

# **A mismatch of expectations? An exploration of international students' perceptions of employability skills and work-related learning**

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## **Introduction**

Employability has been the subject of considerable debate in the higher education sector for some time now. It is a controversial concept that is difficult to define (Harvey, 2001; Lees, 2002; Yorke, 2006). Employers, academics, students and government have struggled to agree on a definition. In Scotland the new 'Graduates for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' QAA Enhancement Theme has re-ignited the debate (QAA, 2009). Knight and Yorke's understanding of the term is still the most commonly cited. They define employability as "a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Knight and Yorke, 2003). It has recently been adapted by the CBI in their 'Future Fit' report on how graduates can be prepared for the workplace. Their definition puts the emphasis on the needs of a "modern competitive economy" which requires workers who can adapt their "skills, knowledge and attitudes" continually to "prosper in a changing world" (CBI, 2009).

How universities can improve their students' employability skills is far from clear. Ever since the Dearing report (Dearing, 1997), the debate about the best way of doing so has shown no signs of abating. Bolt-on or embedded? Subject specific or generic? A job for the careers service or the academic departments? There seems to be no one-size-fits-all solution, neither within the UK (QAA, 2006; Connor and McFarlane, 2007) nor internationally (Little, 2003; Harvey and Bowers-Brown, 2006). In her study of different national approaches to enhancing graduate employability Little points out that "there is little evidence of systematic thinking about how best to do it, let alone any model that can be badged as 'best practice' and adopted wholesale" (Little, 2003).

The arrival of an ever increasing number of international students on UK campuses has given the employability debate a new focus. What employability skills are important for them and their future careers? Which employment markets and which communities are they preparing for and how can staff at British universities support them in their efforts?

Given increasing graduate mobility in the global employment market, universities need to base their academic provision on an understanding of international employers' graduate recruitment criteria. While there is some evidence that there are similarities in the expectations employers have of graduates (Andrews and Higson, 2008), there are also indications that employer demands vary from country to country. In the UK, the CBI regularly asks their 240,000 members for their views on the importance of different graduate skills. The results from their latest survey on education and skills (CBI, 2010) show that businesses expect their new recruits to possess a wide range of transferable, 'soft' skills such as self-management, communication and teamworking. Other UK studies reveal that employers from all industries agree on the importance of these generic skills but that they are dissatisfied with the skills levels they see in their graduate applicants (Archer and Davison, 2008; Levy and Hopkins, 2010).

At European level large scale EU surveys show that employers from different countries are looking for similar skills but they disagree in rating their importance (Euro Barometer, 2010). Whereas 91% of the Maltese and 76% of the British respondents considered communication skills very important only 40% of the Danish and 26% of the French participants felt the same. The views from graduates

in the EU reflect this diversity. Large-scale European studies (Schomburg and Teichler, 2006; Van der Velden, 2007) reveal that they perceive the relevance of graduate employability skills differently. Brennan and Little point to the importance of “local and cultural traditions and histories” which define “meanings and practices associated with graduate employment” (Brennan and Little, 2009).

Evidence from countries outside Europe and the English speaking world is more scarce. Brennan et al (2001) compared the perceptions of European graduates with those of their Japanese counterparts and found some interesting differences. When asked what they considered to be the top ten competencies from a list of 36 that they possessed at time of graduation, the Japanese respondents placed ‘loyalty and integrity’ at the top of their list and put ‘working in a team’ last. European graduates put ‘loyalty and integrity’ in fifth place whereas UK participants did not include them at all.

Given such a variety of views, it is likely that international students who study at UK universities arrive with an understanding of employability that differs from that of their British teachers, employers and fellow students. What they consider to be important in preparing for employment might clash with the ideas that shape the academic curriculum and careers advice in the UK host institution. Results from international student surveys<sup>1</sup> point to a potential conflict. In the case of Glasgow Caledonian University the data from the surveys shows that international students were very positive about the learning experience overall but they were the least satisfied with the employability related aspects of their studies<sup>2</sup>. This picture is repeated across the British higher education sector. International students complain most often about a lack of careers support when questioned about their experience at UK universities (Connor and Brown, 2009).

What might be the reasons for their dissatisfaction? What do they expect when they arrive? The study presented here aimed to answer that question. More specifically, it sought to identify international students’ understanding of employability skills and their views on the UK learning and teaching styles designed to improve them.

