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'Because Sometimes Your Failures Can Also Teach You Certain Skills': Lecturer and Student Perceptions of Employability Skills at a Transnational University

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigates lecturers' and students' understanding of the concepts and language underpinning higher education strategies of developing employability skills. While a solid grounding in discipline-specific knowledge and skills is what most graduate degrees aim at providing, employability skills are increasingly becoming an important factor when evaluating prospective employees. Embedding the acquisition of employability skills into higher education courses has emerged as a response to industry demands for work-ready graduates. The forces of internationalisation and globalisation mean that employers the world over are looking for graduates with additional soft skills, abilities and achievements. The context for this study is Westminster International University, Tashkent (WIUT), a transnational university in Uzbekistan. By means of a qualitative case study, the views of lecturers and students were investigated and common themes and perspectives identified. The main findings indicate that although students and lecturers share similar perspectives on the importance of employability skills, the purpose of employability focused pedagogy is not easily communicated to students. Furthermore, students feel that a more systematic approach to recognising and demonstrating employability skills would help them in their transition from education to work.

Keywords: global higher education, employability skills, transnational education, employability pedagogy

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'Porque a veces Tus Fracasos También Pueden Enseñarte Ciertas Habilidades': Percepciones de los Profesores y Estudiantes de las Habilidades de Empleabilidad en una Universidad Transnacional

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Resumen

Este estudio exploratorio investiga la percepción de los profesores y estudiantes de los conceptos y el lenguaje que se utilizan en las estrategias de educación superior para desarrollar las habilidades de empleabilidad. Mientras que los conocimientos disciplinarios son el objetivo de la mayoría de los posgrados, las habilidades de empleabilidad son cada vez un factor más importante al evaluar a los posibles empleados. La adquisición de habilidades de empleabilidad en la educación ha surgido como una respuesta a las demandas de la industria de graduados preparados para el mundo laboral. La internacionalización y globalización hacen que los empleadores busquen graduados con habilidades blandas, destrezas y logros adicionales. El contexto es Westminster International University, Tashkent (WIUT), una universidad transnacional en Uzbekistán. Mediante un estudio cualitativo, se investigaron puntos de vista y se identificaron temas y perspectivas comunes. Los hallazgos indican que, aunque los estudiantes y profesores comparten perspectivas similares sobre la importancia de las aptitudes para la empleabilidad, el propósito de la pedagogía enfocada en la empleabilidad no se comunica fácilmente a los estudiantes. Además, los estudiantes sienten que un enfoque más sistemático para reconocer y demostrar habilidades de empleabilidad les ayudaría en su transición de la educación al mundo laboral.

Palabras clave: educación universitaria internacional, educación transnacional, pedagogía de la inserción laboral

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In the 21st century it has become widely recognised that employability skills are a valuable asset that university graduates must acquire to secure graduate level employment (Davies et al., 2012). Although a solid grounding in discipline-specific knowledge and skills is what most graduate degrees aim at providing, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) Employer Skills Survey 2011 ranked employability skills as the most important factor when evaluating job applicants (Davies et al., 2012). In response to this and previous studies (Bourne, McKenzie, & Shiel, 2006; Caruana & Spurling, 2007; CBI/NUS, 2011), UK universities have set upon a strategy of promoting and developing graduates' employability skills, often framed in the language of what it means to have desirable graduate attributes. This embedding of employability skills into course and curriculum design is aimed at reducing the perceived shortfall in the ability of graduates to perform tasks needed in the workplace. Looking beyond the UK into other parts of Europe, the 2014 Erasmus Impact Study also confirmed that 92% of employers recognised the importance of transversal skills (Brandenburg et al., 2014). These sentiments are echoed further afield as the forces of internationalisation and globalisation mean that employers are looking for graduates with the desirable skills. No exception to this is Uzbekistan, where a study by Ajwad et al., (2014) revealed that employment outcomes in Uzbekistan are compromised by skills shortages. The study argued that the education system in Uzbekistan was not providing the kinds of cognitive and non-cognitive skills that employers were now demanding in light of increased globalisation. Perhaps more revealing were the concerns raised about the quality of tertiary education and its apparent inability to provide the labour market with graduates skilled in the relevant areas. The extent of student awareness regarding employability is also something that is often overlooked, and this is a perspective that has not been explored in Uzbekistan. There are, however, challenges to a shift in international educational philosophy from traditional notions of intellectual enlightenment to a skills based agenda. For example, Jackson (2009) and Tymon (2013) have suggested that students and stakeholders differ in both expectations and understanding regarding employability skills. There are also considerable doubts about whether employability skills can be effectively taught in the classroom (Cranmer, 2006). Allais (2012) goes further to argue that educational policy has become nothing more than a

tool to promote neoliberal economic ideals. Nevertheless, universities compete on national and international levels to promote the success of their employability strategies.

