



# **The student voice in employability within tertiary business and management education**

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# Table Of Contents

Index of Figures.....	viii
Acknowledgements .....	x
Abbreviations .....	xi
Abstract .....	xii
1 Introduction .....	1
1.1 Context.....	1
1.2 Higher Education background for the study.....	2
1.3 The significance of employability.....	3
1.4 Aim.....	6
1.5 Central research question.....	6
1.5.1 Sub-questions .....	7
1.6 Objectives.....	9
1.7 Research design overview.....	10
1.7.1 Location of study.....	11
1.8 Structure of the PhD thesis.....	14
1.8.1 Chapter outline .....	15
2 Literature Review .....	17
2.1 Introduction.....	17
2.1.1 Literature review structure.....	18
2.2 Higher Education Institutions - Policy and change.....	19
2.2.1 Higher Education expansion – The Robbins Report (1963).....	20
2.2.2 Expansion in Business & Management degree programmes.....	21
2.2.3 Expansion of business & management - Skills.....	22
2.2.4 Expansion for widening participation .....	23
2.2.5 Changes in HE funding and finance.....	25
2.2.6 Government skills policy and HE .....	28
2.2.7 Higher Education competition and marketisation .....	32
2.2.8 Employability focus in HE - The Dearing Report (1997) .....	32
2.3 Definitions and conceptual concerns of employability.....	34
2.3.1 Higher Education - Supply-side employability .....	35

2.3.2	Definitions of employability - HE perspective .....	36
2.3.3	Definitions of employability - Graduate attributes .....	38
2.3.4	Higher Education and the curriculum .....	39
2.3.5	The delivery of employability outcomes by HE.....	44
2.3.6	Stakeholders - Demand-side employability .....	47
2.3.7	Defining employability for employers .....	48
2.3.8	Employability - The employer perspective.....	49
2.3.9	Critiques of employability.....	51
2.4	The role of capitals in the HE employability agenda .....	53
2.5	Bourdieu – Theory of Practice.....	54
2.6	Forms of capital .....	57
2.6.1	Human capital.....	57
2.6.2	Social capital .....	58
2.6.3	Cultural capital.....	58
2.6.4	Identity capital .....	59
2.6.5	Psychological capital.....	59
2.6.6	Economic capital.....	61
2.7	Development of theoretical framework.....	61
2.8	Literature review summary .....	62
3	Research Philosophy .....	64
3.1	Introduction.....	64
3.2	Model for research.....	65
3.3	Ontology, epistemology and axiology.....	69
3.3.1	Ontology .....	70
3.3.2	Epistemology.....	71
3.3.3	Axiology.....	72
3.4	Research philosophies .....	72
3.4.1	Positivism.....	73
3.4.2	Interpretivism .....	74
3.4.3	Hermeneutics.....	75
3.4.4	Critical Theory .....	77
3.4.5	Postmodernism/ Poststructuralism .....	79
3.5	Engagement of the researcher.....	82
3.5.1	Motivation and value basis .....	82

3.5.2	Paradigm shift – Selection of the research paradigm .....	83
3.6	Principles for interpretive field studies .....	84
3.7	Philosophical Summary .....	88
4	Research Methods .....	91
4.1	Introduction .....	91
4.2	Research question design .....	91
4.3	Evaluation of potential research methods .....	93
4.3.1	Action Research .....	93
4.3.2	Ethnography .....	93
4.3.3	Grounded Theory .....	94
4.3.4	Historical context of Grounded Theory .....	94
4.3.5	Evolving Grounded Theory .....	96
4.3.6	Applied benefits of Grounded Theory .....	98
4.3.7	Application of Grounded Theory .....	98
4.4	Research design .....	103
4.4.1	Research Design for Theory Development .....	104
4.5	Research type and approach .....	105
4.6	Data collection and analysis .....	107
4.6.1	Time horizon .....	108
4.6.2	Data collection techniques .....	109
4.6.3	Focus groups .....	110
4.6.4	Interviews .....	111
4.7	Qualitative sampling .....	113
4.8	Quality considerations .....	116
4.9	Ethical research issues .....	117
4.9.1	Data protection .....	120
4.10	Data collection pilot .....	121
4.10.1	Pilot test questions .....	122
4.11	Data management .....	123
4.11.1	Recruitment of participants .....	123
4.11.2	Data collection summary .....	123
4.11.3	Primary data evaluation tools – QSR NVivo .....	126
4.12	Data capture tools .....	128
4.12.1	Mendeley .....	128

4.12.2	Coggle information mapping tool.....	129
4.12.3	Transcription services.....	130
4.12.4	Online Survey.....	130
4.13	Analytical approaches for Grounded Theory .....	131
4.13.1	Data analysis .....	131
4.13.2	Coding – Initial .....	131
4.13.3	Coding – Focussed.....	133
4.13.4	Analytic memo .....	134
4.13.5	Analytical method .....	134
4.14	Conclusion .....	136
4.15	Summary of the research method approach .....	136
5	Findings and Analysis.....	139
5.1	Introduction.....	139
5.2	Focus groups.....	140
5.2.1	Development of focus group data coding .....	140
5.2.2	Progression of focus group data analysis .....	143
5.3	What does employability mean to students? .....	145
5.3.1	Skills to <i>get</i> a job/skills to <i>do</i> a job.....	146
5.3.2	Undergraduate degree value.....	148
5.3.3	Work or life experience.....	149
5.4	Student opinion regarding their development of employability skills? ..	150
5.4.1	Self-assessment – Organisational fit.....	151
5.4.2	Self-assessment – Emotional traits.....	152
5.4.3	Impact of the professional development module.....	153
5.4.4	Employability support .....	155
5.4.5	Stress or pressure.....	157
5.5	What is the role and influence of capital elements? .....	158
5.5.1	Confidence .....	158
5.5.2	Motivation.....	159
5.5.3	Work placements .....	160
5.6	Individual student interviews.....	164
5.6.1	Development of student interview data coding.....	164
5.7	What does employability mean to students? .....	166
5.7.1	Journey to University .....	166

5.7.2	Undergraduate degree value.....	168
5.7.3	Adjusting to university life – Becoming independent.....	170
5.7.4	Skills to <i>do</i> /skills to <i>get</i> a job.....	171
5.8	Student opinion regarding their development of employability skills? ...	173
5.8.1	Employability focus in HE .....	173
5.8.2	Impact of the professional development module.....	174
5.8.3	Work placement dilemma.....	176
5.8.4	Work experience .....	179
5.9	What is the role of and influence of capital elements? .....	180
5.9.1	Personal attributes.....	180
5.9.2	Confidence .....	182
5.9.3	Motivation.....	184
5.9.4	Benefits of employability .....	185
5.9.5	Balance .....	187
5.10	Employer interviews .....	190
5.10.1	Development of employer interview data coding.....	190
5.11	What does employability and development mean? .....	192
5.11.1	Work readiness, defining employability & organisational fit .....	193
5.11.2	The purpose of Higher Education .....	195
5.11.3	Employability in the HE curriculum .....	196
5.11.4	Barriers to employability .....	197
5.11.5	Balance .....	198
5.12	What is the role and influence of capitals? .....	199
5.12.1	Student-Employer engagement.....	199
5.12.2	Maturity .....	200
5.12.3	Stress and pressure .....	201
5.13	Is there variation in opinion with employers regarding employability? .	201
5.13.1	Work ethic.....	202
5.13.2	Work placements and work experience.....	203
5.13.3	HE-Employer relationship .....	204
5.13.4	Continuous Development .....	205
5.14	Staff interviews .....	208
5.14.1	Development of staff interview data coding.....	208
5.15	What does employability and development mean? .....	210

5.15.1	Employability and self-awareness .....	210
5.15.2	The purpose of Higher Education .....	211
5.15.3	Teaching of employability.....	213
5.16	What is the role and influence of capitals? .....	214
5.16.1	Confidence .....	214
5.16.2	Work experience .....	215
5.17	Is there variation in opinion with staff regarding employability? .....	216
5.17.1	Professional conduct.....	217
5.17.2	Barriers to employability .....	218
5.17.3	HE-Employer relationship .....	219
5.17.4	Professionalism/Continuous Development .....	220
5.18	Summary.....	223
6	Discussion .....	224
6.1	Introduction.....	224
6.2	Central question: What does employability mean to students? .....	225
6.2.1	Skills to <i>do</i> and skills to <i>get</i> a job .....	225
6.2.2	Requirement for a degree and the purpose of HE .....	229
6.3	RQ1: Student opinions regarding employability development.....	232
6.3.1	Self-assessment and organisational fit.....	232
6.3.2	Opportunities for further development - Placement dilemma .....	234
6.4	RQ2: Role of Capital .....	238
6.4.1	Human capital.....	238
6.4.2	Social capital .....	239
6.4.3	Cultural capital.....	240
6.4.4	Identity capital .....	242
6.4.5	Economic capital.....	242
6.4.6	Psychological capital.....	243
6.5	RQ3: Variation in opinion .....	247
6.5.1	Employability as a continuous development process .....	247
6.5.2	Work ethic as an employability attribute .....	249
6.6	Theoretical development.....	252
6.6.1	Habitus, employability meaning and development .....	253
6.6.2	Field, employability meaning and development .....	255
6.6.3	Capital, employability meaning and development.....	259

6.7	Interrogation of the definition of employability .....	262
6.8	Summary.....	264
7	Conclusion.....	266
7.1	How well was the aim met? .....	266
7.1.1	Constructing the meaning of employability .....	267
7.1.2	Constructing employability development .....	268
7.1.3	The role of capitals.....	269
7.2	Key contributions .....	271
7.2.1	Theoretical contribution .....	272
7.2.2	Original contribution .....	273
7.2.3	Implications for policy and practice .....	274
7.2.4	Implications for the student experience.....	275
7.3	Evaluation of the conduct of interpretive research.....	278
7.3.1	What are the limitations? .....	280
7.4	Future research.....	281
7.5	Researcher reflection.....	283
8	References .....	285
9	Appendix .....	304
9.1	PhD research information sheet.....	304
9.2	Interview consent form.....	306
9.3	Individual student interview questions.....	307
9.4	Student interview participant biographic data .....	308
9.5	Research outputs .....	309



## Index of Figures

Figure 1-1 Thesis visualisation .....	6
Figure 1-2 Structure and flow of the PhD thesis.....	15
Figure 2-1 Key historical legislative and policy changes for Higher Education in the UK <i>adapted from</i> Barr (2014:42) .....	20
Figure 2-2 Summary of threshold concepts <i>adapted from</i> Flanagan, (2019) .....	42
Figure 3-1 The Research model for the study .....	68
Figure 3-2 Table of four different ontologies. Easterby-Smith <i>et al.</i> , (2015:50) ....	71
Figure 3-3 Approaches within the two main paradigms <i>adapted from</i> Collis & Hussey (2014:46) .....	73
Figure 4-1 Identifying research questions - Collis & Hussey (2014:104).....	92
Figure 4-2 Key differences between research typologies <i>adapted from</i> Saunders <i>et al.</i> (2016:145).....	107
Figure 4-3 Study of perspectives for validity, reliability and generalisability .....	117
Figure 4-4 Principles in research ethics <i>adapted from</i> Bell & Bryman, 2007 <i>cited in</i> Easterby Smith (2015:122).....	118
Figure 4-5 Student focus group participants .....	124
Figure 4-6 Student interview participants.....	125
Figure 4-7 Employer interview participants.....	125
Figure 4-8 Staff interview participants.....	126
Figure 4-9 Screenshot to illustrate the coding function of QSR NVivo .....	127
Figure 4-10 Node assignment and coding .....	128
Figure 4-11 Screenshot to illustrate the Mendeley referencing tool.....	129
Figure 4-12 Explanation of constructivist grounded theory method.....	134
Figure 4-13 Table of assumptions of the interpretive paradigm & corresponding researcher justification <i>adapted from</i> Collis & Hussey (2014:46) .....	138
Figure 5-1 NVivo codes for student focus groups .....	142
Figure 5-2 Mind map of focus groups CGT analysis theoretical categorisation & theoretical framework outcomes (green boxes) .....	163
Figure 5-3 NVivo nodes for individual student interviews .....	166
Figure 5-4 Mind map of student interview CGT analysis theoretical categorisation & theoretical framework outcomes (green boxes).....	189
Figure 5-5 NVivo nodes for employer interviews .....	192

Figure 5-6 Mind map of employer interview CGT analysis theoretical categorisation & theoretical framework outcomes (green boxes).....207

Figure 5-7 NVivo nodes for staff interviews ..... 209

Figure 5-8 Mind map of staff interview CGT analysis theoretical categorisation & theoretical framework outcomes (green boxes) .....222

Figure 5-9 Findings synthesis from the primary data .....223

Figure 6-1 Summary of the major theoretical categories .....224

Figure 6-2 Role and impact of capitals ..... 260

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## Abbreviations

AGR	Association of Graduate Recruiters
B&M	Business and Management degree programmes
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CGT	Constructivist Grounded Theory
CIPD	Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development
CPD	Continuous professional development
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy, renamed Advance HE from March 2018
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEP	Higher Education Provider
HND	Higher National Diploma
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISE	Institute of Student Employers
IT	Information Technology
MBA	Masters of Business Administration
NPM	New Public Management
NUS	National Union of Students
ONS	Office of National Statistics
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
SRHE	Society for Research in Higher Education
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
UN	United Nations
WP	Widening Participation

## **Abstract**

Employability is a set of skills needed to get a job. There is an expectation that students will exit education having developed employability skills in order to be successful in their chosen occupation. It remains therefore an important topic for research and it covers many areas from policies in Higher Education (HE) through to ideologies, practices and models to embed employability within the curriculum. The aim of this study was to discover the undergraduate student voice with respect to employability. It used Bourdieusian social theory and Tomlinson's graduate capital model to better understand the meaning and development of employability. Higher Education, government and employers are all grappling with the problems of employability for graduates and this study provided practical and academic contributions in this area. The thesis presents a literature review, drawing upon government policy, empirical and theoretical academic studies to contribute to the research of employability.

The study took place within the business school of the University of Salford, located within the North West of England. Questions were posed in focus groups and interviews to undergraduate students undertaking a core professional development module. Responses to the student views were then collected via interviews with HE staff and employer stakeholders. A constructivist grounded theory method was applied across this study capturing various dimensions of opinion regarding employability. The student view of employability was grounded in the data and the method allowed the researcher to construct the reality as seen from the perspective of the students.

The findings of this thesis are that students had a deep understanding of the meaning of employability though its development was considered to be challenging. In contrast to some of the literature, students understood employability goes beyond simple listing of 'transferable' skills. This thesis uncovered a 'placement dilemma' whereby students understood the value of work experience for developing employability but due to various factors, uncertainty prevented some students from pursuing this avenue.

Furthermore confidence, a form of psychological capital was found to underpin the meaning of employability for students (Rattray, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017a). Within

the theoretical framing for this thesis it has therefore been concluded that psychological capital is found to be a key enabler for the development of employability. Responses to students' views by employers and staff suggested that continuous development is also a key element of employability. Hence this thesis advocates that HE and stakeholders should use continuous development and psychological capital to form a revised definition of employability contributing to an improved understanding.

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Context**

The fourth industrial revolution is considered to be a global phenomenon, which is characterised by a number of changes that includes automation (robotics and artificial intelligence), digital technologies (mobile internet and cloud computing) and biotechnology (Schwab, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2018). The changes have global impact, which serve as a challenge for governments, businesses, universities and the general population, to respond and positively harness the benefits of such change.

The revolution is driven by rapid advances in technology which is changing the nature of work and therefore the demand for skills (Universities UK, 2018). One aspect of this is the challenge for the education sector, in preparing people to develop employability skills, to exploit the advances. A problem therefore lies in how the education sector understands employability requirements so that it can respond and implement actions that prepare people not only for the labour market, but also for a life beyond work.

This PhD study began in 2014, amid the fourth industrial revolution. Economic, political, and social factors are affecting change which means that the demand for skills, particularly those of a higher level, will be greater than ever in the coming years.

This thesis concerns employability in higher education for business and management degree programmes placing the focus on the undergraduate student voice. Much of the empirical research to date has focused upon employability of graduates, or employability definitions and models. There is a gap at a micro-level concerning the opinions of undergraduates; this study contributes by addressing this gap. By accepting the premise of Bridgstock (2017:352) that in relation to employability, HE can be more effective in preparing students for the future of work and society, then the student voice should be heard. Interviews have been conducted with students from The University of Salford business school. This thesis uses capital resources and the socio-analytical tools of Bourdieu as a theoretical framework or lens applied alongside a constructivist grounded theory method.

Broad ideas from the fourth industrial revolution may seem abstract or unrealised for some, but on the other hand, we may take for granted the benefits that the rapid development of technology has provided in terms of communications, enterprise and the potential for improved working and social conditions. In terms of work, it is estimated that 65% of children entering primary schools today are likely to work in new jobs and functions that don't currently exist (Universities UK, 2018). A future aspect of employability will require changes in the type of work we do, how we go about that work and through developing flexibility in skills. In realising the benefits of modern technology, people may need re-training and continuous development across their working lives and perhaps even be required to do many different jobs in the future.

To tackle the future challenges, organisations such as the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) argue that a range of qualifications will be needed. Qualifications come in the form of higher national diplomas (HNDs), apprenticeships, degree apprenticeships and importantly for this study bachelor's degrees, postgraduate and research degrees (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017). Alongside qualifications, there are increasing demand for employability skills, these are required in subject-specific topics, professional and technical areas, supported by core transferable skills. Within the last few years employability has become a significant focus for the tertiary education sector and is the central topic for this study (Artess *et al.*, 2017).

## **1.2 Higher Education background for the study**

Employability remains a major topic for research, and it covers many areas from policies in HE through to ideologies, practices, and models to embed employability within the curriculum. There is a significant debate about the definition and outcomes of what employability actually is. Several authors state the multidimensional and complex nature, upon which a single agreed position has not been attained (e.g. Tymon, 2013; Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017).

However, employability remains a critical part of the public policy rationale of higher education today (Artess *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, the current external landscape as mentioned places significant pressures within HE to produce graduates with the



requisite skills to meet the needs of the economy and labour markets (BIS, 2015a) This has led to a variety of reports about skills shortages and differences in opinion as to the levels of development of employability skills (and other skills) by graduates, alongside the corresponding availability of graduate type jobs within the market (HECSU, 2017).

As a result, HEIs have made significant efforts to embed employability into the undergraduate curriculum and provide support for employability (Cole & Tibby, 2013). Yet there remains a lack of consensus as to how HE should implement employability initiatives. However, in terms of establishing the success of the efforts by HEIs, the focus has been upon graduate outputs rather than undergraduate input (Bryson, 2015). Outputs are considered for graduates in terms of qualifications and gaining employment as productive economic units, rather than in terms of the ability to utilise and realise the benefits of higher education for both individuals and society (Bryson, 2015:552). Undergraduate inputs are defined as curricular and wider support student systems, such as careers services that focus upon employability development.

Furthermore, the literature review conducted for this study, supported by a major review of literature from 2012-2017 undertaken HEA from Artess *et al.*, (2017) suggests, that in relation to employability, there is a lack of a student voice. The vast majority of the research explored focuses upon graduate outcomes rather than undergraduate views.

This being the case how do we know what are the needs of our undergraduates, how do they understand employability and engage in its development? How can HE support undergraduates effectively if we do not have a clear picture of their opinion? This study aims to capture the student voice to find improvements in employability frameworks that meet the needs of both students *and* stakeholders.

### **1.3 The significance of employability**

With an increased research interest in employability overall, effort has been targeted towards a definition. The literature review explores the development of employability definitions. However, the following definition identifies the phenomena for this thesis as:

‘A set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.’

Yorke (2006:8)

Following from this research, it can be said the very expression, ‘the degree is not enough’, captures a range of challenges at the heart of the current student and graduate experience (Tomlinson, 2017b:16). There is widespread agreement and evidence in terms of policy, practice, and research that employability skills are an essential outcome of participation in HE (Tomlinson, 2012). Consequently, Wilson *et al.* (2013) and Bryson (2015) suggest that there is a narrowing of focus towards outcomes, or a mechanistic tick-box approach to ‘skills acquisition’, rather than consideration of inputs aimed at developing employability capability that can expand opportunities for achievement upon graduation. This connects to public policies practices such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and policy reviews that continue in this vein (*Higher Education and Research Act 2017*; Department for Education, 2019). Such focus can affect social arrangements and economic structures for people’s opportunity to flourish at work and in life. The shift in emphasis in education is said to be from socially orientated, value added and transformational to an instrumental or economic view of HE and employability. It is also suggested students themselves cannot see the value of undertaking employability skills development (Tymon, 2013; Wilson *et al.*, 2013; Bryson, 2015).

There are concerns and counter arguments that the purpose of education is not just to produce graduates that serve the needs of a shifting economy and preparing people for the world of work. Wheelahan (2015:751) suggests the reduction of education in several cases is towards skills needed to get a job resulting in the subordination of knowledge. If we accept that employability should be an integral part of HE, then we should consider the impact that this perspective has upon the value of knowledge versus skills. Biesta expresses this point further:

‘Whether academic knowledge is indeed of more value than, for example, vocational skills, it all depends on the access such knowledge gives to particular positions in society and this, as sociological analysis has

abundantly shown, is exactly how the reproduction of social inequality through education works’.

Biesta (2009:36)

Such comments follow from the argument of Maton (2005) suggesting HE should work to enable students to access several forms of capital to support the development of both skills *and* knowledge. Furthermore, HE should integrate opportunities to develop capital into teaching and learning for students to convert such capital and the resources conferred by them, in a more explicit manner (Maton, 2005).

Capitals are defined as key resources that confer power or status and in a graduate context benefits and advantages (Maton, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017a). Capitals are acquired, interact and strengthen based upon formal and informal experiences. Capitals comprise of multiple forms, such as human, social, cultural, identity and psychological. The role of capital is also expressed in the work of Bourdieu (2004), in his research-based tools for socio-analysis. A capitals based concept developed by Bourdieu (1984) considers HE as a field forming a setting in which agents and their social positions are located.

From contemporary research, expanding upon Bourdieusian research, Tomlinson (2017b) has developed a conceptualisation of graduate employability based on graduate capitals. The combination of capital based concepts of Bourdieu and Tomlinson was a valuable approach to understand graduate employability and the challenges faced in the transition to the labour market, that have implications for developing employability strategies for HE. This approach informed the analytical direction taken for the thesis (detailed in chapter 4, research methods).

The above introduces and provides a summary of the key themes that are involved in this PhD study that has led to an investigation in to the student voice for the meaning of employability for students within HE B&M education. The following section will provide an overview of the literature incorporated into discussions alongside each of the research questions that have been designed for this study.

## 1.4 Aim

The overall aim of the PhD study was to discover the voice of undergraduate students relating to employability within tertiary business and management education. Figure 1-1 shows the student placed at the centre of the study to obtain their view of employability based upon the influences of capital and the external field. The student voice outcome of this approach is one of the main contributions of the thesis.

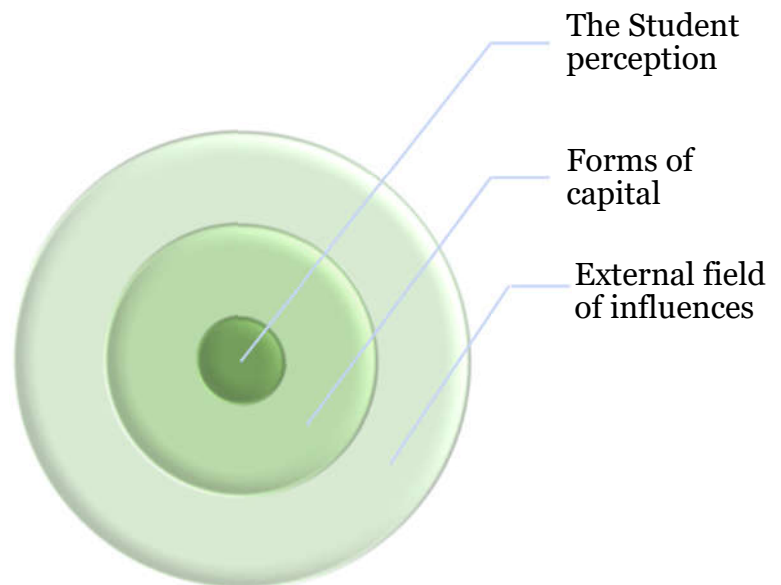


Figure 1-1 Thesis visualisation

## 1.5 Central research question

### **What does employability mean to undergraduate students within tertiary business and management education?**

This question is aimed at adding to academic studies on employability that examine the opinion of undergraduate students, particularly within the vocational discipline of business and management education. The question contributes to the literature on employability in providing a voice to students and an understanding of the meaning of the concept from their viewpoint. This question was posed to obtain a student view upon the framing or definition of employability and was then applied to interrogate the current definitions.

In interrogating the understanding of the term employability this question stems from the various definitions and meaning attached to the description or categorisation of skills and how they translate in the workplace. Barrie (2006:217) contends that there are a bewildering array of terms for describing student skills. Within the literature the description of skills may include 'transferable skills', 'generic skills', 'attributes', 'qualities', 'professional skills' and so on (Yorke, 2006; Biggs and Tang, 2007).

Some or all categories of ‘skills’ listed may be attributed to employability but this assumes an agreed definition, upon which some caution is urged by Harvey (2005) and Yorke (2006). The lack of clarity and precision is has been highlighted for over two decades. This began with Hillage and Pollard (1998) who suggest that from a Government policy perspective the term employability is used in a variety of contexts with a range of meanings. Given the variation in usage it is therefore difficult to navigate what exactly employability means and how it can and should be developed.

#### **1.5.1 Sub-questions**

##### **1. What are students’ opinions regarding their development of employability skills?**

A theme has arisen whereby a variety of reports suggest that there is a lack of workplace preparedness from graduates resulting from the shift in emphasis towards employability and vocationalism (CIPD, 2015; Artess, *et al.*, 2017). This includes work by Cumming (2010:407) stating graduates ‘lack appropriate skills, attitudes and dispositions, which in turn prevents them from participating effectively in the workplace’. This coincides with reports from employers and students alike that a lack of appropriate skills for employment (communication, teamwork and leadership) are to be found within the graduate population (CIPD, 2014; CBI, 2015).

It has been established that Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s) are making significant efforts to embed employability into the curriculum (Cole and Tibby, 2013). Therefore, this question is presented as an opportunity to obtain further data upon this point. This presents an opportunity to ascertain interest and attitude towards employers’ claims and evaluate the efforts of HE, by providing an opportunity for students to explain their position further. This question allowed for insights in relation to preparedness and to explore what opportunities students take to develop employability skills.

##### **2. What is the role of capitals in employability for students?**

The need to develop graduate employability remains dominant in the discourse within HE. The discourse stems from government views of HE as a policy lever for achieving greater competitiveness in the knowledge economy (Maton, 2005). The effectiveness of the employability skills approach is subject to critique in the

literature. This issue of transference and contextual barriers between formal learning and the workplace is therefore brought into question (Mason *et al.*, 2009; Wilton, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017a). Maton (2005) and Tomlinson (2017a) suggest a shift is required from a skills approach to one of capitals. The role of HE to enable students to develop both skills *and* knowledge therefore relies on the ability to access forms of capital which can then be converted into future labour market success (Maton, 2005).

The employability literature and philosophical perspectives of Bourdieu provide the basis of the development of the theoretical lens to examine the role of capitals as expressed by the participants of this study. For Bourdieu (1984) capitals are defined as particular resources that individuals have access to in the form of economic, social and cultural capital. From this foundation and in the light of graduate attributes, the conceptualisation of capitals has been extended further for this study to encompass capitals such as human, identity and psycho-social forms. These dynamic forms are defined by Tomlinson (2017a:339) as key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto graduates.

The research adopts the conceptualisation of Tomlinson (2017a:340) of 'employability constituting a range of dynamic, interactive forms of capital', but applied in the undergraduate rather than graduate context. The research question is posed to evaluate the role and basis of capital that employability may confer on the students in the HE field.

Crebert *et al.* (2004:148) further suggest that the demonstration of skills by students is linked to the development of confidence in their application to new and different contexts, including the workplace. What is interesting from the work of Crebert *et al.* (2004) is that the significance of skills can be realised, provided students are made aware of their importance, and are given opportunities to practise them.

### **3. Is there variation in the opinion of employability from stakeholders such as employers and lecturers?**

Following from the previous question, Sin and Neave (2016) argue that there are misunderstandings by stakeholders based upon the definition of employability, as well as disagreements upon its significance and the role of HE. The discourse

surrounding employability skills extended even further, as Wilson *et al.* (2013) examined students understanding for the need of professional development.

As suggested, what colours the situation under consideration is the conflation and number of discourses that surround both employability and skills. Tomlinson (2012) identifies key themes including human capital, identity, positional conflict, skills, and social reproduction as dominant conceptual themes. Tymon (2013) states that both 'employability' along with transferable skills are multidimensional and complex, particularly as they could be viewed differently from the perspectives of stakeholders such as students, graduates, universities, employers, policy-makers and even Government.

Given the suggestion for various dimensions given to employability, this question aims to investigate if employers and staff agree or disagree with the student view. The methods applied to assess this final question, were carried out after the completion of the collection of data and initial analysis from student participants. As such, the viewpoints of students were subsequently applied in the question development for this group of stakeholders, thus allowing the student voice to be heard.

## **1.6 Objectives**

To address the aim and research questions for this study the following objectives were set out:

1. To investigate the opinion of the meaning of employability for students and stakeholders within the field of HE
2. To understand the impact of employability skills and the role and influences of various forms of capital
3. To investigate the response of employer and staff stakeholders, to students' opinion of employability
4. To interrogate the definition of skills within employability to understand the relative emphasis in an HE context.

## 1.7 Research design overview

A theoretical framework was used to analyse the purpose and function of employability for students (detailed in Chapter 2). This was developed from the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's (2004) research-based thinking tools for socio-analysis of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*. Based upon the analytical approach to the initial data, an expanded and contemporary view of capitals was required. This is supported by the application of the work of Tomlinson in relation to graduate capitals (Tomlinson, 2017a).

The research design is based upon an interpretivist approach using a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) method (detailed in chapters 3). Qualitative data was collected from students, employers and staff and the process and analytical approach is detailed in chapter 4.

Data was collected using the techniques of student focus groups and individual interviews, from which data was analysed to generate a set of questions posed to represent the student voice, to employers and members of staff from the University of Salford Business School. Employers and staff were then asked to respond to the student views to establish a further understanding of the student voice. Students were recruited from the undergraduate cohort and employers were selected from those that have an established relationship with the business school. Staff were selected from the business school who have a role in teaching employability curricula. All participants were asked to volunteer for the study.