### **The strategic context at Glasgow Caledonian University: embedding employability through work-related learning**

At Glasgow Caledonian University employability is at the heart of its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (GCU, LTAS, 2008-2015). It requires all schools to build students’ competencies in the skills demanded by employers through embedding work-related learning activities in the taught curriculum. The slogan “Learning for the Real World” has become its main marketing tool (GCU, 2010). A new university-wide strategic change initiative named the Real WoRLD Project (**Realising Work-Related Learning Diffusion**) was launched in 2008 to advise academic staff on different ways of engaging students in work-related learning (Real WoRLD, 2008). To provide a clear definition of the term, the project team developed five ‘Principles of Work-Related Learning’ (McKinnon and Margaryan, 2009) which identify work-related learning as activities that

- provide students with learning opportunities to integrate theory and practice
- achieve learning outcomes that state what the students will be able to do in the workplace
- encourage and support students’ interest in a wide variety of careers
- require students to take on an active rather than a passive role in the learning process
- accommodate cultural diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> See International Graduate Insights group (1-graduate) Student Barometer

<sup>2</sup> The ISB questionnaire defines employability as “learning that will help me get a good job”.

Examples of work-related learning activities are work placements and internships, industry mentoring and work shadowing schemes, case studies, simulation exercises, student-led and client-based live projects and enterprise activities.

One of the Real WoRLD Project’s aims was to identify what students’ perceptions of employability skills are. A first round of focus groups with UK students was conducted in the summer of 2008. A second series with international students took place a year later. Its findings are presented in this paper.

### The study

The data collection process for this study was based on informed consent. Students were recruited through an invitation in the university newsletter for international students and e-mail invitations sent out by programme leaders whose courses were most popular with international students in the academic year of 2008-09. A total number of 27 paid volunteers from three academic schools (Business, Computing and Engineering and Law and Social Sciences) and ten countries participated in the focus groups. 16 students were postgraduates on one-year taught programmes, 11 were undergraduates from all years of study. 44% of the sample were Nigerians who represent the largest group of international students at the university. Table 1 shows the participants’ countries of origin.

Country of origin	Number of participants	Percentage of sample
Nigeria	12	44
India	3	11
Poland	3	11
Russia	2	7
Ghana	2	7
Pakistan	1	4
Uganda	1	4
France	1	4
Spain	1	4
Portugal	1	4
<b>Total:</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1: Focus groups participants’ countries of origin

It must be acknowledged that such a high percentage of students from one country (Nigeria) can lead to somewhat skewed results because of a national bias in the data set. The results of this study should therefore be viewed with a certain degree of caution. Nevertheless, cross-cultural research has established that Nigeria is representative of the collectivist cultures<sup>3</sup> most of the UK’s international students come from (Hofstede, 1986 and 2004; UKCISA). Hofstede’s work shows that Nigerian students share certain values and assumptions with their contemporaries from other collectivist societies such as Pakistan, India or Malaysia. Given the limitations of this small-scale study it does not claim to present a complete picture of *all* international students’ perceptions.

The focus group discussions were based on a framework of questions designed to explore how these students prepare for future employment. In the first section they were asked to reflect upon their criteria for choosing a subject, a programme and a UK university. The second section investigated their perceptions of employability skills and their learning experience at Glasgow Caledonian. Students were asked to compare learning and teaching methods in their home countries with those they had experienced in Scotland. They were also encouraged to reflect on potential differences in

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed definition of collectivist cultures, see page 6 of this paper.

employers' recruitment criteria at home and in the UK. A final set of questions focused on their future career plans. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes depending on the number of students and the strength of the discussion. The data was recorded and transcribed. It was analysed inductively by clustering the responses around the key themes from the question framework.

## Findings

Given the large amount of data created, only a small percentage can be presented here. This paper focuses on the participants' views of essential employability skills and their response to the learning and teaching styles they had experienced in British higher education.

### Perceptions of employability skills: adaptability and cultural awareness

The students in this sample were very aware of the national variations involved in the definition of employability skills. During their short time in the UK (from four to nine months at the time of the study) they had already experienced that recruitment practices in Britain differ from those in their home countries and that they needed to adapt to the local context in their search for employment.

When asked what they considered to be the most important graduate recruitment criteria, the non-European students felt that evidence of a highly regarded qualification, technical knowledge and practical work experience rather than soft skills mattered most in their countries. The degree certificate as physical proof of knowledge was considered to be the most important element of the job application process in India, Pakistan, Ghana and Nigeria.

