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**‘Am I employable?’: Understanding students’ employability confidence and their
perceived barriers to gaining employment**

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Abstract

This paper addresses employability among undergraduate Marine Sport Science students' at a post-92 HEI in the UK, focusing on perceptions of employability and confidence in gaining graduate employment after having careers education embedded within their programme. Results (69% of cohort/n=57) showed that Marine Sport Science students' perception of their employability increased year on year whilst conversely, confidence in gaining graduate employment decreased year on year. This was due to seven perceived barriers: competition, experience, location, degree quality, qualifications, economy and confidence. The 'diving board theory' was established explaining the juxtaposition of improving perceived employability alongside decreasing confidence in gaining employment.

Keywords: Employability; Graduate employment; Confidence; Barriers; Experience; Qualifications.

Word Count: 6,041

Introduction

According to Rees *et al* (2006) Graduates in Sport programmes in the UK are well prepared for the wide range of professional and vocationally orientated careers in what is described as a growing and maturing sector, due to capabilities such as independent

judgement, initiative, empowered decision-making, team working and interdependence. However, there are concerns expressed about the employability of sport graduates in the UK ‘fuelled by the rapid growth of undergraduates studying sport’ and concerns over ‘the appropriateness of those graduates to employers’ needs’ (Minten, 2010, 67). More generally, Margaret Dane (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service) highlights that there is a need for employability to be ‘right up there on the agenda, especially in the light of increased tuition fees [in England] that have raised student and parent expectations’ (Anyangwe, 2011, website).

This paper therefore focuses on the continuing issue of employability within Higher Education (HE) in the UK through an examination of students’ perception of their own employability and their confidence in gaining graduate employment after they have had careers education embedded within their programmes. Our paper presents the results of a 2012 case study of Marine Sport Science students’ at a post-92 HE institution in England. The action to embed careers education within their programmes was taken in 2010 in recognition of the growing concern of employability within HE in the UK, and through guidance from the QAA that stated that ‘Careers education can be taught via discrete modules ... or embedded across a programme of study’ (QAA, 2010, 11).

Why focus on employability?

Employability is a persistent and significant theme in HE in the UK (Wilson, 2012), and has been a topic of concern for many academics (Blasko *et al*, 2002; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Holmes, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2002; Pierce, 2002). In particular the enhancement of student employability has become significant due to the pressure of stakeholders including government (BIS, 2011; Dearing, 1997), employers (Archer and Davison, 2008), and students (CBI/NUS, 2011).

Known as ‘massification’, there has been a rapid enrolment growth in HE (King Alexander, 2000) leading to increased competition for traditional graduate employment and accordingly, a reduction in the currency of a degree (Palfreyman, 2012). Whilst this has been partly compensated for by the expansion in the variety of graduate employment available (Elias and Purcell, 2004), because the supply of graduates is large, competition for graduate jobs remains strong. This is evidenced by studies such as the UK Graduate Careers Survey 2014, which reports that ‘the average number of graduate job applications made by finalists has increased from 5.7 applications per student in 2009-2010 and 6.9 applications

per student in 2011-2012 to an all-time high of 7.5 applications per student in 2013-2014' (High Fliers, 2014: website). As an outcome, graduates find that possessing a degree is merely a pre-requisite for their employment - they must also deliver other 'value added' experience, skills and qualities. The troubled economic situation of recent years has further contributed to the instability and imbalance between graduate supply and demand. As 'the relationship between higher education and the economy is longstanding' (Yorke, 2006, 2) the recent turbulent economic climate of the UK has placed renewed emphasis on this aspect of HE provision.

Increased competition in the graduate labour market combined with the recent increase in tuition fees, means that employability is one of the most significant factors that affects a student's choice about where to study (Diamond *et al*, 2012). Significantly, the 2014 Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey reported that 76% of students who took part felt their main reason for attending university had been to improve their job prospects (Sodexo, 2014). Institutional reputation, as well as employment opportunities are both components of the 'employability' choice being made by students (Palfreyman, 2012) and in the UK, increased transparency of data on graduate employment prospects through mechanisms such as the Key Information Statistics (KIS), assists students in making informed choices about the anticipated return on their degree investment.