A critique of qualitative research includes the issue of transparency. Bryman (2012:405) suggests that it can be difficult to establish what the researcher *actually* did and how they arrived at the study's conclusions. There can also be difficulties surrounding participant selection criteria and the process of analysis. For this study both aspects were addressed collecting data from volunteers and with the use of QSR NVivo software for the analysis to aid the tracking and enhance the clarity of the findings, discussion and conclusion presentation (chapters 5, 6 and 7).

Four data sets in total were collected and data analysis was completed using a multi-phased approach of initial and focused coding and analysis. This commenced with an initial coding of all the student-centred data, followed by the data collected from employers and staff. This was undertaken following the process detailed in chapter



4, leading to the development of a theory to address the research questions that is grounded in the data.

#### **1.7.1 Location of study**

The case study institution for this PhD was University of Salford, which is an HE institution that attained a Royal Charter in 1967. The University of Salford developed from the late nineteenth century Royal Technical Institute, located within the North West of England.

With a tradition of training and educating the local workforce, Salford continues to have a strong track record of providing access to education for under-represented groups (Molyneaux, *et al.*, 2017). In line with the whole HE sector, the University of Salford has grown significantly over recent years and now has approximately 20,000 students with 42% of the population coming from widening participation backgrounds. Widening participation backgrounds in this case include those entrants from schools and colleges, lower socio-economic groups and low participation neighbourhoods. The proportion of widening participation is relatively high compared to other institutes (University of Salford, 2017).

Widening participation (WP) is a UK Government strategic policy for the higher education sector. WP aims to address the discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups by increasing the participation from traditionally under-represented groups. A policy review of HE is detailed in the literature review (section 2.2), WP is highlighted here as a key feature of the case study institution, and therefore an overview provides contextual support for the study.

Policies for WP were just one of several changes in the HE sector which resulted from the expansion of HE implemented over a number of years from the mid-twentieth century. Such changes by the UK Government were aimed at developing an education and skills base that was competitive for the economy. It was the Dearing report (Dearing, 1997) which is considered to have influenced the change in HE policy, ultimately resulting in the development of the WP make-up of the student population that was seen at the University of Salford during the study period.

The main focus of concern for Dearing (1997) was to tackle low expectations and achievement to promote progression into both further and higher education. The

groups targeted by the Dearing report (1997) included women, ethnic minority groups, lower participation neighbourhoods, first generation to consider HE and students from different socio-economic groups (i.e. non-professional and managerial groups). Under-represented groups also included mature students from all the groups listed. Questions have remained over a number of years to address fair access and participation for tertiary education for the socially or economically disadvantaged, and are now connected to the employability agenda by the nature of the changing labour markets and economic globalisation (David, 2009).

The Dearing report (1997:106) stipulated that it wished 'to see participation widened and the differentials between groups reduced significantly over the coming years.' The reports stated aim was for HEI's to commit to WP and to develop robust strategies for doing so. Policies for widening participation were an attempt to influence the diversity of the student population for which HE has responded with pedagogies and practices accordingly including new kinds of entry qualifications.

The University of Salford took up this challenge to develop policies and practices with a series of initiatives to develop WP across the institute. The main focus for the vision included 'approaches to student recruitment, retention and success and in parallel our strategies for enhancing employability, supporting enterprise, developing a real-world relevant curriculum and ensuring our focussed research has real impact' (University of Salford, 2017).

The work within the University to support WP includes school and college outreach programmes to target local high schools with learners from under-represented groups to deliver aspiration-raising activities both on and off campus. Such action includes specific programmes to target black and ethnic minority groups (BME). This is combined with collaboration with various educational networks operating to manage success, retention, progression and outreach activities. More broadly the University is a member of UK partnerships, a Regional Partnership Network of Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges with the aim of making the HE programme portfolio more accessible to local communities and harder-to-reach groups.

In terms of pedagogy the actions with respect to WP include teaching developments for flexible study and support programmes such as 'skills for

learning', alongside teaching and support service activities across each of the individual schools.

An element of the stated vision for the university is 'By pioneering exceptional industry partnerships we will lead the way in real world experiences preparing students for life' (University of Salford, 2017). In support of this, several changes within the institution structure have taken place to accommodate its position and HE role. For example a new role of a Dean for Students has been created in order to focus upon student engagement and manage the need for greater student responsiveness (University of Salford, 2017). The leaders of the university recognise the relative low access to social capital of the student intake. Consequently employability and how it is understood by such students is of key importance, therefore making the University of Salford an ideal institution to base the study upon.

In addition to the growth of this institution and the HE sector, at the same time we see an expansion in B&M education courses (sometimes referred to as business and administration), which are described as semi-vocational with variation in job content and context (HESA, 2019). This study is an examination of the meaning of employability for students within HE, who are currently studying a range of bachelor's degree business and management programmes, with Salford Business School.

Across the twelve B&M degree programmes, all students undertake a professional development module as part of their studies. The level 5 module is compulsory and aims to develop competencies, attributes, knowledge and attitudes in students so that they develop confidence and competence in identifying and addressing their own employability needs and goals. Each student followed a typical labour market recruitment process via a constructively aligned learning, teaching and assessment experience. Every student was provided with a live job description appropriate to their course, they were then required to complete eight typical recruitment processes, and assessed throughout, where real-time individual feedback was provided. The recruitment processes included for example, a self-assessment, creation of a CV and culminates with an individual panel interview. The module was delivered in collaboration between academics, careers services colleagues and external stakeholders (Procter and Harvey, 2018). This particular employability

framework was designed and implemented based upon the recommendations of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) 'Defining and developing your approach to employability: a framework for higher education institutions' (Cole and Tibby, 2013).

## **1.8 Structure of the PhD thesis**

The diagram below represents the structure of the document and the flow of this study to date. The pattern and shape are a means to represent the interconnections between the central tenet of the research questions and the research processes that contribute to the interpretive nature of this study. The design, along with the research model, illustrated in chapter 2, is a map to guide both the research and readers of this thesis. The purpose is to demonstrate that from an interpretive grounded theory standpoint, the questions and the theoretical contribution development resulted from the concurrent collection of data (primary empirical and secondary literature) and its analysis.

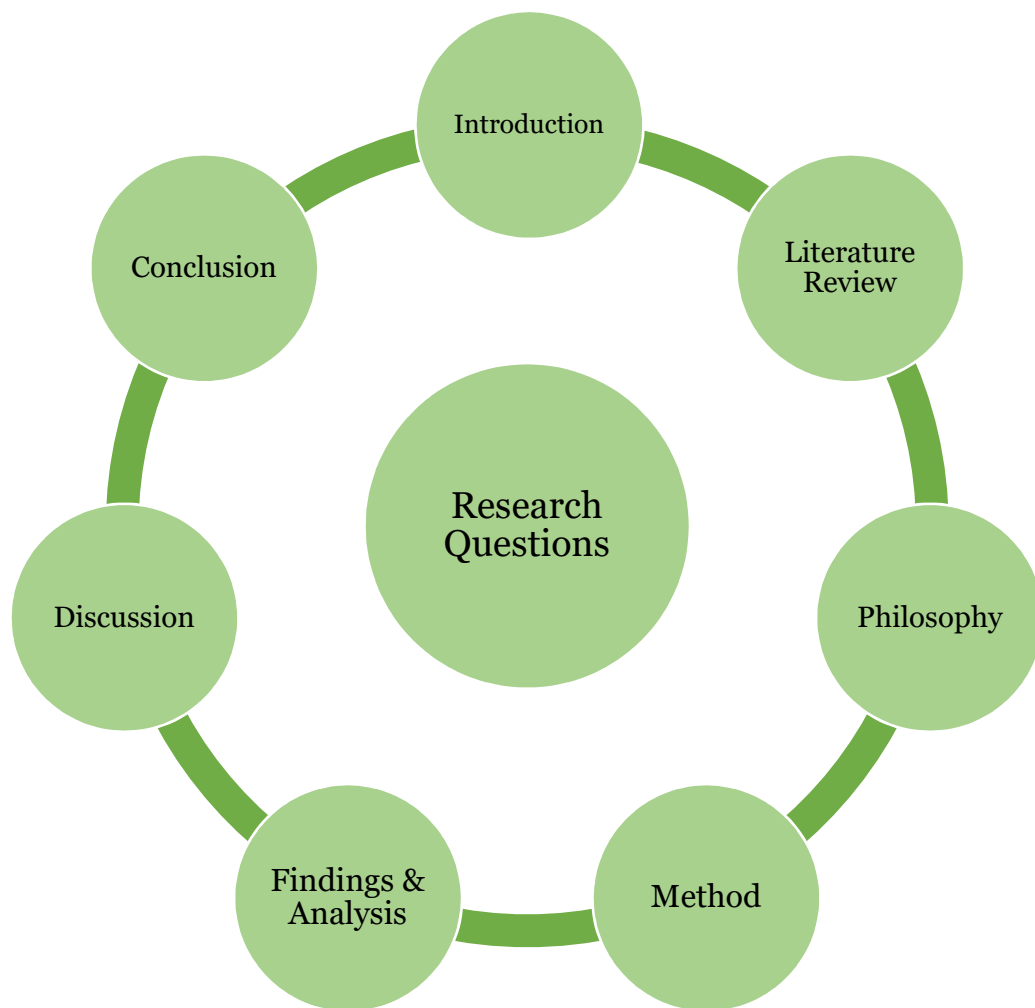


Figure 1-2 Structure and flow of the PhD thesis

### 1.8.1 Chapter outline

Chapter 1 – This introductory chapter sets out the purpose and key themes of the thesis. It provides an overview of the research questions, intended direction, position and actions of the research.

Chapter 2 – The literature review includes details of the pertinent literature that has been reviewed to date, and from which the theoretical frameworks has been developed.

Chapter 3 – Philosophy: A chapter that details the philosophical considerations and basis for the research. This chapter includes an explanation of the motivation and values of the research, considered to be crucial in the conduct of the study (Walsham, 2006).

Chapter 4 – Research Methods: This chapter covers all the pertinent details regarding the methods and research design that have been applied in the production of this thesis. This chapter also addresses issues of validity, reliability and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 – Findings and Analysis: This chapter provides an in-depth presentation of the analysis from the findings of the empirical data. Four data sets were collected, and the results are presented in relation to the research questions.

Chapter 6 – Discussion: This chapter addresses the key findings and connects them to the relevant literature to present the substantive theories resulting from the research.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion: This concluding chapter completes the thesis by setting out the contribution to knowledge. The chapter also provides an assessment of the thesis aims, theoretical contribution, limitations and potential future research.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this thesis is to establish the student voice in relation to employability. In order to do this it is important to establish the influences and current thinking in relation to employability in order to develop a theoretical framework to meet the objectives of the thesis.

With the increasing emphasis within Higher Education Institutions (HEI) upon employability, tension is created due to competing agendas. There is a significant body of literature that relates to employability. This is exemplified by a single study from the Higher Education Academy (HEA)<sup>1</sup> which undertook a review of 187 pieces of research from the period of 2012 to 2016 alone (Artess *et al.*, 2017). The review of the literature for this thesis draws significantly from this period and draws attention to some older research to provide context and analysis for the study.

The following points highlight the significant issues raised from the HEA review (Artess *et al.*, 2017) that informs this research:

- There has been a significant amount of change within the landscape of Higher Education. Such change is continuous and there are multiple policy reviews
- There is a wide range of terminology or definitions surrounding employability
- The pressure placed upon HEI's to provide adequate support for student employability, but a lack of consensus as to how this should be done
- There is a lack of a clear student voice, the review revealed only limited evidence of student views of employability provision
- There is a consensus that there is value in engaging with employability
- There are several frameworks and models that attempt to measure the outcomes of graduate attributes and employability but these often focus upon graduate employment

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<sup>1</sup> The HEA became Advance HE in March 2018, following the merger of the Equality Challenge Unit, the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

- There is a major body of literature that addresses employability in relation to Business and Management degree programmes.

### **2.1.1 Literature review structure**

To fully evaluate the literature in relation to the concept of employability the review will be broadly divided into ‘supply-side’ and demand-side’ perspectives and factors. Due to the number of contexts for employability, the review will draw upon employment study research of Hillage and Pollard (1998) and McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) in order to make this distinction. Supply-side refers to the responsibilities of the individual-centred components of employability, whereby the emphasis is placed upon the individual to develop and demonstrate employability to gain employment. The topics in this case include employability for students and graduates. For the purposes of the literature review, HE is also considered as the supply-side, given the responsibility now placed upon it for developing employability with students.

Demand-side considers employability outcomes in the labour market and therefore the skills requirement or demands of employers. Traditionally speaking demand-side factors were those of labour market conditions, such as availability of jobs and macroeconomic conditions. However, the shift in focus towards employability factors from those of labour market conditions, has placed more importance on the skills required by employers (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

From a policy perspective there are several publications from Government, Government bodies or industry representative groups that have influenced changes that have developed in HE. The key driver of historical and current policy is included in this chapter. The HE sector has been transformed across many areas including the expansion of the number and type of tertiary institutes, changes to funding mechanisms, and regulatory changes to widening participation. Government policy in relation to skills in HE will also be examined in the literature review. This area will concentrate in particular at attempts at policy making to balance the skills needs for the UK between the supply and demand-side concerns.

Following from the policy review the significance and definitions of employability will be considered from both the supply and demand-side. This section will also consider employability inputs, in terms of actions taken by HE to address



employability for students. In this area, the literature draws upon key ideas that revolve around institutional needs or views from students and employers.

The focus upon employability has resulted in an increasing consideration upon forms of capital as resources that confer employability. The work of Bourdieu (1986) is drawn upon, having particular relevance with respect to capitals, education and social theory. The range of capitals examined is expanded by also drawing upon the graduate capital model of Tomlinson (2017a). Together this literature examines the influence of capitals in relation to employability. The final section of the review evaluates the relevance and application of the seminal work of Bourdieu in the formulation of the theoretical framework.

## **2.2 Higher Education Institutions - Policy and change**

There is an extensive literature that looks at educational reform, policy, and economic aspects within HE. The body of work also includes an examination of the politics and ideology of employability as applied to the field. The aim of this section is to highlight the key arguments that has placed employability as fundamental to HE that it has become a central policy issue for HEI and Government. It is not the intention to comment upon policy decisions, but rather to provide context to wider debates about the place of HE within society and its role in developing employability that have informed the need for this study.

Figure 2-1 highlights the main legislative and policy changes. The discussion will analyse the major changes that have relevance in this study, demonstrating that they have contributed to the increased focus and importance of employability within HE.

It is argued that the changes and the accelerated pace of change, particularly from the late 1980's onwards, can be attributed to the adoption of New Public Management (NPM). NPM was implemented as public sector reform to increase the efficiency and to enhance the effectiveness and performance of public organisations (Broucker *et al.*, 2015). NPM is the application of business methods that result in a public sector (and therefore the HE sector), which is cheaper, more efficient, and more responsive to its 'customers' (Pollitt and Dan, 2011). Adopted by the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher and continuing with John Major, implementation of NPM principles has involved cutting budgets and tightening

controls, creating internal competition, and introducing monitoring mechanisms (Shattock, 2008).

The literature review begins with an overview of the key government HE initiatives that have taken place over an extended period. This section will evaluate the policy and change that has seen increasing focus upon employability and emphasis seen within HE. An examination of the literature with respect to business and management education will also be included in this section.

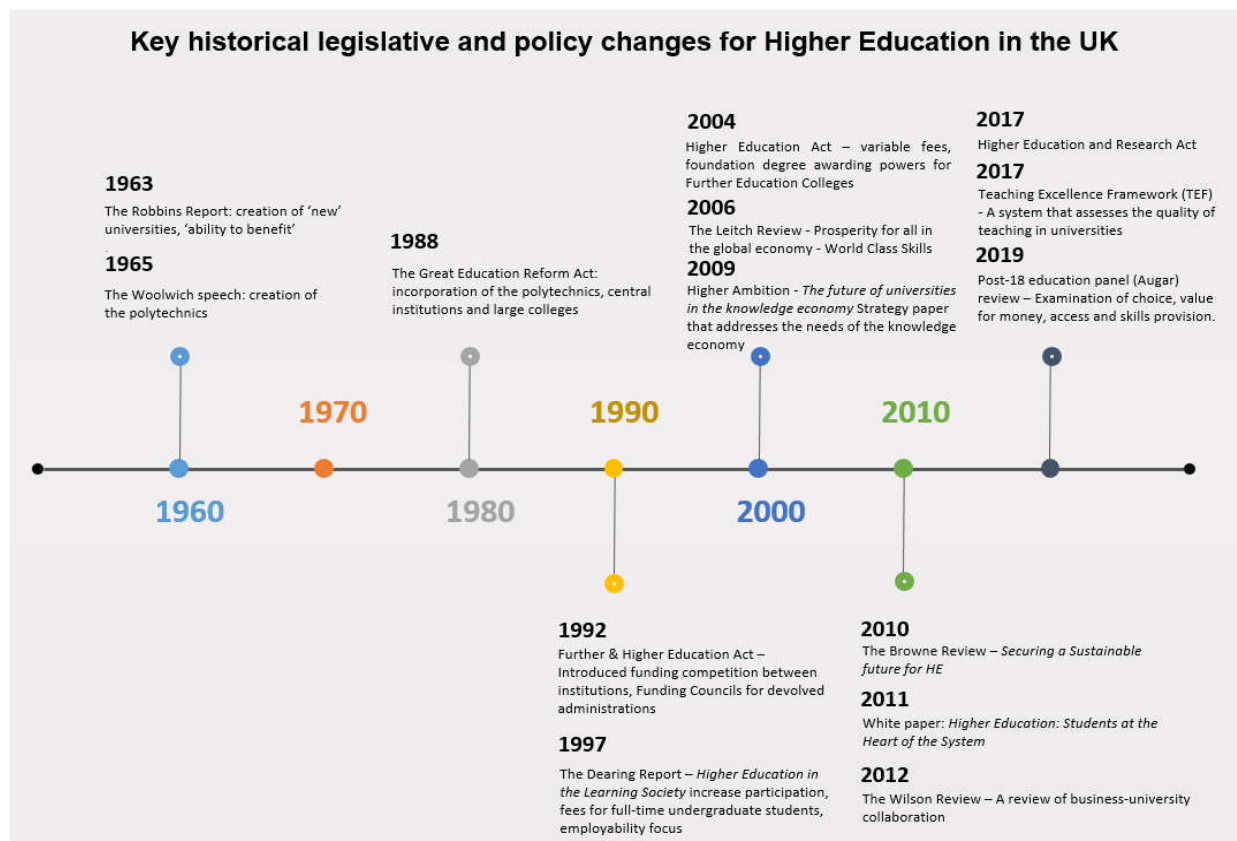


Figure 2-1 Key historical legislative and policy changes for Higher Education in the UK *adapted from* Barr (2014:42)

### 2.2.1 Higher Education expansion – The Robbins Report (1963)

Here in the UK, since the mid 1960's there has been periodic change which has paved the way to the development of the current employability agenda for the whole HE sector.

It could be argued that the expansion of the HE system was a result of the bipartisan commissioning of the Dearing report (1997) 'Higher Education in the learning society' (Dearing, 1997). In fact, the roots of expansion are seen from as early as

1963. In 1963 the Robbins report provided evidence and strongly argued for the expansion of higher education (Robbins, 1963). This led to the creation of ‘new’ universities to ensure that all who were qualified and wished to enter should be able to do so (i.e. that the supply of places should expand to meet qualified demand) (Barr, 2014). As a result, Robbins transformed the notion of restricted access, with arguments based upon the then very latest ideas of socio-economic human-capital and ‘skill-based technological change’ (Barr, 2014: xxiii).

In keeping with this vision of Robbins for mass education and therefore competitiveness of the country, is a dependency on the development of a large, high-quality system of higher education. This was supported by evidence gathered for the Robbins report that suggested there would be growing demand for graduate labour, allowing more people to think about going to university (Barr, 2014:16). As the London School of Economics (LSE) later commented, one of the UK’s great strengths has been its system of higher education, an outcome largely based on the Robbins expansion (Barr, 2014).

The vision of mass education was not without its opposition (The Times, 1966) but the advice from the Robbins report stated that the majority of new universities or institutions chosen for the granting of university status should be in or near large centres of population (Robbins, 1963:163). Such ideas were supported by the proposition that HEIs influence not only the students, but they also have an important role to play in the general cultural life of the communities in which they are situated (Robbins, 1963:265). Cities like Salford could therefore benefit from the outcome of the report. In February 1967 the Royal College of Advanced Technology (which was established in 1896) became the University of Salford when Her Majesty the Queen handed over the Royal Charter (University of Salford, n.d.).

### **2.2.2 Expansion in Business & Management degree programmes**

The rationale from policymakers for expansion, in this semi-vocational area of education is twofold. Firstly, there was a need ‘to service high-skill labour requirements of a knowledge economy’ and secondly to increase education and employment opportunities for under-represented groups (Wilton, 2011). Expectations following from both the Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997) reports, determined those who were to benefit from the changes include women, mature

students, minority ethnic groups and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

According to research from Wilton (2011:87), 'B&M students are more likely to be drawn from sections of society targeted by the widening participation agenda', and it is argued B&M graduates would be 'well placed to exploit the opportunities described by advocates of HE expansion'. As a direct consequence of these policy changes, there has been a notable expansion in HE entrants to B&M programmes (HESA, 2019).

The resultant parallel expansion of B&M education meant that by the early 1990s, 84 universities offered undergraduate courses. As an example, in 1992 124,000 full-time undergraduate and post-graduate students were studying business or finance (Danieli and Thomas, 1999). This led to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to report at that time 'management and business studies is now one of the largest areas of tuition in the UK' (ESRC, 1994:1).

The number of B&M studies students has continued to grow for several years. This is illustrated by figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2019). From 2006-07 they accounted for 11% of all undergraduates (204,815 students), growing to 14% in 2012/13 and remaining at this level in 2017/18 (with a total of 342,973 students). At the University of Salford, the number of undergraduate enrolments is no less significant with 11% of its student body (2,355 students) studying these degree programmes, meaning that the Business School has one of the largest student populations across the university faculties.

### **2.2.3 Expansion of business & management - Skills**

Polytechnic institutes providing a wider range of degree level vocational education were created in 1965. Historically speaking this change not only supported the expansion aims of the 'physical' system but also allowed further mass education opportunities.

Rapid expansion also increased the provision of vocational subject areas and this is particularly true in relation to business and management education. In 1960 there was a limited post-graduate business administration offering with barely any evidence at the undergraduate level (Danieli and Thomas, 1999). This changed with

the advent of the ‘newer’ universities and polytechnics and since then, provision has also increased in ‘older’ universities (Wilton, 2008:143).

The *Education Reform Act 1988* sought to address many areas from across all levels of education including that of HE funding. Referred to as the ‘Great’ Education Reform Act (1988), or even the ‘Baker Act’ it was ushered in by the Education Secretary Kenneth Baker during a period dominated by the forces of neoliberalism (Gillard, 2018b). The policy emphasis of the time was upon cost reduction, privatisation and deregulation, the public sector was not excluded from the impact of this stance (Jones, 2003:107).

The key results of the 1988 Act were firstly the incorporation of polytechnics, allowing them to become independent financial institutions, as was already the case for universities. However it was not until 1991 that the new education secretary, Kenneth Clarke abolished the binary system, granting university status to all polytechnics.

Arguments over the reason behind the above changes are basically two-fold, ideological and financial. From an ideological perspective Kogan and Hanney (2000) argue that Kenneth Clark was ‘horse-trading’ with the polytechnic principles for vocational education, whereas Readings (1996) suggests that the move served to enhance an ‘excellence’ model, imitating the United States model of Higher Education. Financially speaking, Readings (1996) and Ward (2014:101) conclude the moves signal government control through market forces, stemming from the policies of the conservative Government of the time. The critique suggests that the binary system was not removed for egalitarian reasons, but rather to implement controls of the HE grant allocation system.

All the sources cited here admit that the funding of HE and the newly expanded system had become complicated. The effect of the Baker/Clarke system was to halve the amount of funding available per student (Barr, 2014).

#### **2.2.4 Expansion for widening participation**

The pledge in 1997 from former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair was that half of all young people should go on to higher education (Adam, 2017). Despite changes in Government over the period, by the time of the 2010 Browne review, 45% of people between the ages of 18 and 30 entered HE, up from 39% a decade ago. This

figure had reached 49% in 2017, although not quite meeting the timescales originally set out, the current Conservative Government claims this to be a successful indicator of the continued support for widening participation (Adam, 2017; ONS, 2017b).

Despite widening participation and an increasing number of graduates, the evidence presented by Wilton (2011) suggests employers prefer graduates from old-universities rather than ones from new-universities. This leads Wilton (2011:97) to conclude that employability skills cannot overcome unequal labour market opportunity, bringing into question the efficacy of employability development agendas. Thus, despite an overall expansion of HE, research suggests a noteworthy influence of employers upon social mobility, limited due to employer preferences for particular graduate types. This leads Lee (2016) to conclude that expansion has not created the greater social mobility or enhanced employability anticipated.

Returning to the debate as to what employability skills might be, the research highlights a 'lack of fit' between transferrable skills compared to those most used in employment (Wilton, 2008:156). From a student perspective, it may be the case that they are not served by B&M programmes that focus upon academic skills (research and written communication) rather than education in developing workplace management skills. Jackson (2012) concurs with this point suggesting that the pedagogical basis of employability frameworks do not adequately challenge students in skills and capability development.

The case is made for a reconsideration of the supply-side of the labour market by placing some responsibility upon the demand-side with employers creating more high-quality jobs that can be accessed by all (Wilton, 2011:98). This point may allow employers to clarify what employability skills really are required from graduates to overcome inconsistencies between employer wish lists and their recruitment processes (Jackson, 2012:354).

The work of Wilton and Jackson is of relevance to this study since the type of institutions and participants are similar in this study. Their work highlights the potential impact of the policy changes that have occurred.

Empirical research from Wilton (2008; 2011) for example, suggest common findings that the link between employment and employability is not

straightforward. Differences lie not just in the definition of employability between employers and educators but concern employer criticisms of a lack of ‘work-readiness’ and employability skills from graduates of B&M education.

Even where graduates report the development of the skills often demanded by employers’, evidence suggests that the entrenched proclivity for certain types of graduates in the labour market (Wilton, 2011:97). The different views of employability represents a considerable obstacle for the supply-side of new graduates.

#### **2.2.5 Changes in HE funding and finance**

Several sources such as Gillard (2017) and Barr (2014) suggest the significance of the changes the Robbins report instigated for HE cannot be underestimated. However, whilst addressing restricted access, the report did not serve to transform the finance of higher education to pay for the expansion.

Only six years after the report was published, the economic impact of the changes were being questioned. Expansion of university places had doubled, along with the expansion of existing institutes, exceeding the Robbins target. This is critically and succinctly summarised by an article in The Economist magazine from April 1969 (The Economist, 1969). The article comments that due to the significant success of the ‘emergency’ university expansion, it was time to begin looking further into the future and planning for HE. The Economist (1969) examines both the estimation of student numbers entering the overall system of further and higher education, arguing for Britain to avoid lagging other countries in its provision. In making the point about systems of provision that met demand the article points towards the significant financial demands that were now evident. The operating costs of universities were set to continue to increase, which they suggest, was a dilemma for a centrally funded system.

To overcome the pitfalls of success, The Economist (1969) suggested modifications of the overall system of provision. Perhaps the magazines thinking was ahead of its time, suggesting a change in intuitional powers, including those for awarding degrees. However, awarding powers for further education institutes was introduced much later in 2004 (see Figure 2-1). Based upon their reasoning The Economist cautioned against the introduction of student loans, stating:

‘But to replace grants by student loans would of course discriminate against girls and poor students, who would be less ready to face the prospect of repayment. There is still no easy answer to this difficulty while Britain is not geared to the provision of reasonably paid vacation jobs - in the way that government and industry are in the United States.’

The Economist (1969:13).

From this point in time, there is a prevailing argument concerning tertiary sector change leading to social and cultural gaps of inequality that may result in limitations of access to HE based upon financial restrictions. Sources of such arguments originate from both academia and social commentary.

The *Further and Higher Education 1992* began to address funding and the increasing costs of HE. The act ended the 'binary divide' between the universities and other providers by making them all 'higher education corporations', essentially an action that doubled the number of universities in the UK (Gillard, 2018a). The newly created Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFC) was set up to manage HE funding and to sustain a ‘world leading system of higher education’ (HEFCE, 2018).

Only a few years later the cost of expansion had led to turmoil in terms of funding, and concern was raised by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (now Universities UK). As a result the Conservative Government commissioned the Dearing report, which was published in 1997, shortly after a Labour Party landslide general election victory (Birch, 2017). Aside from a focus upon ‘key skills’ (discussed in the next section), Dearing recommended the introduction of tuition fees for full time undergraduate students, paving the way for ‘a new funding regime which was aligned with the philosophy that market regulation was the most effective way to ensure efficiency and quality.’ (Birch, 2017). The Dearing (1997:100) report is also considered to have had a significant impact in terms of mass education.

After much controversy, The Higher Education Act 2004, narrowly passed through parliament (Gillard, 2018b). The cause of the controversy was the new legislation that allowed universities to charge variable fees (of up to £3,000 per year). However, the Government determined that there was significant under-investment



and decisions were required to ‘put the universities and student finance system on a sustainable basis’ (DfES, 2003).

In an attempt to develop a 10-15 year strategy for HE, the report *Higher Ambition – The future of universities in the knowledge economy* was published (BIS, 2009). Although the report signalled commitment to widening participation and fair access, along with developing skills for ‘knowledge economy demand’, there remained a significant focus upon resources. In other words the financing of HE would need to have ‘the greatest return in excellence and social and economic benefit’ (BIS, 2009:4).

From the numerous developments set out in the *Higher Ambitions* framework, Peter (Lord) Mandelson commissioned an independent review into the beneficiaries of HE, i.e. taxpayers, students, and the private sector. The Browne review ‘*Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*’ resulted with actions to alter the financial caps placed upon tuition fees and the expansion of the student loan system (Browne, 2010). The Browne report further embedded the importance of HE providing support employability, suggesting an institute’s ability to provide employability support is key to improved student choice and prosperity (Browne, 2010:31).

The Browne review sparked yet more policy revisions and white papers. Such events resulted from the formation of a coalition Government and they aimed to create a diverse and competitive higher education system. Most notably a white paper (and later, impact assessment) published reforms to tackle three challenges. *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011) was intended to create further financial sustainability, widen participation and sustain a higher quality HE sector (BIS, 2015a). This particular overhaul was intended to ensure HEIs ‘provide innovative, high quality learning’ through the introduction of market competition to the sector, couched in terms of improving the student experience (HEFCE, 2014; BIS, 2015b).