Review of Related Literature

Recognition of Employability Skills

Students may have many different reasons for entering university, ranging from the idealistic notions of expanding knowledge and gaining valuable life experience, to more practical aims of getting a job. While no one would claim that a university education is a golden ticket to a highly paid career, students look at employment rates of graduates as a deciding factor in choosing an HEI (Brown et al., 2005). The importance of employability has risen to prominence in recent years, especially as the economic downturn of 2008 negatively affected the world jobs market.   The increase in the number of graduates has led to questions about whether a university education equips students with the prerequisite skills for the labour market, so much so that levels of graduate employability are now included in higher education performance indicators, influencing the ranking of universities (Morley, 2001). This has posed the question of whether the development of employability skills is the responsibility of universities, students or employers. De La Harpe, Radloff and Wyber (2000) conducted a pivotal study that was one of the first to identify specific generic skills that should be taught to all undergraduate business students. It must be noted that such studies are context dependent, and directed towards a specific labour market, in this case Australia; although with increased globalisation there is the argument that localised contexts also require graduates with skills that are globally transferable (Harvey & Bowers Brown, 2004). In contrast, Cranmer (2006) argues that due to the highly specific nature of some skills, they can only realistically be acquired in the workplace. Despite these claims, it seems that developing graduate employability skills has now become a matter of policy in countries that wish to compete in the global knowledge economy.

Definitions of Employability Related Concepts

With increased interest in employability over the past decade many studies have tried to create taxonomies of the skills and attributes needed by graduates to enhance both their job prospects, and their chances of functioning at the desirable level in the chosen profession. Older taxonomies e.g. Hillage and Pollard (1998) had focused on broader definitions of employability relating to the areas of getting a job: ensuring that key skills and an understanding about the world of work are embedded in the education system; keeping a job: maintaining employment and making transitions between roles; and getting a better job: being independent in the labour market by managing employment transitions between and within organisations. Perhaps the most revealing findings of this research were regarding the direction of Government policy, which was aimed more at developing knowledge and vocational skills, perhaps at the expense of softer skills. In addition, the focus had shifted towards those entering the labour market from education or unemployment, with responsibility devolved to the individual and the supply side rather than the employers on the demand side. Although the report was not specifically directed at the graduate labour market, the findings were important in highlighting the need to acknowledge that employability was a collective responsibility. Dearing (1997) had previously identified key skills that should be taught at undergraduate level. The key skills were: communication, numeracy, information technology and learning to learn. As an addendum to this, Hillage and Pollard (1998) added team-working and problem solving. Thus was started a discussion around employability as a social construct, where the various concepts and key skills were at the same time applicable to many contexts, but at times highly context dependent. Brown, Hesketh and Wiliams (2003) elaborated on this, stressing that employability was both relative and absolute, as any individuals possessing a particular set of skills and experience (absolute) would not determine employment in an unstable and unpredictable (relative) jobs market. At the beginning of the 21st century researchers into employability skills became more concerned with the notion of graduates doing graduate level jobs; the ability to do a job rather than the skills and tactics needed to get a job (Harvey, 2001; van der Heijden, 2001; Yorke,

2001; Knight and Yorke, 2002). This shift in perspective required a more complex description and understanding of the skills, attributes and competencies; one which focused as much on generic skills as subject specific knowledge. Two definitions that invite comparison are as follows:

> A set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen occupations. (Knight and Yorke, 2002, p.3).

> A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy. (Yorke, 2006, p.8).

While Knight and Yorke (2002) distinguish between the ability to get a job and maintain successful employment, Yorke (2006) emphasises skills and knowledge rather than achievements. It is clear both definitions recognise the importance *skills* and *personal attributes*, but the subjectivity involved in what these may be invites further discussion. Various studies have examined specific skills that employers require in respect to the disciplines, these include contexts such as chemistry (Hanson & Overton, 2010), Geography (Haigh & Kilmartin, 1999), and Business related subjects (Andrews & Higson, 2008). However, the past decade has seen an increase in the number of studies that stress the importance of generic skills. This has led to definitions of employability being defined as lists of desirable skills and attributes, with increasing weight placed on the acquisition of *soft skills*, which can be simply defined as 'personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people,' (OED online, 2016). Archer and Davison (2008) in their comprehensive survey of 233 large and small UK and International companies found that soft skills such as team-working are more important than most hard skills. Communication skills was deemed to be the most desired employability skill, although employers reported low satisfaction levels with graduates' ability to communicate effectively. The largest importance/satisfaction gaps in the capabilities of new graduates were in the areas of commercial awareness, analysis and decision making, and communication skills. The

main discrepancies between UK only and International companies were the desirability of foreign language ability, and the value of overseas work experience (Archer & Davison, 2008). Recommendations from the survey were aimed at employers, universities and graduates: Employers should better inform universities of their needs, stress the importance of soft skills, and recruit from a wider pool of universities rather than those with high rankings. Universities should ensure that degree programmes meet the needs of the employers, adequately communicate business' employability demands to prospective students, and incorporate reflective learning practices in course design. Students should demonstrate soft skills for employability through their university experience; and exploit opportunities for mobility and foreign language development, especially if considering working for an international company. However, as pointed out by Smith, Ferns and Russell (2014), the lack of an underpinning or overarching theoretical framework can lead to a fundamental misunderstanding about the level of development of particular skills, and whether their development constitutes an achievable goal of higher education. More importantly, any study aiming to address issues of employability should start with the stakeholders' conceptualisation of the construct itself.