Embedding employability within HE programmes

HE Institutions and academics have recognised and acknowledged 'the employability issue' for some time (Blasko *et al.*, 2002; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Holmes, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2002; Pierce, 2002, Wilson, 2012). For example, in 2002 The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) to help the HE sector engage with employability policy and practice. Whilst many staff then, and even some now, do not see developing employability as being a purpose of HE, what Sarson (2013) terms as 'education for employment's sake', the progression of the 'employability agenda' cannot be denied. Career motivations (to improve job opportunities and to improve salary prospects) are top of students' agenda for undertaking a degree (Sodexo, 2014), consequently many universities include statements about employability in their strategic mission, and HEFCE retains a strong emphasis on the importance of developing and integrating careers and employability. Actions fall into three broad areas: encouraging students to make the most of extra-curricular opportunities; making

available and promoting co-curricular activities (i.e. activities that sit outside the curriculum but which operate in tandem and are supportive of the curriculum); and embedding employability within the taught curriculum (Reference Authors Paper, name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process).

Of these three areas, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) have highlighted the relevance of embedding employability within the taught curriculum. The QAA's revised code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards (2010), contains a section entitled 'Career Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG)'. In this section they suggest that employability can be embedded in to the curriculum, either as discrete modules or across a programme of study. Programme designers are asked to think about 'joined up' implementation and to 'consider how staff and resources within the careers service, including career information and destination data, can be used to facilitate student learning' and to provide 'clear links between subjects and career planning' in order to assist students in engaging with CEIAG provision (QAA, 2010, 12). HEFCE states that;

Embedding employability into the core of higher education will continue to be a key priority of Government, universities and colleges, and employers. This will bring both significant private and public benefit, demonstrating higher education's broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development

(HEFCE 2011, 4)

Despite the substantial drivers outlined above, the reality is that a limited number of degree programmes incorporate substantive, curriculum wide, integrated support for the development of employability. Studies looking at employability perceptions and outcomes from programmes which have embraced wide-scale curriculum change are rare and are therefore valuable in the insight they provide on graduate employability.

Confidence in gaining employment

Confidence is an issue that often comes up in relation to published work on employability, with a lack of confidence frequently cited as a barrier to employability (Norman and Hyland, 2003; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Yorke and Knight, 2007). In developing research questions, our study therefore asked students directly about how confident they felt in obtaining graduate employment. As a pre-cursor to introducing our findings on the views of

students about their employment confidence, it is therefore worthwhile here to examine findings from the literature on confidence and explore its relationship to employability

Educational literature on confidence identifies different perspectives, depending on whether confidence is seen as a trait that an individual possesses, or as a characteristic that is situationally specific (Norman and Hyland, 2003; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). Norman and Hyland (2003) interpret that, where confidence is seen as a trait possessed by an individual, this implies that the trait is relatively stable and that 'those who lack confidence would remain lacking in confidence and there would be little educators or educational programmes could do to increase learners' confidence' (264). However, Roberts and Mroczek (2008) demonstrate that confidence is malleable and tends to increase with age, therefore implying that confidence is a trait that may be influenced and developed. Situational perspectives on confidence talk about individuals feeling comfortable and confident in some situations but not necessarily in others (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). For example, in relation to employability, an individual may feel confident in giving presentations but may have lots of self-doubt about undertaking a job interview. Perhaps confidence has aspects of both, being a trait that individuals possess, but which may be situationally modified, so that in different circumstances an individual may feel more or less confident.