It appears to be the case that a sustainable funding model has not yet been found for HE as the Government has commissioned another review of post-18 education and funding, headed up by Dr Phillip Augar (Department For Education, 2018). The remit of this review is a focus upon choice and competition across the sector, access for all, skills, and value for money. Once again, the economic aspect of education is

under scrutiny, following the ideology that HE supports economic value. The post-18 review remit focussed upon ‘future-proofing the economy by making sure we have a post-18 education system that is providing the skills that employers need’.

Delays in publication highlight the financial significance of this review as it has been suggested any recommendations should be considered as part of a spending review (Morgan, 2019). The report was finally published in May 2019, with over 50 recommendations suggesting a cut in student fees, changes to the funding system and a renewed skills focus (Department for Education, 2019). Implementation of the recommendations are uncertain due to the current changes in Government leadership and Brexit focus.

### **2.2.6 Government skills policy and HE**

As seen from the previous section, a great deal of focus has been placed upon the funding and financing of HE. The overview above suggests that policies for skills development were recommended in various reports, but the impact has perhaps been eclipsed by financial constraints that became a major focus of all Governments. This section will highlight two reviews that were commissioned with a remit to impact upon skills policy in HE.

Developing skills was the ambition set out within the 2006 Leitch Review – ‘*Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills*’ (Leitch, 2006). The scope of the report was to look across both the broad adult education sector and industry (post-16 education and workplace training) to identify the ‘UK’s optimal skills mix in 2020 to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice’ (Leitch, 2006:1).

The key finding from the report, which is relevant to this study, focuses on the supply and demand-side of skills between education establishments and employers. Analysis from the report states that ‘previous approaches to delivering skills have been too ‘supply driven’, based on the Government planning supply to meet ineffectively articulated employer demand’ (Leitch, 2006:12). This has led to poor allocation of resources to meet the skills needs in the UK for it to be globally and sustainably competitive. Leitch therefore recommends a move to a ‘simplified’ demand led system wherein ‘employers and individuals have a strong and coherent voice’ (Leitch, 2006:17). With the cooperation of employers, Leitch also

recommends that the Government provide the bulk of the funding for basic skills and the platform for employability for skills.

In consideration of the HE sector, Leitch concludes that universities must work to develop relationships with employers to improve course inputs to ensure outcomes meet the skills objectives set out in the review. The HE participation target of 50% is insufficient in international terms and has not been met (detailed in 2.2.4), therefore Leitch suggests that a focus upon participation rather than attainment has contributed to the gap for high level skills identified in his report (Leitch, 2006:67).

For HE to contribute to the overall aim of ‘world-class skills’, the report recommends a number of actions for the sector. Firstly, HE needs to develop direct relationships to engage with employers to develop high-level skills in the workforce, alongside a simplified network of skills advisory bodies. In doing so there should be a shift in focus from full-time, undergraduate degrees to a more flexible range of provision. The growth of HE would therefore come from a broader range of the population (i.e. older people) entering HE, fitting with a broader skills strategy. The Leitch review recommends the Government funds vocational courses (including apprenticeships) be accompanied with targets for HE to increase focus on workforce development rather than just participation.

Overall, changes since 2006 seem to build upon the intention to increase employability, flexibility and economic competitiveness as driven by the neo-liberal agenda (THE, 2007; Burke, 2008). Barrie (2006) suggests that the resultant changes within HEI themselves are not only a response to Government policy but also to the demands of society and as a result HEI are required to redefine their purpose and role.

The Wilson Review (2012), follows the theme of increased collaboration with businesses. The approach of Wilson continues to emphasise universities role as ‘supply-side’ entities, emphasising the economic value placed on contribution of the HE sector. The first point made in the report, Wilson (2012:1) states ‘Universities are an integral part of the supply chain to business—a supply chain that has the capability to support business growth and therefore economic prosperity.’ Wilson states that to attain excellence in the supply chain, universities capacity in the ‘landscape of collaboration’ must improve to align with business needs.

Wilson is adamant that the reputation of the HE sector depends on such actions, demonstrable through attracting students in the marketplace in informing ‘student choice’ (Wilson, 2012:2). It is suggested that this can be achieved by setting out a mission with ‘strategies to ensure the development and recording of students’ employability, enterprise, and entrepreneurial skills’ (Wilson, 2012:2). To ensure the change is incentivised, monitoring and reporting of outcomes should be coordinated by HEFCE (Wilson, 2012:67).

The report recognises issues with the ‘demand-side’ of the labour supply chain. Wilson (2012:3) identified two issues of relevance. Firstly the review considered the misalignment between graduate aspiration and the number of jobs available in the corporate sector. Secondly, linked to graduate jobs, are concerns about equality in recruitment processes, which although rigorous do not result in a diverse workforce.

A common refrain from the demand-side is ‘Graduates of today just don’t have the necessary skills to meet the needs of business today’. The answer of Wilson (and Leitch) is to recommend that HE build upon the good practice, avoid development in isolation and develop further collaboration with business for the best skills outcomes. Some of the practices that Wilson considered to be of value will be examined in further detail in the subsequent supply-side and demand-side sections of the literature review. These include models and frameworks for developing employability in curriculum. However, one of the key recommendations of relevance in the changing policy landscape is the need to develop employability skills via formal work placement or internships. Convinced by the evidence of value in terms of academic performance, employability skills and opportunities (e.g. CBI/UUK, 2009; Mason *et al.*, 2009), the Wilson review recommends that every undergraduate should have the opportunity to undertake a university-approved work placement or internship. Again, a collaborative approach increasing these opportunities should be developed, along with removing barriers allowing students to participate. Barriers include costs, so adjustments to fees to accommodate sandwich years were encouraged.

Following from the Wilson review, the coalition government produced a white paper response to the findings, ‘*Following up the Wilson Review*’, acknowledging the recommendations (BIS, 2012). The white paper draws a parallel between the values in the Wilson review, in terms of the skills and knowledge universities provide to

society as expressed by Robbins almost 50 years earlier (BIS, 2012;3). This latest white paper also connected to the impact assessment of *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011), once again reiterating the need to maintain financial sustainability and continuing with widening participation.

For the CIPD the importance of the UK's skills base has always been key to the work they undertake. Critique of Government skills policy was published by the CIPD (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017). Professional bodies play a key role since they sit between the supply and demand-sides in relation to skills provision and are ideally placed to comment on development issues.

The CIPD report concluded that, despite the recommendation of the likes of the Leitch report and other policy changes, urgent reform was still needed. For the UK to have a workforce that is competitive in a fast- changing world, skills and capabilities are vital to economic sustainability and growth (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017:2). The CIPD are concerned that if focus remains with the supply-side, the country and business will not be able to meet the technological advances and the challenges of an ageing workforce.

In the view of CIPD the goals set out in the Leitch report should have been effective. However, due a combination of change fatigue, the 2008 financial crisis and changing priorities for the Coalition Government in 2010, implementation of Leitch had disappointing results (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017:6).

The CIPD suggests the following points are of concern (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017:6)

- Too much priority has been given to expanding HE, with qualifications rather than skills being the main outcome
- At the same time there has been a substantial decline in employer training and investments in cash terms and effort, it is suggested that 'employers deploying large numbers of graduates in non-graduate jobs as a cheaper alternative to investing in intermediate skills'
- Lifelong learning is a major objective of education and skills policy in both the UK, EU, and the OECD. Lifelong learning is defined as ongoing formal and informal participation in education and training. The UK lags the EU

with participation rates declining since 2008. As a result, life-long learning should be promoted.

- Lifelong learning is a feature of international policy. The international Labour Organisation (ILO) states employers have responsibility to support in this area ‘to help maintain productivity and employability in the face of change.’ (ILO, 2011:23). The ILO in its latest report on the future of work and skills recommends ‘universal entitlement to lifelong learning [that] enables people to acquire skills and to reskills and upskill’ (ILO, 2019).
- Poor stability from the Government has contributed to the lack of coherent progress that the CIPD illustrates in its report. The CIPD therefore suggests that policy be more consistent and coherent, with political responsibility remaining in a single department ‘rather than being bounced around’ (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017).

#### **2.2.7 Higher Education competition and marketisation**

The most significant regulatory changes arrived in the form of the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, impacting upon funding body administration, with the abolition of HEFCE, for example. The structural changes to the institutional and competitive landscape, also allowed private sector establishments degree-awarding powers. The 2017 act also introduced new metrics to measure the quality of teaching in the form of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The changes were reasoned by the Minister of State at the time, Jo Johnson, as ‘introducing more competition and informed choice into higher education, we will deliver better outcomes and value for students, employers and the taxpayers who underwrite the system.’ (BIS, 2016:8). As a result of these changes concerns were raised by the NUS about the relationships between measured teaching quality and rises in tuition fees, as marketisation of HE (NUS, 2016).

#### **2.2.8 Employability focus in HE - The Dearing Report (1997)**

Returning to 1997, the New Labour government had a policy to widen participation and attempted to construct HE to enhance employability, entrepreneurship, economic competitiveness and flexibility (Burke, 2008). As discussed, the implementation of the Dearing report introduced tuition fees and the massification of HE, however skills was a major focus to the commission. The introduction of

tuition fees was a response to a funding crisis at the time, which had arisen from the expansion of the HE system.

The Dearing report in effect ushered in the era of employability focus and remains widely cited today in terms of 'key skills' development, graduate employability and the role that HE has in supporting students in this area. Dearing recommended that HE should focus on skills which were the 'key to the future success of graduates whatever they intend to do in later life' (1997:133). The report also recognised the changing labour markets, considering the shift towards 'knowledge workers', changing career structures, fluid working patterns and new jobs.

At the time, the Dearing report highlighted skills such as written and spoken communication, basic computer literacy and team working, all of which have been highlighted as 'key' employability skills in government policy (Dearing, 1997). The promotion of the development of 'key skills' came with a clear rationale: to support a 'knowledge-intensive economy', that is highly skilled to ensure national competitiveness, therefore providing justification for the continued expansion of the graduate labour supply (Wilton, 2008).

From the changes subsequently implemented, Tomlinson (2017) surmised that HEI's were now under scrutiny to support graduate economic potential, with an economically-centred policy for education. This resulted in a 'supply-side' attention of the labour market where the expansion of a competitive HE sector transformed into a mass system that is focused upon skills-based and vocationally- aligned curricula (Tomlinson, 2017:3).

Many academics agree with Tomlinson and Holmes (2017), that the Dearing report made explicit the need for HE to enhance 'employability' skills, which subsequently has resulted in a plethora of initiatives (supported with increased investment) for improving the employability of graduates (Wilton, 2011:91). It was also stated there should be diversity of provision of higher education (Dearing 1997:252), suggesting that HE is key to economic prosperity and social mobility.

Converging with the expansion of HE, there was an economic ideology in the promotion of business and management education as a means of addressing a growing demand for professional managers (Wilson, 2001). Despite this action there has been criticism and lobbying from employers that the graduate labour

supply lacks ‘work-readiness’. Yet despite concerns, B&M undergraduate education continues to expand, alongside a growing appetite for B&M programmes among HE entrants (Wilton, 2008).

### **2.3 Definitions and conceptual concerns of employability**

As stated, the approach to the literature is broadly along the lines of supply-side and demand-side of high-level skills for the labour market. This section will begin with an examination of the definitions and aspects of concern in the HE and supply-side of employability before moving on to the employers or demand-side.

In navigating the definition problem, it is also important to recognise the bridge between public policy and institutional practices. Rich (2015) provides some clarification by distinguishing employment (labour market status) from employability (skills and preparedness) within the institutional and public policy discourses. Only by recognising this point and the plurality of factors that contribute to a conceptualisation of employability, will it be possible to enhance its value and develop suitable interventions over the longer term (Williams *et al.*, 2016: 878). Separating employment from employability is a stable platform from which to begin.

The definition of employability has shifted throughout history but appears to be based upon the premise of two key effects, broadly seen as a demand-side or a supply-side perspective on employability. The term originates from the particular circumstances of World War II, when employability was merely described as whether people were available for work (Gazier, 1999). Subsequently, the position developed by researchers and policy makers, suggests a demand-side, i.e. an employer concern, which is focused upon individuals to develop skills and capability to *do* a job. Skills to *do* a job are defined from the differing needs of the employer and may be developed through or by them. Whereas a focus upon the supply-side concept of employability concerns skills and attributes to *get* a job. Skills to *get* a job, concern individual ‘capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required’ through possessed assets of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Hillage and Pollard, 1998:1).

Although the concept of ‘employability’ has existed for over a century it remains contested and debated across local, national and global labour markets (Gazier,



1998b; McQuaid *et al.*, 2005). Despite such debate, it remains a core element of governmental labour market policies in the UK, Europe and beyond. Indeed it is also subject to promotion by the OECD and even the United Nations (UN) (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

The central concern for employability is underlined via the signatories of the European Union states (EU) to the Bologna Process, argued by Sin and Neave (2016) as placing employability as an ambitious and shared goal. The Bologna Process is a series of agreements that allowed for the creation of the European Higher Education Area in 1999. Its purpose is to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications. For all member countries, which currently includes the UK, the main goal is to increase staff and students' mobility and to facilitate employability (EHEA, n.d.). Although the Bologna Process provides agreement in principle, Sin and Neave (2016) argue that there are misunderstandings by stakeholders of the employability definition, significance, or implementation methods.

Even with the emphasis placed upon employability, no additional understanding or clarity was added, 'it merely registered the changing dynamic between higher education and the labour market that had already occurred over the past decades' (Sin and Neave, 2016:1448). Adding to the problem of pinning down employability as an actionable concept, in the time taken to develop the Bologna Process, the way 'was left open for varied understandings across stakeholder groups to flourish.' (Sin and Neave, 2016:1448). Employability was interpreted in the light of each interest group's concerns; Sin and Neave (2016) therefore claim that employability took on the characteristics of a 'floating signifier' i.e. acquiring different meanings, therefore having a nuanced impact upon policy development.

### **2.3.1 Higher Education - Supply-side employability**

Concerning the supply-side, relating to do a job or being employable is an orthodoxy that requires interaction with employers and the labour market for seeking out job opportunities. For the individual this includes transferable skills, motivation, and access to social capital components of employability. With a critical examination on the concepts of employability McQuaid and Lindsay (2005:205) assert that the supply-side thinking has been 'hollowed out' in many theoretical and policy discussions. They argue that focus has shifted towards the employability skills

possessed by the individual whilst ignoring the barriers to employment and the influence, responsibilities, and attitudes that employers may have. Given the analysis within the literature and the socially constructed positioning of this thesis, employability, it is argued, 'should be understood as being derived from, and affected by, individual characteristics and circumstances and broader, external (social, institutional and economic) factors that influence a person's ability to get a job' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005:206).

### **2.3.2 Definitions of employability - HE perspective**

In attempts to consider definitions therefore, Barrie (2006:217) contends that there is a bewildering array of terms that have emerged in describing student skills. Within the literature the description of skills may include 'transferable skills', 'generic skills', 'attributes' 'qualities', 'professional skills' and so on (Yorke, 2006; Biggs and Tang, 2007). Cranmer (2006:172) also gives a sense of this difficulty considering the 'woolly concept' of employability definitions from 'threshold skills' to a set of 'knowledge, skills and abilities' that are acquired from HE curricula. Some or all categories of 'skills' listed may be attributed to employability but this assumes an agreed definition, upon which some caution is urged by both Harvey (2005) and Yorke (2006). The reasoning of Harvey (2005:13), lies within a plethora of micro interpretations and probabilistic focus upon gaining employment rather than a process of enhancing abilities.

The discourse surrounding employability skills extends even further, as Wilson *et al* (2013) examines students understanding for professional development. Furthermore, Cummings (2010) presents the construct of 'conceptualised performance' as a means of combining the situational enactment of skills (e.g. high-level accomplishment, complex outcomes) along with situational settings (e.g. the laboratory, field workplace etc.). The attempt to move away from merely the classifying of skills, aims to provide enrichment to the debate surrounding the assessment of student capabilities. This approach however does add further complexity for defining employability.

As suggested, what colours the situation under consideration is the conflation and number of discourses that surround both employability and skills. Tomlinson (2012) identifies key themes including human capital, identity, positional conflict, skills, and social reproduction as dominant conceptual themes. Tymon (2013) states

that both ‘employability’ along with transferable skills are multidimensional and complex, particularly as they could be viewed differently from the perspectives of stakeholders such as students, graduates, universities, employers, policy-makers and even Government.

Guidance documentation created by Pegg *et al.* (2006) for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) considered the benefits to the individual, the community and the economy in a definition of employability:

‘Employability skills’ are those personal attributes that can be applied to gain and maintain employment. Employability skills therefore include a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes or competences that make students more likely to gain employment in their chosen occupations.’

Yorke (2004:410 *cited in* Pegg *et al.*, 2012)

Around the same time Harvey (2003:03) created a definition by stating that employability is not just about getting a job.

‘Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a current career. It is about learning, and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. The emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner.’

The academics Harvey and Yorke have both studied aspects of employability extensively and remain widely cited. It is from such work and the external increasing political pressure upon HEIs to concentrate resources on employability, that pedagogical approaches were developed. The influential definition here is:

‘A set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy.’

Yorke (2006:8)

The model of ‘Pedagogy for Employability’ was produced by Pegg *et al.* in 2006, and was developed from the work of Yorke (2006). This was followed by the work already described of Cole and Tibby (2013) for a framework to embed employability

into HE curricula. The HEA guidance proposed that such a definition could only be realised if student empowerment comes from a curriculum that develops a wide range of skills or abilities alongside confidence and even creativity.

Additionally, Yorke (2006:3) is insistent that, unlike other definitions discussed in this section, employability is not just an attribute of new graduates. Rather employability needs to be continuously refreshed throughout a person's working life.

The research summarised above, although serving to explore the issues and concepts surrounding employability and skills, does not appear to provide clarity for stakeholders within the field. The focus remains upon outcomes and does not provide clear insights of the perspective of students and their needs. As such, these definitions will need to be interrogated and analysed alongside the findings from this research, where upon it may be possible to clarify the most appropriate working definition.

What is apparent from the review of definitions is the clear focus upon the supply-side, with emphasis upon individual responsibility, some of which is now squarely placed as the duty of HE. There is less focus upon the employer to invest in employability and skills development, and even less focus for them to define the requirements from the labour market.

### **2.3.3 Definitions of employability - Graduate attributes**

Graduate attributes is another area of research that has added to the debate in trying to define and find ways of effectively implementing aspects of the employability agenda. Bowden, *et al.* (2000) defined employability as a set of graduate attributes:

‘the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution and, consequently, shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and as a citizen’

Bowden, *et al.* (2000: par 1)

Following the definition set out by Bowden, *et al.* (2000) and Barrie and Hughes (e.g. Barrie, 2006; Hughes and Barrie, 2010) have undertaken several pieces of research to establish the understanding and influences upon assessment of graduate attributes in an Australian context. Once again, it should be noted that it places

focus upon outcomes, rather than inputs, based upon the pressure for HEIs to demonstrate the production of employable graduates.

The premise of the argument in relation to articulating graduate attributes into the curriculum is as follows: ‘Perhaps the greatest limitation of current practice is that graduate attributes are often assessed *for* rather than *with* students’, which also feeds into the argument that a clear shared understanding is yet to be found (Hughes and Barrie, 2010:331). The limited understanding between both students and lecturers can lead to an unrealised potential to engage and benefit from curriculum inputs. It is agreed that students need to be actively engaged as partners in the assessment process.

There is certainly no agreement or clear measure of attainment from the assessment of graduate attributes. As Hughes and Barrie (2010) argue, overall the complexity of graduate attributes (and by association employability) is a barrier to a true measure of attainment. What is clear is that graduate outcome measures, in terms of graduate first-destination employment status, are considered to be problematic, in that such figures are a measure of graduate employment rather than employability attributes (Bridgstock, 2009:33).

#### **2.3.4 Higher Education and the curriculum**

In the UK, embedding employability within the curriculum has become a major activity for universities. Advance HE has produced several publications aimed at both defining and strategically developing employability for the HE curriculum (Advance HE, n.d.). The most significant document ‘Pedagogy for employability’, Cole and Tibby (2013) clearly places employability as of the utmost importance, as follows:

‘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 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).

‘Pedagogy for Employability’ advises HEIs upon the position that should be taken for embedding employability regardless of mode or topic of study, (Cole and Tibby,

2013:5). Cole and Tibby emphasise the extent of university-wide responsibility in supporting students in the explicit nature of employability, whilst acknowledging the complexity of employability development.

Furthermore, Cole and Tibby (2013:6) warn institutions that employability is not about passing the responsibility to careers departments in preparing students for employability, or replacing academic standards by filling the curriculum with employability style modules. In this case, they consider employability to be a serious strategic and pedagogical development.

Charged with such responsibility universities have since taken a range of actions to address and strengthen emphasis upon developing employability skills. According to Tymon (2013:841) there 'is increasing pressure for all academic courses to include employability development'. Being able to follow the guidance from the Advance HE is just one example of this suggested pressure. However, this has resulted in some significant criticism of the ways in which universities have responded. Part of the issue lies once again in the definition of the concept. The terms of graduate 'skills', 'competencies' and 'attributes' are used inter-changeably, but they often convey different things across the stakeholder spectrum. The definitions are not always likely to be shared among employers, university teachers and graduates themselves (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Barrie, 2006).

Crebert *et al.* (2004:148) further suggest that the demonstration of skills by students is linked to the development of confidence in their application to new and different contexts, including the workplace. What is interesting from the work of Crebert *et al.* (2004) is that the significance of skills is only realised by students when they are made aware of their importance and given opportunities to practise.

Consequently, Wilson *et al.*, (2013) and Bryson (2015), suggest that there is a narrowing of focus towards outcomes, or a mechanistic tick-box approach to 'skills acquisition', rather than consideration of inputs to the utilisation of skills and development. Such focus can impact upon social arrangements and economic structures for people's opportunity to flourish at work, and in life. Wheelahan (2015:751) also suggests that in several cases education is being reduced to skills needed to get a job resulting in the subordination of knowledge.

Questions have therefore been raised about whether HEIs can and should include employability within the curriculum. As a result of the core employability paradigm for HE, Cranmer (2006:172), sought to examine the various methods that have been developed to deliver employability skills within the HE curriculum. This work casts doubt on the effectiveness of employability skills development and teaching within curricula but it concludes that work experience and employer involvement in courses is more effective for students. This research was followed up by Mason *et al.*, (2009) to assess the impact of various employability skills initiatives on graduate labour market performance. The findings of which suggest once again that it is structured work experience that had ‘clear positive effects on the ability of graduates’ to find and secure graduate level jobs. Further, this research states that there is ‘no evidence that the emphasis given by university departments to the teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills has a significant effect on the labour market outcomes considered’ (Mason *et al.*, 2009:23).

It has also been found that employability inputs can vary across the student population, based upon differences in demographics, including country of origins, individual preferences, and engagement in and differences in the programme of learning.

One approach to examine the effectiveness of embedding employability into the HE curricula is a study that applied the principles of threshold concepts. Supporting students to develop their knowledge about employability processes is a perspective reported in the research of Procter and Harvey (2018). By embedding employability into the curriculum, the authors suggest that developing knowledge about employability is a threshold which, when reached, empowers and gives confidence to the student (Cole and Tibby, 2013; Procter and Harvey, 2018). These conclusions were drawn from a study that applied threshold concepts to employability through the professional development module that took place at Salford Business School (detailed in section 1.7.1).

The theory of threshold concepts was developed by Meyer and Land (2003), from a research project examining the characteristics of effective economics undergraduate education, and has subsequently been applied to a range of disciplines. Akin to a portal, achieving a threshold opened up a ‘new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something...it represents a transformed way of understanding, or

interpreting, or viewing...without which the learner cannot progress' (Meyer and Land, 2003). The idea of threshold concepts were held by Meyer and Land (2006) to be central to the mastery of their subject. Subsequent work by Cousin (2010), demonstrated the significance of threshold concepts in developing pedagogy as well as facilitating subject specific knowledge. Teaching practice and learning experiences of students within HE, through the lens of threshold concepts was more fully explored in the collection of work published by Meyer *et al.*, (2016).

Figure 2-2 below summarises the feature of threshold concepts as described by Flanagan (2019).

Threshold Feature	Impact Characteristics
Transformative	Once understood, a Threshold Concept changes the way in which the student views the discipline
Troublesome	Threshold Concepts are likely to be troublesome for the student. Perkins (1999) has suggested that knowledge can be troublesome e.g. when it is counter-intuitive, alien or seemingly incoherent
Irreversible	Given their transformative potential, Threshold Concepts are also likely to be irreversible, i.e. they are difficult to unlearn.
Integrative	Threshold Concepts, once learned, are likely to bring together different aspects of the subject that previously did not appear, to the student, to be related.
Bounded	A Threshold Concept will probably delineate a particular conceptual space, serving a specific and limited purpose.
Discursive	Meyer <i>et al.</i> , (2006) suggest that the crossing of a threshold will incorporate an enhanced and extended use of language.
Reconstitutive	Understanding a threshold concept may entail a shift in learner subjectivity
Liminality	Comparing the crossing of the pedagogic threshold to a rite of passage, involving a potentially messy journey to learning. Liminality requires active engagement of the learner, as this threshold is crossed back and forth as the student experiences both positive and unsettling shifts in comprehension.

Figure 2-2 Summary of threshold concepts *adapted from* Flanagan, (2019)

Procter and Harvey (2018:215) argue that an approach to assessment that followed a typical recruitment process linked to expert advice, feedback and reflection allowed students to build upon the development of employability skills to get a job. Additionally, it is stated that the module experience helped students actively construct their employability rather than passively learning about careers, developing knowledge about their skills to do a job. The findings presented by



Procter and Harvey (2018) highlight the threshold features experienced by students undertaking the professional development module. This includes the transformative and irreversible aspects of achieving a threshold of understanding of employability. Understanding why an employer requires a combination of competencies is integrative, and can be morale boosting since the threshold of employability is bounded. By asking student to reflect upon their learning it was also understood that developing employability could also be troublesome, where students alternated between embracing and rejecting the module, between anxiety and confidence (Procter and Harvey, 2018:217). It followed that the process of student engagement with their employability indicates a period of oscillation or liminality, as discussed by Meyer and Land (2006) (see Figure 2-2). This accords with Perkins' (1999:8) characterisation of constructivism as an energising process of discovery, one that yields deeper understanding.

By defining employability as a threshold concept, some students will not have realised the threshold of understanding of employability until later in their learning journey. For this type of employability teaching to be effective, students not only need to appreciate the importance of employability in general but, most importantly, they need to cross the threshold between their understanding and that of employers.

Later work by Tymon (2013) continued to engage with the discourse surrounding the inclusion of employability in HE curricula. Here, differences in opinion of employability was considered alongside student perspectives and engagement, to examine employability initiatives. The concerns herein, which is a theme of much of the literature (Artess, *et al.*, 2017), are that despite the efforts that have been expended, there is inconsistency and a lack of universality in both the definition of what employability is for frameworks in HE. The conclusion is that, despite significant efforts by HE, there is a lack of engagement by undergraduate students with employability. Tymon (2013) highlights this as involving issues of understanding, alongside the requirement for personal attributes such as motivation and commitment.

Motivation for engagement in employability activities is also the subject of a review by Tate *et al.* (2015). Once again, the review identified only limited evidence of student views of employability provision. As can be seen much of the research is

based upon graduate surveys and the measurement of graduate outcomes rather than considering the perspective of current undergraduates (for example Barrie, 2006; Wilton, 2011; Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017).

### 2.3.5 The delivery of employability outcomes by HE

There has been increasing pressure placed upon HEI's to provide adequate support for graduate employability in the light of increasingly flexible labour markets. An expectation of responsiveness is required from HEIs to consider their primary role to 'develop graduates as lifelong learners, transform students by *enhancing* their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities while simultaneously *empowering* them as lifelong critical, reflective learners' (Harvey, 2000:3, emphasis in the original).

Reports from employers and students alike show a lack of appropriate skills for employment (communication, teamwork and leadership) are to be found within the graduate population (CIPD, 2014; CBI, 2015). An examination of employer requirements does not assist with the attempt to define 'employability skills' (SCONUL, 2014). As such, employers operate with a loose, tacit notion of graduate identity that varies according to their own requirements (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, *cited in* SCONUL, 2014).

Strathdee (2009) uses the concepts of cultural and social capital to theorise the links between HE and the labour market, raising an interesting question about how universities are understood and judged by employers when recruiting. Brown and Hesketh (2004 *cited in* Strathdee, 2009:86) argue that meeting the competitive pressures of advanced capitalist economies has led employers to demand that graduates immediately add value to their enterprises. This may be attributable to the move to a market driven HE, where institutions would set their *own* agenda with regards provision for employability support but this has not been the case.

There are several academic arguments in response to employers' views on employability, summarised as follows:

**Skills development:** How can such skills be effectively developed within HE? Whilst there is no overall current consensus, it is also important to consider B&M studies as semi-vocational with careers more variable in both job content and context (Wilton, 2008:148). If the primary focus is upon the marketability of cumulative personal skills, there is a need to consider the balance between academic skills and

skills for a business environment, or rather being equipped to do a job (Harvey, 2001).

**Transferability:** Can skills be readily transferred into employment without either work experience or suitable work-based training and development? There is a suggestion that the employer perspective is an ‘unrealistic wish-list of skills and an attempt to pass the cost of pre-employment training on to HE’ (Wilton, 2008:156). On the other hand, (detailed in section 2.3.4), the promotion of employability has become a focal point for HE with the development of a number of initiatives and frameworks to embed employability into the curriculum (Artess, *et al.*, 2017).

**Demand:** There are questions over the potential for an imbalance between supply and demand (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams, 2003; Ball, 2019). Detailed in section 2.3.8.

**Recruitment practices:** Another contrasting factor is noted by Wilton (2014), which surrounds complex recruitment and selection processes. This complexity could be attributed to the increase in the number of graduates entering an already tight labour market. However, Wilton (2014) suggests that the effect can be seen from the perspective where employers lack coherence and clarity in their own criteria which results in graduates that are often unclear as to what they are expected to demonstrate.