Perceptions of Employability Skills

As definitions of employability have evolved in recent years, many studies have investigated reasons for the disparities between the objectives of educators and the requirements of employers. Leveson (2000) suggested that the problem could be one of perception, specifically differences in the understanding of the language that underpins the whole employability discourse. A lack of understanding between interested parties may lead to potential discrepancies in the aims of competency based higher education. A specific and problem is the meaning of the term 'generic'. Marginson and O'Hanlon (1992) questioned whether *generic* meant the same as *essential*, and in turn whether the acquisition of generic skills in higher education implied transferability to the workplace. This latter point is crucial, as a failure of graduates to apply what they have learnt can only result in a widening gulf between employers' expectations and graduates' ability to perform. More recently, Jackson (2013) observed that employers of business graduates were taking the transferability of non-technical skills for

granted. Increased collaboration between employers, educators and graduates was seen as the most effective way of closing the gap. Studies also emphasised employability's multi-faceted nature, with both internal and external features (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). The key point is the focus on the individual's perception influenced by both internal and external dimensions; what the prospective employees regard as their options for work, rather than the "the conception of employability as a human resources strategy promoted by organisations as an alternative to career or job-for-life" (*ibid*, p.24). The external factors include the reputation of the university, and the credibility of and demand for the students' chosen field of study. The internal dimensions include factors such as students' confidence, ambition, and academic performance. An alternative approach to conceptualising employability was put forward by Holmes (2001) in a challenge to the dominant skills agenda. The *graduate identity* approach argues that employability is best understood as being individual and subjective, underpinned by the twin concepts of practices and identity. In this interpretation the work outcomes of the graduates are shaped by their own individual experiences, and therefore more research is needed that focuses on individual identity. As an extension to the graduate identity approach, Tomlinson (2007) conducted a qualitative study of UK final year undergraduates. Here students developed individualised narratives regarding their career progression. It is clear that students constructed their own identities in relation to their individual perceptions of both their own employability skills and their position to the labour market.

Context, Purpose and Significance of the Study

Uzbekistan is a central Asian ex-Soviet Republic with a population of around thirty-one million (World Bank, 2015). Socio-political and economic changes since independence in 1991 have seen an increase in the scope and demand for internationally recognised higher education. In 1996 the British Council established a branch in the capital, Tashkent, with the goal of providing learning and development opportunities and access to information, ideas and expertise from around the world (Hasanova, 2007). Educational reforms have increased the demand for higher education, and in 1997 Parliament introduced the new Law on Education, which led to reforms in the structure of the education system. The population receives

nine years of compulsory general secondary education, and a further three years of specialised, or vocational training in colleges and lyceums (Ikramov, 2002). Currently, the higher education system consists of 64 establishments, including 19 universities, and six transnational universities. One of these is Westminster International University, Tashkent (WIUT) which was set up in 2002.

In 2011-12 there were around a quarter of a million students in the Higher Education sector in Uzbekistan. A survey of businesses in Uzbekistan identified a shortfall between graduate skills and those desired by employers (Ajwad et al., 2014). With the implementation of international quality assurance frameworks, most notably the 1999 Bologna Protocol, universities in Uzbekistan are under increased scrutiny as they are "still mostly governed by government ministries and have only limited freedom to tailor their programs to the needs and requirements of the Uzbek economy" (*ibid*, p.66). In this context, the development of transnational universities in Uzbekistan is an opportunity to bridge the employers perceived skills gaps. However, from the students' perspective, things may be different. A recent study into experiences of students at transnational universities across the world found that Transnational Education programmes were not addressing local skills gaps, nor sufficiently supporting students in their pursuit of international employment (Mellors-Bourne, 2014).

While research into Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) is relatively new, it is understandable that no specific studies have been carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of TNHE programmes in Uzbekistan. On a broader level, the European Training Foundation (2015) identified the need for a more flexible higher education system in Uzbekistan that produced graduates capable of working in a number of occupations. Since 2012 the trend in the country has been a move away from developing infrastructure for education to promoting growth of the community of professional vocational teachers, with an emphasis on quality, content and support for employability. Priorities for improvements include the continued professional development of teachers, and perhaps more relevant for WIUT and similar institutions, closer cooperation between employers and educators to promote employability. However, an investigation into stakeholders understanding of employability related concepts has not been investigated in relation to TNHE in Uzbekistan. A

localised study of one the country's most prominent transnational universities will provide valuable insights into how these stakeholders, specifically students and educators, position themselves in the ongoing debate.

Previous studies investigating the perceptions of employability skills, whether from the perspective of employers or employees, have typically employed quantitative methods. In these Euro-centric studies the aim was to quantify the notion of employability at a national level (Almeida, 2007; Bernston, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006), or at the level of industry (Grip, Loo, & Sanders, 2004). Studies that concerned the perceptions of individuals in matters related to acquiring work, or performing successfully in the workplace, also favoured quantitative methods (Van Dam, 2004; Schyns, Torka, & Gössling, 2005). These aforementioned studies were concerned with constructing multi-dimensional models of employability or research instruments.

Research Questions

The notion of employability skills is a construct which "grows by accretion with the addition of new sub-constructs" (Smith et al., 2014, p.6). Since no single body has control over the construct, it is subject to different interpretations from those with a vested interested, namely, government policy makers, employers, educators and students. Sin and Neave (2016, p.1) claim that, 'as a concept, employability commands little consensus. Rather it is interpreted in the light of each interest group's concerns […] as a floating signifier'. It is this position, with employability being a *floating signifier,* which informs the research questions:

- What are lecturers' and students' perceptions of desirable employability skills, and how do they converge or diverge?
- What strategies are used by students to develop their employability skills, and what strategies are used by lecturers to develop the employability skills of their students?