Self-confidence is viewed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), alongside self-efficacy and self-esteem, as being an important moderator of employability. They state that 'if self-efficacy is seen as a belief that one has the capability in a particular situation, then self-confidence could be seen as the way this is projected to the outside world' and 'an increase in self-efficacy should be reflected in an increase in demonstrated self-confidence' (286). This interpretation raises the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of confidence in relation to employability. The extrinsic function of self-confidence is that it has the ability to make others feel confident in your abilities, i.e. it conveys and convinces people of your capabilities on the basis of confident behaviours and attitudes. The intrinsic function of self-confidence is in how it relates to a person's own goals and horizons; a lack of confidence limits one's employability ambitions which in turn will limit the actions one may take to improve their employability (e.g. whether or not an individual has the confidence to apply for a job in the first place). This is because self-confidence impacts on one's 'motivation to undertake projects, to adjust, and persevere in the pursuit of one's goals in spite of various setbacks' (Benabou and Tirole, 2002, 877).

Various authors in studying the employability of their students have commented on how different employability interventions and influences have impacted on confidence. Qenani *et al* (2014) picked out work experience, self-management, and the perceived reputation of the institution as elements that increased student employability confidence. They identified internships as the most influential factor, quantifying this by saying that students who undertook an internship were ‘almost 2.5 times more likely to feel highly confident of their employability, controlling for other factors’. In their examination of work integrated learning experiences for sports studies students, Fleming *et al* (2009) found that confidence was developed through work experiences and that this was linked to other facets of employability such as initiative. Developing on the value of work experience Thompson *et al* (2013) found, that extra-curricular work experience was not uniformly beneficial for students. They identified that it could be beneficial for developing confidence, and other attributes such as social skills, planning and organisation but that this was only evident where students were strategic in their choice of extra-curricular activities and level of involvement, and was ‘hindered by poorly defined career plans’ (144). They conclude that support to facilitate reflection is necessary to develop employability in general. Cunningham *et al* (2013) also pick up on strategic aspects that link confidence and employability. In their paper on biomedical students they report a number of individuals singled out ‘building confidence’ as a reason for undertaking volunteering. Strategic and self-managing career behaviours are also identified as being central to increases in students’ self-confidence according to the views of the respondents in the study by Qenani *et al* (2014). Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009), in research to explore how real-world experiences could be integrated into the curriculum, found that external feedback from employers was the most important factor in raising their confidence in this context. The students reported valuing ‘actionable feedback which was detailed and made suggestions for improvement’ (304).

The above studies indicate that there are various experiences and actions that may be valuable in the development of confidence for employability. These studies imply that employability interventions may, at worst, have no impact on a student’s employability confidence, but that in general, confidence is likely to increase as a result of exposure to activities such as work experience, volunteering, real-world scenarios and reflection.

Methods

This study was based at a post-1992 University that in 2012 offered three Marine Sport Science programmes: BSc Applied Marine Sport Science (AMSS), BSc Surf Science and Technology (SST) and BSc Marine Sport Sciences (MSS). Before September 2010 employability was not directly addressed in modules within Marine Sport Science programmes but was covered in a series of one off lectures given by the central Careers Education team, a popular and traditional mode of delivery across many HEI's. However, the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) data for the Marine Sport Science Programmes - data which is collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and which is used as a measure of employability and is publicly available - showed that students who were able to gain employment, did not achieve graduate positions that require a degree, or more specifically a degree in Marine Sports Sciences. This prompted an exploration of various curriculum initiatives to improve their ability to achieve graduate positions.

Following the Code of Practice guidance from the QAA on embedding career education, information, advice and guidance (discussed above) a strategy to utilise and embed the resources within the Careers and Employability service across all three years of the Marine Sport Science programmes was developed (Reference Authors Paper, name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process 2012a; 2012b). Mandatory careers, employability and enterprise-related modules were embedded within a core business strand of all three years of the Marine Sport Science programmes. Discussion with the Careers Education service then highlighted appropriate events which aligned with the content of these modules (see Table 1). An detailed example of this is the competitive FLUX event, an annual inter-university competition which takes students through the process of setting up a business and of business planning (Plymouth University, 2014). The FLUX event ran during the module Enterprise in the Marine Sports Industry where students developed an understanding of enterprise and developed skills associated with business start-up in the context of the Marine Sports industry. The FLUX event therefore enabled students to put many of the skills they had developed within the module into practice through a simulated environment.