Research from Cai, (2013:458) suggest that employers have changing perceptions of workers with similar qualifications. These dynamic attitudes vary according to their different traditions, political biases, and other factors (Teichler, 2009 *cited in* Cai, 2013). Believing there to be a lack of empirical research on what shapes employers attitudes, Cai (2013) presents a conceptualisation based upon the development employer beliefs about graduates’ employability. The recommendations suggest that, in line with the consensus presented here, universities should provide support for students to enter the labour market. Special attention needs to be placed on the ‘relevance of their education programmes to the labour market’s needs and the quality of the graduates’ and ‘universities need to have close interaction with employers and to get involved in a range of employers’ networks.’ (Cai, 2013:466). Therefore, responsibility falls to HE to engage and inform employers of what they are doing to influence their beliefs.

Research in employer perception also focuses upon employability related measures and the production of evidence in the desired outcomes for education, where HE is seen as the supply-side, a producer of talent (Artess *et al.*, 2017).

Tymon (2013:852) raises concerns that an instrumental view of employability outcomes is evidenced by the simplistic way in which employability is measured through employment statistics. This has been described by Christie (2016) as a progressive change resulting from attempts to examine public accountability and the perceived value of higher education (HE). This concern is addressed in the work of Christie (2016) with a critical evaluation of use of employability rankings in national university league tables. By using data drawn from the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey, (a census of graduate destinations six months after graduation), this shifts the usage from a general interest benchmark of market trends to a measuring stick to compare between universities. Christie (2015) argues that employability outcomes, or rather graduate destinations, remain subject to measurement rather than gain critical understanding. Several stakeholders use DHLE data, but it is argued that the analysis of it can lead to simultaneous over-simplification and obfuscation that does not result in clarity or trust. The DLHE data can only very loosely be considered a measure of the employability of a university's graduates. However, it is noted that the DLHE is to be replaced by a new graduate outcome reporting system and the first report is set to commence in spring 2020 (HESA, n.d.).

Keeping in mind concerns about how employability measurement is currently presented results in the generation of a wide variety of discourses and critiques. It is suggested that performance measurement of universities with league table reports such as DHLE, provides only a quantitative snap shot of the number of jobs in the labour market (Harvey, 2001), and avoids any of the qualitative complexity of employability and preparedness of graduates.

Rich (2015) states simply having a consistent framework for employability will not only make employability measurable but will also help to enhance it. In doing so, Rich (2015) suggests any such framework should be used systematically before, during and after a degree course in the development of desirable employability skills.

Although there is a lack of clarity upon how or if employability should be measured, the debate serves to blur the lines between employment and employability. Regardless of critical inputs vs. outcome reviews, measurement through employment statistics is instrumental and far too simplistic in that it ignores quality and sustainability issues (Tymon, 2013:852).

Due to the multiple perspectives and dimensions, employability can be based upon individual dimensions and even the actualisation of employability in terms of job market outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017b:6). This section has highlighted the issues in context for HEIs along with the responses to the attempts to measure employability outcomes. The following sections will examine the demand-side perspectives of employability.

### **2.3.6 Stakeholders - Demand-side employability**

An examination of the demand-side of employability sees the impact of the changes in sectorial demands towards service industries, non-manual occupations, and knowledge work (requiring higher skills and qualification levels). To define demand-side employability, external factors need to be considered, including employer attitudes, the supply of education and training, alongside the actual supply of jobs within the economy. The demand-side definition must take account of personal circumstances, institutional, infrastructural and labour market barriers (Hillage and Pollard, 1998).

This initial discussion of the definition of employability originates from an examination of the overall UK labour market policy development, including that of tackling unemployment within the population. It does, however, provide an important backdrop since it allows the recognition ‘that employability implicitly assumes specific types of demand that may vary across space, time and employers.’ McQuaid and Lindsay (2005:214) add ‘employers, potential employees and wider society can and do have fundamentally different perspectives on employability.’ This is significant in relation to critically evaluating graduate employability in and across both the HE landscape and labour markets, which are currently experiencing dynamic change.

### 2.3.7 Defining employability for employers

Definitions have also emerged from the demand-side. Besides coexisting definitions, another key point is the distinction between employability as both continuous and distinct from employment. The point being that employability, regardless of your employment status is a continuous development process, contextualised by factors of the external environment (Harvey, 2001 *cited in Williams et al.*, 2016: 878).

However, the massification of HE has resulted in a heterogeneous mix of graduates. This has led to the tightening of linkages based upon knowledge and skills produced through universities and those necessitated by employers. In other words, labour markets and employers, prior to massification were responsive towards generic academic profiles, if graduates could fulfil other job demands. The once flexible and open-ended relationship between HE and the labour market, has ‘ruptured’ according to Tomlinson (2012:410).

A theme has arisen whereby a variety of authors suggest that there is a lack of workplace preparedness from graduates, resulting in a shift in emphasis towards employability and vocationalism. This includes work by Cumming (2010:407) stating graduates ‘lack appropriate skills, attitudes and dispositions’ and Wilson *et al.* (2013) suggesting there is a lack of sophistication in understanding transformation of students in readiness for professional life.

As a key stakeholder, employers are the functional drivers from which a practical shift from the theoretical to the strategic and practical application of employment and employability occurs. It is perhaps obvious that employers tend to view employability as primarily a characteristic of the individual. Leaving aside (in this section) the arguments for graduate ‘work-readiness’, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) defined employability as follows:

‘Employability is the possession by an individual of the qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby help to realise his or her aspirations and potential in work’

CBI (1999:1)

Since the publication of this definition, the UK economy and labour market had suffered a significant blow from the 2008 global recession (Scarpetta, 2008). The CBI later shifted from the aspirational outlook of 1999, to a more attribute focused definition, resulting from the economic and labour market changes. The organisation subsequently collaborated with the National Union of Students (NUS). The document '*working towards your future*' provided guidance to engage students in preparation for the job market. This new definition casts aside aspiration to focus upon generic attributes required by employers.

‘A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy’

Confederation of British Industry/National Union of Students,  
(2011:14)

The discourse here is based upon employability as a set of skills or attributes. Representing graduate employers is the Institute of Student Employers (or ISE, formally known as the Association of Graduate Recruiters or AGR). Influential in policy terms, the ISE have identified nine employability skills, which focus upon intra and inter personal skills or ‘soft’ skills. Within the policy is a predominance of commercial and business acumen. This is in contrast to the HEA who define fourteen ‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’, formed into generic categories of literacies, competences and character qualities (Artess, *et al.*, 2017).

The compatibility between these two approaches are clear in terms of the individualised nature of graduate attributes and the need for personal qualities. However, both have a reliance on the supply-side, for becoming, and of developing as an individual who has the required set of skills and attributes (Morrison, 2019). There is no suggestion of a developmental contribution from the demand-side within this policy.

### **2.3.8 Employability - The employer perspective**

In terms of literature regarding the views of employers in relation to graduates and universities, there is a significant volume of work both in academic and policy terms, which often makes headlines in the press (e.g. Times Higher Education, 2015;

Tomlinson, 2017a). Two elements are important here, the views from a supply and demand perspective and then a consideration of actual practices of graduate recruitment and selection.

Tomlinson (2017b:23) asks the question: ‘what are the views employers have about graduates and universities.’ Tomlinson also poses other questions, for example, ‘for employability; to what extent do graduates meet the organisational demands and how can the relationship between HE and employer organisations be better understood and coordinated?’ (Tomlinson, 2017b:14). The question that has not been addressed is what is universities role in the supply-side, can and should they be more involved in the development of work placement and experience opportunities. For this question, consideration is given to the current economic and labour market situation, and accusations of HEIs not producing ‘oven ready’ graduates.

The UK has one of the highest graduation rates in the OECD and as a result, the CIPD (2015) reports that the increasing number of graduates in the labour market demand for has significantly outstripped the creation of high-skilled jobs. Their report concludes that the UK has too many over-qualified graduates entering non-graduate jobs, not able to realise investment in HE that creates burden for young people. This seems contrary to reports from Universities UK, (2018) suggesting a future increase in demand for higher level skills. This supply issue may create a situation of so-called under employment, which could be attributable to occupational structures or a skills and careers expectation mismatch. It is also important to consider other external forces within the field, where a graduate jobs mismatch is seen within the labour market. Government statistics show that almost one in three, 31%, of all graduates are not doing graduate – or high-skilled – jobs (BIS, 2016).

From a graduate perspective, research from the CIPD (2015), states that nearly a fifth (19%) of graduates reported their degree had not equipped them with the right skills. Additionally, amongst other published surveys and media reports, for example the BBC (2015), suggest that 40% of students do not think their university education has been value for money.



Such outcomes are as a consequence of the UK expansion of the university sector, with currently 49% of school leavers entering HE, it is suggested that such growth is not replicated in the graduate labour market (Adam, 2017). The growth of graduates to 49% up to September 2017 is significant following an overall upward trend. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) has shown that this growth has continued, since the 2008 economic downturn, however, the numbers have levelled out slightly since 2014. The result may reflect lower demand for graduate skills in addition to an increased supply of graduates (ONS, 2017a).

The views of employers vary from stating that graduates lack the skills required by business such as adaptability or ‘work-readiness’ but in contrast other reports suggest positive appraisals of skills such as problem solving and communication (Tomlinson, 2017b:24). The positive side to this picture is further research showing that employer demand for graduates continues to be strong, with an 87% graduate employment rate in 2015, the highest rate since 2008 (Universities UK, 2015). This is supported by data from the ONS (2017a), stating that graduates are more likely to be employed than non- graduates. Although only 49% were in what the ONS terms professional occupations.

The data summary provides conflicting statistics and views, but overall it seems employers are satisfied, but there is a mixed picture in terms of graduate employment conditions. Analysis from Ball (2019) states that although there are many more graduates, the UK is not using its stock of graduates as effectively as it could and that there is a problem in the pipeline of supply.

### **2.3.9 Critiques of employability**

As demonstrated, there is a significant critique of the concept of employability. It remains poorly defined and there is a battle between policy makers, academic researchers, and practitioners as to the best approaches that reflect the needs of the key stakeholders.

What is still clear from the definition review is the lack of a student voice. The undergraduate is under represented and often overlooked in favour of the view of graduates or policy makers. In terms of clearly understanding employability skills and attributes, a large number of mainly survey-based studies and a plethora of lists and frameworks have been produced (Holmes, 2015:222). The results have not

produced a consensus in terms of how to develop employability from the range of skills requirements. As stated, much of the research has focused upon graduates, rather than an examination of how their skills acquisition may be effectively be facilitated, determined by undergraduates themselves (Holmes, 2015:222). Holmes (2015:223) points out, in terms of 'becoming a graduate', there is a 'paucity of literature' concerned with this process.

Graduates ability to demonstrate their competencies, in terms of employability *and* skills therefore, will be vital throughout their lives and not just in achieving a first graduate job. This is especially important for students from a widening participation background who enter the University with less social capital and less confidence in their own ability (Christie, 2015). Tomlinson (2012) cites Kupfer (2011) in highlighting 'the continued preponderance of structural and cultural inequalities through the existence of layered HE and labour market structures, operating in differentiated fields of power and resources.' With such significant forces focused upon students, the challenge for HE is to understand the various perceptions, definitions and influences in the field that create tensions in the understanding of employability.

Although the expansion of HE has continued at a pace, there is significant criticism of the situation today. From an ideological perspective, this is a policy shift from the cultural rationale for HE towards economic advancement, reliant upon individuals to develop graduate employability and enhance human capital (Salter and Tapper, 1994; Wilton, 2008; Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017). The complexity, or some might say poorly defined sense of employability, raised questions for the capability of HEIs to teach the subject (Rutt *et al.*, 2013). The conclusions of Tymon (2013: 853) suggested that teaching of employability skills (and the surrounding pedagogy) was not achievable or (even) desirable for HE. She goes on to say that 'development of these [employability skills] is possibly outside the capability and remit of higher education institutions'.

As mentioned the expansion of HE was accompanied by a growth in B&M degree programmes. Several researchers sought to examine the subsequent impact of increased employability skills development that was undertaken by HEIs. Wilton (2008; 2011; 2012) carried out a series of work that importantly (for this study), links employability to the case of outcomes for B&M graduates.

In summary, the relationship between employability, employment and the inputs and outcomes from these concepts is far from straightforward. The evidence based on the content and context of B&M as semi-vocational programmes would suggest that there is a congruence between skills developed within education and those used in managerial work (Wilton, 2008:144). However, this is not always reflected in the outcomes for B&M graduates in Wilton's studies. There is a lack of fit between skills developed and those used in employment. Wilton suggests there is a lack of consensus as to how they can be inculcated by HE (Wilton 2008:156; Artess *et al.*, 2017).

Tensions described arise 'over the ultimate purpose of a university education and how its provision should best be arranged' (Tomlinson, 2012:411). Within the past 20 years there have been significant socio-political transformations within the HEI system. Substantial change has occurred under a neo-liberal agenda ranging from Government funding and policies to widening participation (Burke, 2008). In combination Tomlinson (2017b:) states that 'graduate employability is one of high stakes for graduates, universities and employers alike'.

The above provides support to the argument that the current agenda for HE contributes to a narrow employability focus that neglects the development of broader skills that are of fundamental importance. According to Tomlinson (2017b) the social meanings attached to graduate status in the mass education era has pluralised the student experience. The ability to stand out and demonstrate one's employability value is now much more difficult. It may be the case that given all the focus on employability as developed from within HE, gradueness might be derived from spaces outside HE, such as life experiences and interests (Brennan, *et al.*, 2010).

## **2.4 The role of capitals in the HE employability agenda**

Capitals can be understood as key resources accumulated through graduates' education, social and initial employment experiences, and which equip them favourably when transitioning to the job market. Some sources of capital are rooted in graduates' formal education and socio-cultural milieu and are converted into subsequent economic value (Bourdieu 1986). Being aware of forms of capital and finding ways of further enriching them is a significant task for the individual

(Tomlinson, 2017b:17). It has been deemed necessary therefore to examine the capital influences based upon the relationship between participation in HE and entry into the graduate labour market (Burke and Hannaford-Simpson, 2019).

From the literature review, capitals feature in many studies that conceptualise employability, several of which draw upon Bourdieusian theory. Bourdieu focused upon economic, social and cultural forms of capital in his work; however there are several other forms including, human, identity and psychological capital. All of these forms of capital, that have been associated with employability, will be examined in this section and drawn upon later in the development of the theoretical framework for this thesis.

One of the key themes of this literature review has been to face the challenge of understanding graduates' skills and how they might be defined and understood from a range of stakeholder perspectives. Although there is variation, the work of Artess *et al.* (2017); Williams *et al.* (2016); Holmes (2013) and Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) have provided rationale and support for the dimensions of capital components. The range of capitals featured within several frameworks are dedicated to developing graduate attributes and have moved beyond the work of Bourdieu's key capitals.

It is argued that forms of capital can play a considerable role in shaping graduates' transitional experience and early employment outcomes (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2017:29). This section will examine the literature that is relevant to a range of capitals mentioned and evaluates research regarding the development of capitals for HE participants. The section includes a wider range of capitals to create a context in which to capture and represent students' views in the current setting.

## **2.5 Bourdieu – Theory of Practice**

The greatest dissemination and application of the work of Bourdieu remains within HE and graduate employment. Given that employability is based on the premise of developing greater human and social capital, the work of Bourdieu provides a method or a way of thinking and a manner of asking questions (Mahar and Wilkes, 2004).

Bourdieu's (1988) later work, *Homo Academicus*, developed a characterisation of the field of HE and a general approach to studying culture and education. Drawing

upon this work Bourdieu states; ‘within education systems, participants in education are products of those systems: ‘students’ behaviour and qualifications are largely formed by their prior experiences’ (1998 *cited in* Kupfer 2011:188).

A concept realised by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) considers HE as a field that forms a setting in which agents and their social positions are located. Maton (2005) suggests HE should enable students to access forms of capital (both skills *and* knowledge). Therefore the HE field could allow for the opportunity for students to convert capital and the resources conferred by them in a more explicit manner if they are integrated into teaching and learning (Maton, 2005). In other words capital developed within or gained from HE (the field) will determine the chances of success for practices, in this case, employability (Bourdieu, 1986).

Based on the above, this research intends to focus specifically upon business and management education viewed through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu’s (2004) research-based engagement thinking tools for socio-analysis. The conceptual tools of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* provide support to the framework of this inquiry and facilitates an examination of the research questions giving a philosophical underpinning to the overall setting of the research.

Bourdieu’s *habitus*, *field* and *capital* can be considered to be a network or system of forces (Jenkins, 2002). The ability to develop, recognise and use forms of *capital* are then enablers based upon the context of the *field* and *habitus*. The thinking tools are expressed together as a schematic:

[(*habitus* + *capital*)] + *field* = practice

Bourdieu (1984:101)

Employability skills, in this context, are the tools that will allow the freedom and independence of education to be realised. The argument here is that skills will allow students to acquire their own insights and enable them to link back to their own world, supporting their ontological reality and the epistemological learning needs (Freire, 1972:30). Critically supporting this perspective, Coombes *et al.*, (2000) argue that the emphasis on employability decontextualizes, generalises and isolates skills from the learner’s world.

The *habitus* is formed from cultural and historical experiences that influence the dispositions, attitudes and feelings of a person which in turn informs people's practices (Bourdieu, 1977b). For Bourdieu, *habitus* is never fixed, but is a set of durable and transposable dispositions that begins development within the family and early school environment. Bourdieu (1977b:78) describes the function as forming the 'regulated improvisations' that create norms, values and dispositions and even the ability to cope with change. The dispositions possessed as appropriate to one field are translated accordingly to another field, although this may have different rules (Jenkins, 2002). This may be seen as a structuralist view, however as Burke (2016b) argues Bourdieu also has a subjective and individualistic view of *habitus*. *Habitus* is an open concept, built upon limitations but is formed from material conditions but is durable and generative through other sources such as family and education systems (Burke, 2016b:7). There is the possibility therefore, in terms of employability, that dispositions developed in HE may be translated into the work place.

The *field* is considered as the social arena in which the actors operate defining the situation for the occupants. Within the field struggles take place to access specific resources (or stakes in the *field*) take place (Jenkins, 2002). It is often understood as the arena (context or setting) in which *habitus* and capital interact (Burke and Hannaford-Simpson, 2019). In this case, the *field* is the arena of the HEI, as the research of Maton (2005) shows, the advantage of Bourdieu's conceptual framework is that it enables higher education to be seen as an object of study. It has been shown that HEIs have a degree of autonomy within the HE *field*, but it is also seen, HEIs are under increasing pressure to focus upon employability, which has consequences for how the *habitus* of agents is constructed at the institutional and individual level (Kupfer, 2011).

Forms of *capital* are defined by Bourdieu in several configurations such as economic, social, cultural, intellectual and academic as considered to be of goods or resources that are at stake within the *field* (Bourdieu, 1991). Types of *capital* are judged to have the potential to be transformational, based on the dynamics within the *field*. This is because for Bourdieu (1986) capitals are not isolated but interconnected. Bourdieu envisages a process in which one form of capital can be transformed into another (Reay, 2004). Kupfer (2011) examined the definitions of

interests and reputations for actors within the field and asks: are certain types of *capital* seen as more important than others in HE fields? For example, in the context of this study, could the development of employability skills lead to the development of *social capital* that would be transformational within HE, for employment and life beyond work? It may be the case however, that other forms of capital (as highlighted from the literature review) prove to be more valuable.

The field functions to allow the participants to determine the value of capital that is at stake within the field. The interest is based upon collective historical processes. In the context of this study, it is important to understand the changes (structure, financial and curricula) that have occurred within the field of HE, and the impact this may have had regarding the current focus upon employability.

## **2.6 Forms of capital**

### **2.6.1 Human capital**

Human capital is referred to as the knowledge and skills that are acquired by an individual through formal educational and experiential learning. Becker (1962) conceived human capital as an investment that can result in positive gain in the labour market and even allows a person to compete for the ‘desired’ job role.

The influence of human capital has been developed within the employability conceptualisation by several authors, becoming significant in terms of graduate outcomes. For example, Hillage and Pollard (1998), considered human capital as assets in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes possessed and how they are applied both in the workplace and for negotiating access to work in navigating the labour market. Knight and Yorke (2003) considered human capital in terms of ‘skills’ applied with reference to ‘understanding’ and for Van Der Heijde and Van Der Heijden (2006) the conceptualisation included ‘occupational expertise’.

Opportunities to develop human capital aspects within the HE curriculum are common amongst the authors mentioned, but Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) attempted to formalise this within a practical model for developing employability. Their model included human capital considerations but broadened the impact of both work and life experience on student employability development.

According to Tomlinson *et al.* (2017) the alignment of formal ‘hard skills’ (skills and technical knowledge) along with career-building skills (Bridgstock, 2009) is essential in order to realise human capital.

### **2.6.2 Social capital**

Bourdieu identified social capital as social obligations or connections seen as convertible to economic capital. They are enacted, maintained and reinforced in exchanges between people (Bourdieu, 1986:21). Social capital can be mobilised through human capital to take advantage of relationships and networks for the development of employability opportunities. In other words, the application of social capital can aid access to employment and job opportunities (and economic capital) via the career-related networks and contacts.

The key to the development of social capital is appropriate social relations and ties with significant others, which can result in improved knowledge and confidence for accessing employment (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2017).

For Tomlinson (2017a:342) a student’s social and cultural milieu, family, and cultural support are important sources of social capital. Networks, norms, and trust with university support services, plus LinkedIn form the basis of capital in contemporary HE. Critically Tomlinson (2017a) suggests that this aspect is important in lower socio-economic status groups and, is significant in this study whereby the student population at the University of Salford constitute this social grouping.

### **2.6.3 Cultural capital**

Bourdieu (1986) perceived cultural capital as enhancing or self-improving properties of the individual. Cultural capital is the formation of culturally valued knowledge, dispositions and behaviours that are aligned to the workplaces that graduates seek to enter (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2017). From the evaluation of the literature by Williams *et al.* (2016) cultural capital is not frequently associated with employability. Burke (2016a) and Tomlinson (2017a) confirm, from an employability perspective, cultural capital can allow access to the rules of the game for organisational fit and behaviours, along with understanding of the field rules. In navigating work practices, cultural capital brings knowledge and confidence for understanding these situations.



Here, socially desirable and interpersonal behaviours along with an understanding of the symbolic value of the degree is significant in this capital dimension. In relation to employability, this is important in terms of what is required to ‘fit-in’ with an organisation. This can be a challenge for graduates in being able to determine the differing requirements of an organisation, but also may be a form of discrimination in the selection process in terms of whether a candidate fits or not (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

Furthermore, Burke (2016a) suggests that this can be an additional challenge for students of lower social-economic groups. Development for students and graduates may be through social group membership and networking, however it is a difficult concept for practitioners to incorporate into employability frameworks.

#### **2.6.4 Identity capital**

Described by Tomlinson *et al.* (2017) as a personal form of capital, identity capital represents the concepts of self-perception linked to psychosocial aspects of the graduate self. The strength of identity capital is linked to the ability to meet future career goals and aspirations (Tomlinson, 2007). Both Holmes (2015) and Jackson (2016) emphasise the need to consider the development identity capital as an emergent and lifelong process.

The ability to be able to describe and present identity is an asset, that not only has to be understood by the individual themselves but also by employers (Holmes, 2013). This ability can be met through the standard methods of CV’s and online portfolio building via portals such as LinkedIn, making the development of identity narratives an important part of employability. These processes to apply skills and articulate skills to ‘get a job’, often forms part of employability frameworks and is a significant element of career and student support services. Jackson (2016) states that a shift from a skills based approach to the development of a ‘pre-professional’ identity, emphasises characteristics and attributes of the self.

#### **2.6.5 Psychological capital**

Psychological capital is described as ‘positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace’ (Luthans, 2002:59). Psychological capital as a concept has its roots in the ‘positive psychology’ of

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) which sought to focus upon people's positive behaviours rather than their weaknesses. The principle is to build upon strengths to flourish in organisational setting and develop a locus of self-control (Çavuş and Gökçen, 2014). Psychological capital includes states such as confidence, hope, resilience, positive self-evaluation, and personality traits such as conscientiousness. The essence of psychological capital lies in resilience, adaptability and even emotional security and is an affective relation of social capital (Rattray, 2016). The work of Rattray (2016) connects psychological capital with the dimension of liminality, a threshold concept described by Meyer *et al.*, (2016). Liminality is argued to be an unstable space in which the learner may oscillate between old and emergent understandings, occupied during the process of mastery of a threshold concept (Cousin, 2010). The development of psychological capital could support the ability to beyond liminality and aid student to realise the threshold of employability (detailed in section 2.3.4).

The successful development of psychological capital is dependent on the ability of an individual to cope within challenging environments (or negative experiences) and find alternate pathways. Applied to employability this involves developing strategies that expand the scope of employment opportunity and respond to a changing job context (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). It also entails being pro-active and even re-orientating goals based on labour market change. Self-efficacy is associated with the concept of psychological capital, where Bandura (1995:2) determines 'efficacy beliefs influence how people think, feel, motivate themselves and act'. Crucially, according to Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007:285) self-efficacy and self-confidence provide a link between knowledge, understanding, skills, experience and personal attributes and employability'.

The work of Luthans *et al.* (2007:245) focuses on the idea of 'who you are becoming rather than who you are' which may be an important aspect since this study is examining undergraduate students who are working towards becoming graduates. The development of psychological capital is said by Luthans *et al.* (2007:245) to contribute to a better understanding of thoughts and emotions that shape personal behaviours.

### **2.6.6 Economic capital**

Economic capital is wealth either inherited or generated from interactions between the individual and the economy (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu (1986:252) posited that economic capital 'is at the root of all the other types of capital', in other words, to realise the benefits of any forms of capital, some form of expenditure is required. This could be purely financial or a cost in nonmonetary forms, for example by 'spending' time, attention, care, and concern or even labour costs. From this perspective, Bourdieu attempts to avoid a narrow economic standpoint to highlight cultural or social capital that may be gained through transformations that requires some form of economic capital.

Economic capital is not specifically examined in this thesis; however, it should be evaluated given the changing landscape in financial terms with the introduction of university tuition fees and student loans. There is a connection with the 'institutionalised form of educational qualifications' identified by Bourdieu (1986) as a function of economic capital. The gaining of a degree level qualification will result in simple cultural capital but the convertibility or growth of further capital, will according to Bourdieu (1986:246) depend on the structure or opportunities available in the field.

## **2.7 Development of theoretical framework**

From the literature, it has been established that there are several voices that inform the opinions, policy and empirical research, which provide a picture of employability within HE today. The gap from this picture is the voice of the undergraduate student in terms of what they feel is important in relation to employability and the support provided during their studies. In order to examine the gap a theoretical framework is required. The theoretical framework is a product of the literature review and drives how the research is carried out. It provides a lens for the qualitative interpretation of the data (Myers, 2013:23). The findings will be derived using an inductive approach, a tradition that is open-ended and exploratory and is aimed at theory building.

The contribution employability and skills are considered to be important interactions to gain forms of capital, the development of which should be facilitated within HE. Much of the research and measurement to date focuses upon graduate

outcomes rather than undergraduate inputs. In addition, the tension that may be created between the HE provision of employability skills and wider understanding is contested within the field.

A number of theoretical frameworks were considered for this study, analysis of which are covered in the philosophy and method chapters. The theoretical framework was informed by an examination of the wider purpose and nature of university education from employability or 'knowledge based' conceptions. Based upon a social constructivist approach, the theoretical framework will draw upon the social theory of Bourdieu. This is justified in that, in order to study a social field (in this case HE), Bourdieu's work seeks to provide an account of the relations between agents within the field through studies of their practices (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008).

It is argued that Bourdieu, alongside the contemporary works from the literature, is expanding the debate and tackling the tension between employability, skills and stakeholder understanding in terms of what is desirable for education. A framework was developed by bringing together the ideas of capitals developed with the current considerations for education surrounding the teaching of employability.

## **2.8 Literature review summary**

Employability is a multi-faceted concept and it has the weight of expectation from across a wider stakeholder spectrum. This section has concentrated upon the role and views of HEIs, employers and students/graduates. Given this point and the role HEIs play in developing student employability it is important to appreciate the nature of the concept in order for the needs of students to be best understood and met. The understanding of employability from the student perspective is therefore important in this aspect. This study also aims to understand employability inputs from the students' perspective and seeks to interrogate the influencing factors within the field that impact upon the concepts validity.

Moreover, for employability frameworks to be fit for purpose, it is important to understand other influencing factors. There has been an increasing focus upon employability, driven by government policy changes. Therefore, the policies that have developed around the structure of HE and its role employability were critically evaluated in the review.

The final outcome of the literature review is the theoretical framework. The development of this was facilitated by using Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, capital and field to outline the changing dynamic between HE and the labour market. The theoretical literature highlights the continued preponderance of structural and cultural impacts through the existence of layered HE and labour market structures, operating in differentiated fields of power and resources. To meet the objectives and to develop the contemporary lens of the theoretical framework with respect to capitals, the graduate capital model of Tomlinson (2017a) was examined. The approach to this particular area of the literature, aligned the Bourdieu's theory of practice with dynamic forms of capital and are applied in the current institutional setting. Together these elements form the theoretical framework for this research.

The next chapter will take support from the literature review and research question development by examining the philosophical basis for this thesis.

### **3 Research Philosophy**

**‘The goal of philosophy is to find a good enough path through a dark wood’**

Warburton, (2015)

**‘If you can't say it clearly, you don't understand it yourself’**

Searle, (1983)

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to firstly explore various strategies and then determine *the* strategy that will be applied in this inquiry through the methodological process. To begin, an exploration of the different philosophies, paradigms and research approaches that underpin the research process has been undertaken. This includes consideration of the philosophical disciplinary influences that apply in this case. A link will also be made to the motivation and values of the researcher in relation to this inquiry.

To guide this process, the following objectives have been generated to support the development of the research process:

1. To establish the overall philosophical position of the researcher in relation to epistemological, ontological and axiological positions which form the foundation to this research.
2. To examine and justify the research paradigm for this thesis
3. To discuss the characteristics of the research in the context of business and management, social science and education.

The nature of research and the approaches that might be taken are wide ranging. Myers (2013:6) argues that ‘in a university setting research is defined as an original investigation, undertaken to contribute to knowledge and understanding in a

particular field'. From various terms of reference Collis and Hussey (2014:2) summarise the general agreement that research is:

- a process of inquiry and investigation
- systematic and methodical, and
- increases knowledge.

Walliman (2011) argues that the term 'research' is often wrongly applied and to be true research, it should have purpose and incorporate systematic processes for data collection and interpretation. In this particular inquiry it is important to recognise that business and management research is eclectic in nature, drawing upon knowledge from other disciplines (such as sociology, psychology and economics). The high level of education of those participating in the research and the practical consequences it has, provides a distinctive focus for research in this context (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012).