Method

People develop their own world view as an accumulation of experiences; researchers can add to the body of shared understanding and experience by

describing and retelling the natural experiences of others. Fundamental to this is the concept of *tacit* knowledge; the knowledge people have based on their own personal experiences, intuitions, and understandings of the world around them. This tacit knowledge is shared by means of association with other people. From an epistemological standpoint, it may be argued that truth lies only in propositional statements. While this may be valid in the natural sciences, where *explanation* is key, in social sciences the understanding of a phenomenon may be of equal importance. Case studies take place in a natural setting, such as a place of work or educational establishment, and aim at a more holistic understanding of the event being investigated. It is from in-depth study of participants in their natural setting that new understandings or further questions may be uncovered. This research is a case study, conducted by way of semi-structured interviews, that focuses on the bounded system of one educational institution, Westminster International University, Tashkent (WIUT). For these aims qualitative, open-ended semi-structured interviewing was used. The interviews were guided by an interview schedule, which included set questions and prompts. Example questions include:

- What does the term 'employability skills' mean to you?
- What do you think employers are looking for in graduates?
- How can WIUT graduates stand out from other applicants when applying for a job?
- Do you do anything in the courses at WIUT that you think has value for work situations?
- How can graduates demonstrate employability skills to prospective employers?

Participants

The participants were chosen through purposive sampling because of their roles at WIUT; lecturers and students from two undergraduate degree courses, BA Business Administration and BSc Economics. The two chosen courses covered a wide range of core and option modules available to students at WIUT, and would allow for sufficient depth of coverage of the research questions. Eight face-to-face semi structured interviews were used to collect the data. The lecturers, three female and one male, each had between six and eight years of teaching experience at WIUT. One of the

lecturers had also studied for an MA at WIUT. The students, two female and two male, were either 1st or 3rd year undergraduates. Three of the students had completed the pre-university foundation course at WIUT; one student had completed a foundation year at a local university. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university ethics committee, and all participants were briefed on the purpose of the study. The confidentiality of all data relating to the research was also assured.

Instrument

For the detailed analysis a thematic analysis approach was employed, as this is recognised as being both rigorous and flexible. The questions were designed to elicit participants' own perceptions of employability related concepts, and how their own individual experiences have shaped those perceptions. Each interview lasted around one hour. The final framework for analysis emerged as the themes were defined and refined. The QSR NVivo software package was used in analysing and organising the data. The final thematic map of the data (Table 1), under the global theme of *employability skills*, aimed to demonstrate how participants' perceptions were shaped by their own experiences of working, teaching and learning. The thematic map considered past, present and future issues, allowing participants to tell their story in a way that informed the research questions.

Table 1
Thematic map for data interpretation

Global theme	Main themes	Sub-themes
Employability skills	Influences	Work experience Teaching and learning
	Perceptions	Own definitions Importance of generic skills
	Current Strategies	In-class strategies External influences
	Outlook	Demonstrating employability Changes in behaviour

Key Findings and Discussion of Research Questions

Perceptions

What are lecturers' and students' perceptions of desirable employability skills, and how do they converge or diverge?

It is clear that employability can be interpreted and understood in a number of ways. Sin and Neave's (2016) claim that employability is a *floating signifier* that commands various contended meanings certainly holds true in the light of the findings. The participants' own perceptions were shaped largely by their own engagement with both pedagogic and work related practices. Lecturers saw employability as something that they should equip students with; including the skills needed to get a job, as illustrated by these two lecturers' definitions:

> The skills that will add our graduates some value in the labour market, some skills that they can sell to the future employer.

> Employability skills mean that we equip our students with the skills that would be helpful for them to get the job and function successfully.

Familiarity with the terminology was largely through university policy documentation regarding revalidation of modules and generic descriptors of course or module student outcomes, as explained by one lecturer:

> This is a familiar term especially with revalidation. I had to develop the course, that's when I was faced with terms such as employability skills.

The work related background of lecturers influenced perceptions; two of the lecturers came from an education and teaching background and two came into teaching after a period of working in industry. The lecturers from a teaching background had a clearer concept of what employability meant, and appeared to be more confident in discussing the topic. This might seem somewhat counterintuitive, as those with more experience of work in non-education setting might be expected to have a better idea of what is required to succeed in the labour market. However, a possible explanation of this, particularly regarding the experience of one participant, is the fact that employment was in family owned businesses, where the normal processes of applying for jobs, interviews, trial periods and promotion based on merit and performance might not have applied. There was much alignment among the student and lecturers with general definitions; all agreed that employability involved the development of generic skills, and these skills were linked to the needs of prospective employers. Interestingly only one student participant mentioned that the skills were ones that employers were looking for, perhaps showing a broader awareness of issues:

> The skills that employers look for when hiring graduates or students, the skills that are most   desired by employers.