Stage	Compulsory Modules	Competitions Embedded	Careers Events Embedded		
Stage One	Employability and Enterprise	Mini FLUX Competition	Marine	Sport	Employability

	in Marine Sport	within (winners entered into regional FLUX)	Conference (Timetabled) Regional FLUX for winning team of mini FLUX Faculty of Science and Technology Careers fair (Timetabled)
Stage Two	Work Based Learning in the Marine Sports Industry	Hot Seat Competition Application	Marine Sport Employability Conference Hot Seat Competition Faculty of Science and Technology Careers fair
Stage Three	Enterprise in Marine Sport	Business Ideas Challenge	Business Ideas Challenge Marine Sport Employability Conference

Table 1. Embedded careers education as part of Marine Sport Science courses

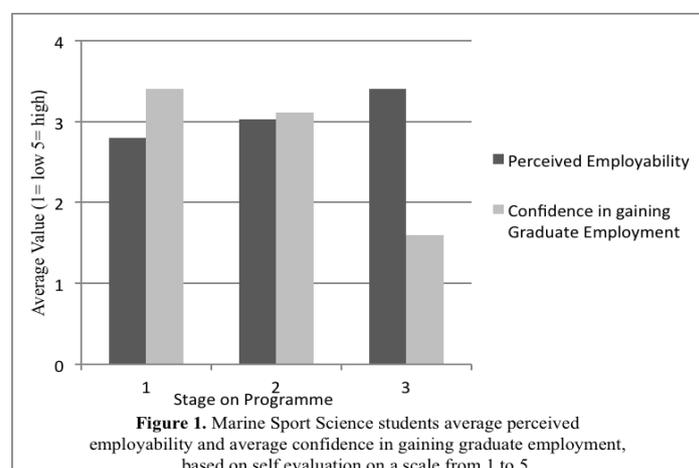
Although HE institutions are not able to reach directly into students' extra-curricular activities, they can, through co-curricular activities such as career development, help students to recognise the significance of those activities and represent to best effect achievements that can be supported with evidence from extra-curricular activities. For example, students' work on their CV and their participation within a competition that involved a role play interview process highlighted the importance of extracurricular activities which they were then able to address.

Data was gathered using a survey designed using a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) format. Participants were students on one of three Marine Sport programmes at a post-1992 institution. Participants were asked to define employability and then quantify their employability and confidence in gaining graduate employment through the use of a simple scale (1 to 5). It is worth considering the point made by Lees (2002, 11): 'It is more difficult to measure graduates' abilities than it is to measure those who are employed, against those who are unemployed or continuing to study'. This point highlights why undertaking a measurement of employability is more problematic than a standard government measurement of graduate employment. As expressed by Cole and Tibby (2013), 'employability is not something that can be quantified by any single measure. The Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey is a measure of employment not employability. Evaluating employability in the way that this study has done at least attempts to capture a more valid expression of this aspect of student development through attempting to understand a student's perception of the term before asking them to rate themselves on a scale.

The remainder of the questionnaire was based on ‘My Vocational Situation’ (Holland *et al*, 1980), a tool which aims to investigate difficulties in career decision making, in particular personal barriers and environmental barriers, which were of interest in this study. A total of 57 Marine Sport Science students (69% of the population), participated from all three years of the three undergraduate programmes in 2012. The survey was conducted within class time to maximise response rates. Themes emerging from the survey responses were identified and used to code the data. This coding enabled both quantitative and qualitative analysis: the former in relation to student’s rating their employability and confidence in gaining graduate employment; the latter to provide a more detailed understanding of the barriers perceived by students.

