

Managing expectations – Balancing between being a good student, becoming employable or becoming the right “HR employee”

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Abstract

Employability is a concept that has gained much attention in European as well as national policies in Sweden. The discourse of employability means a shift in responsibility from the labour market towards the individual to develop the right competencies for becoming employed. Higher education (HE) is also often seen as the means for enhancing the employability of HE graduates. In Human Resource (HR) work there seems to be different expectations concerning the “right competencies” for an HR employee. There seems to be a paradox between on the one hand regarding HR work as crucial for the managing of organisations and on the other a lack professional legitimacy. This paradox is visible not only in the work practice where there seems to be a divide between strategic and practical work but also between Swedish educational programmes related to HR, where there seems to be a divide between an academic and a practically oriented curriculum.

This paper is concerned with how non-traditional students learn to manage the expectations from higher education as well as the labour market in becoming the “right HR employee”. More specifically the paper deals with the following research questions:

- How do five non-traditional students describe their transition between HE and the labour market?
- What competencies do the students, HE staff and employers describe as important for becoming the “right HR employee”?

The paper is based on an ongoing European research project about the employability of non-traditional students after HE, financed by EU Erasmus + (2014-1-UK01-KA203-001842-TP). The paper is based on interviews with senior lecturers and career counsellors working with the programme Personnel, Work and Organization (PAO) at Stockholm University, ten interviews with employers in the private, public and third sector, and biographical interviews with five non-traditional students interviewed twice. Non-traditional students are defined as students that are the first in their families to enter HE in Sweden and concerning aspects as age, class, disabilities, ethnicity and gender.

The preliminary findings show that both employers and HE staff focus on competencies required in HR work, with a similar focus on theoretical and analytical skills and somewhat communicative and personal skills. However, there seems to be a lack of consensus among employers in what kind of theoretical and practical skills are needed in HR work. Non-traditional students struggle with handling the transition between HE and working life and balance between their view of the expectations raised by HE and the labour market. They thereby learn to become employed rather than to become a good HR employee. A conclusion of this article is thereby that employability could be seen as a practice which requires special competencies not related to HR work.

Keywords: employability, non-traditional students transition, competence, HE, HR,

Introduction

Employability is simply defined as the means for the individual to gain the right skills for increasing the probability of getting employment, stay in employment or change employment (Clarke, 2008). Fejes (2010) describe it as a shift in responsibility from the employers and the society towards the individual. The last decade employability has gained much interest in the western societies and is, according to Clarke (2008) a concept that mirrors the changes in the labour relations on the labour market. Employability could be analysed from a societal, organizational and or/individual perspective (Thijssen, Van der Heijden & Rocco, 2008). The societal perspective is concerned with employment rates, the organizational level with the match between competence requirements and individual competencies (Nilsson, 2016). Finally, the individual perspective focuses on the individual's opportunities to acquire and keep a job on the internal or external market (Williams, Dodd, Steele & Randal, 2016). Higher education (HE) is seen as an important institution, responsible for enhancing the employability for students by bringing them the competencies needed on the labour market (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2016).

This paper is concerned with the employability of non-traditional students in HE and their transition to Human resource work (HR work). HR work is important for a further understanding of employability as HR workers to a large extent are responsible for the recruitment at the labour market, in general. Nilsson (2016) suggests that employability is operationalized in the recruitment processes. However, there seems to be different expectations concerning the "right competencies" for an HR employee. These different expectations could be seen as part of a historical paradox between regarding the HR work as crucial for the managing of organisations and at the same time viewing the HR employee as lacking professional legitimacy (Berglund, 2002). This paradox seems to be visible in both the work practice where there seems to be a divide between strategic and practical work (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015) and between Swedish educational programmes related to HR, between more academic and practically oriented curricula.