*"I think it's really different when you compare the UK and Nigeria. In Nigeria what is most relevant is your qualification, first qualifications...The document is really, really, really very important, more than in other countries." (Nigerian)*

He continued to explain that employers in his country are forced to look for documented evidence of academic achievement because the Nigerian education system is *"not trusted by the people"*. In his view they have more confidence in a British degree than a Nigerian one: *"The system in Nigeria has broken down...papers can be bought."* Although the 12 Nigerian students in this study were by no means representative of their country's student population they seem to reflect a widely held view that the quality of their higher education system is poor and insufficiently related to labour demand requirements (Saint et al, 2003).

Another Nigerian student explained that he felt ill-prepared for the UK labour market because he lacked the soft, interpersonal skills employers are looking for. He had applied unsuccessfully for a job with a British energy company. When he asked the recruitment officer what graduate qualities they were looking for she explained *"... we want to see your interpersonal skills, we want to see how you can interact, how you are able to work with others because we are going to train you."* He added: *"...because they don't want a situation whereby the student is ... only concerned about his education. They don't want to work with that kind of person."*

He realized that his Nigerian understanding of the most essential employability attribute; i.e. the ability to achieve high grades on a prestigious degree programme, differed from the UK definition which focuses on generic, 'soft' skills.

Other cultural differences in defining employability became obvious in the focus group discussions. Highly developed technical skills and subject knowledge were perceived as more important in India

and Pakistan and in the African countries represented here (Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda) than they are in Britain.

*“ I felt that to quite some extent that in the UK interpersonal skills are more important compared to Pakistan. In Pakistan they ask for more technical skills... employers need specific technical skills and they ask you the technical questions (in the interview).”*

He added that employers in Pakistan may also test the candidates' general knowledge in an interview to make sure they are as educated as they claim to be. They do not always trust the quality of the degree certificate. Evidence of highly developed soft skills such as team working was not required.

Practical work experience was considered the most important recruitment criterion by all participants. They felt that employers in the UK as well as in their home countries value graduates who have some understanding of real-life working practices.

*“ The degree gets me into the interview room but it's the experience that will get me the right job .” (Nigerian)*

They were very aware that there are different ways of providing students with an insight into the workplace. Placements were considered the most valuable but they also recognized the importance of other work-related learning activities such as employer talks, industry visits, job shadowing opportunities and case studies. When asked whether they were satisfied with the provision of work-related learning opportunities on their programmes, all but one gave a negative answer. The students felt that the university could do more to help students gain practical experience. The lack of placements and industry based projects concerned them the most.

The debate about practical work experience revealed interesting cultural differences<sup>4</sup>. The African participants felt very strongly that academics should use their contacts in industry to give their students an advantage in the job application process. They expected to be given a special recommendation, an invaluable introduction to their lecturers' industry networks. One Ghanaian participant expressed his disappointment that the university had given him a standardized form to confirm his status as a student rather than a personal letter of recommendation for a summer placement.

*“ I don't think the university are doing enough in that field... they gave me a letter and it was just the basic 'to whom it may concern', he is a student of this school, I hope that suits your purpose and that was it. No, I expected something more... Interviewer: “A recommendation?” “Yeah.”*

The Nigerian students agreed. They pointed out that personal contacts matter a great deal in the employment market in their own country.

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<sup>4</sup> This paper bases its understanding of 'culture' on the most commonly cited definition by Hofstede (1980) who defines culture as “ collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.” More recently, the GLOBE research programme (House et al 1999) interprets the term as “ shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations”.

*“Nigeria is all about, let me use this phrase, man knows man, that’s it. It’s everywhere. If I know him, you know, you can just say, please help me ...”*

The African students’ dissatisfaction with the ‘service’ provided by the academic staff in Scotland reveals their cultural values and their understanding of the relationship between student and teacher which has been widely recognised as culture specific (Hofstede, 1986; Palfreyman et al, 2007, Timm, 2008; Carroll and Ryan, 2008). They come from cultures that Hofstede terms ‘collectivist’; i.e. societies where the individual expects an ‘in-group’, be it the extended family, clan or organization, to protect the interests of its members (Hofstede, 1986 and 2004). In return absolute loyalty to the collective is expected of them. The participants in this study expected a favour from the academic community they felt they had joined. They claimed that it would be common practice in their home countries. When they did not receive it in Scotland, they were disappointed. The European students in the focus groups did not seem to expect such an entry ticket to the employment market. They did not raise it as an issue of concern.

Other employability skills cited included team working, communication skills and cultural awareness. All participants felt that the ability to work in a team is essential for any graduate job in any country.