Results and discussion

In presenting and discussing the results of this study, the distinctiveness of the cohort (Marine Sport Science students) must be restated as the results illustrate the perceptions of this cohort, and may only suggest students’ perceptions outside of this discipline area. In response to asking students to rate their own employability and their confidence in gaining graduate employment Figure 1 shows that Marine Sport Science students perceive their employability to increase year on year.



This increase in perceived employability is comparable to a study by Saunders and Zuzel (2010) who found that final year students rated themselves more highly when using an employability skills profile than that of second and first year students. Furthermore, they also found that new graduate employees were rated less highly by their employers than the graduates had rated themselves. As a caveat then, it should be recognised that the students in

this study may not be as effective in employment as their own high perceptions of employability may imply.

Despite the Marine Sport Science students perceiving their employability to be increasing as they progress through their degree programme, these same students report that they lose confidence in gaining graduate employment year on year, with a particularly significant drop in their third and final year. A one-way ANOVA test highlighted that there was a statistically significant difference between the results for confidence rating for each stage ($0.011 < 0.05$). It can therefore be said that stage three students show a statistically significant drop in the rating of their confidence in gaining graduate employment. This decline in confidence in gaining graduate employment (Figure 1) is particularly interesting. Not only does it contradict the self-reported increase in perceived employability of the students but it also contradicts the increased confidence one may think would be associated with exposure to specialised training, work experience and careers education, all of which should give the students a better indication of their career choices and better developed career management skills (Holland *et al*, 1980, Roberts and Mroczek, 2008). Yet this is clearly not what the results show. Other research reports similar findings. A statistically-based study focused on second year Business Studies undergraduates from three different UK universities (Rothwell and Rothwell, 2008) found students demonstrated a general lack of confidence in employability across all three institutions in relation to how well the students perceived they would fair with their employability. A link between the findings of this paper can also be made to a study conducted in the USA. Qenani *et al* (2014) note that students are increasingly less confident in their employability as they progress through their time at University, attributing this to 'the fact that the prospect of looking for a job becomes more immediate and the uncertainty of finding one more apparent as they get closer to entering the labor market after university' (Qenani *et al*, 2014, 210). Supporting Qenani *et al*'s (2014) findings, Stoner and Milner (2010) put forward that a lack of confidence relates to the need to make and justify choices. Therefore, as students approach graduation, a time when choices about their future needs to be made, there is a drop in confidence. Interestingly, Cogito Talent Limited (2015, 7), in a study of students from a UK post 1992 institution, asked if they felt they have the necessary skills to start their career, based on the rationale that: 'it may be reasonable to suppose that as an individual goes through university they increase their knowledge and skills and accordingly increase their confidence'. However, following data collection they also noted a significant decrease in second year students' believing they have

the necessary skills to start their career. They attributed this to a decrease in confidence due to increased workloads and pressure to secure work placements. However, like Qenani *et al* (2014) they surmised that this may be also be because students are beginning to consider their career and the challenges in gaining employment. Even though Cogito Talent Limited (2015) link the possession of knowledge and skills to confidence, in their paper they went on explore changes in the confidence levels of students in respect to gaining employment over the time in their degree. In accordance with the findings of this paper, Cogito Talent Limited also found students rating themselves as ‘confident’ decreased (from 64% to 41%) from the start of their programme to the time of data collection and students rating themselves with ‘no confidence’ increased from the start of their programme to the time of data collection. However, it should be noted that this was done retrospectively; students were asked to reflect on past confidence levels as well as current levels of confidence, raising methodological issues of reliability.

In order to further explore issues of confidence the students in this study were asked what they felt the barriers to gaining graduate employment were; a question which might help to further explore why confidence decreased year on year. Figure 2 is a word cloud which displays what Marine Sport Science students perceived as the barriers to gaining graduate employment. The larger the word is, the more commonly it was mentioned by students.