In this paper we have a special interest for non-traditional students studying HR. By non-traditional students we in its broadest sense mean students from underrepresented groups regarding age, class, disability, ethnicity and gender, where both quantitative and qualitative research show differences in student access, success, retention and drop-out from HE (Carlhed, 2016; Bron, Thunborg & Edström, 2014; Quinn, 2013; Thunborg & Bron, 2017; UKÄ, 2015). There are however a lack of studies focusing on the employability of non-traditional graduates.

The aim of this paper is to understand how non-traditional HR students learn to manage the expectations from HE as well as the labour market in becoming the "right HR employee". More specifically the paper deals with the following research questions:

- How do five non-traditional students describe their transition between HE and the labour market?
- What competencies do the students, HE staff and employers describe as important for becoming the "right HR employee"?

Previous research

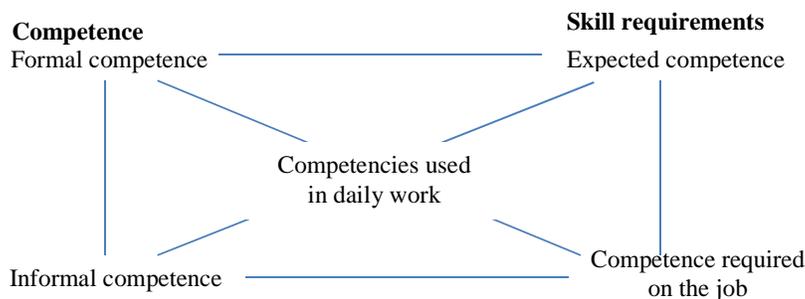
Research on transition from HE to working life in Sweden has been discussed in relation to different educational programmes (Axelsson, 2008; Nilsson, 2007; Nyström, 2009) where students in general academic programmes are seems to learn abstract, theoretical knowledge in HE and to do the work at the workplace (Axelsson, 2008; Nilsson, 2007) while students in professional programmes seems to start learning become a professional during HE by focusing on professional

knowledge, professional identity formation sometimes even including internship. A consequence of this seems to be that students in academic programmes are less confident in how to handle their future work than students in professional programmes (Nyström, 2009). Even if getting a better view over the work area through HE, the researchers draw the conclusion that the work practice is most crucial for becoming a professional (Ohlsson, 2009; Lindberg, 2012). Löfgren Martinsson (2008) explicitly studied the issue of employability for HR students, claiming that employability is to be seen as a process starting in HE and continuing through working life.

Theoretical point of departure

This paper focuses on non-traditional HR students' transition from HE to the labour market which could be viewed as a learning process. Learning is in this article briefly defined from a biographical learning perspective. A biographical learning perspective is especially interested in the social learning processes that could be understood from individual life stories. Learning is seen as an ongoing process of constructing a persons' life in relation to different social settings. Alheit & Dausien (2000) uses the concept biographicity for capturing the ongoing change processes that people go through during their life course. We have earlier found that people experience struggles in transition affecting their formation and transformation of identity (Bron & Thunborg, accepted). By identity we mean how people define and present themselves in interaction and with reference to others (Bron, Thunborg & Edström, 2014).

For understanding the different expectations of the right HR employee, we use the concept competence. Illeris (2014) defines competence as a unifying concept that integrates everything it takes in order to perform in a given situation or context. Ellström (1992) shows an analytical model that distinguishes between skill requirements and competence, where competence could be seen as the supply side of the model whereas the skill requirements the work demands.



Ellström (1992, page 38)

From the competence side of the model Ellström further distinguishes between formal and informal competence. Formal competence relates to merits concerning knowledge, skills and/or abilities that is visible in certificates or other documents. Informal competence is instead relating to the individual's actual knowledge, skills and abilities which mean that an individual can lack some of the formal competence that they have formal merits for and on the other hand have other abilities not visible through formal documents. On the demand side he also makes a distinction between expected competence and actual required competence for being able to perform on the job. Expected competence are often related to what is available on the labour market and not related to what is really needed for being able to do the job. Ellström (1992) further distinguishes between theoretical and intellectual skills, manual skills, social skills, ideological normative skills involving attitudes, values and personal skills, adaptive and developmental skills, which we here define as learning skills as they relate to on the one hand learning to adapt to the work and the organizational culture

and on the other being able to critical reflect over work and culture to contribute to organizational change.