Research methodology is a strategy that incorporates the research design lying behind the theoretical foundations and methods for collecting and analysing data, thus linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes (Crotty, 1998). The process, however, should still be supported by a systematic approach, as research should be based on logical relationships and not just beliefs (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010). Allowing for reflection and revision as part of the research process, leads to refinement and clarification of many important factors such as the research philosophy, applied methods, collecting and analysing data to fulfil the overall research aims. In fulfilling a systematic approach to this thesis this chapter begins with an examination of the characteristics of the research.

### **3.2 Model for research**

An extensive literature search has been carried out regarding research design and what is clear is that there are a myriad of opinions, approaches and models of design. There are differences in terminology and interpretations of the research process. In general, the processes that are cited here incorporate the elements of philosophical positioning, theoretical perspectives, methodology and methods. Crotty (1998:3) refers to these as basic elements, but argues that the terminology is confusing and that these terms are 'thrown together in a grab-bag style as if they were all

comparable terms'. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2015:68) suggest the essence of research design is making choices about what is observed and how, in answering the central questions of the research.

From the various models, the common approach is to consider:

1. Philosophical positioning – the researchers stance towards the nature of the world and how knowledge is obtained (epistemology and ontology)
2. Theoretical development – the researcher's particular perspective that will govern the methodological choices e.g. positivism or interpretivism.
3. Methodology – the researcher's approach, e.g. experimental research or ethnography, considered as part of the overall research strategy.
4. Methods – shaped by methodology, methods are techniques for collecting data e.g. survey or interview.

There are a number of models that have been published to aid researchers in establishing an appropriate research philosophy. Critically considering models, Saunders's research onion (2016), is widely cited and subject to updates. However, the research onion is presented as layers giving no sense of the interconnection between elements of the research processes or theoretical requirement. This is because the research onion excludes the philosophies of ontology, epistemology and axiology. Crotty's Hierarchal Levels (1998) suggests a flow and interconnection through these perspectives, but it does not include the important element of research questions. A much broader set of research design considerations is proposed by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2015:104), is thorough in its composition, accounting for epistemological perspectives. However, this model also does not consider research questions.

Given the deficit in these models, for the purpose of this research an alternative model has been created, Figure 3-1, based on the adaptation of the ideas mentioned above. This model has been designed to incorporate axiology (researcher engagement and values) as part of the philosophical positioning, since the value basis of the researcher is considered by many to be an important factor (for example, Collis and Hussey, 2014; Myers 2013; and Lincoln, 1995). This concept is considered in this thesis to be another important part of the philosophical paradigm belief system. This thesis is based upon qualitative research as an acceptance that



researchers make their values known in a study (Somekh and Lewin, 2011; Creswell, 2013:20; Collis and Hussey, 2014).

This model also includes research questions considered as focal point in the research process (set out in chapter 1). The aim of the adopted model is to guide this particular study, outline a clear strategy and overcome the ambiguities that may result from the literature review and applied methodology. The model connects the research philosophy to the method, data collection and analysis (detailed in chapter 4 and 5), and then finally to the development of the result theoretical contribution and grounded theory (detailed in chapters 6 and 7).

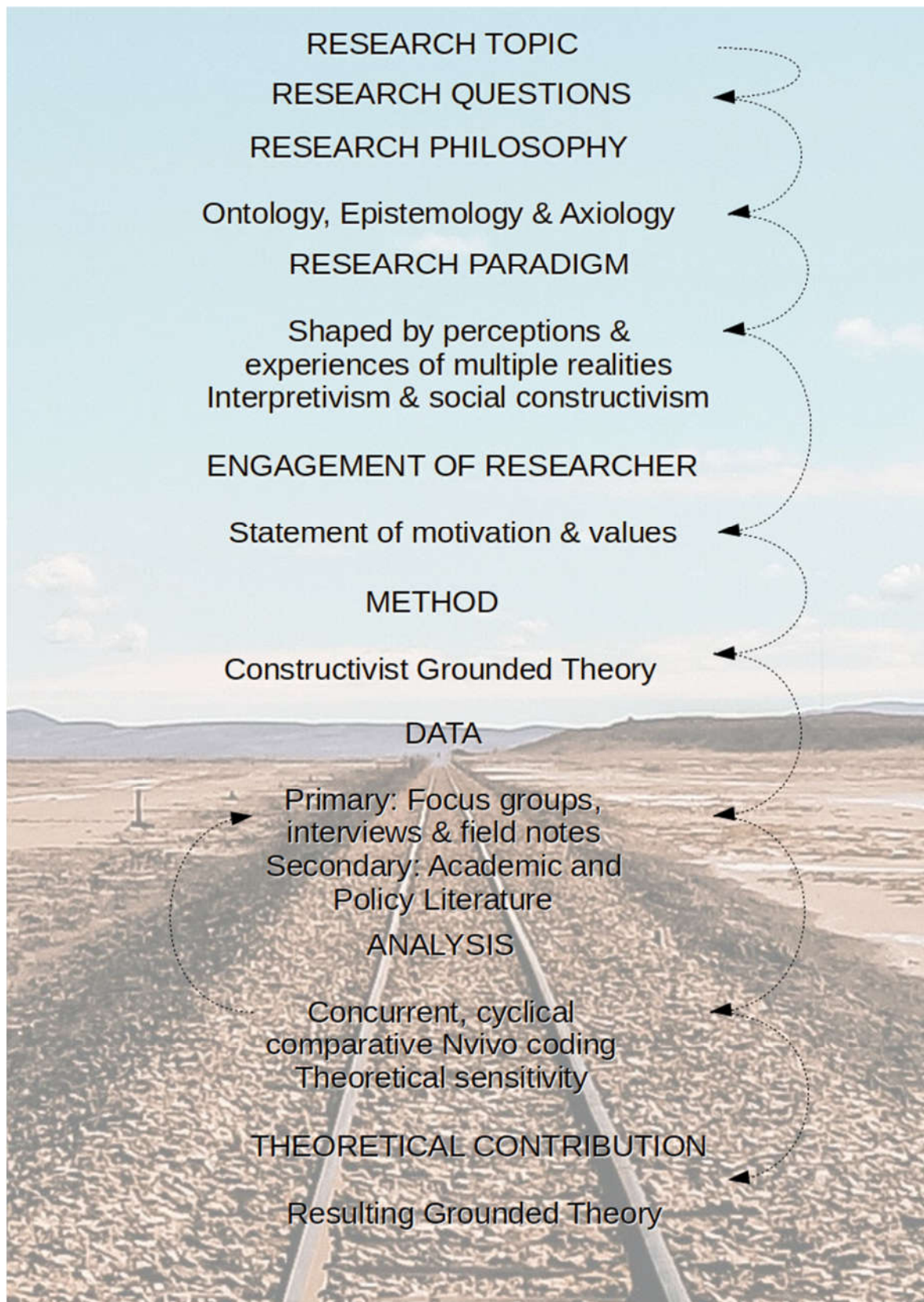


Figure 3-1 The Research model for the study

Photo: Jelskov (n.d.)

### **3.3 Ontology, epistemology and axiology**

In this section the underpinning research philosophy is explored alongside the values and paradigmatic view that will shape this thesis. Furthermore, the wider philosophical considerations for this research, along with the motivation behind the PhD study are explained in the following section. Alternative approaches have been considered but for this thesis an interpretive philosophy that acknowledges the impact of researcher values was taken in the research approach. Overall approach, a social constructivist view that is influenced by poststructural thinking towards education is taken.

Before any practical research issues are considered it is vitally important to examine the philosophical issues that inform this research. As Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (2015) insist, the researcher has an obligation to understand the core philosophical building blocks of epistemology and ontology that create the research paradigm. From this foundation, the decisions and assumptions surrounding the methodology and methods can be explained.

Furthermore, as Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (2015) conclude that there has been debate for many centuries about the relationship between data and theory, and therefore how philosophical paradigms are derived. In understanding this, the epistemological association of knowledge and how it can be obtained, along with the ontological assumptions, need to be established.

In the development of the researcher's philosophical framework it should be acknowledged at this stage that the thesis is firmly placed within the social sciences tradition, concerned as it is with people and their life contexts. As mentioned the related philosophical questions underpin human judgements and activities (Somekh, 2011). Questions are therefore asked about the theory of knowledge and ways of inquiring into the nature of the world (epistemology), questions of values (axiology), of the theory of being and the nature of reality (ontology). All are considered equally significant in the sociology tradition.

Guba and Lincoln (1994:107), argue that philosophical paradigms may be viewed as basic belief systems, based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. The paradigm forms a worldview, as a set of basic beliefs that defines for the individual the nature of the 'world' and their place in it. Paradigms as a basic

belief system means that it is not possible to establish the ultimate truthfulness. Philosophical debates have taken place across thousands of years based upon the paradigm or belief system that guide the researcher. Myers (2013) considers that philosophical paradigms are often taken for granted and should be made explicit by the researcher, especially as these ideas will inform the overall research design. This section will also therefore address research paradigms of positivism, interpretivism, hermeneutics, critical theory and postmodernism/poststructuralism.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) have devised a system to analyse the basic beliefs that define an inquiry paradigm. This system asks questions of the ontological, epistemological and methodological position of the inquirer to enable a clearer understanding of their worldview and the influence it may have upon their inquiry. In questioning the belief system, it can define for inquirers what the researcher is about and the limits of inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:108). This section of the chapter sets out the questions of ontological, epistemological and axiology. The methodological questions and philosophical assumptions of this thesis are then linked to the interpretive frameworks that will operate at a specific level in the process of the research. Each question has been addressed following the primacy set out by Guba and Lincoln (1994:108).

### **3.3.1 Ontology**

Ontology refers to philosophical questions relating to the nature of being and the reality, or otherwise, of existence (Somekh and Lewin, 2011:326). Generally, in approaching research there is an attempt to understand the world in which we inhabit, based on the desire to understand further the phenomena that surrounds us. Socrates believed that through argument, reasoning and questioning, we can begin to understand the nature of reality as opposed to what appearances suggest as reality (Warburton, 2012).

The ontological questions for this PhD study are what is the form and nature of reality and therefore, what can be known about it? (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:108). From an interpretivist perspective, the belief for this study is that social reality is subjective, that it is socially constructed. In the view of Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2015:49), the ontological position depends upon both the topic of enquiry and the preferences of the individual researcher. The focus in this study is the behaviour of

people, taking a relativist perspective, a paradigm accepts multiples truths and where facts depend on the view point of the observer (highlighted in Figure 3-2).

Ontology	Realism	Internal	Relativism	Nominalism
<b>Truth</b>	Single truth	Truth exists, but is obscure	There are many 'truths'	There is no truth
<b>Facts</b>	Facts exist and can be revealed	Facts are concrete, but cannot be accessed directly	Facts depend on viewpoint of observer	Facts are human creations

Figure 3-2 Table of four different ontologies. Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (2015:50)

### 3.3.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge in the physical and social worlds (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015:51). Epistemology is concerned with the theory of knowledge and how knowledge is obtained in the physical and social worlds.

To establish theoretical perspectives of philosophy Crotty, (1998:10), believes that ontological and epistemological issues should be considered together. The issues embody the notions that are mutually dependent to allow the researcher to discover 'how things really are' and 'how things really work'. Crotty states (1998:3) that epistemology is 'the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology'.

The epistemological questions applied to this PhD study are: What is the relationship between the knower or the would-be knower and what can be known? (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 108). This relates to the position of the role of the researcher with respect to beliefs and truth and is connected to the motivations and values. Myers (2013:36) points out that for qualitative research, the researcher should understand the grounds of their knowledge, especially the validity, scope and limits of that knowledge.

Critically examining knowledge and truth for interpretive researchers, Klein and Myers (1999:78) stated 'what is at stake here is not the truth or untruth of the claims, but the world of social relations'. This is key to this interpretivist is in the approach

to creating new knowledge. Therefore, the subjective evidence will be assembled based upon focus groups and individual interviews undertaken in this research (as summarised in chapter 5). Supporting this it is accepted that within this study the epistemological approach is transactional and the researcher values may result in some subjectivity (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:111). The researcher and the object of investigation are interactively linked, as interviews will be developed from the initial focus groups and ‘findings’ will be discovered as the study progresses. Additionally, as well as conducting the focus groups and interviews, the researcher will also be undertaking teaching in employability issues. Thus the researcher is also immersed and has a stake in the inquiry phenomena. In taking the interpretivist perspective, the distance between the researcher and what is being researched is minimised (as described later in this section).

### **3.3.3 Axiology**

Axiology is concerned with the role of values, and in qualitative research the researcher makes their values known in a study. To fully establish the overall philosophical position of the researcher in relation to the research, it can be said that it is these values that help to determine what are recognised as facts and the interpretations drawn from them (Collis and Hussey, 2014:48). For this position to be realised, the researcher is transparent in their own values and bias basis, whilst admitting to the value-laden nature of the data that is collected.

In this inquiry, the main topic of enquiry is that of employability. As the literature review has detailed, there is significant debate about what exactly the basis of employability is, and how the concept is defined. This ranges from skills to *get* a job to those required to *do* a job, with much debate in between (for example: Tymon, 2013; Wilson *et al.*, 2013). In this case, a relativist position is taken, as the researcher believes that such debate arises from the different perspectives and experiences of people. The world can therefore be interpreted in different ways, and is not concrete but socially constructed, stressing the active role of individuals in the construction of social reality (Bryman, 2016).

## **3.4 Research philosophies**

Historically speaking, the focus of philosophical thinking was based in the study of natural sciences, in consideration of beliefs about the world and the nature of

knowledge (Collis and Hussey, 2014). Positivism as a single paradigm was referred to by Khun (1962; viii) as: ‘Paradigms are universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners’. Positivism is based upon the principles of a singular and objective view of reality that can be described by measurable properties, independent of the researcher and can be classified objectively (Myers, 2013).

The positivist paradigm was developed by theorists such as Comte (1798-1857), Mill (1806-1873) and Durkheim (1859-1917) and began as the basis of the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1889-1951) where the major work, focused upon the logic of language. Eventually, as philosophical thinking developed, it became influenced by industrialisation and capitalism whereupon attention began to turn to the study of social phenomena (Collis and Hussey, 2014). Since it is impossible to separate people from the social context in which they exist, interpretivism has developed from the inadequacies of positivism, recognising the subjective rather than an objective reality.

Paradigmatic views also influence the research method, with qualitative and quantitative types used to classify and characterise approaches. Where positivism seeks to measure social phenomena (using quantitative methods in much of the early research), interpretivism explores the complexity of social phenomena to gain interpretive understanding (Collis and Hussey, 2014). Figure 3-3 shows a comparison of some of the terms used to describe approaches to the two main paradigms.

Level/Epistemology	Positivism	Interpretivism
<b>Technical</b>	Quantitative	Qualitative (not exclusively)
<b>Social</b>	Objective	Subjective
<b>Discipline</b>	Scientific	Humanist
<b>System</b>	Traditionalist	Phenomenological

Figure 3-3 Approaches within the two main paradigms *adapted from Collis & Hussey (2014:46)*

### 3.4.1 Positivism

Positivism relates to a philosophical framework that has its basis in the natural sciences and scientific methods. The ontological belief within positivism is for reality being real, external and independent of us (Collis and Hussey: 2014;

Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Epistemologically speaking, knowledge is derived from observable and measurable facts serving as proof for justifiable assertions (Walliman, 2011). A deductive approach is used with highly structured quantitative methods to examine phenomena that can be observed and measured to generate credible data (Crotty, 1998). Within the positivist paradigm, theories are used to explain phenomena, whilst looking for causal relationships and create law-like generalisations. In positioning the research, positivists believe reality is independent of us, therefore there is objectivity and the act of investigating social reality has no effect on that reality (Creswell, 2014).

The main criticisms of the positivist paradigm, relevant to this investigation is that it is impossible to separate people from the social contexts in which they exist. In addition, participants cannot be understood without examining their perceptions. The structure of the approach places constraints on the data collection leading to the possibility of relevant findings being missed. Finally, the assertion that the researcher can remain objective is questionable, certainly within social science or educational research contexts. In such cases, researchers bring their own interests and values contrary to positivist epistemology (Collis and Hussey, 2014).

### **3.4.2 Interpretivism**

Interpretivism has developed as a critical response to positivism. The ontological position is that social reality is constructed through culture and language and that multiple meanings and interpretations of that reality exist. Social reality is therefore subjective rather than objective. Due to the accepted difference between people, knowledge is derived from a focus upon narratives, perceptions and interpretations of new understandings and the contribution of worldviews (Collis and Hussey; 2014; Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

Social worlds are not studied in the same way as physical phenomena; the needs of the research approach are quite different from that of positivism. The interpretivist researcher usually adopts an inductive approach using a range of qualitative methods to gain a rich understanding of the differences in perspective between individuals and their circumstances. It is not possible to achieve this by a single measure or universal law. As Van Maanen (1983:9) stated, interpretivists 'seek to describe, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the



frequency of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world’.

Due to the subjective nature of interpretivism, from the researchers perspective, it is impossible to separate what exists in the social world from that of the researcher (Smith, 1983 ; Creswell, 2014). The researcher therefore in their investigative role has an effect upon that which is being researched. Within this paradigm, it is recognised that the axiological implication that values and beliefs of the researcher are not set aside. Rather there is a focus upon complexity, richness, multiple interpretations and meaning making; the researcher must adopt a crucial empathetic stance within the interpretivist philosophical position (Saunders *et al.*, 2016:141).

An interpretivist position was taken in this research, the above points are therefore important in the conduct of this study. Employability is a complex issue, with many meanings and interpretations across the stakeholder spectrum (see chapter 2). As stated, the undergraduate student voice is largely unheard in the HE scenario under investigation. The researcher has attempted to take account of this complexity by collecting qualitative data to interpret the subjective position from the participants of this research.

### **3.4.3 Hermeneutics**

The theory and methodology of hermeneutics is one of interpretation of text, traditionally that of the bible, but in modern times it applies to verbal and non-verbal communications. The application of hermeneutics today may be seen in the form of the question: How does language shape the life it seeks to describe and how does life shape language? (Brown and Heggs, 2011). The circular notion of the question, known as the hermeneutic circle, provides a focus on how people experience the world and make sense of it rather than a notion of the underlying truth. Two of the best known exponents of this theoretical perspective is Gadamer (1976) and Ricoeur (1981), for whom there are certain truths that orientate our way of seeing things (Brown and Heggs, 2011). There are also associations with Habermas, Derrida and Foucault, the positions of whom are dealt with in subsequent sections.

The work of Gadamer is concerned with the context in which texts are written, interpretations of which are influenced by the cultural sphere of the interpreter. For

Ricœur, temporal issues are central to hermeneutics. The reasoning is that there will always be a gap between the author and reader that is generated over time (Easterby-Smith, *et al.*, 2015).

According to Klein and Myers (1999:71), the hermeneutic circle principle is foundational to all interpretive work of a hermeneutic nature. Crotty (1998) states that the understandings we are able to reach are enmeshed in the language of human beings. This reiterates the prominence of the role of communication and interpretation.

From a natural sciences perspective, Crotty (1998:92) argues that understanding can be gained by analysing the component parts of a phenomenon. However, in the human sciences this, 'simply will not do. To understand a text bearing upon human affairs or a culture that guides human lives, one needs to be able to move dialectically between part and whole, in the mode of the hermeneutic circle'.

In the application of hermeneutics, Klein and Myers (1999) suggest that Gadamer's description of the 'hermeneutic circle', the terms 'parts' and 'whole' should be given a broad and liberal interpretation. The authors argue that interpretation can be in the form of an historical story or the parts can be the interpretive researchers' and the participants' preliminary understandings. This can then allow for the development of a shared meaning in terms of the application, emerging from the interactions between them. An important additional point made by Klein and Myers (1999) is that participants appropriate (i.e. make their own) ideas from the researcher and vice versa.

The application of this approach has appeal in terms of understanding the social and political contexts through HE or Government policy or curriculum documentation etc. There is the opportunity to examine the responses of HEI to policy and subsequent curricula development. The historical context of the current positioning of employability issues is important for this study, shaped around a discursive analysis via the literature review and seen in the subsequent influence upon the development of the research questions (as detailed in the relevant sections).

The development of a shared meaning in terms of the current situation, the opinion and meaning of employability can be gained through the analysis of the interview transcripts. This will provide a contemporaneous interpretation.

Brown and Heggs (2011) suggest the principle of human understanding in the case of hermeneutics are most often associated with action research, but this is not the approach taken in this research. Rather the interpretive aspect is achieved by an iterative process of the parts and the whole that is constructed by the participants (Klein and Myers, 1999). Therefore, the appropriate application of hermeneutics is accounted for within the *evaluation* of the study and the grounded theory approach.

The associated methods of action research are addressed in section 4.3.1 and grounded theory in section 4.3.3.

#### 3.4.4 Critical Theory

Social sciences further diversified from natural sciences in the early twentieth century, incorporating a political dimension, resulting in ‘critical theory’ (Somekh *et al.*, 2011; Crotty, 1998). Critical theory is an interdisciplinary social science method developed by ‘The Frankfurt School’, whose concern was about critiquing and changing society, from the assumptions springing from powerful ideologies of the time. Critical theory was shaped by political concerns, arising from the turmoil of the first and second world wars.

Marx was also an influence upon critical theory. Marxist ideology was based on the premise that the relationship between the economic ‘base’ of society and political power, results in the determination of forms of social consciousness. Marx concluded therefore, it is the social being that determines consciousness (Crotty, 1998:61; Marx, 1961). Such ideas are predicated upon the spirit of social constructionism and equality originating from the idea of the means *and* access to economic means of production.

Following such developments, Habermas (1991), a member of the Frankfurt School, developed the ‘*Theory of Communicative Action*’. Habermas (1970) argues that society itself can impose inequality and alienations, but this taking place may be invisible to people. His ideas are based upon the way in which language can empower and transform human interactions, an ideal considered in the use of unconstrained language that strives for agreement between others.

With the theory of unconstrained language, Habermas recognised that language had become distorted within societies by political power and ideologies thus giving a need to seek the 'ideal' communication. This is said to be achieved by stepping outside, identifying the distortions and critically reviewing the language. A truth or authentic knowing can then be found within this non-oppressive, inclusive and Universalist moral framework. Brown and Jones, (2001:58) suggest 'ideal' communication can be utilised to make things better from some supposed deficit position.

This form of critical theory (otherwise known as a critical hermeneutic methodology), in one respect is said to bring about emancipation and empowerment, resulting in practical action for change, from 'critical' or 'self-reflective' ways of knowing (Lovat, 2010:493). Although there is some criticism of positivistic partitions of knowledge levelled towards Habermas (Pedersen, 2008), his key thesis is concerned with the way in which the mind works in constructing knowledge. Habermas (1970) made the distinction between the natural and social sciences clear in his work.

Critical theory has strong ontological and epistemological views that converge with this research and the researcher. The work of Habermas seems particular pertinent given the difficulties that lie with the communication and understanding of definitions and applications of employability concepts. However, critical evaluation suggests that an 'ideal' communication may not be practically possible, as the scope of the study will be unable to make sufficient impact to resolve the employability debate (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018). Habermas's theory of communication requires people to have significant capacity for critical flexibility, which Habermas himself admits is a problem (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018).

Given the critique of social sciences research with respect to empirical data, the researcher agrees with the premise from Bourdieu *et al.*, (1991) and which is emphasised by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2018), that critical theory is not primarily empirically orientated. The researcher positions herself in the interpretivist paradigm where empirical data can provide a crucial input into research, based upon claims that social reality is not external to the actors within it.

It is true that critical theory includes a political dimension, one that has been shown as important with respect to employability. As illustrated in the literature HE has been subjected to significant political ideologies and employability is borne out of the tension this creates. In studying a social phenomenon such as employability and ‘reality’ for students and stakeholders it will be difficult to remain objective and neutral as a researcher who is also a member of the HE society (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018). Overall, critical theory is highly theoretical with little room to account for practical circumstances and constraints.

In avoiding any complications that positivistic positioning critical theory may establish, the approach will not be applied in this study. The study is not asking if employability should be a concern for HE but rather, examines the situation where it is taught and what that means for students given the context (field) in which it has taken place.

#### **3.4.5 Postmodernism/ Poststructuralism**

The differences between postmodernism and poststructuralism are subtle and have become less discernible over time and yet the designations have been used in diverse ways (Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, 2016; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018). The approach(es) have had wide academic attention. From the origin in France in the 1960’s the scope and impact in the social sciences has fluctuated until the mid-1990’s where it began to subside.

The work of French philosopher, Lyotard (1979/1984) brought postmodernism to academic attention. Postmodernism provides a critique of scientific progress and is associated originally with the architectural and arts movement of the time; it contains an ontological position that is opposed to realism (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015). Postmodernism was later developed mainly by other French philosophers, including Derrida (1978) and Foucault (1979). Postmodernism places focus upon the role of language and of power relations, the purpose is to ‘question ways of thinking and give voice to alternative and marginalised views (Saunders, *et al.*, 2016).

Moving away from the Frankfurt School and structuralism, Derrida became an influential philosopher who distanced himself from the movements and traditions that came before him. Irwin (2013:171) states that the primary influence of

Derrida's work remains within the philosophy of education and its related disciplines such as pedagogy. This poststructural thinking functions on the basis that there are no universal truths or rules that can be extrapolated from the positivist ideology. As such it is in contrast to the critical social theory paradigm of Habermas which is concerned with the principles of unveiling, uncovering hidden forces and material structures, providing illumination through various discourses.

Sharman (2004:88) suggests that conceptually Derrida is faithful to one philosophical tradition in terms of ontological development in that 'there is no neutral, no detached or absolute vantage point for knowledge' because through our language and conceptualisation, thoughts are bound. We are therefore complicit in the construction of our reality, Derrida would say that our understandings are filtered by something else 'conditioned by the media through which we receive depictions of it', (Brown and Jones, 2001:5). From this Derrida developed the premise of *deconstruction* suggesting that there is nothing that is not caught in a network of differences and references that give a textual structure to what we can know from the world (Lather, 2004:4).

Quality in social sciences research is therefore dependent upon the persuasive power of outcomes and the ability of language to construct and represent meaning (Somekh *et al.*, 2011). This is also subject to much debate with philosophers such as Foucault's concept of 'discourse' and Derrida's 'deconstruction' as they examine ways of uncovering the truths and meaning.

The work of the structuralist philosophers initiated debates about the nature of outcomes for socially orientated research. This includes the idea of the imposition of order or the presentation of a grand narrative from data, serving to highlight the dilemmas of social science epistemologies. Haraway (1991:187), summarises that by stating the need for '*simultaneously...a critical practice for recognising our own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of the "real world"*'.

Poststructuralism 'is an ontological and epistemological position that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century within the humanities and social sciences' (Fox, 2014:3). Postmodernism is however closely associated with poststructuralism, taking a more political stance within its perspective. The epithets "post-

structuralist” and “postmodern” are increasingly interchangeable, and most theorists now prefer the former attribution to describe their work (Fox, 2014:3).

The perspective moves beyond the structuralist ontologies, the ideas of Marxism for example, of structures that may constrain human action. There remains concern with power relations that move further to emphasise the role of knowledge and textual processes in achieving and sustaining relations of power.

One of the most important philosophers and theorists that influence this study are Bourdieu, who work within the poststructural paradigm. The French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) breaks from Marxian political roots to take a deeper social and symbolic view. Bourdieusian philosophy and theory of ‘cultural capital’ provides a framework for understanding how factors such as social class and education reproduce both social privilege and exclusion (Somekh *et al.*, 2011:9). As stated in the literature review, education was an important topic for Bourdieu.

Several aspects of postmodernism could provide a lens for the philosophical stance for this thesis. This includes Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ to examine ways of uncovering the truths and meaning. This postmodern principle is that multiple voices are allowed to speak, but it is the knowledge gap of the student voice in relation to employability that this thesis seeks to address.

Poststructuralism has widely published links with educational research but the approach has a strong link to power relations and political action. Power relations are not key to the research questions in this case. However the broader concepts of social theory developed from Bourdieu that advocates theory informed by empirical data, will allow the research to address data collection and knowledge claims (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The recognition of the relational workings of social situations are important. Employability can therefore be examined in relation to their location in the HE field and in relation to other stakeholders in that field (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008).

This section has explored the rationale for the research philosophy adopted for this thesis. Rather than taking philosophy for granted, it has been recognised that failure to link philosophical issues, such as the relationship between data and theory could

have serious consequences upon the quality of the research (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2009).

However, when all the philosophical positions are considered, the thesis must remain in keeping with the ontological, epistemological and axiological perspective of the researcher (relativist, transactional and subjectivist), therefore an interpretivist approach is the overall position taken. In practical terms the research was framed within the field of education and social sciences, by classifying the research as interpretive meant that knowledge is gained from social constructions. In defining interpretive research Klein and Myers (1999:69) state 'it is assumed that our knowledge of reality is gained only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents, tools, and other artefacts'. In other words interpretive research focuses the complexity of human sense making in attempt to understand how people think and act in constructing their social reality. The conduct of the research was guided by the principles, based upon the interpretive paradigm, set out by Klein and Myers (1999), this is discussed in section 3.6.

### **3.5 Engagement of the researcher**

Based upon the evaluation of the philosophical paradigms and as stated above it is also important to consider motivation and experiential background of the researcher that led to engagement in this research. This next section serves as supporting reasoning, exploring the philosophical constructs influencing researcher engagement in this thesis.

#### **3.5.1 Motivation and value basis**

Walsham (2006:327) states it is important to 'describe the researchers own role in the process'. This following discussion details the researchers' background and influencing factors that addresses the point that Walsham is making.

The basis of the researcher's undergraduate education was in biological and biochemical sciences. Progressing to a PhD study has resulted in a dichotomy of framing new understanding and professional activities, from those of the natural sciences to that of social sciences. From past education, skills were developed to understand and construct theories carefully and systematically, through planned testing and experimentation, with a positivist outlook.



The positivist paradigm also influences the axiological outlook. In terms of research, as Borg (1963, *cited in Cohen et al., 2011*) explains it 'is a combination of both experience and reasoning' for successfully discovering the truth. Analysis, rational reasoning and problem solving, as a biology graduate, were part of an outlook applied successfully to subsequent professional practice. The conception being realism, seen as order within society and the ability to explain human behaviour and conduct. Later career progression involved moving into a first line managerial role, where the nature of that work resulted in a shift to a relativist perspective, accepting many truths depending upon the viewpoint of the observer.

The undertaking of a Masters of Business Administration (MBA), allowed for a re-examination of paradigmatic assumptions. The MBA required the study of decision making and abilities to separating people and business needs within the social context in which they arise. The study of business and management is often in terms of subjective and particular scenarios. The study of these new topics allowed the researcher to develop an understanding of the inadequacy of positivism as applied to the needs of business and management and subsequently social research. The learning and philosophical examination has continued with the researchers move into academia. One of the most influential factors for the researcher's current philosophical understanding has been the development towards the area of social science and educational research that has resulted in a shift to interpretive perspectives and beliefs.