Figure 2. Marine Sport Students perceived barriers to gaining graduate employment

As can be seen from Figure 2, there are clearly seven terms strongly emphasised in students’ responses. In order of the importance that students attach to these perceived barriers, these are: competition, experience, location, degree quality, qualifications, economy and confidence. As stated above, students were questioned about their perceived barriers to employment in order to further explore what factors were affecting their confidence. In

asking this question, the students have directly identified confidence as one of their barriers. The other six identified barriers all appear to have greater significance for the students. However, they can all be seen as interdependent facets of employability which feed into employability confidence.

Looking in more detail at these seven barriers, these may be categorised as either being either course specific (location and degree quality), related to the individual (confidence, experience, qualifications), or external, (economy, competition). 'Location' is viewed as being course specific barrier to employment. This is because, for this group of students, it was very much related to their need to be located somewhere where they could pursue their marine sport passion, but this placed them in a region with unfavourable graduate employment prospects. The identification of this factor may not be as significant for other degree programmes in which students may have greater choice of where to study and greater perceived employment mobility. These attitudes and expectations are reinforced by comments from the students in this study about employment barriers including: 'not wanting to work in a city' (Stage 3 Student); 'being able to enjoy my passion, surfing' (Stage 3 Student); and 'no jobs in chosen locations' (Stage 3 Student).

'Degree quality' is another course specific barrier identified. Like all HE academic programmes, the Marine Sport Science programmes go through institutional quality processes to produce an academically rigorous degree. Therefore the barrier of 'degree quality' in actuality was not questionable. However, perceived degree quality may have featured strongly within this study because of media coverage about Marine Sport Science programmes, specifically the BSc Surf Science and Technology. Throughout the programme's existence, but more specifically during the recent media coverage of the tuition fee rise, BSc Surf Science and Technology received significant negative media attention. For example in 2004 the BBC News reported 'Hobbies such as surfing are being turned into "Mickey Mouse" degree courses, a teachers' union conference is to be told' (BBC, 2004). Commentary in the tabloid press suggested that 'the names alone are enough to raise an eyebrow, if not two. Students getting their A-levels can choose from courses including surf science and technology... hairdressing and salon management... and stained-glass window studies' (Smithers, 2010). Statements such as 'A degree in surf science and technology - is this a silly degree?' (BBC, 2001) undermine the credibility of the degree in the eyes of the public and students but they hide the fact that the course was launched because of demand by local employers for the graduates it delivers to marine sports industries and that the

curriculum adheres to the same quality standards and expectations of other degree programmes. Sadly it seems the deluge of negative comments surrounding the quality of the BSc Surf Science and Technology impacted the students and led them to believe that the quality of their degree was a barrier to gaining graduate employment. For example, one stage 3 student noted ‘preconceptions or prejudice towards degree’ as a barrier which highlights again the emphasis on perceived degree quality as opposed to actual degree quality. In support of this hypothesis that media coverage has impacted on the students’ feelings about their employment confidence, Qenani *et al* (2014) found that universities that were highly rated and had high reputational capital would produce students that were more employable and looked on more favourably by employers. This leads to students believing that if their university is highly rated ‘they will be more confident in their own knowledge, attributes, skills and abilities, and preparedness for the labor market’ (Qenani *et al*, 2014:206) and inversely, students who have the belief that their university, or in the case of this study, that their programme is lowly rated, will be less confident in their own knowledge, attributes, skills and abilities, and preparedness for the labour market.