To understand the different expectations concerning the right HR employee it is also important to distinguish between the competencies expected to work in the HR profession and the competencies for becoming employed in a HR position. Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) means that employability competencies consist of four different elements: employability assets, consisting of knowledge skills and attitudes; career management skills including job searching skills and job getting skills including CV writing, work experience and interview techniques.

Method

This paper is part of an ongoing study with the aim to enhance the employability for non-traditional students after HE (2014-1-UK01-KA203-001842-TP). In the project we have specially focused on the three-year Bachelor programme, Personnel, Work and Organization (PAO), which is an interdisciplinary programme related to Human Resource (HR) at Stockholm University. This programme involves studies in Education, Psychology, Sociology, Economics and Law. During the fifth semester students choose to specialize in education, psychology or sociology with special intermediate courses and write their Bachelor thesis. The programme is interdisciplinary within the spectrum of behavioural sciences and develops students' competencies for preparing to work with issues of recruitment, personnel development and leadership in state, private and voluntary organizational contexts. However, the programme is a general academic programme and does not involve an internship component. Nevertheless, there is as an additional course after graduation, an internship 15 credits course that HR graduates are welcome to take/register if they wish.

Interviews

This paper is based on three different sets of interviews. First, it consists of 10 biographical interviews with five non-traditional students, interviewed twice, once during the last study year and once half a year after graduation. Second, it consists of ten semi-structured interviews with employers, four within the public sector, three within the public sector and three within the third sector. Finally, it is based on two interviews with HE staff, working within the PAO-programme.

Analyses of data

The interviews are analysed by two types of qualitative methods. As a first step we analysed the biographical interviews as a whole, building vignettes about students' transition between HE and working life and how they managed these expectations. In the second step we described expectations from the students, HR staff and HE staff. The interviews with employers and HE staff was analysed by a content analysis trying to find categories in relation to expected competencies. In the final analyses, we compared the different expectations from the students, employers and HE staff and related this to the students' stories about managing expectations.

Results

In the results we first describe the five students' stories as a whole. There after we focus on the expected competencies that students, HE staff and employers describe. Finally, we focus on how the students describe how they learn to manage these expectations.

Five student stories of the transition between HE and working life

In this section we will describe the stories from Anastasija, Alexandra, Amanda, Emma and Clare.

Anastasija's story

Anastasija has an international background, coming from an EU-country. She grew up in Sweden as a child and went to school here, but her family moved back. Eight years ago she came back to Sweden, and started to learn the language from the beginning. Anastasija loves to study and has been involved in many HE programmes and free courses before starting at the PAO-programme at the age of 38. Attending the final year, she has great hopes in establishing on the labour market. However, she struggles with the language and her identity as she fears she is not as good in Swedish as to be seen as a Swede on the labour market. When I meet Anastasija the second time she told me that she got her degree delayed by two months, but that they did a splendid essay and got very good critique. Just before ending her studies she was not feeling well mentally, she felt a strong pressure to get a job and had doubts that she would not be able to find one. The transition from HE to employment was a very difficult for her. She started by working a few hours at one place and then got a preliminary job at a second; both in trade unions for white collar workers. She there works as a consultant, a labour law specialist. Finally, she is offered a full time job, which is going to be permanent.

