

Abstract: Employability and Non-Traditional Students: A Psychological Contract Approach.

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This paper presents a critical perspective on contemporary research and practice in relation to the employability of non-traditional students in Higher Education (HE), considers employability in the context of widening participation in HE, where failures have occurred the potential causes of these failures, and proposes a future research agenda anchored on the psychological contract as a context within which promises can be made, understood and kept. The last two decades has seen a substantial growth in HE participation, initially in the 'sunset economies' of Europe and the USA; with subsequent further growth throughout the developing world. While this has potentially enhanced opportunities for huge numbers of individuals from non-traditional backgrounds who were most likely the first in their families to engage with HE level study, the reality of post-degree employment at an appropriate level has eluded many.

The paper begins by considering two major policy challenges. The first is the extent to which employability has a potential smoke-and-mirrors quality, in that it deflects attention from a more significant cause for concern, which is the availability of good quality jobs for ambitious individuals seeking to enhance their social mobility. The second policy challenge follows from the first and lies in the unmet expectations and under-employment currently being experienced by graduates throughout the world, which is exacerbated for those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Employability is then considered as a component of the student psychological contract (SPC), where it is potentially at least an expectation if not a perceived entitlement. A brief review of contemporary literature on the SPC will be considered, from which a model has been developed. This identifies the causes of the SPC as including engagement, expectations (or entitlements), and the existence of alternatives; the content of the SPC as including the extent to which universities are seen to deliver on their promises; finally perceived employability (the expectation of securing sustainable work of an appropriate level) is identified as an outcome of the SPC alongside other attitudinal factors (commitment, satisfaction, security) as well as behavioural outcomes (attendance, participation, retention). Data from an exploratory study will be used to test a potential measure. Finally, a research agenda is proposed which aims to develop a richer understanding of student employability which is more appropriate to challenging 21st century labour markets and the expectations, perceived entitlements and even demands of contemporary students.

Biography

Dr. Andrew Rothwell is a member of the Centre for Professional Work and Society in the School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University, UK, and the author of several papers concerning both self-perceived employability (individual's perceptions of their own employability) and critical perspectives. The greater part of his teaching career has been spent working with non-traditional students. Andrew's work is widely cited and replicated in several languages and cultures. Current work includes collaborative research on student employability in other countries and theoretical development.

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