Barriers that can be considered common to all students, and which we classified as ‘external’, are those of the ‘economy’ and ‘competition’; the later in particular being viewed as the largest barrier to employment by the students in this study. Post recession, the current economic climate has led to high levels of unemployment, where competition for graduate jobs is fierce (Allen, 2013) with graduate employers seeing an average of 85 applications or more per graduate job in 2013 (Coughlan, 2013). The competitive graduate job market has been frequently reported in the media with statements such as ‘one in five graduates out of work as unemployment rates for university leavers doubles’ (Loveys, 2011), ‘new graduates face tougher struggle in their search for jobs’ (Doward, 2012) and ‘thousands more graduates forced to accept menial jobs as bosses demand degrees for low-skilled work’ (Clark, 2012) only increasing concerns over the economy and competition for graduate employment, which in turn creates a lack of confidence among the student population, and places these elements (economy and competition) firmly in their minds as a barrier to gaining graduate employment. For example, one stage one student noted ‘Competition from other graduates with more experience...limited jobs in preferred sector’ as a barrier, whilst another stage two student noted the ‘economic climate’, and finally a stage three student spoke about ‘The mess in government...economic crisis’.

The remaining barriers which we have classified as being related to the individual – ‘confidence’, ‘experience’ and ‘qualifications’ - possibly stem from the students’ own definitions of employability. In this study, students were also asked to define employability. The word cloud in Figure 2 highlights what terms they most frequently used within their definitions. The two most common terms are quite clearly qualifications and experience. As the students view these as an important element to employability they therefore quite logically regard not having qualifications and experience as being a barrier to gaining graduate employment. Similarly, Nguyen *et al* (2005) found that students who were not confident of success in job hunting cited a lack of skills and abilities as a reason for their low confidence. Since skills feature strongly in students’ definitions of employability in this study, if students consider that they have a deficiency in this element of employability, then this will naturally lead to subdued confidence and the creation of a perceived barrier to employment. Interestingly experience (the students lack of), is viewed as one of the most prominent barriers to employment but this is despite all the students within this study receiving ‘experience’ through a Work Based Learning module. Work experience has long been recognised as one of the most important elements of developing graduate employability (e.g. Harvey et al, 1997) which is why work experience was included for all the students in the development of the Marine Sports Science programmes being examined here. Nationally, work experience is also increasingly recognised as being vital for student’s career prospects with.

Of the seven perceived barriers to employment identified by the students, confidence itself features directly in this list, but it is the smallest of the perceived barriers. Some students therefore explicitly recognise that a lack of confidence is a barrier to employment. We argue that the other barriers identified by the students also feed in to a lack of confidence as exemplified by this stage three student who listed their barriers as ‘Lack of positions available, too much competition, value of qualification’.

Following the discussion of the results presented here - that while Marine Sports Science students perceived their employability as increasing year on year, inversely, they reported a decrease in their confidence in gaining graduate employment as they approached graduation - we propose terming this phenomenon the ‘Diving Board Theory’. We feel this is an apt description which envisages that as students move through each stage of their programme (along the diving board), they get closer and closer to having to gain employment (jumping off the diving board). The further they move along the diving board, the more

acutely perceived are the barriers to employment (fear of jumping). This raises the diving board higher, affecting their confidence in jumping off and therefore their confidence in gaining graduate employment. If students do not perceive any barriers or perceive them less acutely, then the student will have more confidence in jumping off and therefore more confidence in gaining graduate employment.

So, is a loss of confidence inevitable as students approach the end of their degree (jumping off the diving board)? Can employability related curriculum interventions and opportunities be included and shaped to mitigate any loss of confidence (to lower the diving board and lessen the fear of jumping)? For the students on these programmes, they were following a curriculum in which employability had been embedded yet these students still displayed a loss of confidence in their employability. This therefore raises the question about what lessons we may be able to learn to help refine employability interventions in order to develop their effectiveness. Of the seven barriers to employment identified as being of most significance to the participants in this research, some are barriers that may be addressed through the curriculum but others are beyond control. Academics for example have no control over the external barriers of 'economy' and 'competition', or in this particular case, on the reputational damage caused by the media. However, what and how they support employability within the curriculum will directly influence confidence, and indirectly influence it through a student's experience and qualifications.