*“ The group work is better because in any situation, especially now that we’re going global, we are going to have to work with people of different cultures, of different behaviours and most times you’re going to work with people you don’t like personally.”*  
(Nigerian)

Cultural awareness as an important employability skill was raised by the Russian participants who had found it difficult to understand British culture when they first arrived. They had chosen to study in the UK to improve their knowledge of different cultures and looked to their course at university to give them an insight into all aspects of British society, including business etiquette and networking skills.

*“I think one of the great skills to have is building good relationships, working relationships. See, in Russia, people are ...much more friendly. So they use different persona of yourself to build these relationships. Here you need different things...if you are trying to implement the same ways as you did in your own country it doesn’t work here and it chokes you.”*

The Nigerian participant in the same group also felt that British people are more reserved than his fellow citizens and that he needed to adapt to their communication styles to be successful in the UK workplace.

*“In my country we are very effusive, we are very boisterous, show the emotion, shake hands... (here) you have to learn to value their privacy, they don’t like it...it’s not that they are not friendly but they want not to be too open.”*

He suggested that the university offer international students an introductory course in British business etiquette and networking skills to help them understand such cultural differences.

### **Views on learning and teaching styles: an abdication of responsibility?**

The feedback on the learning and teaching styles the students had experienced in Scotland was generally positive. The student-friendly approach adopted here compared very favourably with the

more distant student-staff relationship they had experienced at home. All of the participants reported that academic status and authority matter more in their countries. Staff there were perceived to be less interested in answering questions from individual students and insist on more formality in communicating with them. In contrast, academics in the UK were seen as helpful, open and friendly.

*“ You can ask as many questions as you want...I don't think I have ever been turned down...the relationship between the teacher and the student here is amazing because I call my teacher George, I don't call him 'Sir'...(In Poland) they (the students) are probably seeing some of them (the staff) as God.” (Polish)*

*“Same in my country. They are so big-headed.” (Nigerian)*

Students were also aware of the different learning styles in different countries. Almost all of them felt that the rote-learning method in their home countries was inferior to the practice-based approach in the UK. They agreed that they were learning more from a lecturer who illustrated theory with practical, real-life examples rather than just presenting the theory in a formal lecture. They praised the use of case studies and course work instead of traditional end of year exams because it helps them develop useful employability skills.

*“ I think it (the teaching) is really great because we do mostly case studies. I have never done so many case studies in my life...it really opened my knowledge... you put yourself in the situation of a manager, what would you do if you were there and stuff like that ...” (French)*

*“ ...about the coursework. I think it is more tailored to the industrial system of doing things...coursework is more fashioned to the work that's expected in the industry where people will be made to go out and find out something and present a report, maybe present it before a board.” (Nigerian)*

While most of the feedback on the learning and teaching methods they had experienced in the UK was positive, there was also some criticism. The full-fee paying students who make considerable financial sacrifices for studying abroad complained about the low number of contact hours. They want to see value for money which they perceive to manifest itself in high input from staff.

*“ I have been told that the university prepares you ...to work by yourself and study by yourself. But then, I think, don't call it full-time, call it self-teach or distance learning. This is not full-time.”(Russian)*

These complaints about low contact hours point to a similar conflict between two value systems. The Russian students clearly felt that their Scottish teachers did not care sufficiently about their students' progress when they did not teach them every day, did not check up on their attendance in class and expected them to learn on their own. Their idea of a good quality education seemed to clash with the UK perception. They wanted to see much more input from academic staff and the university as a whole because they were used to it in their own country. One of the students explained that the attitude of academic staff in Russia reflected employers' more paternalistic approach to managing their staff . *“ ...post-Soviet bosses, they are looking after you because it's in their habit to look after their employees...” (Russian)*

In a similar vein the participants struggled to understand the benefits of independent student learning which is at the heart of the UK university experience (Biggs, 2003). While they appreciated the British staff's best intentions to support their students, they were also critical of what they perceived to be an abdication of responsibility and a lack of interest in students' academic progress.

*"(In Russia) ... teachers are very interested in teaching you...at times they are bugging you, why don't you come to lectures, why don't you do this and that? Here it is ...more self- teaching, so you should do it yourself...but you pay money. So you are paying to get some knowledge from someone." (Russian)*

These Russian students perceived the British approach to university teaching as 'laissez-faire' at best and irresponsible at worst. They appeared unconvinced that they could learn as much here as they could in their own country. The participants from Africa and Poland agreed with them.