This may be expected as this student had the most experience of internships among the participants, which in turn poses the questions whether conceptual knowledge of employability skills can best be acquired through work experience. It is clear that all the participants buy into the notion of the skills agenda that has come to dominate HE curricula over the

past few years. While criticism of the skills agenda is a feature of UK HE discourse (Wolf, 2007), such discussions are not common in Uzbekistan. In fact, there is a discussion to be had as to whether UK based definitions of employability are relevant for developing countries such as Uzbekistan, where there may be a more rigid system of government central planning. Uzbekistan, since independence in 1991, has been slowly transitioning to a market economy, where elements of a Soviet style economy still persist with subsidies, price controls and extensive government planned production (Lasch & Dana, 2011). Such a demand-led system, where it is the providers of employment who dictate what is or is not important, can only lead to increased marketisation of institutes such as WIUT, where endorsing the discourse of employability equates to endorsing an emergent capitalist economic system (McCowan, 2015). In addition, the success of any government policy to promote employability might be measured in terms of the numbers of graduates in graduate level jobs, thus equating employability with employment (Wilton, 2008). The definitions chosen for evaluation by the participants of this study (Knight & Yorke, 2002; Yorke, 2006) were focused on the ability to attain and maintain graduate level jobs, but did not consider the changing structure of labour markets. When shown the two definitions some participants did not always find them to be clear, or even useful, as illustrated by one perceptive lecturer comment:

> Achievements? I would put this one into question because sometimes your failures can also teach you certain skills - everyone views achievement differently.

The students may take on board such definitions and frame their own perceptions in terms of competition for the limited number of graduate jobs available to them. This view may also be reinforced by university documentation and policies that are well meaning in terms of providing employment opportunities, but do not consider wider ethical implications such as making a valuable contribution to society, or the demands of the labour market looking ahead a number of years. The forty-one employability skills identified by Jackson (2010) are illustrative of the vast array of capabilities "vying for inclusion in the definition of employability" (Smith et al., 2014, p.2). It is not surprising that the skills identified by participants fell within this comprehensive list. A point to note here is that

participants, when referring to employability skills, did not distinguish between skills or attributes that may stem from broader values or attitudes; both skills and attributes were considered under the same umbrella term of employability skills. Table 2 shows the employability skills that were identified (without prompting) during the course of the interviews:

Table 2
Employability skills identified by participants

	Business administration	Economics
Lecturers	Adaptability	Analytical skills
	Communication skills	Communication skills
	Flexibility	Critical thinking skills
	Managing expectation	Numerical skills
	Presentation skills	Presentation skills
	Self-management	Punctuality
	Team-working	Research skills
	Time management	Social skills
	Transferable skills	Team-working
	Working to deadlines	
Students	Assertiveness	Critical thinking
	Language skills	Communication skills
	Presentation skills	Leadership skills
	Team-working	Research skills
	Work experience	Time management
		Transferable skills

The skills identified by participants were largely non-technical and generic. With the possible exception of numerical skills, presentation skills, and language skills all can be categorised as soft skills. These skills are more related to personal characteristics and are difficult to demonstrate or measure. A significant difference in perceptions between lecturers and students was not evident, but it can be noted that the two skills that were

given prominence by lecturers and students were *team-working* and *communication skills*. Across the two subjects it was interesting to note that the skills of *critical thinking* and *leadership* were identified by students and lecturers from Economics, but not from Business Administration. Jackson (2013) cites examples of deficiencies in specific non-technical skills identified by business graduate workplace performance, particularly in critical thinking and leadership. Many of the skills identified by participants could be seen as ones that relate as much to desirable academic outcomes than transferable employability skills *per se, i.e.* ones that can be practised and evaluated in a classroom or educational setting. These include presentation skills (assessed presentations), team-working (group presentations and coursework), numerical skills (coursework that includes a mathematical component), language skills (in English, as this is the language of instruction and assessment), research skills (assessed coursework which references academic sources), working to deadlines (submitting coursework on time), punctuality (arriving to classes on time), and time management (prioritising coursework in relation to deadlines). An interesting aspect to consider here is the reason why lecturers and students consider a particular skill or attribute to be of importance. Furnell and Scott (2015) emphasised their belief that graduate students primarily recognised the relative importance of skills as a direct result of applying them to work contexts. While there has been widespread criticism of how naïve conceptualisations bear little or no relationship to actual employment practices (Wolf, 2007), students in this study have identified what they consider to be the most important employability skills largely through their practical experiences of internships and through extracurricular activities that necessitated the use of cognitive, and social and behavioural skills. One student was keen to point out that one of the biggest challenges facing students is how to apply theoretical knowledge in practice:

> There are some things that you are not told at university which might help in the workplace. For example, how to work with colleagues; you should be more assertive and flexible. At university we get only theoretical knowledge.

This student recognised that her own work experience has gone a long way to bridging the gap between theory and practice. However, it is not just

a matter of recognition of the skills, but also the way they can be demonstrated and used as a valuable tool in both securing employment and working productively. One lecturer noted that students may have a practical advantage if their family are business owners.

> From my experience those students who have a family business or their own business are somehow more confident. They show they've already used their knowledge in some area.