Within the programmes examined here, careers and employability activities and resources were embedded across all three years of the Marine Sport Science programmes, yet students still reported a loss of confidence in relation to their employability. From this finding, what lessons might we learn about how careers and employability should be supported within the curriculum? The literature on confidence, reported above, identifies a number of aspects that appear to be most important for developing employability confidence including work experience (Flemming, et al, 2009), self-management/strategic behaviour (Cunnigham et al, 2013), actionable feedback from employers (Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009) and reflection (Thompson et al, 2013). The careers and employability thread introduced throughout the curriculum on the Marine Sports Science programmes provided students with opportunities for work experience (and therefore hopefully actionable feedback from employers), and advice and encouragement on strategic and self-managing careers behaviours. Using this focus on confidence to evaluate the interventions introduced in this study, greater success in developing employment confidence may be gained by refining how

these interventions were supported. On reflection, improvements to the embedded careers and employability aspects of the programme might be achieved by 1) providing more opportunities for individual interactions in order to have conversations with students which challenge them to reflect more deeply on what they have learnt and what actions they need to take. This more individual approach recognises that different students will be in a 'different place' with respect to their careers thinking and allows for more tailored encouragement and advice to help students develop a more personalised strategic approach to thinking about their development and career; 2) Encouraging an improved quality and focus on reflection by providing greater guidance and scaffolding. This approach recognizes the fact that reflection is a skill that individuals find difficult and that greater facilitation in this area may be required; 3) improving interactions with employers in order to generate a more mutually beneficial relationship and provide guidance to the employers about how they can make their support and feedback most beneficial (for example, by prompting them to provide actionable feedback).

Conclusion

This study focused on Marine Sport Science students' in a post-1992 University in the UK, the perceptions of their employability, their confidence in gaining graduate employment, and their perceived barriers to employment. The results of this study showed that while Marine Sport Science students perceived their employability to increase year on year, they also lost confidence in gaining graduate employment year on year, particularly significantly in their third and final year.

In order to further explore issues of confidence, students were then asked what they felt the barriers to gaining graduate employment were. They expressed seven common perceived barriers: competition, experience, location, degree quality, qualifications, economy and confidence. The seven barriers were categorised as either being course specific (location and degree quality), related to the individual (confidence, experience and qualifications), or external, (economy, competition).

It was considered that the media played a role in these barriers, both course specific and generic. There was a significant amount of negative comments surrounding the quality of the BSc Surf Science and Technology that could have impacted the students and led them to believe that the quality of their degree is now a barrier to gaining graduate employment. More generically, the media's coverage of the economy and the effect on graduate

employment and therefore competition, the barrier that students perceived as being the most significant, has led to further barriers being envisaged by students.

The findings of this study culminated in the establishment of the 'Diving Board Theory' which described the process of marine sport science students moving along the diving board closer to what they may feel is the precipice of graduate employment. As they moved along the diving board the seven barriers identified appear to raise the board higher (according to those students who perceived them), generating a crisis of confidence and fear of jumping off into graduate employment. The 'diving board theory' enables an explanation of the juxtaposition of improving employability whilst decreasing confidence in gaining employment.

The fact that students reported decreased confidence in gaining employment despite receiving a curriculum wide focus on employability and despite reporting increased perceived employability prompted evaluative discussion of the effectiveness of employability interventions. Suggestions for how employability support could be better developed within the curriculum included greater opportunity for personalised discussions with individuals, greater support for reflection to aid more strategic approaches to employability and improved relationships and communication with employers in order to help them provide motivational support for students.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that if we only asked the students if they felt they had improved their employability, then the findings of this study would have been very different. The data would have suggested very positive messages about the employability confidence of these students. We can see that it has been important to look at their confidence in relation to their employability as this has provided a very different perspective in terms of the evaluation of the employability interventions made on the programmes in this study.

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