Evaluating these views from an intercultural perspective points to a potential culture clash based on conflicting values. Values can be defined as "desirable, transsituational goals, varying in importance that serve as a guiding principle in people's lives" (Schwartz and Bardi, 2001). The values that shape students' perceptions of the purpose of a university education, the role of a teacher and the responsibilities of a student are not universal. There is sufficient evidence that they differ from culture to culture (Hofstede, 1986; Teekens, 2003; Carroll and Ryan, 2008). Teekens refers to a country's education system as an "expression of a national cultural code " which is learnt in childhood and "very hard to unlearn". Like most of the full-fee paying international students at UK universities the students in this study came from "collectivist cultures" with a "high power distance". Hofstede defines power distance as "the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal" (Hofstede, 2004). In high power distance cultures, students respect and admire teachers for their 'wisdom' and their subject knowledge (Hofstede, 1986). They expect them to provide a great deal more guidance and advice than British academics, who come from an "individualist culture" with a "low power distance", are prepared to give. Whereas UK staff expect their students to be independent learners who take responsibility for their own academic progress (Knight, 1996), students from collectivist cultures such as India, Pakistan and Nigeria often feel that it is the teachers' duty to do that for them (Hofstede, 1986). As a result British academics or careers advisers who are not aware of such cultural differences might perceive international students as too demanding or 'immature'.

## **Conclusion**

This study provided a first glimpse of the complex interactions between cultural value systems and perceptions of quality in learning and teaching. Reflecting on employability acted as a catalyst for a debate about the value of studying at a Scottish university. The respondents in these focus groups challenged the validity of pedagogic concepts such as independent learning that form the basis of curriculum planning in the UK and other Western countries. They also raised the question whether British academics are aware of the cultural implications of their teaching styles and the different employer recruitment criteria in their students' home countries. What and how students need to learn to be successful in finding a graduate job in different national employment markets will continue to be the subject of the educational debate at global level. Teekens emphasizes the importance of understanding the 'system' that has produced the foreign student (Teekens, 2003). If programme teams, who teach a class of almost exclusively international students on their postgraduate programmes, are not aware of the hidden values and assumptions students bring to their classroom, the likelihood of misunderstandings and conflict is high. It would, therefore, be helpful for busy academics if the university could provide them with a set of short briefing notes

about the education systems and the learning and teaching approaches in the international students' home countries.

Appropriate staff development opportunities could provide further support. Cultural awareness training for academics and careers advisers would need to focus on the role of values in learning and teaching rather than the detail of specific national customs. Reflecting on one's own culture and how it might be perceived by foreign nationals would be the best starting point for an enlightened debate (Carroll and Ryan, 2008). Colleagues who have lived and worked in different countries could share their first-hand experience of the difficulties involved in adjusting to a new culture to inform those who have not. Current and former international students could be invited to speak about their experiences when they first arrived in the UK. Academic induction programmes which explain the rationale for and value of an independent learning approach to new student cohorts would further assist in avoiding potential confusion, disappointment and disaffection.

An improved level of cultural awareness could potentially ease the culture shock which so often obstructs successful communication at university and in the workplace (Oberg, 1960; Marx, 1999). All students, including those from the UK, would benefit from courses on national differences in business etiquette and the job application process. At Glasgow Caledonian University we ran a successful series of workshops on improving international students' networking skills. They took part in highly interactive interview simulations and networking role-plays which were acted out by professional actors. The workshops were followed by a networking lunch with a selection of local employers which gave the students the opportunity to put their newly acquired skills into practice.

Given international students' often reported difficulties in gaining access to placement and internship opportunities because they lack employer contacts and networks in the UK (Connor and Brown, 2009), it would be beneficial to embed campus-based, alternative work-related learning activities in the taught curriculum. Employers can contribute to the teaching by providing real-life project briefs which students work on. That way international students gain a first-hand insight into UK employers' needs and expectations. In some subjects employers are also called upon to assess and provide feedback on students' reports and presentations. At Glasgow Caledonian we offer simulated assessment centres to prepare international students for real-life interviews. An alumni mentoring scheme which matches employers with current (international and UK) students to provide them with information and advice on the graduate recruitment process has been particularly popular with international students.

British universities are tasked with providing a well educated workforce for the global employment market (UKCES, 2010). In the current funding climate they rely very heavily on the financial contribution from international students to achieve that. High priority should therefore be given to understanding the cultural differences which shape their attitudes and expectations.

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