This was echoed by another lecturer:

> The majority of students already have part time jobs by the time they graduate. Some of them work with their parents business. I know some students whose family have businesses such as banks. It is common to work at parents' businesses after graduation

Regarding specific skills, these were easily identified by participants, but conceptualisations seemed to be shaped more by pedagogical factors. The list of skills generated by participants is in line with competencies listed in employability frameworks such as Archer and Davison (2008). However, this is not to suggest that participants all agreed on the skills and attributes that are linked to employability. As noted by De La Harpe et al., (2000), the terms used to describe such generic skills are used interchangeably with *attributes*, *characteristics*, *values*, *competencies* and *qualities*, and these are often understood as being independent of learning contexts. It is clear that terms such as these are very different to easily identifiable skills such as presentation skills, which are more easily measured as a learning outcome of a particular course of study.

Strategies

What strategies are used by students to develop their employability skills, and what strategies are used by lecturers to develop the employability skills of their students?

The value of promoting employability as one of the aims of higher education is still a matter of contention, but as long as virtually all HE institutes are compliant in the process it would seem prudent to incorporate

employability pedagogy in the curricula. Lecturers at transnational universities may see the inclusion of employability pedagogy as an advance on more traditional methods of teaching, and from the interviews it was clear lecturers recognised the need to make their classes practical and interactive. However, it was evident that the benefits of certain types of learning activities, e.g. role plays and collaborative projects, were often not made explicit enough to students. All lecturers were enthusiastic in their description of the kinds of activities they encourage. When lecturers were describing specific classroom activities they tended to highlight those skills more related to the cognitive domain; logical and creative thinking, problem solving, and discussion based interaction. This can be contrasted with the previously mentioned definitions given by lecturers, which tended to focus on pedagogic aspects and more testable elements. One activity mentioned by a lecturer was simulations and role plays:

> We like simulations and role-plays. Participants take the role of managers or employers and   pretend to have a different cultural background. They have a problem solving task where they need to analyse the cultural profiles of negotiators.

Students also seemed to enjoy and recognise the value of such activities, with one being described as particularly useful; an activity where they had to communicate various emotions without using words, through saying numbers with different intonation:

> In Personal Development [module] we did simulations and role-plays. They were fun; they made us actors. In real life tone of language plays a big role when you are developing a relationship talking to other people

However, it may also be the case that not all students recognise simulations and role-plays as a beneficial activity:

> Many people do not perceive the simulations as something serious. They [fellow students] complain after the class that they are not getting much from the simulations, but I believe we enhance our emotional intelligence. The absence of such simulations in the

> Lyceum makes them [students] feel that this is something that has
> no value.

The student argues that the reason for this is that many students, before entering undergraduate studies, are used to a strict schedule of lectures and taught classes in their Lyceum (High School equivalent). A link here can be drawn with teaching methods in the Uzbek school system. It has been noted that teaching methods have not advanced significantly due to educational structures being highly hierarchical, with policy reform being developed in a top-down manner (Weidman & Yoder, 2010). Criticism of teaching methods in the schools have included outdated training that focuses on the transmission of factual information, and a distinct lack of opportunities for teachers to acquire strategies in using methods that are more conducive to the development of students' critical thinking or problem solving skills. When probed on this issue the student went on to state that during the set-up of role plays little or no explicit information was given as to why students were doing the activity:

> There were no specific explanations as to why we were doing this;
> the only instructions were we should just begin interacting. Maybe
> the absence of explanation affected the perception and the value.

If the students did not always equate such activities with enhancing their employability skills then it seems likely that they would not take them as seriously as activities such as assessments that had concrete outcomes. As noted by Knight, (2003), "If your project fosters achievements valued by employers, does it also ensure that learners know this?" (p.5) This is at a micro level, but at the macro level of the degree as a whole, students may also lack the ability to adequately describe their experience of higher education. Although curriculum practices may aim to foster the development of skills that are valued in the labour market, if students are unable to either express or demonstrate their employability readiness to potential employers then there will likely be a continued shortfall in work-ready graduates. The context in which skills are developed is an important part of learning, and if employability skills are to be successfully embedded in curricula then the context-related implications of the skills being promoted should be considered in greater depth. Although team-working

was recognised as an important employability skill by all of the participants, the lecturers felt that it was difficult to incorporate it into the classroom activities, especially at higher levels. Moreover, there did not seem to be a clear distinction between team-work as an opportunity to foster mutual understanding and cooperation, and group assessed coursework, as this lecturer pointed out:

> On teamwork it's an interesting point because level 6 modules discourage teamwork as their summative component. We had the comment from the external examiner that we cannot have that many summative group courseworks.

This is not to say that lecturers do not see the value of such activities, but more they feel constrained by the academic regulations placed upon them from above. The reason for this may not seem perfectly logical in terms of pedagogy and practical application. One student described how one of the level 6 modules that previously had assessed groupwork, included in its learning outcomes *building a strategy that was communicated across the whole team*. There are difficulties involved in administering groupwork assessment. Students may feel that less hardworking classmates are benefiting (in terms of coursework credit) from the hard work of others, especially if a mark is given for the group as a whole. While this is not promoting the benefits of mutual cooperation, it is understandable that students want credit and recognition for their efforts, and if teamwork and collaborative activities are not contributing to marks then their importance may be undervalued. One student equated team-working, specifically when the team does not work well together, with problem solving, drawing on an example of a group presentation:

> You have to solve a problem for your group and for yourself - one student was ill, another one went home, the third just didn't come. I had to choose the topic myself. At the end we got positive feedback.