### **3.5.2 Paradigm shift – Selection of the research paradigm**

Based on previous experience of the researcher, the theoretical perspectives of interpretivism and post-structuralism represent somewhat of a paradigm shift. Employability became a significant area of interest given the intersection it has taken across the experiences of the researcher. Due to an undergraduate scientific background, postgraduate business and management education and teaching practice (of the researcher), it was possible to experience a dichotomy between the positivist and interpretivism paradigms. This is dominated by ten years' of managerial experience (within the public sector but outside of academia) with attempts to apply objective reasoning and logic to day-to-day outcomes.

Latterly, moving into business and management education has allowed the development of an understanding and appreciation for reflective practices and

research discourses. These may be used to determine the ideographic nature of the researcher, that the world and our view of society may be very different from one individual to another (Burrell and Morgan, 1985). Therefore, although sometimes conflicting, an examination of interpretive and also post-structural perspectives can suggest new possibilities by providing new lenses through which to view the research questions. As Walsham (1993) also argued, interpretive methods of research start from the position that our knowledge of reality, including the domain of human action, is a social construction by human actors.

By positioning the research and the researcher within this framework it was possible to use the theoretical perspective, with a philosophical underpinning to examine ontological assumptions (about the nature of employability), for the development of knowledge. The epistemological discoveries are found through the methodology and methods applied to the identified research theme (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Crotty, 1998).

Examining the researcher's background and being able to explain the shift that has taken place in making sense of the world was an important act before developing the methodological approach. Walsham (2006) declares that it will be possible to share the conclusions that are produced from this thesis from the reality that was observed in the study. The theories produced are ways of making sense of the world, and shared meanings are a form of intersubjectivity rather than objectivity.

Having undertaken this evaluation the researcher agrees with Walsham (2006:320) on the plausibility of alternative ontological positions. Understanding this allows the researcher to conduct interpretive research and have an awareness that Geertz, (1973:9) summarised as 'what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to'.

### **3.6 Principles for interpretive field studies**

In 1999, Klein and Myers published an influential study; 'A set of principles for conducting and evaluating interpretive field studies in information System'. The authors became aware that questions were being asked about the conduct and quality of Information Systems (IS) research. From their work there is an assertion that 'interpretive research can help IS researchers to understand human thought and action in social and organisational contexts; it has the potential to produce deep

insights into information systems phenomena' (Klein and Myers, 1999:67). As a result they outlined seven principles to guide the production of quality research.

Such is the value and contribution of this work, the framework has been adapted and is incorporated into this PhD study. The principle was used to judge the quality and conduct of this research based upon the social context and the qualitative approach.

The principles are outlined below and adaptation is seen in the research examples taken from the literature review. At the end of the study, via analysis and theory building, these principles will be applied and contrasted to the outcomes to determine the adherence:

### **1. The Fundamental Principle of the Hermeneutic Circle**

*This principle suggests that all human understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they form. This principle of human understanding is fundamental to all the other principles.*

The idea of the hermeneutic circle suggests that we come to understand a complex whole from preconceptions about the meanings of its parts and their interrelationships.

Hence, in a number of iterations of the hermeneutic circle, a complex whole of shared meanings emerges. This interpretation should be used in applying the principle of interaction between the researchers and subjects.

Example: Williams *et al.* (2016) carried out a review of the current understanding of employability from between 1960 to 2014. The review presents an assessment of the similarities and differences between various components of employability conceptualisation. Capital, career management and contextual dimensions were identified as unifying themes. It iterates the variation in shared and disputed meanings, which should be accounted for in the development of employability research and assessment.

### **2. The Principle of Contextualization**

*Requires critical reflection of the social and historical background of the research setting, so that the intended audience can see how the current situation under investigation emerged.*

Gadamer's insight that there is an inevitable difference in understanding between the interpreter and the author of a text is created by the historical distance between them. The hermeneutic task consists, not in covering up the tension between the text and the present, but in consciously bringing it out (Gadamer, 1976:133).

Consequently, interpretive research seeks to understand a moving target, where contextualisation supports our understanding of the emerging current situation.

Example: There is a body of work from Tomlinson (2012) and Tomlinson and Holmes (2017) that examines graduate employability in the wider social, economic and political landscape. Such context is important in the consideration of past and current understandings and approaches to employability in curricula, policy and research. The notions generated from this body of work has an influence upon future directions for employability in HE.

### **3. The Principle of Interaction Between the Researchers and the Subjects**

*Requires critical reflection on how the research materials (or "data") were socially constructed through the interaction between the researchers and participants.*

The notion in this case is to consider the social interactions that are key to interpretive research, and that reflective practice takes place alongside the consideration of the facts produced.

Examples: As well as considering those provided by Klein and Myers (1999:72), the work of Trauth (1997) regards self-consciousness and questioning her own assumptions as important. Elliot (2014) states the importance of self-reflective actors within social research. Additionally, Walsham (1993) considers the influence of the researchers' background upon the research and its paradigm. The contribution of these authors for conducting interpretive research reminds us to consider the emotional and intellectual dimensions that are of value.

### **4. The Principle of Abstraction and Generalization**

*Requires relating the idiographic details revealed by the data interpretation through the application of principles one and two to theoretical, general concepts that describe the nature of human understanding and social action.*

Klein and Myers (1999:75) make the point that theoretical abstractions and generalisations should be placed in context, i.e. carefully related to the field study details as they were experienced and/or collected by the researcher. Therefore, readers can follow how the researcher arrived at his or her theoretical insights.

Example: Within the field of educational research, the conceptual tools of Bourdieu (2004) namely *habitus*, *field* and *capital* have been applied in many cases. An example that can be ascribed to this principle is that of Kalfa and Taksa (2015) who apply Bourdieusian theory to the adoption of teaching methodologies designed to enable the development of generic employability skills. This principle also has clear link to the grounded theory method adopted in this study (chapter 4).

## **5. The Principle of Dialogical Reasoning**

*Requires sensitivity to possible contradictions between the theoretical preconceptions guiding the research design and actual findings ("the story which the data tell") with subsequent cycles of revision.*

Klein and Myers (1999:76) are adamant on this point, fundamentally the philosophical assumptions must be transparent, with the type of interpretivism clearly stated. The preferred philosophical direction must be assessed to establish this. This is was one of the key aims of this chapter, the outcomes of which are summarised in Figure 4-13.

Example: Wilson *et al.*, (2013) examines the meaning of professionalism for students. This is on the basis of preconceptions and multiple perspectives regarding what professionalism *is* and *should* be, considered along with pedagogical implications. This is studied alongside opportunities for participants to engage with such discussions and express their views.

## **6. The Principle of Multiple Interpretations**

*Requires sensitivity to possible differences in interpretations among the participants as are typically expressed in multiple narratives or stories of the same sequence of events under study. Similar to multiple witness accounts even if all tell it as they saw it.*

The principle in this case requires an examination of the social context has upon actions being studied. To achieve this the research must seek multiple viewpoints along with the reasons for them.

Example: The research of Cumming (2010) attempts to reframe the debate surrounding skills in HE. Cumming (2010) analyses three conceptual frameworks, with the aim of shifting the direction of discourse. The approach accounts for multiple stakeholder perspectives for the concept development that has been applied in this study.

### **7. The Principle of Suspicion**

*Requires sensitivity to possible "biases" and systematic "distortions" in the narratives collected from the participants.*

The encouragement of forms of critical thinking has been a feature of the principles stated so far and is concerned with the interpretation of meanings. In an adaptation of 'hermeneutics of suspicion' from Ricoeur (1976), this principle adds critical analysis that accounts for social influences that may create distortion upon data collected in field studies.

There is however an element of concern in this final principle, since Deetz (1996) questions the extent to which social research can (or should be) critical. A point that is of considerable disagreement among interpretive researchers. Given this, Klein and Myers (1999:78) point out, 'this leaves open the possibility that some interpretive researchers may choose not to follow this principle in their work'. Therefore, the example provided by Klein and Myers (1999) will remain in place but open to revision as the research progressed and further literature was evaluated.

Example: Forester (1992) looks at the facetious figures of speech used by city planning staff to negotiate the problem of data acquisition.

## **3.7 Philosophical Summary**

The literature revealed a variety of philosophical paradigms within which there are differing philosophical assumptions. In addition, there are several differences in how certain terms are used and applied within philosophical studies (Creswell, 2013, Crotty, 1998, Collis and Hussey, 2014, Saunders *et al.*, 2016 and Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015). The study of positivism, interpretivism, hermeneutics, critical

theory and poststructuralism has been vitally important in understanding the philosophy to establish the approach taken in this study.

The philosophical assumptions establish the researcher's stance towards the world within which research is undertaken are based upon:

- Ontology: The theory and study of being (Crotty, 1998) – Subjective, relativist, socially constructed
- Epistemology: The theory of knowledge and how it becomes known (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015) – transactional and subjective
- Axiology: Roles of values - the research is values bound, the researcher is part of the research (Collis and Hussey, 2014)

The research questions, values of the research and field setting lend themselves towards an interpretive approach. This PhD is an inductive study which sought to investigate the meaning of employability, to establish the student voice within an HE context. The ontological position is that social reality is constructed through culture and language and that multiple meanings and interpretations of that reality exist. Social reality is therefore subjective rather than objective.

In the consideration of alternative paradigms, the power relations, realist single truths and manifestations of experience of critical theory are not central to the research questions, nor are they key to the overall philosophical assumptions of this thesis. They also do not inform or influence the axiology of the researcher.

The focus and impact of the employability agenda in HE could be seen through the poststructural lens in this thesis. Poststructuralism was not used in this study, however, it was determined that the structural influences upon the field of study ultimately leads to some poststructuralist connection. As has been evaluated in the literature review, it is difficult to separate the structures that influence the responses to the employability agenda. These include the political, economic and pedagogical issues associated with the concept. Included within this paradigm are considerations of the purpose and impact that education has upon students within the current and future systems, which is now conflated with employability.

The social and organisational contexts and the understanding of how participants construct meaning was important in this study. This lead to adaption of Kline and Myers (1999) seven principles of interpretive field studies that guide and judge

interpretivist research. This approach was beneficial in terms of the interpretive stance and to support the quality and conduct of the research.

The study was primarily an inductive exploratory study that has taken a socially constructivist approach to examining what employability means within HE business and management education. The contribution to knowledge is via new understandings and worldview of the undergraduate student participants.



## **4 Research Methods**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The chapter includes an examination of the methodology considered for the study and goes on to establish and justify the methods for analysing and collecting data. In the latter half of the chapter, issues of validity, reliability and ethical considerations are fully discussed.

This qualitative study takes an interpretivist and socially constructivist approach. To ensure the most appropriate methods were applied a variety of commonly accepted methods and techniques were evaluated. This chapter presents the main considerations for the overall research design in conjunction with the theoretical framework created for the study (following from Philosophy Chapter 3).

The methods considered include action research, ethnography and grounded theory. The data collection techniques considered include survey, focus groups and interviews. In terms of design, consideration has been given to quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approaches.

### **4.2 Research question design**

There are differences in opinion as to the process and stages of methodological design, such differences also include when to formulate the research questions within the overall research process. There are also arguments regarding the prominence of the research question as a driver of the research process and design (Bryman, 2007). Some research methods may not have research questions i.e. certain versions of grounded theory (Bryman, 2007:6). However, the formulation of research questions forces a focus upon the issues that you want to find out about more precisely and rigorously (Bryman, 2016:8).

Collis and Hussey (2014:104) developed a model to aid the identification of research questions (Figure 4-1). For these authors (and several others), the research questions are at the centre of the research. Identifying the research questions are considered a crucial stage in the research process and the heart of the design. The model in Figure 4-1 was followed in a process to narrow the purpose to several questions that will be addressed in the study (Creswell, 2013:138).

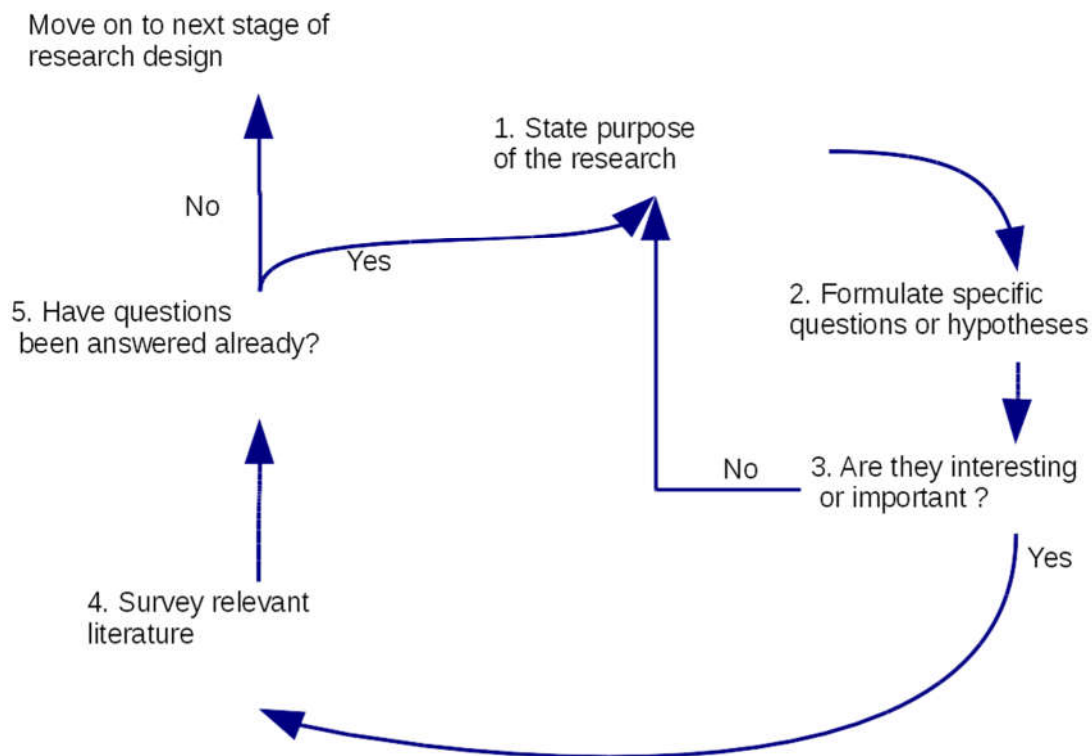


Figure 4-1 Identifying research questions - Collis & Hussey (2014:104)

The central and sub-questions, along with aims and objectives to support the purpose and contribution of this for this study are detailed in the introductory chapter 1. The production of objectives enable operationalisation of the research questions in a practical sense (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

Based upon the model of Collis and Hussey (2014) the questions were developed from a review of the key literature, and were subsequently informed by discussions, conference presentations and research experiences. Research in business and management, educational and social science mainly advocate the development of research questions from within the methodological approach, resulting from the literature review. This reasoning provides an accurate description of the research decision-making process for this study, an approach, which is preferred by Bryman (2007), and attempts to avoid a normative approach to research questions.

It is important to recognise that given the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study, some flexibility in relation to question development was required as the data was gathered and the work progressed. The reasoning of Brown (2014), argues that

research questions ‘may undergo a number of changes as the work progresses’. One of the sub questions was adjusted, in accordance with the model of Collis and Hussey (2014) (Figure 4-1). It became clear early on in research process that social capital was not the only form of capital seen in the findings and therefore the question was adjusted to account for this point of interest and capture this aspect of the data.

## **4.3 Evaluation of potential research methods**

### **4.3.1 Action Research**

Based upon an initial research proposal development, action research was considered at length. The reasoning was that action research is a basic problem solving method and one that is also values based and is an applied method aimed at bringing effective change in a partially controlled environment (McNiff, 2002). This initially appeared to suit the suiting researcher’s practitioner profile and values. It is strongly orientated towards collaboration, it is noted that several authors, for example Kemmis and McTaggart, (1992:15), state that action research is a group activity and that it is not individualistic. Action research does though lend itself well to the study of particular circumstances as systems for constructing meaning with potential for the development of praxis through, reflection (Kincheloe, 2003; Grundy, 1987). This may have proved valuable, however the researcher is positioned outside of the sphere of organisational influence, where longer term collaboration and extended research is not possible. Thus this limits the true sense of the original action research methodology of a cyclical repeatable process.

### **4.3.2 Ethnography**

Ethnography, derived from anthropology is the most in-depth set of research methods possible (Myers, 2013). This methodology requires the researcher to be ‘where the action is’, becoming a full member of the group that is being studied in order to collect participant observation data. It is an approach to study cultures via the method of field work. The main barriers to adopting this methodology is the length of time to complete all aspects of the ethnography (data collection, translation and analysis), along with the nature of the student groups being studied. In this case, data will be collected from current students undertaking their studies. Building trust and the levels of involvement required in the classroom situation would be difficult to attain without inadvertently interfering with the workings of

that setting. To be embedded within the classroom, a learning and assessment environment as both a researcher and a member of staff, would be disruptive to both the student and the research process. Therefore, grounded theory was explored as an alternative.

#### **4.3.3 Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was developed from a collaboration of Glaser and Strauss in 1967. They published a seminal work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) to explain their methodology for deriving theories from empirical data (Myers, 2013). The authors advocated developing theories from research data rather than deducing hypotheses from existing theories (Charmaz, 2006:4). Grounded theory was originally presented as a response to the sociological research environment at the time.

#### **4.3.4 Historical context of Grounded Theory**

In the 1960's sociological research saw a dominance of the positivistic paradigm and a growth in quantitative approaches. Such approaches suggested that theory could only be generated independently from human existence. However, Glaser and Strauss contested such methodological conventions, and connected epistemological critique with practical guidelines for action in this new theory (Charmaz, 2006:5). In essence, Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed systematic qualitative analysis could generate its own theory, challenging beliefs that qualitative methods were impressionistic and unsystematic. In their seminal work Glaser and Strauss were proclaiming a revolutionary message that from the application of grounded theory, it was possible to construct theoretical explanations for social processes.

One of the main developments and differences in grounded theory from other theories is the continuous interplay between data collection and analysis (Myers, 2013). Thus through design, the guidance from Glaser and Strauss provided accessible an analytic instrument that allows a systematic and emergent strategy to undertake research (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

The theory was adopted by many scholars, it provided a powerful and credible legitimisation for qualitative methodologies, and was said to be a 'qualitative revolution' by Denzin and Lincoln, (1994:ix). Although, in later years the co-authors

views diverged, public disagreements were voiced and both went on to develop different approaches to grounded theory.

Strauss developed the method towards verification and co-authored yet another powerful statement of method or a manual (as often described) that contained clear guidelines and procedures for conducting grounded theory research (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Glaser remained embedded in the espoused method of discovery from which theory emerges from the data, going on to publish work claiming that Strauss and Corbin were not using grounded theory as originally intended (Myers, 2013). He objected to the use of the extended coding paradigm, in which he suggested if data is 'forced' or 'tortured' for long enough, the result is conceptual description not grounded theory (Glaser, 1992:123).

Arising from this academic fracture, Charmaz (2000; 2001) moved to examine the key differences that arose to shift the field of grounded theory research forward. The key distinctions made by Charmaz were between 'objectivist grounded theory' and 'constructivist grounded theory'. As such the work of Glaser, Strauss and Corbin is viewed as 'objectivist' and therefore assumes data to have an external reality that is waiting to be discovered. Crucially this means this form of grounded theory remains in a positivistic realm (Charmaz, 2006:130-131). This is juxtaposed with a 'constructivist' position which is considered to be part of the interpretive tradition. Therefore, this distinction is important if we are to recognise diverse local worlds, multiple realities and take account for the impact these may have upon individuals' views and actions.

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology, in which the enquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action or an interaction shaped by the views of a number of participants (Creswell, 2013:83). Charmaz (2006), advocates a social constructivist perspective, emphasising multiple realities and complexities of multiple worlds. Although infused with the ideas of Glaser and Strauss (1967) Charmaz suggests a more flexible approach to grounded theory than that conceived by originators. The revised approach of Charmaz (2006) takes a constructivist lens that addresses 'how realities are made' on the basis that assumes people...construct the realities in which they participate'. By these means

constructivist grounded theory (CGT) meets the needs for this research and the researcher's philosophical position, interactions and even geographical locations (Charmaz, 2009). The reason being that CGT adopts the methodological strategies of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) theory but does not endorse its epistemology (Charmaz, 2011). CGT adopts a relativist epistemology, seeking an interpretivist understanding which takes into account the research situation and how data is produced within it. Unlike the stance of Glaser, abstractions are not removed from time, space and situation (Charmaz, 2011:168).

The main areas of debate between the two approaches to grounded theory centre on purpose, underlying research assumptions and the position of the researcher. This is along with impact of the literature review, development of research questions and approaches to analysis (O' Connor, *et al.*, 2018). Glaser and Strauss, as originators of grounded theory, had significant influence upon interpretive social science research, which should not be underestimated. Nor should it be taken for granted as a 'go-to' methodology just because of the extent of the subsequent usage. Justification for the usage of CGT is based upon the central tenet of Charmaz's approach, to give 'voice' to a subject which is useful in research and that is professional practice (Higginbottom and Lauridsen, 2014). In this case, the student voice in relation to employability within the field of HE practices.

#### **4.3.5 Evolving Grounded Theory**

From a series of modifications and refinements, grounded theory continues to be the qualitative method most widely used across a range of subjects (Bryant and Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz in particular, across a body of work, emphasises the flexibility of the method, setting out 'I view grounded theory methods as a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages.' (Charmaz, 2006:9). She moves away from the emergent discovery of theory from data but towards the construction of grounded theories as an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it (Charmaz, 2006; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This view places the researcher as part of the world that they are studying and the data that is collected, whilst regarding the participant's implicit meanings, the interpretation and generated theories as constructions of reality. Given the nature of this research, based within a HE teaching environment and collecting data from participants that

are subject to that practice, grounded theory provides a good basis for this constructivist approach.

Furthermore, the reconsideration of grounded theory carried out by Charmaz (2006) is based upon philosophical perspectives and theory development and relative to aspects of practice. Key points to the method are:

- interpretive theory calls for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon;
- this type of theory assumes emergent, multiple realities;
- indeterminacy;
- facts and values as inextricably linked;
- truth as provisional;
- social life as processual.

In keeping with the philosophical stance determined in chapter 3, the development of grounded theory provides a stronger fit to this study. The premise of Charmaz is to use grounded theory methods and theorising as social actions. The researcher is not separate (objective) from the research process but interacts with data to create theories from it. The theory generated depends on the researcher's view. The constructivist stance 'places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data' (Charmaz, 2006:130). Overall from this evolved perspective, CGT is placed firmly within the interpretivist tradition.

Given this, it remains important to recognise that the research does not exist in a 'social vacuum'. So from asking questions about *how* participants construct meanings, it may be possible to study *why*; therefore it is also important to reflect within the analytical process, and be alert to the conditions under which such differences and distinctions arise and are maintained (Charmaz, 2006:130). By taking this particular stance, constructivism fosters researchers' reflexivity about their own interpretations as well as those of their research participants.

This perspective fundamentally fits with the philosophical framework of the researcher and research for this thesis, the support and critique for which is explored in the following sections.

#### **4.3.6 Applied benefits of Grounded Theory**

- Flexibility: Charmaz (2006:2) advocates grounded theory as fostering the research process, in which it is a 'systematic yet flexible guide to collection and analysis, to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves'. Flexibility is also applied to the epistemological stance (determined in Chapter 3). Mediating the reality, understanding and clarity of the position is vitally important in selecting the method that best suits the researcher and the study (O' Connor, *et al.*, 2018)
- Mean making: the methods are 'most suited to efforts to understand the process by which actors construct meaning out of intersubjective experience'. The methods supports the research aim of 'wanting to make claims about how individuals interpret reality' (Suddaby, 2006:634). The thesis focused upon the student voice in a co-construction of theory accounting for the ontological and epistemological positions (Higginbottom and Lauridsen, 2014)
- Data collection: The intended data collection process/phases are suited to the CGT approach. This is to study the data early and begin to separate, sort and synthesise through qualitative coding and attaching labels (Charmaz, 2006:3).
- Data grounding methods: the writing of primary analytic memos about codes and comparisons, combined any other ideas about the data that occur to us (as was the case with the focus groups before moving to individual interview)
- More data may be collected: the reflexive stance allows for responsive actions whilst collection is underway and participants are engaged. Maintaining the momentum of this sometimes difficult process of data collection. The analytical framework is explored in a later section.
- Results: Work culminates in a 'grounded theory' or abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experiences.

#### **4.3.7 Application of Grounded Theory**

As stated, this section aims to construct and justify the research approach and purpose. It would be insufficient to say that widespread acceptability, application and flexibility of the CGT methodology is justification enough. Therefore, critical



support was sought from the literature to ensure that the grounded theory method is appropriately applied in this thesis.

Suddaby (2006) published an article that set out to examine the misconceptions of the use of grounded theory based upon his concerns for what constitutes qualitative research and researcher claims concerning the use of this method. This section will use the six misconceptions to show the appropriateness of the method for this inquiry.

### **1. Grounded Theory Is Not an Excuse to Ignore the Literature**

The issue here refers to the misconception that grounded theory requires a researcher to have no preconceived theoretical ideas before entering the field or any knowledge of prior research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocate the avoidance of ‘received theory’ and risk viewing your data through such a lens. Suddaby (2006:635) refers to several variants of this ‘myth’, including having a blank mind to leaving the literature review until after data collection and analysis. Charmaz (2006) suggests that perhaps Glaser and Strauss overstated their point, in encouraging researchers to focus on new rather than old ideas.

What is clear is that it is a mistake to ignore the literature during any part of the research process. It would not be possible to firstly establish a need for research with an academically acceptable proposal or then to generate clear research questions in the absence of theory or the existing literature. A view from practiced grounded theorists is to take a critical stance towards earlier theories, with Henwood and Pidgeon (2003:138) suggesting the stance of ‘theoretical agnosticism’ during the research process. O’Connor *et al.* (2018) with respect to CGT warn researchers should not accept the literature uncritically but have an awareness of its impact upon the research process.

For this study, the literature was treated to ensure several key assurances as follows:

- To identify a gap from which to generate a theoretic/conceptual contribution;
- To learn from seminal texts in terms of successful methodological approaches;
- To develop a set of clear research questions;

- Single substantive areas were avoided by drawing upon areas such as a broad range of capitals in order to develop an overall robustness to the research approach
- To assert principles for interpretive field work in setting out the parameters for quality field work (Kline and Myers, 1999). Detailed in section 3.6.

## **2. Grounded Theory Is Not Presentation of Raw Data**

Suddaby (2006:635) presents this problem arising from errors in the practice of grounded theory research, which may be attributable to confusion between grounded theory and phenomenology. This results with obvious findings and undigested data being presented as theory, where thorough analysis is not undertaken.

An additional concern is a connection between grounded theory and phenomenology, where phenomenology is subjective in nature, probing into the lived in experience. Whereas grounded theory is objective, attempting to elicit meaning construction and information from the social situation under examination, which can be abstracted into theoretical statements.

For this PhD, careful consideration of the approach to the interview and question structure was undertaken (detailed further in section 4.6). The purpose was not to research the phenomena of employability but to establish the meaning for the participants within the sphere of HE and their undergraduate situation.

Data collection was ordered in 4 phases,

1. Student focus groups,
2. Student individual interviews,
3. Employee interviews,
4. Academic staff interviews.

After each data collection event the audio recording was reviewed and a transcript generated. Initial analysis of all the focus group transcripts was completed in order to generate the interview questions for the next phase. The concurrent collection of data and analysis, developed with a thematic analysis, is detailed further in section 4.13. The application of this method was to address a key point suggested by Martin & Turner (1983:147 *cited in* Suddaby, 2006) that grounded theory is identifying ‘a

slightly higher level of abstraction—higher than the data itself'. In order that subsequent data analysis was grounded in what had been collected before.

### **3. Grounded Theory Is Not Theory Testing, Content Analysis, or Word Counts**

Suddaby raises the concern that when claiming the use of grounded theory, researchers are in fact testing hypotheses. Such action confuses the philosophical and theoretical perspectives of the overall study, for which Suddaby accuses authors of engagement in the sloppy practice of methodological slurring (Goulding, 2002 *cited in* Suddaby, 2006:636). This issue is not exclusive to grounded theory but within other fields of research, as detailed in earlier discussions regarding research philosophies (section 3.4).

Therefore, in avoiding theory testing, aside from having a clear understanding of what the intended purpose of grounded theory is, it is vital to establish a consistent research stance. Further to the evolution of grounded theory, the constructivist stance, i.e. the construction of meaning from data and analysis, seeks to delineate the interpretivist perspective by acknowledging that the resulting theory is an interpretation (Charmaz, 2000, 2002; Bryant, 2002). This point feeds into the constructivist approach detailed above.

In this case the position of the researcher was extensively explored. The aim was to capture the student voice and their interpretation of that reality, to reveal understandings of employability rather than explaining what it is through grounded theory. Section 4.4 clarifies the qualitative approach and conception of the theory via the research strategy. This section also provides an explanation of the analytical framework development. In keeping with the interpretive position for data presentation, clarity of coding techniques, the method acknowledges the nonlinear reality of grounded theory research and analysis techniques.

### **4. Grounded Theory Is Not Simply Routine Application of Formulaic Technique to Data**

The approach taken to data analysis advocated in the original work by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and then further by Strauss and Corbin (1990) is a somewhat systematised approach to data analysis. Suddaby (2006:638) suggests that by

taking a mechanistic and rules based approach to data analysis leads to a separation of the research question from the data. Such issues can arise by over reliance of software packages to produce results and extinguish the ‘spark of creative insight’ that generates exemplary data analysis.

The development of theoretical sensitivity will be applied to avoid routine data processing. Theoretical sensitivity requires the researcher being sensitive to meaning in the data and orientating towards generating a grounded theory from these data (Saunders *et al.*, 2016: 195). NVivo was used to aid the management of the data analysis. As recommended by Charmaz (2006) and Saldana (2016) analytic memos were generated to maintain the constant comparison between the data points, the purpose of which was to aid the development of conceptualisation and build theory. In this manner, the data processes could be described as active management and interpreted, as an inductive approach. This is combined with transparency across the data process (and whole methodology), rather than mechanical thoughtlessness in presenting data. Time was given to link the grounded theory generated to published theories and to put in place a framework for ongoing analysis. This aimed to maintain a researcher/data interaction that is, according to Suddaby, fundamental to grounded research and avoids misconception number 4.