Alexandra's story

Alexandra is 32-years old. She came to Sweden seven years ago from another EU-country with her husband, who got a job at an international company. In Alexandra's family there was no tradition of studying at the HE level, but her mother graduated later in life. Alexandra studied literature to become a secondary school teacher. But in Sweden she could not work in her profession, so she looked both for a job and for opportunities to study. She started studying Swedish as a second language, continued with Swedish on a higher level and took vocational courses to become an enrolled nurse. She worked in the health care system with elderly people, and by doing so she learnt to speak Swedish better. In the University catalogue she found the PAO programme, which seemed to suit her perfectly. During her studies, she learnt that psychology was the most in-demand discipline within the programme, and as such was more appreciated by prospective employers, and thus choosing psychology would make it easier to get a job. However, this is exactly what scares her. She is very uncertain whether she will get a job at all. The competition is enormous, and she is a foreigner which makes her situation especially difficult. Alexandra both work part time, study and do some voluntary work during her last year. The transition to the labour market was a struggle. She finished her BA thesis on time and a week later she signed up at the employment office. She was very anxious and fearing discrimination on the basis of her name that she even considered to change. She applied for a few posts and suddenly got a call from a company, where she is now employed. It took totally five weeks from finishing her studies to getting employment. She was at first employed probationary but got a full employment after three months. She started as a recruitment officer, and is now going to work as a staff coordinator. Even if everything went smoothly, she still thinks that there is discrimination in Sweden, as the company has no native Swedes as employees, and is owned by non-Swedes. She thereby got the job because she was fitting into the non-native Swede model as a 'normal' employment would not be possible for her.

Amanda's story

Amanda is 25-years-old, when I meet her the first time. She was born in Sweden and the only person in her family to pursue HE. The family was surprised when Amanda left her well-established job, and the prospect of becoming a manager, to start HE studies. She took leave of absence from her job, and started to study, first at Linköping University then in Stockholm. She chose to specialise in Education as she learnt that there were opportunities to go abroad as an exchange student. She spent a semester in New Zealand. In her last semester she is pleased with her

course of study and is looking forward to an exciting employment. As the PAO-programme is very popular, she is aware of the difficulties in finding a job. Because of that, she started to work part-time during her studies. The job is in recruitment, which she knows is an area of experience that will help her on the job market. She loves to study, and would prefer to be engaged 100 per cent in her studies, but this is not possible if she wants to secure her employment. The general theoretical knowledge is no a guarantee in real life of work. Actually, Amanda is not expecting to have problems finding a job, even if she would prefer to get it in her place of residence (100 km from Stockholm) which she thinks is not going to be easy. When I meet Amanda after a year, she is back in her hometown, happy with her life. First, she started to work with HR issues on an hourly base, and then part-time while still writing her thesis. Second, she delivered her thesis, which was accepted as a good one, and got an opportunity to work part-time with recruitment in a new company where she got a three months contract. Luckily, and closely to her contract being finished, her boss offered her a new position, created especially for her to become a recruitment consultant, full-time and permanent, and she took it. In total it took her six months to get a full-time job.

Emma's story

Emma is 26 years old during the first interview and at the fifth semester of the PAO programme. She started to study when she was 23 years old, she has two brothers who took HE degrees. Her mother never went through HE, but got a good job and training on-the-job. Her father has a degree and encouraged all their children to study. Emma started to work at the ICA-store, and was also a phone salesperson. Still, when working at ICA, Emma became the victim of an armed robbery, which resulted in a trial, which was a crucial point in her life. As she did not know about her rights at that time she became interested in labour law. During her study time, she learned that one needs to have a HR job placement before seeking a "real" job. This is what counts, so she got a part-time job, even if quite short. Looking for a job is difficult, and she worries about it.

At the second meeting, one year after, Emma has done her final exam, has a degree and has been successful to get a job. But looking for a job was a struggle. First of all, she was not sure what kind of job she wanted to have. The PAO program is general and has very little direct contact with what the working life in practice means. Second, it should have been a right job i.e. one that last longer than just few months thus with some prospects. Even if it took her only one month, it felt like ages, a very difficult time with many uncertainties. She went through an interview for a job she wanted to have, but it was given to someone else. Luckily the recruitment company directed her to another job, and she became employed. She works in a big private firm with recruitment on the global market, and is very satisfied with the job she has.

