Graduate Employability:

What can Higher Education do?

A Literature Review
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Introduction:

This Literature Review will focus on the changes occurring in Higher Education (HE) to cope with employers demands. It will define employability and the view organizations have of it, demonstrating the changes on the economy and its effects on the Labour Market. Then it will discuss the pressure HE Institutions face to include employability in their curriculum and how they can do so. Finally it will discuss the consequences of those changes and worries of some academic professionals. It will try to prove that, in order to best prepare students, HE Institutions should teach graduates means to continuously update their knowledge and skills so they can cope with the demands of employers.

Methodology:

To ensure relevance and legitimacy of this literature review, the literature materials studied were gathered from books, academic journals and newspapers articles. All information gathered was studied and compared and will be cited, paraphrased and summarised throughout this paper in order to demonstrate how conclusions were made and theories created. Full reference of literature used can be found at the end of this Literature Review.

Employability and the changing of times:

Employability is still a vast concept. When asked about its meaning employers give different definitions. It can be described as the capability of acquiring, keeping and getting a new job in case of need. It involves having motivations and skills that allow one to achieve business and personal goals (Rajan et al., 2000); Little and colleagues (2004) describe it as the “set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes” that allow individuals to be more capable in gaining employment and succeed at their career of choice.

With globalization, technology advance and the pressure made by markets, organizations now have a different idea of how to manage their human capital (Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011). These changes occur very quickly and constantly, making companies require their employees to change as quick and constantly. These have caused different reactions to the way employers treat employees. The first approach is to select employees that possess skills and capabilities of interest to the company and improve their employability through further trainings and courses provided by the company (Rajan et al., 2000). One method that has been increasingly on demand is the Assessment of Prior and Experimental Learning.
(AP(E)L) as a foundation of learning and training. Establishing what is already known allows employees to avoid repetitive training and concentrate on their main capabilities (Evans, 2000). By improving employees’ capabilities, employers require that these same workers perform better, increasing their roles inside the company. This causes decentralization, an increase of expectations from the employer, a need to the employee to be interdependent and the need to increase their performance standards (Rajan et al., 2000).

The second approach is the constant exchange of personnel in order to acquire newly trained staff without the need to train them. Staying “lean” companies avoid long-term relationships with employees that do not update their capabilities (Greenhaus, Callaman & Direnzo, 2008 cited in Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011), causing a raise in job loss and a decline in job stability (Bansak & Raphael, 2006; Boisjoly at al., 1998; Farber, 1995, 2005; Kalleberg, 2009; Marcotte, 1996; Marcotte & Hartman, 1995; Monks & Pizer, 1998; Neumark et al., 1999; Polsky, 1999; Rose, 1995; Valletta, 1998 cited in Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011). Companies reduce the number of managers, discard unprofitable units, reduce noncore functions and rely on temporary and contract workers in order to keep skills and capabilities consistent with company’s objectives eliminating the problem of maintaining less valuable employees (Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011). These companies are called “Boundaryless Organizations” since they reduce the restrictions of communications and production caused by organizational boundaries (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick & Kerr, 1995 cited in Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011). These “Boundaryless Organizations” create “Boundaryless Careers” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996 cited in Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011) which are independent from organizations arrangements. Rajan (2000) divides workers into four different classes: job satisfiers, flexible workers, career builders and franchise builders. He says that Organizations concentrate on franchise builders and career builders on their efforts to increase employees’ employability. Career builders are described as employees that have great loyalty towards the company and plan on progressing upwards in the same workplace, while franchise builders are workers that constantly change workplace and focus on building a “personal brand”. This “franchise builders” can be compared with the ones Diranzo and Greenhaus (2011) call “boundaryless” they work across interorganizational boundaries and improve their employability while doing so. This employability replaces job security, since it makes them more employable. These workers develop a proactive response to the environment, and have control over their employment option (Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011).

Economic changes do not affect only employers but the way employees react to the environment as well. In 1998 graduates were employed not by their area of expertise but for their personal traits (Clare, 1998). In 2011 Sullivan (2011) claims that qualified employees are...
in demand, making them the ones to evaluate their employers, and not the opposite. He also states that the lack of security makes graduates define their careers by profitability, not by vocation. Job turnovers are becoming more common. In order to explore their careers and develop a greater understanding of the environment, individuals constantly search for new employment opportunities, strengthening their values and capabilities (Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011). The constantly need of employers to change personnel is reflected at the behaviour of employees. The concern with employability is now part of any level of education, since high school until post graduation (Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011). The constant changes require employees to constantly update their capabilities, driving them back to school in order to become more “marketable” (Nikravan. 2011).

