation and opportunity to undertake identity work as evidenced by their strongly positive response to the question of work experience being useful to them. In practice, the participants in this study were observed to be acting as agents through engagement with careers services and seeking advice. However, some of the rich resources for identity work were not readily accessible. While most of the students had role models in the industry and could envisage themselves in a work environment, their developmental networks were found to be overly reliant on family and friends, rather than more diverse networks which would be richer resources for identity work. The new employability courses had been designed, through increasing the opportunity for identity work, to support students' capacity for identity work, however, in some cases, a lack of resources was observed.

Students were using role models and possible selves as resources for identity work, though their developmental networks could usefully be expanded to provide more support for identity transitions. Indeed, imagining a professional self was easy for 86% of the group. Looking more closely at the responses from the group of students who said that they had applied for a work-related opportunity, 71% had been influenced in their overall programme choice by having such an opportunity. For those that had not applied, only 50% had been influenced. As 94% had come to realise that work experience would be useful to them, the lack of pre-application influence would appear to indicate lack of information or understanding about this element of the new employability courses at the pre-application stage.

Given an employability focus, the implication of this study is that universities should structure curricula and the learning experience so that students both recognise and engage with it, irrespective of their individual subjectivities. Early clarification of employability

module mapping with clear messages designed to signpost advice and mentoring provided by the university could make the opportunities available more closely related to student aspirations and, more effectively, lay the foundation for identity adaptation to a skilled practitioner.

Study limitations and future work

The survey elicited useful information about students' awareness and perceptions of work-related learning and resources for identity work. However, the responses need to be explored more fully. The study is also limited by the lack of diversity in the participant group. Future work to remedy these limitations is underway. This includes follow up interviews and extending the survey to new student groups across the university. In wider terms, a cross-institution study would be of interest as a means of comparing the impact of differing approaches on student self-identification.

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