Clare's story

When we met Clare the first time, she studies on her last semester at the PAO programme. She came to Sweden six years ago when she was 41, from one of EU-country where English is a main language. She has a degree in Law and Psychology, and 20 years of experience as a lawyer. Coming to Sweden because of marrying to a Swede she thought of getting a job in her own profession but it was just a dream. She started with learning the language already in her own country, and continued in Sweden. She needed to change her career to be able to work. Clare chooses the PAO-programme while talking to a career and study adviser at the University. She is a very good student who wants to learn as much as she can, thinking about the language and the content. Thus, she studies full time, and her aspiration is to do well and improve her Swedish. She is taking care of her little son too, which prevents her to look for a part-time job. She is aware that there can be problems to find a job as she is too old. She applies for a part-time HR assistant job, and is doing very well at the

interview, but is told that she is overqualified. She is writing her final essay for the degree and applies for an Internship Course to be able to find an internship place.

During the second interview, one year later, Clare told us that she was successful with her graduation but the Internship course was not possible, as she was not able to find a company that accepted her. Thus, before and after the summer 2016 she was applying for HR jobs, but was not even asked for the interview. Then she started to look for another job and in the late Autumn she became employed at the state Insurance Agency (in the public sector) first taking a six weeks on-the job training, and then being able to work conditionally during a half a year to be finally employed permanently. Her Swedish degree obviously helped her to find a job, but it does not have anything to do with HR. Still, she is very happy that she is finally being able to get any position at all, and to start a new life and career.

Expected competencies

This section presents the five students, employers and HE staff expectations of the competencies that a HR graduate should have. Firstly, we describe the students' expectations, thereafter the expectations from employers and finally the expectations from HE staff.

A non-traditional student perspective

Most of the students like to study and think that their studies are important for getting employment. However, they are uncertain about what they should know and be able to do for getting employment. The students think it is important to have a degree for being employable. It is also important to have the right work experiences conducted during their studies, which is considered to be in recruitment:

First of all, it is important to graduate ... The standard is to take a degree, and then you go to the kind of recruitment job and then maybe you get a wider HR job... (Amanda 1)

Anastasija do think that students are trapped between the expectations between HE and the labour market:

I have been investigating the possibilities on the labour market ... during the last year we are trapped in the middle because either the employers want you to have a higher exam when you have finished the studies or think that you are overqualified.... To be able to get a job, you have to start working part time and then get a full time job at the same place...they want you to start working before you have one year left of the studies. (Anastasija)

For Alexandra psychology is seen as most demanding and also the subject that is seen as the best for gaining employment:

to choose psychology is a good choice, but it is very demanding, I regret sometimes I struggle with statistics pretty much, it is difficult, but still it feels good that I challenge myself any way, that is something that is not comfortable making me kind stronger....So it was good to choose psychology, which has a good reputation from those who are already working and going PAO program, as the focus on psychology is the most demanding, when there is a choice between two people (to be employed), they tend to choose the one that read psychology... (Alexandra, 1)

The students have difficulties to describe what kind of competencies they have learnt during their studies that are crucial for an HR job. They do, however, think that the educational programme is too theoretical for getting the right practical skills:

... it feels that one gets a lot of knowledge from the programme and ... much stuff with all critical perspectives on things, one knows actually what science should be, how to find things that you really have to get from the university, and it feels like the pure practical knowledge, the real one, you cannot get from here ... (Amanda 1)

Emma thinks that the education lacks contact with the working life:

... So this is a good education, but I still think maybe one could get more contact with companies from the being to be able to create a bigger and wider solid network and ... because it is so important precisely in this education to get only the foot, in a place somewhere to show who you are and what you can or else one will not get any (Emma1)

For Clare, the age discrimination in Sweden in general makes it hard to get work even if being competent:

I think (the labour market) is extremely closed for people who, you know, first of all they need networks eh despite that this course highlights you know competencies, it's not competencies you ...it is the ages between 32 and 42, there is your employability that Sweden hires, employability, and I know that I passed that, and it is not that, I know that I have, that I can work and have more to give, there is somebody who is 32 and has less experiences than me, eh I ye, you just know you can be down the pail on the older side, you know, particularly trying to start a new career and again it is contradictory information they can get, as I could see that one wants encourage people to change careers, first starting to ... so I have these strategies what I want to, and I still do think that I am employable. We will see how it turns out what response I get, but I think I might peruse employer to take me on on the basis that I actually... Clare 1

Students talk about practical and theoretical knowledge being aware that the first one is important to have on the CV to be employable. However, the programme does not provide practical skills, and the only chance from the University they have is to take an Internship course after the graduation.