**Employability at Higher Education:**

With constant technological advances and quick changes in economy it is clear the need to update HE curriculum as well. The demand for specialized labour drives individuals to universities in order to improve their employability. The pressure on universities to include employability in their curriculum is growing, this is a result of the belief that development of Human Capital, would also develop national growth and prosperity (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The expectations are that HE should become more complex, instead of building only academic knowledge it is supposed to build personal traits and employability skills on students. This can be accomplished by different means. Knight and Yorke (2003) suggest creating a work experience, entrepreneurship programme, improving careers advice and the use of portfolios. According to Harvey and Colleagues (1997, cited on Knight & Yorke, 2003), employers search for knowledgeable, intelligent, willing to learn, self-managing, communicating, team-working and intrapersonal graduates. Little and ESECT Colleagues (2004) state that students gain from work experience; it allows them to learn by doing and helps them understand their role in the workplace. They discuss that during their undergraduate years, students are frequently learning from the environment and that working during undergraduate years help students develop the required skills for success, it makes them more mature, teach how to work in a team, how to communicate, develops interpersonal skills and helps them construct an awareness of the workplace culture. Little and Colleagues also illustrate three different methods HE Institutions could achieve this. First they can develop the work experience as part of a programme of study, attaching the work experience to the conventional programme, making generic modules available to students and/or developing an additional programme that is mostly based on the workplace. Secondly the work experience could be additional to the conventional programme, like on sandwich programmes, putting the
Employability skills are being added to the curriculum in order to cope with changes, these will continue to occur and the curriculum will continue to be modified. Moreland (2004) suggests that entrepreneurship is a key factor when dealing with employability and HE Institutions have only to gain by adding such skills to their curriculum. The idea is to improve self-employment concepts between students. Entrepreneurs should be able to identify opportunities, create value from those opportunities, develop the capabilities of being successful on their endeavour and be committed to their cause (Moreland, 2004). This skills, in addition to innovative and creative thinking (what Moreland calls “intrapreneurship”), would provide students not only with key talents but also opening the possibilities of self-employment. According to Moreland, small businesses create more work, reducing unemployment. Survey of Student Enterprise Project (STEP) (1994, cited in Moreland, 2004) showed that almost half of the graduates wanted to have their own business. Globalization requires individuals to always learn and develop their competence, one needs to reflect on situations in order to learn from them (Moreland, 2004). This shows that teaching specific skills is not the solution of the problem on the long-term, HE institutions should be concerned with their students’ aptitude to learn, by developing a self-improvement expertise graduates that would be able to continuously develop their skills and aptitudes and be capable of coping with the changes that occur in the future.

Controversies:

Anna Tims (2011) argues that the changes in HE curriculum is worrying some professors that think that soon education will be confounded with training. Some say HE is supposed to provide individuals with wisdom and should not be seen only as an investment. Alan Smithers, director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at Buckingham University, says: “Employers are looking for a good degree from a good university; they’re less bothered about nebulous employability skills.” (Tims, 2011 p.1).

David Stanbury, joint director of the Centre for Career Management Skills at Reading University, suggests that HE should be a preparation for life, and employment is part of life (Tims, 2011). It is then HE’s responsibility to prepare its students for that purpose.
Conclusion:

This Review showed the view of some authors regarding graduate employability and their opinions of how HE should deal with that. Though changes in HE are necessary, they should be executed carefully. Too radical transformations could disappear with the research element in HE, turning it into a work preparation only.

Transformations in the economy, work environment and academic environment are synchronized. This way, the changes in HE curriculum are essential for the preparation of graduates to the work environment, but instead of simply adding employability skill to the curriculum, HE institutions should be more worried about preparing their students for the future. Teaching students methods of self-improvement would prevent the need of constant changes in the curriculum. This way graduates would be ready to face any further changes even after graduation.
References:


Knight & Yorke. (2003) Employability and Good Learning in Higher Education, Teaching in Higher Education. 8: 1, pp3-16