It is not necessarily the case that students see their progress purely in terms of assessment marks. As with many of the participants, the discussion of classroom activities revealed further insights into how skills related to employability are embedded in the curriculum. Another student was

particularly perceptive in his analysis of the importance of team-working, making astute connections which touched upon two skills for the future workplace (Davies, Fidler, & Gorbis, 2011); cross-cultural competency and novel and adaptive thinking:

> Working in a team teaches you how to work with different people
> from different countries.

    Lecturers seemed less aware than students of the opportunities for development that existed outside of timetabled classes. The extent to which students engaged with extracurricular activities was impressive, but again the problem was that students either did not relate these activities to employability, or felt they lacked the ability to describe them in a way that encapsulated the employability element. Experiential and action learning strategies are most effective when combined with direct work experience, and are also strengthened by reflection and evaluation by participants (Davies et al., 2012). Students who participated in the peer-mentoring scheme recognised the benefits in terms of developing valuable skills, but felt they needed more recognition for their efforts. Zacharopoulou, Giles and Condell (2015) reported on how to maximise benefits from a similar scheme to the one used at WIUT. Participants recorded experiences of their peer-mentoring scheme in a reflective diary, took part in discussion groups and compiled a portfolio of evidence. Not only did the scheme enhance students' perceived competence in areas of employability, but also raised awareness of limitations in other areas. Knight and Yorke's (2002) USEM model of employability also stresses the role of metacognition and reflection to help students articulate their achievements. The benefits of experiential learning are well reported (Kolb 1984). More current iterations involve personal development planning (PDP) to enable students to be more proactive in their identification of both learning and career orientated opportunities within their undergraduate courses. The Personal Development module for Level 3 students at WIUT was mentioned by lecturers and students as being of practical value. However, Tymon (2013) suggested that employability related engagement increased with students as they progressed in their degree courses, and that students during the early stages of undergraduate study lacked interest in activities that tried to embed employability. Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac and Lawton, (2012)

advocate the integration of experiential learning and embedded employability approaches as long as it is backed up with effective means of documenting and recording. This enables students to reflect constructively on the experience, learning and development. Further integration of these practices with work experience and internship opportunities could be of benefit to WIUT students, especially during the later stages of the degree. One of the main recommendations of Ajwad et al., (2014) was to improve the flow of information between employers and prospective employees. This included ways of matching the supply of skills with the employer demand. For a university it would seem prudent that there is a strong relationship with local employers, and also that both students and lecturers were in a position to benefit from such a relationship. At WIUT both lecturers and students have opportunities to interact with employers. One lecturer expanded on this:

> We did have discussions with professionals from industry and I remember that they marked communication skills, technical skills and team building […] They want our students to be good communicators in different formats, so this is also writing, oral, being able to communicate with clients successfully, and being able to build personal relationships.

These comments highlight employers desire for graduates with skills related to social intelligence: "the ability to connect to others in a deep and direct way, to sense and stimulate reactions and desired interactions" (Davies et al., 2011, p.8). This lecturer also remarked that this was in the previous year before module revalidation, where employers and lecturers had a round table discussion. It was acknowledged that more could be done in this area:

> Here we need to improve our communications with the employers and organise events like the careers day more often. We need to get more feedback from the employers.

Meetings with employers also provided another lecturer with valuable information regarding desirable skills:

> When I was talking with the employers, which does not happen very often, they mostly seek the soft skills which are transferable, highly transferable, not subject specific.

One lecturer, who had also been a student at WIUT recalled that guest speakers were invited from an international bank. She enthused about these conversations she had, as a student, with prospective employers. She remembered students were keen on asking the employers what they wanted from graduates:

> We were students at the time, so basically we were asking them what they [employers] are looking for. Why are you [lecturers] teaching us this theory that cannot really be applied in the real world because of all the assumptions? He [employee of international bank] said we are not looking for your knowledge of a theory; it's the way you think.

This caveat suggests that employers have specific expectations on individuals' performance, in line with the skills for future workforce proposed by Davies et al. (2011). These include *novel and adaptive thinking* and having a *design mindset*; being able "to represent and develop tasks and work processes for desired outcomes" (*ibid* p.11). Through interactions such as this employers are also taking steps to communicate their needs to educational institutions. A student also recalls a visit from employers:

> Several months ago a representative of the HR department for [an international company] in Uzbekistan came to deliver a presentation, and I remember asking about the most important skills they look for in students. She said it was the ability to achieve results, to deliver results quickly. Results oriented people are in demand.

A way for students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application is through undertaking an internship. The value of this was noted by the same student:

> I recognised during my last internship that people learn their functional duties doing work. It is very seldom functional duties coincide with the curriculum they went through. Skills are more important than knowledge, that's what I saw in [international company]. They wanted skills.

Another student had a similar experience during one of his internships, where his qualifications and subject specific knowledge were not considered of great importance:

> I think they [employers] are looking not at your subjects but at your character. They didn't ask me about my faculty marks. The subject knowledge was applicable when you were faced with practice. Usual theories may not work in real practice, even if your subject knowledge is not very deep you can learn a lot from working.