An employer perspective

The employers have different views of what kind of competencies that HE should provide students with for becoming employable within the HR sector. The employers think that academic skills are important including an ability to handle a lot of information, analytical skills, being critical as well as being able to relate theory to practice:

I think it is important to understand the issue and be able to conceptualise and structure it so they know what it is all about. ... The ability to read through a large amount of information, select the important aspects and summaries the findings. (Employer 4)

To have high theoretical skills and good knowledge of new research for being able to make good analyses, be critical and come up with good suggestions about what to do in relation to practice. (Employer 4)

However, they have different expectations regarding what kind of theoretical skills and perspectives graduates need to become employable. One difference concerns the relation between soft (theoretical knowledge in behavioural and social sciences) and hard knowledge (theoretical knowledge in business and law).

There are different perspectives... I'm angry about the expectations about what we should know... we don't have to know economy ... but we have to be good in people in knowing how people work... know people and understand how they work ... (Employer 1).

... there are certain abilities that you should have when coming into the labour market to fit into an organizational context... when I studied the programme, it was mainly in behavioural science. I think you need to complement that with other perspectives on management and organization, the perspectives from the technicians, economists, medical perspectives so that you have a more perspectives on the person in working life. (Employer 6)

More economy, more figures, be better in counting... it is like a red thread, like being unable to understand economy without controlling the customers. (Employer 9)

There are also differences between seeing HE as important for being able to do the job now or for the future:

The difference between a practical education, that has to do with what you are able to do now and a theoretical education, that is focusing on what you should be able to do in ten years. This is something that people don't understand that the PAO-programme and other HE programmes are not made for what you should do when you graduate. (Employer 6)

For some employers practical skills are seen as necessary, while for others it is seen as something that they learn at work. There are two ways of looking at the kind of practical skills needed. One way is related to knowledge about the HR context and what kind of work they are supposed to do. The other is related to practical skills for being able to do the work.

I think it's a pity that they stopped the work experience requirements for the programme. Now they come out at 19 with good grades and have an idea of working with people... they need to see workplaces. It doesn't have to be private sector but to have worked in complex systems (Employer 1)

My expectations are not so high but more hands on, practical work is needed because they cannot talk about leadership and organisational values if you don't know how it is built. It is like putting a roof on a house that is not built... (Employer 8)

Working with people requires communicative skills according to employers, but focusing on different aspects. From having an interest in other people to have values, personality and sensitivity as a person:

To be able to function in a social context is really really important, especially if you are going to work ... meet people, talk to people, listen to people and understand their needs and how you are going to transform these needs into the business, to be able to deliver something, to interact with other people. That requires sensitivity!!(Employer 2)

Much is personality, what kind of values a person has, and the abilities ... I do identify the drives and the values... (Employer 9)

The employers think it is important for HE graduates to have the right expectations when coming out. On the one hand it is claimed that graduates ought to understand that they have to learn the

work from the beginning and be aware of that it takes time to learn the work properly. On the other hand, graduates should be more self-confident and know that they have to bring in new ideas into the work practice:

Young people of today are individualistic and need to understand that they are part of a social context and not be disappointed that they cannot do what they want. They have to do what is needed. (Employer 5).