## **5. Grounded Theory Is Not Perfect**

On this misconception point, Suddaby (2006:638) is concerned with the issue of theoretical sampling and saturation. Whilst acknowledging that there can be a tension between pragmatists and purists on this point, Suddaby reminds us that grounded theory was ‘founded as a practical approach to help researchers understand complex social processes...and a pragmatic middle ground between some slippery epistemological boundaries’.

In this case, the initial sampling, data collection process and the sampling criteria for participants is detailed in section 4.7. Theoretical sampling aided the development of the theoretical categories (generated from the analysis) and drove the gathering of more data as required. Theoretical saturation refers to the point at which gathering more data about theoretical categories reveals no new properties

nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006:189).

## **6. Grounded Theory Is Not Easy**

Finally, the aim of point 6, is to overcome the misconception that grounded theory is easy. There may be an apparent simplicity from authors that provide prescriptive accounts or those offering more flexible approaches. Academia seems to agree that grounded theory crafted from experience, hard work, reflection and even good luck is key (Suddaby, 2006; Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

The important processes considered in this case was that the researcher must account for their positions in the research process; as detailed for this researcher in section 3.5.1. The act of self-reflection is also important to account for personal biases, world-views, and assumptions while collecting, interpreting, and analysing data. Kenealy (2012) advises only practice will overcome a lack of experience and avoid significant adaptation of the method. A final useful point to address misconception observations of Suddaby, also comes from Kenealy (2012: 423) advising that researchers should focus upon ‘ideas that fit and work’ from their data to develop grounded theories.

## **4.4 Research design**

Following the exploration of the philosophical assumptions and research methods, it was possible to construct the research design, based upon the interpretivist and inductive approach to the research. Although as Creswell (2013) points out there is no agreed structure of how to design a qualitative study, the process begins with the selection of quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods.

Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (2015) considers that good research design is fundamental to achieving high-quality research. In practice to answer the research questions, the choice of design reflects decisions about the research process (Bryman, 2012) and may also be considered as *strategies of inquiry* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

On a basic level, differentiating between the quantitative and qualitative methods could be to distinguish between the generation of numeric and non-numeric data. The research design choice did consider the philosophical assumptions alongside the research type and approach (Saunders *et al.*, 2016:165). In the light of the critical

evaluation of research designs, Silverman (1993) points out that no one approach research, quantitative or qualitative, is intrinsically better than another. Silverman (1993) observes that in characterisation these terms cover a variety of methods and approaches that differ considerably. These differences were compared and contrasted to determine the design for this thesis.

#### **4.4.1 Research Design for Theory Development**

Strategies for research design of the quantitative type tends to be associated with positivism with a deductive approach to theory development. It is said that quantitative research has an objectivist conception to social reality (Bryman, 2012:160). In conjunction with a distinctive epistemological and ontological basis it is important to remember that quantitative research is not just about data in the form of numbers. A wide range of social research concepts (and multiple dimensions) can be measured and indicated from such designs (Bryman, 2012).

The criticisms in relation to quantitative research are wide and varied. In particular criticisms by Schutz (1962:13), from a philosophical and social world view 'quantitative researchers fail to distinguish people and social institutions from 'the world of nature'. The premise of this argument is that the scientific approach ignores people's interpretation of the work and their self-reflective capacity.

On this basis, for qualitative research the researcher interacts with what is being researched because it is impossible to separate what exists in the social world from what is in the researcher's mind (Creswell, 2014). The open, interactive and narrative research designs, emphasises the adoption of understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of the world by its participants (Corbetta, 2003; Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research therefore allows social and cultural aspects to be studied in depth, allowing for exploration of a particular topic, in this case employability.

Over the last 20 years the application of qualitative methods have increased significantly and are now widely accepted across many social science disciplines, including business (Creswell, 2013; Myers, 2013). As with quantitative research, qualitative research however is not without criticism. Often criticism is targeted toward the researcher's close relationship with participants and subjectivity. Critique includes arguments surrounding replicability and generalisability.

Therefore, according to Lincoln (1995:280), the results produced can ‘display honesty or authenticity’. Rigour that is often associated with scientific methodologies can be viewed as trustworthiness, dependability and authenticity in the design of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln, 1995:277). It is important to note at this stage that what potentially is lost in qualitative approaches from a generalisability perspective can be gained in the ‘generative properties of richness’ of this research approach (Rynes, 2007). However, in the face of much valuable quantitative research, disciplined inquiry is still categorised by thoughtful decisions about design strategies, including methods (Lincoln, 1995:227).

To overcome the issues the qualitative researcher needs to ‘come clean’ about their positionality (or epistemology). An approach is required in the formulation of the research with explicit questions and clear terms where clarity is drawn from the literature and the gaps within it (Bryman, 2012:405). Consequently, Lincoln (1995:277) posits that commitment to an inquiry entails four criteria:

- Commitment of inquiry to fairness (balance of stakeholder views)
- Learning of the respondents as well as the researcher
- Open and democratic sharing of the results
- Fostering, stimulation and enabling of social action.

Lincoln (1995:277) cautions ‘the criteria serve to make the field more complicated but infinitely more responsive, rich, politically and ethically sensitive and complex’. This advice supports the design selection in this study.

## **4.5 Research type and approach**

Choosing the approach for this research according to its purpose, it was crucial to navigate the complexities of classifying the research. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2012) suggest that this is important for three reasons. Firstly to allow for informed decisions regarding the design and secondly for the consideration of the research strategy and methodological choice. This is based on reasoning that is best for both researcher and the research itself. Thirdly, constraints can be accommodated if you have some knowledge of different research traditions. Collis and Hussey (2014) have developed a categorisation of research according to its purpose, process, logic and outcome, which is applied in the classification of this particular research.

*Purpose:* The research is classified as descriptive and explanatory and was conducted to describe the phenomenon of employability, as it exists for students. The research also goes beyond the descriptive to analyse the phenomena to gain understanding, by discovering and explaining the causal relations among them.

*Process:* A qualitative approach addresses the research questions by collecting data that was analysed using interpretive methods. For the advancement of knowledge and theory through understanding the phenomena, several authors believe that within the business and management discipline that there is a pure/applied research continuum according to their purpose and context. The judgement being that basic research both enhances the value of subsequent applied research and provides practical solutions to a variety of business and management problems (Hitt and Greer, 2012).

*Logic:* Builds the bridge between the theoretical and methodological relationship. The distinction here is with respect to theory development, which may be that of theory-testing or theory-building, between deductive and inductive reasoning (Myers, 2013). Abduction is a third approach to theory development, combining in effect both deduction and induction (Suddaby, 2006). The table below (Figure 4-2) illustrates the key differences in approaches to theory development.

Saunders *et al.*, (2016) suggests that there are not rigid divisions between the typologies. Both Hakim (2000) and Buchanan *et al.* (2013) argue that the needs, preferences and interests of the researchers are important selection factors. In this case, the researcher's preference is an inductive/abductive approach, via the testing outcomes with cycles of data analysis and collection using CGT.

*Outcome:* In this inquiry, theory was developed from the observation of empirical reality. The study moves from individual observation to generalising from the interactions between the specific and the general (or patterns) as induced from particular instances.

In establishing and understanding the research typologies, it is now possible to discuss the data collection and analysis techniques that underpinned the research.



Deduction	Induction	Abduction
Begins with a theory for testing	Begins with empirical data for building a theory	Begins with a known premise (a ‘surprising fact’) to generate testable conclusions
Generalising from the general to the specific	Generalising from the specific to the general	Generalising from the interactions between the specific and the general
Qualitative data is used to evaluate hypotheses related to an existing theory	Qualitative data used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes, patterns and create a conceptual framework	Data is used to explore a phenomenon identify themes, patterns and locate these within a conceptual framework, which is tested by subsequent data collection
Researcher is independent of what is being researched	A realisation that the researcher is part of the research being undertaken.	The researcher cultivates their position
Theory falsification or verification	Theory generation or building	Theory generation or modification

Figure 4-2 Key differences between research typologies *adapted from Saunders et al. (2016:145)*

## 4.6 Data collection and analysis

In addition to reviewing the literature of this area, the researcher also attended workshop sessions aimed at improving the implementation of the research methods. Guidance from a workshop ‘*Planning and conducting interviews and focus groups*’ from the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) in September 2017, informed the implementation. Based upon the evaluation undertaken, a qualitative approach was taken using focus groups and interviews as the techniques to collect primary data.

Qualitative studies utilise open-ended questions with emerging and non-standardised approaches, with methods ranging from action research to grounded theory and beyond (Saunders *et al.*, 2016:168). Qualitative data sources may include, for example, fieldwork observations, interviews, documents and also researcher's impressions and reactions (Creswell, 2013).

From the interpretivist perspective, there are multiple realities seen by each person. The use of multiple forms of evidence will be applied to question, understand and present the different perspectives. The results from the analysis are interpretations, which are presented as excerpts and transcripts of interviews. These are presented as classifications and typologies generated from the analysis (Bernard, 2013).

#### **4.6.1 Time horizon**

One further element of the research design consideration is the choice of time horizon. The emphasis here is upon two options, cross-sectional or longitudinal designs (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

Longitudinal studies as the name suggests, are carried over a long timeframe, the main strength of which is the ability to study change. Collis and Hussey (2014:64) state that longitudinal research adopts a quantitative method to collected data, via surveys or interviews. This allows for repeated observations which are taken with view to reveal the relative stability of the phenomena under study. The weaknesses of this design include the high cost and time required for repeated measurements. This may also result in participants withdrawing over the period of the research.

Cross-sectional studies are designed to obtain research data in different contexts, but over the same period of time (Collis and Hussey, 2014:62). These designs also often use surveys, but can use qualitative data that is collected once, over a short period of time. As a consequence cross-sectional studies are ideal where time and budgets are constrained. The drawbacks associated with cross-sectional studies include difficulty in selecting a sample that is large enough to be representative of the population. Another problem is how to isolate the phenomena under study from all the other factors that could influence the correlation. The final issue is that cross-sectional studies do not explain why a correlation exists; only that it does or does not exist, it is a snapshot (Collis and Hussey, 2014).

Based on the evaluation of time horizon design, this study will undertake cross-sectional study. There are two key reasons for this, firstly the research questions are not examining change. Secondly the main participants in this study will be undergraduate students. Given the transient nature of their progression it could be difficult to undertake multiple data collection activities beyond a single semester.

#### **4.6.2 Data collection techniques**

As stated, a grounded theory method was selected for this study. This was justified with a number of reasons, but primarily the method allows for focus upon the participants perspective and supports the aim of capturing the student voice. Following from the selection of the method and research design, it is important to consider data collection techniques. This was achieved through an evaluation of a range of data collection instruments.

There are several techniques for generating data as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) attest. As Creswell (2013) suggests that, the list of qualitative data sources is enhanced by the progression into an era of sophisticated information technology and social media. Cohen *et al.* (2011) emphasises that whatever data collection method, the instruments are based on a criterion of 'fitness for purpose'.

As valuable guidance to the researcher, Creswell (2013, 2014) states the importance of considering the interrelated processes of data collection and the role of the researcher in this process. Furthermore, Creswell (2013) describes the activities for gathering good information to include not just the instrument but also gaining access, recording data and storing data. In this thesis access and storage is covered in the ethics issues section and other practical aspects will follow in the data management sections.

Interviews appear to be the primary data collection method applied when using a grounded theory methodology (e.g. Andrews and Higson, 2014). Focus groups were deemed an effective method to generate a large amount of data within a short period, with additional qualitative data emerging from the interactions of the group. The concept of the focus group, i.e. agenda setting by the participants fits with the purpose of CGT, seeking to adopt the learner/participant perceptive and capturing the various dimensions of a topic as it appears to various people. A collective view of employability was therefore initially attained via a focus group method.

There is a suggestion that the participants of the focus groups may benefit from participation in such events (suggested at the SRHE workshop). In this case as the students will be undertaking the teaching, learning and assessment via the professional development module, a focus group may aid their reflective practices and engagement in the unit. The practical process of conducting the focus groups allowed for the development of trust and confidence, thus increasing the ability to recruit volunteers from the group for individual interviews.

Interviews allowed for greater depth of exploration of the outcomes of the focus groups and generated data richness in support of the research aims and objectives. From the arguments of the literature (e.g. Collis and Hussey, 2014) it can be concluded that, in this case, surveys and observation methods may not provide useful and usable data or serve the research questions well enough, particularly as this is an interpretivist study.

#### **4.6.3 Focus groups**

Focus groups are a form of group interview. Rather than a simple question and answer process, the group discuss a topic supplied by the researcher, to reveal a collective rather than individual view (Morgan, 1988). The participants are encouraged to interact with each other, rather than the interviewer (or moderator) across a specified time period. The purpose is therefore to obtain the view of the group rather than the dominant interviewer's perspective. It is possible with a focus group to see the complexity of the positioning of participants in relation to each other as they process questions, issues and topics in focused ways (Kamberelis and Dimintriadis, 2011). These dynamics (alongside the actual discussion itself), can become relevant 'units of analyses' for study.

The benefits of conducting focus groups suggested by Cohen *et al*, (2011) can be summarised as follows:

- generating themes from the insights of the group;
- generating data quickly (and at low cost);
- gathering data upon attitudes, values and opinions;
- empowering participants to speak out and use their own words;
- provide greater coverage of issues that is not possible in a survey;

One further benefit includes the development of themes and topics for subsequent interviews. It is said that the method can allow for group data to strengthen studies that use other methods such as interviews (Olsen, 2004).

The practical considerations for success include the number of focus groups conducted, as a single group cannot eliminate the possibility of outcomes resulting from the behaviours of that group. Generally defined as small groups, Morgan (1988) suggests sampling with care as very important, with between 4 and 12 people per group allowing for over-recruitment. In addition, seeking to provide an appropriate comfortable environment that is conducive to the discussion process is a valuable consideration.

The negative aspects of this method include the difficulty of succinct data analysis due to the qualitative inquiry nature. In terms of the participants, there is potential for group dynamic impacts such as bias of participants who may promote their own beliefs onto the facilitator, or the domination of one member, which may suppress the group. More reserved participants may not contribute their ideas in a group scenario, leading to valuable information being lost (Corbetta, 2003).

Taking into account the practical considerations, a series of focus groups with students were undertaken. This process generated valuable data for analysis and allowed the development of questions for individual student interviews. This approach is detailed in the next section.

#### **4.6.4 Interviews**

Myers (2013:119) states that interviews are one of the most important data gathering techniques for qualitative research in business and management. Interviews allow us to gather rich data from people in various roles and situations (Saunders *et al*, 2003). The richness of the data may be described as 'permitting us to see that which is not ordinary on viewing and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005:vii).

To develop data richness, it is important to determine the level of structure for interviews. Highly structured interviews tend to be undertaken for market research, with a detailed schedule and predefined question structure. Semi-structured interviews provided some flexibility with guidance provided by the interviewer regarding the topics that are undertaken. Finally, unstructured interviews made be

referred to as ‘conversations’ and are seen as spontaneous in nature (Easterby-Smith, *et al.*, 2015).

Many authors write about the practical issues, allowing for successful interviews and reduction in potential bias. Many of the ideas are a variation on the themes below:

*Obtaining trust:* Influences the ability for the interview to provide the information sought, obtaining trust can be difficult if there is a lack of time, the interviewee is poorly informed or if there is issues with positions of power.

*Social influence:* Closely related to trust, Jones (1985) highlights this important factor. Issues to consider include the meaning and significance attributed to the research situations, first-impressions and judgements made by the interviewee resulting in the ‘selection’ of answers based in the perceived need, limiting the ability to obtain truthful or useful answers.

*Appropriate attitude and language:* This is an important consideration in both the preparation and conduct of interviews. Interviewers should appear knowledgeable, competent, humble and sensitive. Questions should be constructed to allow the interviewee to understand the meaning of it. There is a need to be able to construct a story that is logical and consistent, whilst being attentive and avoiding judgement (Fontana and Frey, 2000).

*Getting access:* Allowing for some form of formal agreement (e.g. a formal letter of confirmation) to take place prior to the interview can provide credibility and underline the serious intent of the research. Such practices provide an opportunity for formal information and the setting out of the detail of the interview process for all participants.

*Location of the interview:* Good locations with easy access, a comfortable environment, having low level of distractions (noise or other people) is the minimum requirement. Using a space that is perceived as neutral to all participants can also be valuable in avoiding bias or undue influence.

*Recording the interviews:* Overall it is recommended that as a minimum interviews are recorded, this action is invaluable for producing accurate transcripts, unbiased recording and allowing the researcher engage fully in the interview. Taking notes is

also recommended, allowing for follow up or further prompts to be developed by the researcher. Any notes should be quickly written up after the interview, provided further supporting data to the interview method. Importantly, issues such as confidentiality and sensitivity towards the interviewee is vital with this approach.

Following the procedure of previous studies and based on the clear indications of the likes of Marton (1986) and Kvale (1996) the interviewees were asked to respond to planned questions. The initial problem questions were then followed by a series of follow-up probes. What is asked and how it is asked was important in this method, open-ended questions were posed with the aim (as much as possible) to allow the subject to choose the dimensions of the questions they want to answer. This approach accommodated different interviews that could follow somewhat different courses (Marton, 1986:42)

The premise of applying the above guidelines to the interviews was to reveal the conceptions, describe, and provide examples or explanations and understandings of the phenomena under examination. Thus focusing upon understanding student views of employability rather than the phenomena itself to support the research questions, aims and objectives.

## **4.7 Qualitative sampling**

The data collected for this study was in the form of text scripts and gathered via the methods of focus groups and interviews evaluated above. As Cohen *et al.* (2011) advise, researchers should take sampling decisions early in the overall research design. This section is dedicated to describing the sampling techniques applied to this study.

Based upon the research design, the qualitative data is combined into meanings, interpretations and conclusions. This design type provides a focus, as described by Suter (2011:350) that is sharp but flexible, recognizing that refocusing may be required to extract the greatest meaning and most trustworthy conclusions from the data. The trustworthiness of the evidence base (for the research design and conclusions) depend upon many factors, one of which is the quality of the sample (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015). Cohen *et al.* (2011:143) argue that the quality of the research can 'stand and fall by the suitability' of the sampling technique.

To maximize the value of the data for theory development in qualitative research requires a sampling plan to allow generalisation across a population. This means that participants are selected to serve a specific purpose, rather than chosen at random (Suter, 2011). This is unlike the approaches in quantitative research where, sampling is normally formalised by random sampling or using quotas (Flick, 2008). In relation to qualitative research Maxwell (2005:88 *cited in* Flick, 2008), states that sampling may not be the correct term to use, rather we have to 'select' the right case, groups and materials in a way that is somehow defined. As to how far the individuals represents to the wider population or group is irrelevant, as the qualitative research seeks to explore the group under study not generalise from it (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). In this case, it renders probability-sampling techniques as inappropriate for this inquiry, as generalisation is not key to the design.

'The term 'population' refers to the whole set of entities that decisions relate to; while the term 'sample' refers to the sub-set of those entities from which evidence is gathered' (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015:77). In this study the research 'sample' was focused on persons and groups of persons, where a relatively tight research design and questions meant that some pre-structuring was already in place (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The field was that of an HE institute, the population is associated with business and management degree programmes and the professional development module is a core element in all those undergraduate degrees at the study site.

Non-probability, purposive sampling was applied, conceived as Flick (2008) suggests as a way of setting up deliberately selected cases or events for constructing a corpus of empirical examples of studying the phenomena. It was important to be mindful of the research purpose, design and constraints in approach to determine the sampling techniques that would provide 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011:161).

Whilst the focus groups consisted of volunteers accepting invitations, interviewees were selected to volunteer. Patton (2002) outlines several alternatives for purposive sampling, one of which is 'typical case sampling'. Given that there is already a degree of homogeneity (students from the same cohort) but depth of opinion is sought, a maximal variation sample was chosen. A smaller number of individual interviews were integrated into the study through selecting those with data as varied and



detailed as possible, to disclose the variation and differentiation in the field (Flick, 2008). Therefore students were selected as having a range of experiences from the field of HE. Participants were invited from a range of B&M degree programmes and having a range of experiences with regards to aspects such as work placements, work experience and extracurricular activities.

Saturation was applied as a further guiding principle to ensure the appropriate sampling technique for the study (subject to ethical approval). As common with many qualitative studies, this research is small in scale. Saturation occurs ‘when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights nor reveals new properties of the core theoretical categories’ Charmaz (2006:113). It is where no new properties of the pattern emerge (Glaser, 2001 *cited in* Charmaz, 2006). Ritchie *et al.*, (2003) ascribe three reasons for this occurrence. Firstly, there is a point of diminishing return to a qualitative sample—as the study goes on more data does not necessarily lead to more information. Secondly, a single piece of data may only be necessary for it to become part of analysis framework. A third reason, as frequencies are not the function of qualitative research, one occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the force behind a topic. This, Mason (2010) insist is because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalised hypothesis statements.

The point of saturation is, as highlighted by Mason (2010) a difficult point to identify and is a rather elastic notion. The following factors provide support for saturation applied in this case:

- Small, modest scale studies allows for saturation to be achieved quickly (Charmaz, 2006)
- The relative homogeneity of the sampled population
- Data collections methods – focus groups and interviews
- Timescales and resources available
- Labour intensive nature of data analysis

From a practical perspective, how is it possible to determine the sample size from which saturation may be attained? As Glaser (2001) suggests, it is not feasible to continue sampling until absolutely no new patterns emerge. The scope, time and resources of the thesis prevent this. In a literature review by Mason (2010), he

discovered that there are several sample sizes suggestions. For example, Creswell (2013:81) recommending a sample size of 5-25 participants for phenomenology studies. Mason's study concludes that there are no empirical arguments as to why these numbers are valid in comparison to others.

To overcome the potential ambiguity and false claims of saturation made by authors such as Morse (2000) and Bowen (2008), triangulation from multiple sources of data is obtained by corroboration and converging evidence i.e. this is attained across focus groups and interviews.

#### **4.8 Quality considerations**

It is possible to agree with Easterby-Smith *et al*, (2015:103) that there is an 'underlying anxiety' amongst researchers regarding the perceived quality of their work. This is compounded by the variety of opinion and technical language, which is also dependent upon the approaches and philosophical viewpoints.

Validity is a much-discussed topic. This includes terms such as *trustworthiness*, *authenticity*, and *credibility* (Creswell, 2014). This is in addition to the terms *validity*, *reliability* and *generalisability*. Overall, qualitative validity means the research adopts a process for checking the accuracy of the findings, while qualitative reliability indicates an approach that is consistent in comparison with the given field of research (Gibbs, 2007 *cited in* Creswell, 2014:201). Furthermore, Bryman (2016) set out an extensive critical evaluation of the assessment of quality in quantitative research and the decades long debate that has taken place between prominent quantitative researchers (including Lincoln and Guba).

With this advice in mind, it is also worth noting that from a constructivist design perspective, the term validity is rarely used. This is suggested by Easterby-Smith *et al*, (2015:88) who collates the following terms from the literature: *authenticity*, *plausibility*, *criticality*, *refutability* and *constant comparison*. The final term *constant comparison* follows the principles in the method of CGT.

What is perhaps most important is to embed a process for validity and reliability based on the stated philosophical viewpoint and the epistemological perspective to assess quality. As this study takes a social constructionist perspective the following

questions, from Easterby-Smith *et al*, (2015:103) will guide quality considerations upon completion of the study:

Viewpoint	Constructivist
Validity	Have a sufficiently number of perspectives been included?
Reliability	Is there transparency about data collection and interpretation?
Generalisability	Is the sample sufficiently diverse to allow inferences to other contexts?

Figure 4-3 Study of perspectives for validity, reliability and generalisability

In addition to asking the questions above, two further evaluation strategies will be used, peer review and transparency. Transparency is a foundational theme to this research and has been discussed in multiple areas, in particular the research design section. Procedures, the steps and processes within them, will be documented as part of the implementation of data collection and analysis phases.

Creswell (2014:202) recommends peer review to enhance the accuracy of the account. This allows for a check of the research process and allows questions to be asked about the account from someone unconnected with the research (detailed in appendix 9.5). This particular strategy was employed for this study by delivering conference presentations (SRHE and Advance HE). This strategy also included the practice of research by writing papers and working with colleagues, for example, to produce a book chapter based upon associated research, *Realising the threshold of employability in Higher Education* (Procter and Harvey, 2018). It was also possible to gain feedback from wider colleagues at the University of Salford through discussions of the work at a *Work, Careers and Employability Colloquium*. Full engagement with the PhD assessment processes further allowed for expert review and valuable audit processes.

## 4.9 Ethical research issues

Ethics within research forms a significant and important element of the methodological process and for the overall conduct of the research. Research ethics can be defined as the application of moral principles ‘in planning, conducting, and

reporting the results of research studies. The fundamental standards involved focus upon what is right and what is wrong' (McNabb, 2002).

Research funding bodies, such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the European Union (EU) provide ethical guidelines. Often in alignment with funding bodies, universities in the UK have ethical clearance procedures that all staff and students must follow. Several professional bodies also publish ethical guidelines for researchers and Bell and Bryman (2007) have summarised the principles as follows:

<b>1</b>	Ensuring that <b>no harm</b> comes to participants	Protection of the research participants
<b>2</b>	Respecting the <b>dignity</b> of research participants	
<b>3</b>	Ensuring a fully <b>informed</b> consent of the research participants	
<b>4</b>	Protecting the <b>privacy</b> of participants	
<b>5</b>	Ensuring the <b>confidentiality</b> of the research data	
<b>6</b>	Protecting the <b>anonymity</b> of individuals or organisations	
<b>7</b>	<b>Avoiding</b> deception about the nature of aims of the research	Protection of integrity of research community
<b>8</b>	Declaration of affiliations, funding sources and <b>conflicts</b> of interest	
<b>9</b>	Honesty and <b>transparency</b> in communicating about the research	
<b>10</b>	Avoidance of any <b>misleading</b> or false reporting of research findings	

Figure 4-4 Principles in research ethics *adapted from* Bell & Bryman, 2007 *cited in* Easterby Smith (2015:122)

Even with such guidelines or codes of practice, Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (2015:122) argue that it can become difficult to establish hard-and-fast principles. Issues under consideration include the explicit nature of ethical codes, provision for sanctions (where the code is breached) and the dynamics of power and ideology. To overcome the issues of ambiguity that may arise from the complexity of dealing with ethical issues Mason (1996) argues that researchers should operate as thinking, reflective practitioners, asking difficult questions about the ethics and politics of their own research practice.

With respect to practice, the researcher is a tutor for the professional development module and therefore the study has the characteristics of insider research. In the consideration of this position it is important to be explicit about where the character of one's research can illuminate or obscure the findings and impact upon them (Trowler, 2011). The main consideration is that by working on the module the researcher has bias in wanting the research to be valuable and to contribute to the professional development module work already taking place. Action was therefore taken in the design to ensure quality and rigour to uncover any flaws in the approach. Trowler (2011) set out questions for the insider research to address for the production of robust and valuable research in these circumstances. These are addressed across this chapter, and account for the design of research questions, overall research design, data collection and the sampling process. Another important aspect includes the ethical principles highlighted in Figure 4-4, for the protection of the participants. The researcher position was declared at all times (appendix 9.1 and 9.2) and actions were taken to ensure transparency in analysing and reporting the findings.

As Sin (2010:311) states, 'The ethical conduct of the researcher is an important attribute of research quality.' In making this explicit link to quality, Sin (2010) in her paper highlights the key areas of consideration, all of which share in the principles set out in Figure 4-4. Consideration of quality in this manner also allows for a clear link between the ideas already discussed in section 4.8 with the overall ethical considerations.

In line with the key principles, avoidance of harm towards the participants was considered carefully. This began with voluntary participation in the study, participants were not be coerced. Low value incentives were provided to compensate students for their time when participating in individual interviews. A £10 Amazon voucher was presented to each participant. There were no incentives used for focus group participation which were conducted to minimise disruption. This overall approach was intended to avoid harm and potential bias in the results (Collis and Hussey, 2014).

In managing the ethical considerations, the researcher made a declaration of affiliation, it was made clear throughout the data collection process that although the researcher is a member of staff, there was a clear purpose to the research that

was separate from the teaching/assessment role. This is outlined in the supporting ethical documentation (appendix 9.2).

One of the key areas for ethical consideration for this study is informed consent. In many respects within social science research, informed consent is hotly debated (Bryman, 2012). There is a suggestion that as volunteers, participants know that they are going to participate in research. However, as Homan (1991:73) observes, implementing the principle of informed consent is 'easier said than done'. The key point for this research is that it was very difficult to provide all the information about the study in advance, given the emergent grounded theory approach. Therefore, careful consideration was given to this aspect and potential volunteers and participants were provided with as much information as possible in advance in the form of recruitment materials, information sheets and consent forms (appendix 9.1). Participants were kept informed through the research process and were allowed to withdraw at any point.

Consent for participation and use of data was sought with the provision of anonymity and confidentiality. This was undertaken as per the ethical approval process of the University of Salford.

#### **4.9.1 Data protection**

Another aspect of ethical research issues, confidentiality and management, is data protection. In the UK, *Data Protection Act 1998 c.29*, confers obligations regarding the holding of data and rights for those whose data is held. All data from this study was held and stored in accordance with the requirements of the ethical approval obtained for this protect as required by the University of Salford.

The aim in meeting the ethical requirements was therefore not only to protect the participants and the research (and wider research community) but also to build trust with participants. Trust is an important factor that is an important overarching factor in this research, (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015:123). In accordance with ethical approval and where permission from participants has been granted, relevant quotes are presented from the empirical evidence gathered. All of the participants provided formal consent and their identities have been anonymised, in compliance with the ethical approval process.

For each of the events, field notes (analytic memos) were recorded and a full interview transcription was generated. All of the anonymised transcripts from each event type are stored securely as digital files. The audio recordings for each of the events have been stored securely according to the ethics procedures set out in this chapter.

#### **4.10 Data collection pilot**

This section addresses the practical reality of data collection, considering aspects of success and problems that were encountered in the undertaking of this element. The reflection and conclusions not only guide the subsequent data collection, in order to improve it, but serving to enhance the researchers' knowledge of this essential process.

Pilot testing is advocated as an important mechanism in several types of studies, such as interviews and questionnaires (Saunders, *et al.*, 2016:473). It is stated to be the cardinal rule of research by Krueger (1998:57), although this author suggests that pilot testing of focus group questions is difficult. This is due to the difficulty of separating the questions from the environment of a focus group. Krueger (1998:57) argues that if the focus group fails, how do you know if the questions, the moderator, the room, the recruiting or a range of other factors caused the problem. The reality of the situation is that 'the true pilot test is the first focus group with participants' (Krueger, 1998:57).