The internship experiences of students appear to confirm notions that internships are an effective way of developing employability (Shoenfelt, Stone, & Kottke, 2013). As well as trying to improve their future employment prospects through gaining valuable work experience, students expressed how engaging in extracurricular activities (specifically those organised through the university) could enhance their employability skills. While speaking about their extracurricular activities students made connections with areas of employability. For example, a student talked about her experience of one of the university clubs:

> You don't always need to work for money, like being a volunteer. For example, I'm leader in the conversation and debate club. Leadership qualities are very important. In business you must have leadership skills in order to motivate your workers. It's not the same as management because managers and leaders are not the same.

Although this student did not make explicit connections between the skills gained or applied through extracurricular activities and their application in terms of employability, it is evident that key transferable skills can be acquired through engaging in activities other than internships, employment or academic learning. One student gave an example of how

some skills gained from participating in and organising extracurricular activities had a direct impact on a project he was tasked with during an internship:

> I am deeply involved in the social life of our university. I am general manager of the school volunteers. I have founded six clubs - the kinds of clubs that develop the skills of students. In your social life you do diplomatic approaches for administration. It was very important for me because in one internship I was asked to conduct a lecture by myself about the university, about something that I have learnt from university. It would be impossible if I didn't have experience from social life.

The student went on to mention that, in his experience, academic life was not as important as his social life in the development of his employability skills. He estimated it was 80% social life and 20% academic study. Views such as this were also raised by Lowden, Hall, Elliot and Lewin, (2011), who noted that graduates value their extracurricular activities above the degree content. The reasons for this are it embellishes their CV, and also helps secure graduate level employment. This raises further questions about whether it is beneficial for academic studies to have enhancing employability as a realistic learning outcome. An interesting comparison that emerged from the interviews was the disparities in level of awareness that lecturers have regarding the extracurricular activities at WIUT. The lecturer, who also had been a student, was particularly concerned with this. She pointed to an example of a peer-mentoring scheme where students were perhaps not receiving due recognition for their participation and achievements:

> This year we raised the issue of students who are doing mentoring activities and that they did not feel appreciated. They think about their future and they want to tell employers but they also want some immediate rewards like a letter of appreciation. They want to be recognised for what they do.

A peer-mentoring scheme can be effective as it "can develop employability skills through a programme of activity that formally rewards students for their participation and assists them in articulating their

competencies" (Zacharopoulou et al., 2015 p. 1). As highlighted by Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson and Walker, (2015), it is not necessarily the kind of extracurricular activity pursued at university that is important, but more what the student does within the activity and how well the achievements are communicated to potential employers. This raises some issues regarding how students can demonstrate their employability skills to employers. In their report on employers perceptions of the employability of new graduates Lowden et al., (2011) stressed the importance of the ability of graduates to demonstrate employability skills during the application stage; with particular importance placed on critical and evaluative skills. As well as having an effective CV that is tailored to the specific employer, applicants also need to have the ability to impress and stand out during initial meetings and interviews. Both lecturers and students recognised the importance of CVs, although it was remarked by one lecturer that not all employers in Uzbekistan take CVs, preferring application forms and interviews only. A major point of concern among the students was how they would be able to demonstrate their employability skills to prospective employers. Lecturers generally agreed that timely completion of coursework and active participation in seminars and discussions was a way for students to demonstrate skills such as time management, working under pressure and communicative competence, as these two comments suggest:

> Working to deadlines – it is part of their time management skills. How well they organise their resources and their time.
>
> Leaving coursework to the last minute signals bad time management. Certain pressure may exist when they don't know the peers with whom they work, when you randomly select students [to work in groups]. So being able to work with the team of unknown people, and then successfully produce an outcome within the timeframe, and with good quality.

Students, however, may see this type of activity as something that they are expected to do in their day to day university activities:

> Being responsible, especially working in team projects. You have to be responsible if you want to get higher grades.

When asked how they could demonstrate desirable employability skills in an interview situation, one student referred to achievements in extracurricular activities:

> The extracurricular activity I took part as a team leader and as a presenter. I was given a team. I had to tell them which part to take. I would tell them this in a job interview.

This is not to say that students do not see the connection between class activities and employability, it is more that they see coursework as a means to an end; achieving the grades necessary for a good degree classification. Knight and Yorke (2002) advocate an approach to teaching and assessment that is directed towards students becoming aware of their achievements, and documenting them in a formalised fashion. Doing this will perhaps better equip students with the tools needed to demonstrate their employability skills to employers, something that students of this study would benefit from.

Conclusion

This research aimed at contributing to the discussion on the understandings of the concepts underpinning the topic of employability and employability skills. It has specifically examined the views and concerns of lecturers and students at Westminster International University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Definitions of employability are numerous and varying, focusing on short-term job acquisition, long-term career development, productivity and sustainability. At WIUT there was much alignment between student and lecturer views, and with the extant literature, and the importance of the topic was recognised as a responsibility of both the University and individual students. However, it is clear that the way that graduates align themselves to the labour market is heavily characterised by their experience in higher education. Students at WIUT recognised the value of work-based training and internships as best equipping them with their perceived employability needs, but also questioned the value of employability focused pedagogy if its purpose and rationale was not communicated effectively. As discussed, understandings of employability skills are individual and subjective, linked to previous education and work experiences, as well as

issues of self-esteem and confidence. In light of this perhaps it would be worth pursuing an alternative to the dominant skills agenda, and exploring an approach where employability is promoted indirectly by providing opportunities for students to develop, reflect, record and showcase their employment-ready graduate identity.

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