Critical abilities are good! Generally, if you work with people you have to dare to say what you think, then you have to accept decisions, but to give voice and to be able to have ideas is much easier to work with and easier to understand and also make the process go forward. (Employer 4)

The perspective from HE staff

The perspective from HE staff relates both to how they think about the expectations from the labour market, from the students and from themselves. First of all, the HE staff think that graduates from the programme do get employment:

...we have a .. sporadic picture of what is happening with our students after graduation. We think that most of them ... get work ... we know that our students are good in their studies generally and take their courses but ... disappear before finalizing their thesis... which we relate to them getting employment... I do think they regret it later on .. we have extremely low amounts of applicants to our internship course, ... we interpret that as people get jobs and don't need internship. Those entering the internship course also get work at their internship placement. We usually ask in the end of the course so they have a good employment situation, I think. (HE staff1)

When it comes to expectations the HE staff discuss the rumours from students of having to have a part time job for being able to get employment:

There are rumours that... you have to work part time to get a job, if that's true I don't know....

The crucial competencies that they think students get in HE is related to a multiple perspective on human relations, organisations and the labour market in general:

The contribution from the university is a multiple picture of working life. ...they read about many behavioural and social science perspective, economy and labour law, which is extremely important to understand other aspects and not only the interaction between people but the rules of the labour market and the financial conditions in organisations that they need to have a relation to and I think they are profoundly good at it.... I do believe that students are expected to be good in understanding people and have competencies about human relations, I think it is extremely important. (HE staff 1)

The HE staff also talk about generic competencies relating to all studies in HE that is important for the future labour market:

In every semester, no matter what subject, students get tools for working in groups, projects... it is not only what you learn in each course but rather how you applicate and use it... and the critical thinking... (HE staff 2)

The HE staff also think about the employers' perspective when talking about the employability of HE graduates:

I do think that employers expect that they will come from the programme with new knowledge and a fresh view of the organisation... it is hard to say because employers are not homogenous but I think that if you employ a graduate you do it either to form that person.... Or you think that the organization needs fresh and new knowledge, perspectives and energy...(HE staff 1)

Finally, the HE staff also think that it is important for students to develop a future professional identity during their studies something that the programme to some extent is lacking:

I think that they need to form a more firm identity as HR people, and maybe we are poor in seeing what the whole programme could lead to in the end. This has to do with our history about being a general programme in Personnel, work and organization more than that we educate HR personnel, I think we can do more related to that. (HE staff 1)

To sum up the HE staff perspective is trying to view the expectations of the students from an HE staff perspective but also from a HR perspective and tries to balance between the general academic demands and the professional demands expected by the labour market. In table 1 we compare the different perspectives on expected competencies from students, employers and HE staff.

Table 1. Comparison between perspectives from non-traditional students, employers and HE staff.

Expected competencies	The student perspective	The employer perspective	The HE staff perspective
Academic skills	Theoretical knowledge An academic degree Having the "right profile"	Theoretical and analytical skills Hard vs. soft skills	Theoretical and analytical skills Broad hard and deep soft knowledge Critical thinking
Practical skills	Part-time job Team work	Knowing the context vs. knowing the work	Rumours about part-time job A professional identity Team work Project work
Communicative and personal skills	Being the right person Having networks	Interested in people Sensitivity Right values Right personality	A humanistic perspective on working life
Learning skills	Balancing by being adaptive to both HE and the labour market -	Adaptive vs developmental skills	Adaptive and developmental skills

From table 1 we can see that the mentioned competencies relate to academic, practical, communicative and personal as well as learning skills. HE staff to a large extent focuses on different aspects of the academic knowledge, where the employers have different views of the academic knowledge needed and the students basically talk about having a degree and theoretical knowledge more generally. In the students stages they do not really know what kind of knowledge they need

for an HR work, but at the same time they express some kind of status related to their chosen profile. They do however think that they have to have a degree for getting employment. For the students a part-time job seems to be most important for getting employment especially in recruitment, and sometimes they see teamwork as a competence gained from HE as being important. Employers do seem to have expectations about practical skills but differ in their view of practical skills. Some of them talk about experiences of working life in general where others about being able to do the work. Finally, the HE staff are aware of the students' strategies to work part time but are not sure if it is really needed or if it is just a rumour. They do however think that it is important to help students develop a sense of a professional identity for the HR work. The employers focus to a large extent on communicative and personal skills, concerning deep values for working with people. HE staff also relate to this by talking about having a humanistic perspective. For students however, it is about being the right type and having the right social networks for becoming employed. Finally, HE staff think that students have to have both adaptive and developmental skills for doing a good job, whereas the employers seem to either talk about adaptive or developmental skills. Students talk about balancing between adapting to two different practices, HE and the labour market.

Discussion

The aim of this paper is to understand how non-traditional HR students learn to manage the expectations from higher education as well as the labour market in becoming the "right HR employee".

When turning to the expectations from employers and HE staff there seems to be a consensus about the importance of theoretical and analytical competencies in HR work, even if there are differences among employers about the kind of theoretical knowledge. Even if the employers are convinced that the theoretical knowledge is of high importance, they also claim that it is important to help students to form a professional identity for their future work, something that the employers also think is important. Turning back to previous research about the transition of HE students, the PAO programme is a general academic programme that on the one hand are seen as theoretical, but on the other there are expectations from both HE staff and the labour market in forming a professional identity. This makes the divide between general academic and professional programmes problematic (Axelsson, 2008; Nilsson, 2007, Nyström, 2009)

This lack of clarity also shown in the differences among the employers concerning the importance of practical skills, between experiences of HR work and experiences about working life contexts in general also relate to the paradox of the HR profession in general. From a HE perspective the part time job is seen as a rumour among students. Maybe this could be understood by distinguishing between competencies required for becoming an HR employee and competencies required for becoming employable in general (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2008).

From the student perspective a degree and practical work experiences are both seen as crucial to become employed. Turning to Ellström's (1992) model of the relation between skill requirements and competencies, the HE staff describe the formal and informal competencies that they expect students to gain from HE. Employers to a large extent discuss the actual competencies needed in HR work, but the students consider the relation between the formal competencies and the expected skills for employment. This means that non-traditional students try to balance between the expectations of HE and the labour market. On the one hand, they like to study, are doing well in their studies and with their final theses, but also feel forced to work part time to be able to get a job. Balancing thereby requires the right competencies for gaining an employment but not necessarily for becoming a good HR employee (Dacre Poole & Sewell, 2008).

The students also talk about being the right type, and feel insecure about being non-traditional, not being good enough in Swedish, being too old etc. From the employers' perspective, the communicative and personal skills are seen as important for being a good HR employee. For some of the employers this is even the most important skills for doing the job. These skills, however, are seen as part of personality and are not able to develop according to the employers. This could be regarded as an informal competence (Ellström, 1992) which is hard to formalise.

However, when looking at the students' stories, they all describe their transition as a period of struggles and anxiety, where they try to balance between the demands of HE and the labour market. However, they have been successful in getting employment, even if still wondering about how to become the right HR employee. This study like Löfgren Martinsson's (2008) thereby shows that employability is something starting in HE and continuing through the transition and into working life. However, when comparing the different expectations, the students seem to form a special practice in transition which requires special competencies not related to either HE or HR work. In this practice students form identities to become employable requiring part-time work experiences during the studies, a degree and a good CV, the right social networks and personal attributes for being the right person. As a consequence, non-traditional students struggle as being too old or having the wrong ethnicity, lacking social networks for being able to even start becoming the right employee by becoming employed.

This argument can be supported from one of the quotes from an employer:

...recruitment processes are about measuring how good you are at taking yourself through the recruitment process and not how good you are at work, which is a huge problem and I do think that HR needs to take responsibility for identifying what competencies you really need in your work to be able to do it and organize the process in relation to that. You often have a standardized recruitment process... good you fit in the model but not in your work. (Employer 6)

The research of the transition between HE and working life thereby has to take into account the aspects of employability in understanding the learning process.

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