In practice, this was correct (see later in this section). However, the opportunity to undertake a single pilot focus group was presented. Based upon the literature the primary objective in this case was not to necessarily test the questions but rather to provide experience of group moderation, test the structure of session and the environment required to comfortably undertake a focus group. The pilot also presented an opportunity to gain a perspective upon the needs of student participants. The session was not recorded and the names of the participants have not been retained.

For the pilot volunteers were sought from a group students, whom were attending a scheduled briefing meeting, in preparation for their upcoming work placement. The group included students from across the range of business and management programmes within the business school. In a total of 8 UK and international

students volunteered (2 male and 6 female), from a mix of degree programmes. Given that the pilot took place without prior notice and at the end of a working day and semester, the pilot proved to be insightful and successful.

The conclusions from this event found a suitable, comfortable space (good lighting and seating) is essential. A focus group that lasts no more than 1 hour is acceptable to both participant and moderator, given the types of questions posed and information sought. It was recognised that this group are perhaps more likely to be forthcoming in their opinions about employability given their desire to undertake a placement, however the questions posed did allow opinions to be sought and readily given. This approach provided the moderator space to assess answers, adopt a listening mode and consider the need for supplementary questions.

#### **4.10.1 Pilot test questions**

Based upon the advice of Krueger (1998:58) pilot testing of the questions with a number of different people that are willing to provide support to the research is practical and valuable. In this vein numerous opportunities to do this were taken by the researcher.

Firstly it was possible to discuss the questions within supervisory meetings. Following from this, it was possible to attend a 'planning and conducting interviews and focus group' workshop hosted by SRHE. Here it was possible to have the focus group questions critiqued by a range of researchers with experience in such methods from across a number of different disciplines and institutes. Krueger (1998:58) also suggests that beneficial results can be gained by testing questions with non-researchers such as family members and friends. This provided an opportunity as a moderator to test the questions for flow, conversational ease and how emphasis is placed upon key words.

Undertaking various piloting processes as a novice focus group moderator provided several benefits to avoid time-consuming mistakes. Some questions were refined to provide clarity of purpose, around the ideas of a balance between descriptive, contrast, evaluative and structural questions (Kvale, 1996). This was supported by developing the design of a focus group schedule to ensure the most important questions were given sufficient prominence and time within the overall process. It



was also possible to write some prompts, probes and phrases to aid group control, should it be necessary during any of future sessions.

## **4.11 Data management**

### **4.11.1 Recruitment of participants**

Individuals involved in the research were recruited internally via contacts from the University of Salford either via those contributing to the aforementioned professional development module or via the business school employability hub. Employer participants were familiar with the University and had an established relationship with the Business School. Staff participants worked within the Business School. There are no demographic stipulations for this research and volunteers were accepted from the cohort of students, staff and employers as available volunteers.

Student volunteer participants were found from undergraduate level 4, 5 and 6 students of the Business School programmes. Assistance for recruitment was sought from the professional development programme lead, who distributed the study recruitment information via student email accessed via the university virtual learning environment, known as Blackboard.

Staff were recruited for interview from within the professional development module team. Employer volunteers were drawn from the pool of businesses collaborating with the professional development module or the Business School Employability Hub. All participant groups were subject to the same consent and data protection process for this research as detailed.

### **4.11.2 Data collection summary**

Data collection took place in 4 phases:

1. Student focus groups: 11
2. Student individual interviews: 14
3. Employee interviews: 6
4. Academic staff interviews: 4

Eleven focus groups were conducted which included 63 student participants from a range of business and management degree programmes. The focus groups consisted of 10 groups of level 5 students and 1 group of level 4 students (FG-8) and each session lasted for 50-60 minutes. The summary of participants is illustrated in

Figure 4-5. Each participant has been assigned an identification (ID) based upon the event type and the number of participants, therefore maintaining anonymity as described in section 4.9.1.

ID	Degree Programme	ID	Degree Programme
FG1-1	Accounting & Finance	FG7-1	Accounting & Finance
FG1-2	Accounting & Finance	FG7-2	Accounting & Finance
FG1-3	Accounting & Finance	FG7-3	Accounting & Finance
FG1-4	Accounting & Finance	FG7-4	Accounting & Finance
FG2-1	Business & Financial Management	FG7-5	Accounting & Finance
FG2-2	Business & Financial Management	FG7-6	Accounting & Finance
FG2-3	Business & Financial Management	FG7-7	Accounting & Finance
FG2-4	Business & Financial Management	FG7-8	Accounting & Finance
FG2-5	Business & Financial Management	FG8-1	International Business
FG2-6	Business & Financial Management	FG8-2	International Business
FG2-7	Business & Financial Management	FG8-3	Accounting & Finance
FG3-1	Business & Information Technology	FG8-4	Business & Economics
FG3-2	Business & Information Technology	FG8-5	Business & Economics
FG3-3	Business & Information Technology	FG9-1	Business & Financial Management
FG4-1	Business & Economics	FG9-2	Business & Financial Management
FG4-2	Business & Economics	FG9-3	Business & Financial Management
FG4-3	Business & Economics	FG9-4	Business & Financial Management
FG4-4	Business & Economics	FG9-5	Business & Financial Management
FG4-5	International Event Management	FG10-1	Business & Information Technology
FG4-6	International Event Management	FG10-2	Business & Information Technology
FG5-1	Business & Management	FG10-3	Business & Information Technology
FG5-2	Human Resource Management	FG10-4	Business & Information Technology
FG5-3	International Event Management	FG10-5	Business & Tourism Management
FG5-4	International Event Management	FG10-6	Business & Information Technology
FG5-5	Human Resource Management	FG10-7	Business & Information Technology
FG6-1	Law	FG11-1	Marketing
FG6-2	Law	FG11-2	Marketing
FG6-3	Law	FG11-3	Marketing
FG6-4	Law	FG11-4	Marketing
FG6-5	Law	FG11-5	Marketing
FG6-6	Law	FG11-6	Marketing
		FG11-7	Marketing
		FG11-8	Marketing

Figure 4-5 Student focus group participants

From the focus group activity it was possible to recruit 14 student volunteers to participate in individual interviews. Students were once again drawn from across a

range of B&M programmes studying at level 5 and 6. Each interview lasted for 50-70 minutes. The summary of the student participants is illustrated in Figure 4-6 and a biographic data table can be found in appendix 9.4.

ID	Degree Programme	Sex	Age	UG Level
STU-1	Business & Tourism Management	Female	18-24	5
STU-2	International Event Management	Female	18-24	5
STU-3	Marketing	Male	18-24	6
STU-4	Marketing	Male	18-24	6
STU-5	Business & Financial Management	Female	18-24	5
STU-6	Business & Tourism Management	Female	25-34	5
STU-7	Marketing	Male	18-24	6
STU-8	Marketing	Male	18-24	6
STU-9	Business & Economics	Male	18-24	6
STU-10	Business & Economics	Male	18-24	5
STU-11	Business & Economics	Male	25-34	6
STU-12	Human Resource Management	Female	18-24	6
STU-13	Marketing	Male	18-24	6
STU-14	Marketing	Female	18-24	6

Figure 4-6 Student interview participants

Six employers from a range of companies and roles were interviewed for this next stage of the data collection process (as detailed in Figure 4-7). All of the participants were selected because either they had a connection with the University of Salford and the business school, as work placement providers or have they participated in the professional development module as guest speakers.

ID	Company	Role
Emp-1	Chartered Institute of Marketing/ Professional Body	Network Manager
Emp-2	Agilent/Life Sciences, diagnostics and chemicals	Director of Marketing Communications
Emp-3	Enterprise Rent-A-Car/Global rental car provider	Group HR Manager
Emp-4	Web applications UK/ Web applications development	CEO
Emp-5	Enterprise Rent-A-Car/Global rental car provider	North West England and North Wales Recruitment manager
Emp-6	NHS - Northern Care Alliance NHS Group	Digital Business Manager & ISDN lead

Figure 4-7 Employer interview participants

Finally, four staff were interviewed, all of whom work within the business school and with the professional development module (as outlined in Figure 4-8). Each interview lasted no longer than 60 minutes.

All participant volunteers were selected to represent the teaching team for the professional development module, this included associate lecturers. This is justified as the sample represented the student experience for learning and development in this area as 60% of the teaching team were associate lectures.

ID	Role
Staff-1	Lecturer, programme and international partnerships lead
Staff-2	Associate Lecturer/PhD candidate within Salford Business School
Staff-3	Associate Lecturer within Salford Business School
Staff-4	Associate Lecturer within Salford Business School

Figure 4-8 Staff interview participants

#### 4.11.3 Primary data evaluation tools – QSR NVivo

QSR NVivo is a form of a CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) application. This package was selected for the evaluation of the qualitative data collected. The NVivo software package provides features for managing and analysing textual source materials, providing text and coding queries, including tools to visualise data via the generation of charts and diagrams (Silver, Lewins and Bulloch, 2016). It is possible to use NVivo systematically to code-and-retrieve data, to make analysis more manageable and allowing for interpretation to be carried out. The software efficiently allows data to be reconfigured to enable human analytic reflection, thus fitting with a qualitative, rich-data approach (Saldana, 2016).

There are a number of arguments within the literature regarding the use of CAQDAS. The use of such software is widely accepted within quantitative analysis but there is no universal agreement within qualitative analysis (Bryman, 2016).

The concerns are that coded text can be turned far too easily from qualitative data to quantitative data, simply by counting the number of times a particular code occurs. This would give rise to issues in terms of validity and reliability of the approach according to Bryman (2016) but Saldana (2016:41) responds to such

critique by pointing out that frequency is not necessarily an indicator or significance nor do these coding methods ask you to count. Rather the analytic approaches asks you to ‘scrutinize’, ‘connect’, ‘reflect’ or with developing skill ‘theorise’.

There are arguments that coding can decontextualize and fragment the data (Fielding and Lee, 1998). In a similar vein, Kitzinger (1994) raises concerns CAQDAS codes could result in the loss of important interactions between participants that could have a bearing on the interpretations of the data. As stated field notes have been recorded to capture such interactions and will be considered alongside the coding and analysis process.

The researcher attended two training courses, firstly, a ‘getting started with NVivo course’ in 2016 and in February 2018, an intensive data consultation NVivo workshop. Additionally, library and online resources have proved valuable for development in this area.

All the focus groups and interviews conducted in this study were transcribed, edited for anonymisation then added to NVivo in readiness for the coding and analytic process, before moving onto the theory development.

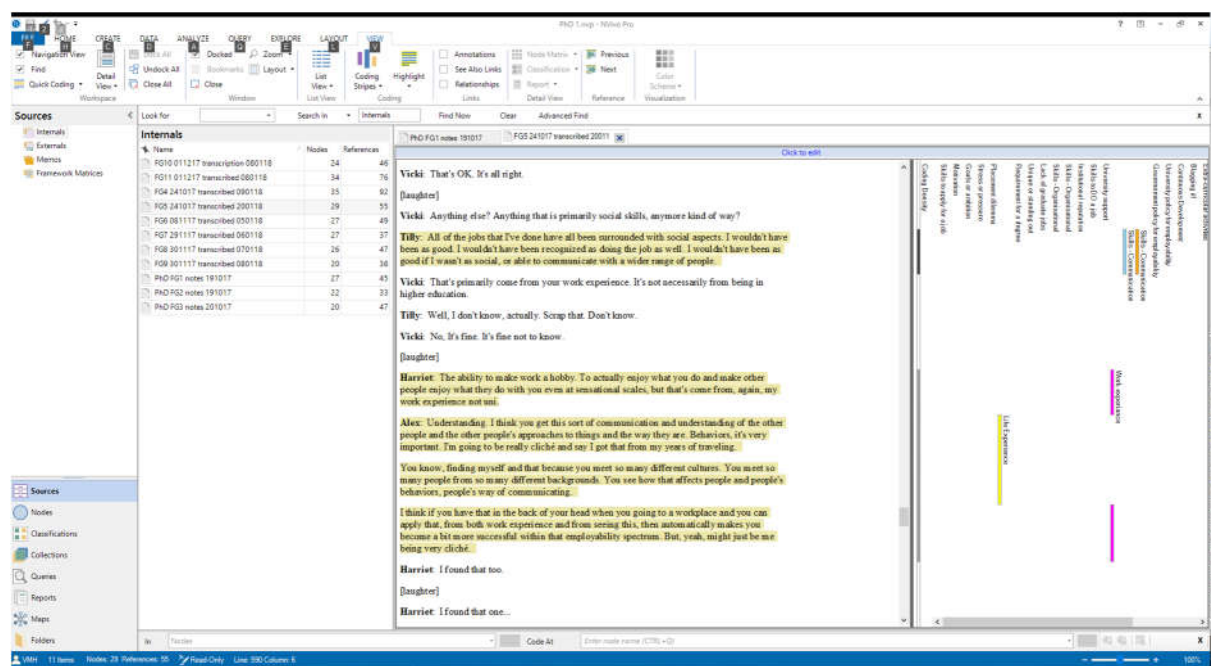


Figure 4-9 Screenshot to illustrate the coding function of QSR NVivo

Coding is just one method for analysing qualitative data. A node in this case is a word or phrase that that ‘symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based data’ (Saldana, 2016:4). The qualitative coding process defines what the data are about and form the first steps to making analytic interpretations. Indeed, Charmaz (2006) states that coding is the ‘pivotal’ link between data collection and an emergent theory to explain the meaning.

The results of the NVivo coding have been exported into a table for each event. The figures display the list of assigned nodes as determined from the primary data, Figure 4-10 explains the presentation of the NVivo coding data.

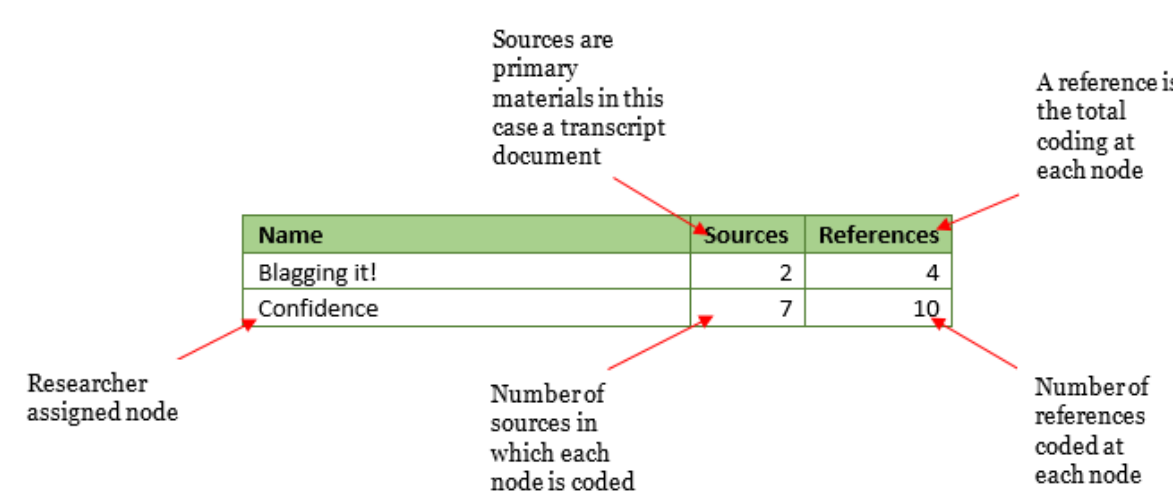


Figure 4-10 Node assignment and coding

#### 4.12 Data capture tools

Four key tools were used in the production of this thesis, Microsoft Office tools, Mendeley a referencing tool, Coggle a mind-mapping tool and a transcription service. Microsoft Word was used to produce the written thesis and for record keeping plus editing/anonymising the transcribed empirical data. Microsoft Excel was used for tracking and recording focus group and interview participant data.

##### 4.12.1 Mendeley

In order to keep track of all the literature materials a referencing management tool known as Mendeley was used, illustrated in Figure 4-11

illustrate the Mendeley referencing tool (Elsevier, 2019). The software was invaluable to search, organise and connect literature that could be annotated as part of the research process. The ‘cite while you write’ function, linked with Microsoft Word was particularly useful in generating accurate reference lists as part of the writing process.

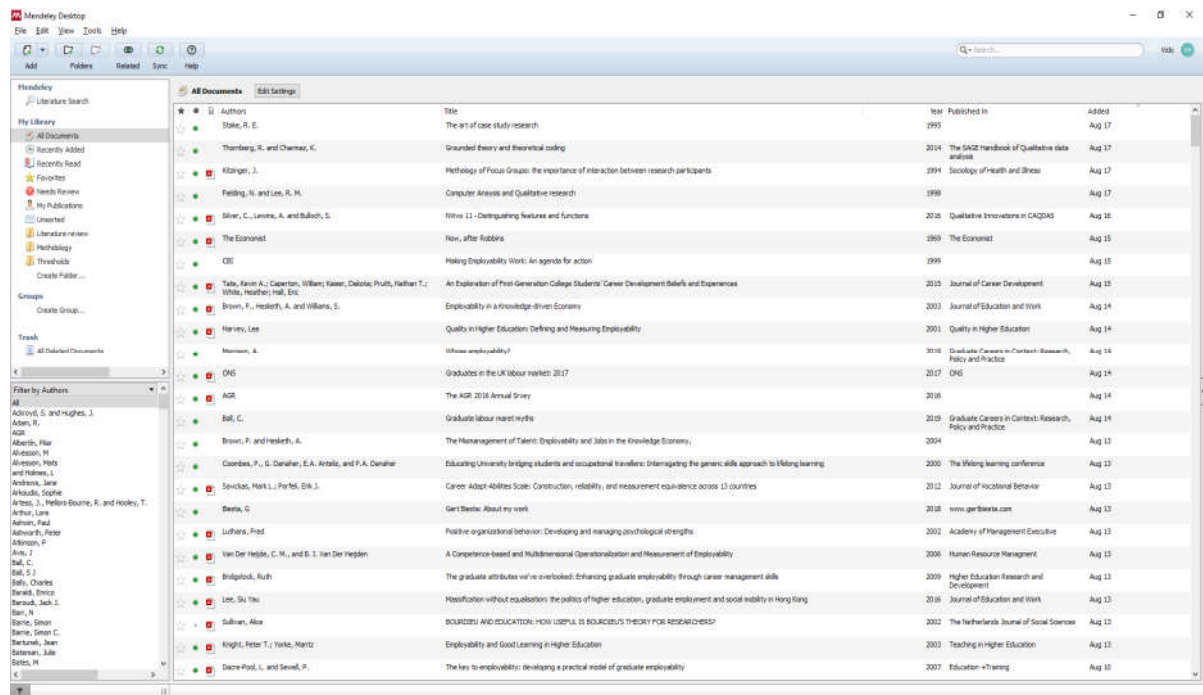


Figure 4-11 Screenshot to illustrate the Mendeley referencing tool

#### 4.12.2 Coggle information mapping tool

In order to present the results, given the large amount of data generated, an online mind mapping tool known as ‘Coggle’ was utilised to produce simple visuals for the outcomes of each data set analysis (Coggle, 2019). Mind maps can be helpful in identifying the linkages or relationships between the different concepts or discourses (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015). This pictorial method has been adapted to fit with the method of CGT as each of the branches of the mind map was generated from or rather grounded from the findings within the data.

Generally, mind maps are drawn with the main ‘problem’ or idea at the centre. For this thesis the diagrams have been adapted to illustrate the responses to the research questions that radiate from the focal point, namely the participants of each data set.

The branches are composed of responses from the students (or in the case of employer and staff data sets, responses to the students) resulting from coding of the interview data. In a further adaption, the branches were then reviewed in the final phase of analysis to generate the grounded theories, or categories that form the main outcomes of the research as connected within the theoretical framework.

#### **4.12.3 Transcription services**

In order to maximise the time available for analysis, two online paid transcription services were used. The services were chosen for both effectiveness and guarantees of confidentiality and security of the data. The researcher covered the transactions costs.

Firstly, a transcription service was employed to convert the audio files for each of the data sets for the focus groups and student interviews. The service was provided by Rev.com, utilising a pool of transcriptionists (Rev.com, n.d.). To begin the process the number of participants and audio files are uploaded. The transcribed file, converted into an MS Word document, was downloaded once payment is confirmed. Upon receipt, each transcript was checked, corrected and uploaded to NVivo for analysis.

A second online-automated service, Temi.com was utilised for the transcription of the employer and staff interviews. Given that only a single participant was involved, this made it ideal for the application of the advanced speech recognition software utilised by Temi.com (Temi.com, n.d.). The service proved to be very fast, cost effective and accurate, checks using the online portal were simple and the final transcription was downloadable in MS Word format for uploading into NVivo.

#### **4.12.4 Online Survey**

Basic demographic data was collected for all the student participants. In this case the tool, Online Surveys, was used which provides services for many UK universities, public bodies and companies (JISC.ac.uk, n.d.). The service is provided via a licence held by the University of Salford. A simple survey was created to collect data for age, sex, country of main residence and ethnicity. This allowed data to be collected from the students via email into the online secure survey portal.



## **4.13 Analytical approaches for Grounded Theory**

### **4.13.1 Data analysis**

As with most areas of research, much has been written about data analysis and while there is a consensus regarding designs for *qualitative* research, there is debate surrounding *quantitative* design (Merriam, 2009). However, in keeping with this thesis grounded research approach, Merriam (2009) is clear that in true qualitative research, the writer makes sense of the field in a personal, socially contracted manner.

The goal of qualitative data analysis is to uncover emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings (Patton, 2002). In this thesis, QSR NVivo coding was applied in the CGT method of initial and focused coding to generate themes and categories (or pieces of the jigsaw puzzle) and then to generate a theoretical contribution. The tools and processes used in data management and analysis are described in the following sections.

The overall purpose is to describe the findings based upon the empirical data and make comparisons across the data and the potential differences between participant groups. From here analysis of the explicit descriptions are then applied in the context of the theoretical framework and the literature to explain the results and the ultimate conclusions. This whole process is data driven (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

To overcome design criticisms, transparency is essential. It is therefore important to be explicit about themes and methods that have been applied (Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Suter, 2011). Therefore, adopting a jargon free communication from the epistemological position and maintaining the importance of the findings in relation to the research questions was vital in this endeavour. Care was taken with the presentation and language of the report to maintain conventions of the research based with educational, business and management areas.

As stated a CGT method associated with Charmaz (2014) provided a flexible approach, fitting more with data collection opportunities available for this research. The process of the analytical approach is detailed in the following sections.

### **4.13.2 Coding – Initial**

Coding consisted of two major phases: initial coding and focused coding. Firstly, from the initial data set collected, the coding process began by defining what the

data was about, and categorising segments of the data by assigning an identifying label. The initial coding process allowed the researcher to learn about the data, and here try to 'understand our participants' standpoints and situations, as well as their actions within the setting' Charmaz (2014:114). The nodes (as NVivo refers to them) emerged from the scrutiny of the empirical data, the construction of which may change, by way of applying the CGT method, as continued interactions with the data occurred. Therefore, the result is that large units of data were analysed in a constant comparison method into smaller units to create an impression of the data with the use of NVivo (Figure 4-10).

Keeping track of the coding and changes that occur were recorded using an analytic memo, which put simply is a reflective record of the coding development process (Saldana, 2016). Using an analytic memo as a further tool to support the analysis of the data, allowed for what Alvesson and Skoldberg (2018:11) 'systematic reflection'. Thereby adding a level of reflection of the interpretation, other than from just coding the data, building the work of interpretation to add value to the empirical research.

The use of an analytic memo is an accepted process but, as Charmaz (2014:115) states, it important to remember that this is *our* (the researchers) view of the empirical reality, defining what we see as significant or happening in the data in the process or formulated a theory that is grounded in the data.

The study of this emerging data from the focus groups was then sorted into categories, from which questions were developed for the next data collection phase, the individual student interviews. A category is a concept that from analysis represents real-world phenomena (Bryant and Charmaz, 2006). The creation of categories aimed to minimise the differences between each data set but to determine from their greatest possible range of category properties (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018). To do this the initial coded labels were then compared and placed into broader categories or groupings.

Initial coding was then carried out for the individual student interviews, and the process repeated to create broad categories to create questions that captured the student voice, that formed the basis of the employer and staff interview.

#### 4.13.3 Coding – Focussed

The next stage of the analysis in the CGT method was focused coding. This approach took the initial nodes and developed the analysis and explanatory focus of the coded data (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). These conceptual categories allowed derived meanings to be collated bringing them together to develop a more substantive theory in later analytical stages (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018).

Here the process was looking for greater analytic potential to develop grounded theory as related to the research questions. Therefore, focused coding used the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes, allowing the analysis of large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2016). At the close of this phase a decision is made to categorise the data incisively and completely, it is not a linear process. Rather, the analysis develops from constantly comparing data to codes and codes to data, codes with other codes, and data with other data to develop higher levels of abstraction (Saunders *et al.*, 2016:598).

Theoretical sensitivity is an important action within the development of grounded theory. Theoretical sensitivity and coding are said to influence each other, the development of it can enable precision in the construction of theory Charmaz (2014:160). Theoretical sensitivity is ‘the ability to generate concepts from data and to relate them according to normal models of theory in general, and theory development in sociology in particular, is the essence of theoretical sensitivity.’ (Glaser and Holton, 2004). The action provided the ability to understand and define the phenomena in both abstract and studied terms, to ultimately discern patterns in relation to the collected empirical data. Theoretical sensitivity is important as a tool to construct theory based on the research questions and the theoretical concepts that have informed the study.

Focus groups or interviews were carried out until it was determined that a theoretical saturation point has been reached for the conceptual categories. Theoretical saturation ‘refers to the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical category reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory’ (Charmaz, 2014:345). In this case, volunteers were available for two additional focus groups and two further interviews; based on the analysis the data was included in the study.

#### 4.13.4 Analytic memo

Written concurrently with coding, analytic memos document reflections on the researchers coding process and coding choices and how the process of the inquiry is taking shape (Saldana, 2016). The outcomes of analytic memo (known as memoing) constitute the emergent patterns, categories, sub-categories, and concepts that emerge from the data. All of which lead to the development of theory.

Overall, Saldana (2016:38) argues that it is possible to accelerate the process of analysis via analytic memo writing. Crucially from a grounded theory perspective analytic memos are a pivotal intermediate step between data collection and draft paper writing (Charmaz, 2006:162). In this case, it provided a basis and means of reflection, upon which the findings and analysis were produced. The analytic memo allows thoughts to be captured, along with the comparisons, questions and directions the research took.

Therefore in terms of examining the research problems and questions ‘memos are about creating an intellectual workspace for the researcher’ (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014:163). Analytic memos can provide significant support for the overall analytical and theory building process.

#### 4.13.5 Analytical method

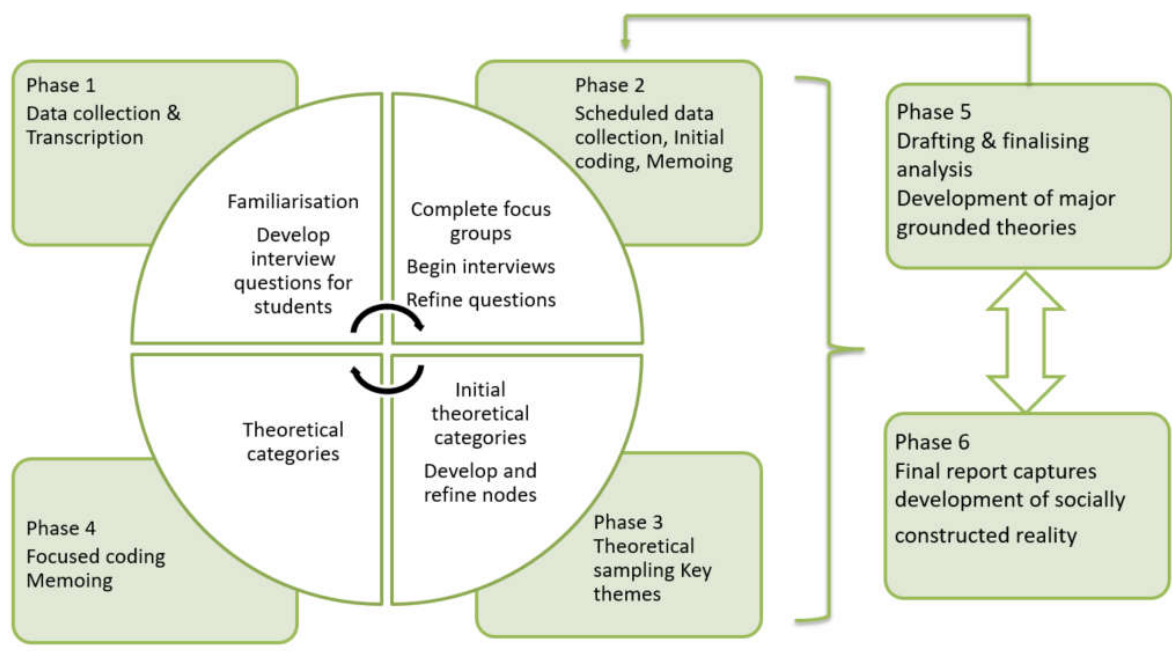


Figure 4-12 Explanation of constructivist grounded theory method

**Phase 1:** Focus group interviews and transcription. Where possible this was completed directly after each event, along with the analytic memo. This first phase enabled some initial familiarity, insight and recognition of themes or common elements.

**Phase 2:** Initial coding and further memoing. To avoid premature closure at this stage, no potential code was excluded (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000:300). Transcription, data collection and coding operated concurrently during this phase.

Coding or recoding occurred according to the findings forming continuous comparison to the point of category development (whilst keeping in mind theoretical saturation).

In keeping with this analytical process the CGT approach continues in the manner detailed via phases 3 to 5, which follows the principle and is metaphorically described by Charmaz (2014:113) as coding ‘generates the bones of your analysis... [I]ntegration will assemble those bones into a working skeleton’.

**Phase 3:** Theoretical sample/key themes. Nodes from the initial analysis of the focus groups were sorted into categories that depicted the data as accurately as possible. This allowed for the development of the questions that formed the basis of the employer and staff interviews. This process determined areas that did not pertain to the research questions or perhaps fell beyond the scope of the theoretical framework.

Student interview questions were developed based upon experiential accounts that emerged from the interest of the focus groups that made clear their experience and viewpoints (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000:300). The same process was then applied to the employer and staff interviews, where the analytical process centred on the development of the theoretical sample.

**Phase 4:** Focused coding: In this phase, the relationships between the categories were be explored. This is a circular process that was applied to all the collected data, and variation between the student views and those of employers and staff were then examined in line with the research questions.

It was essential during this phase to ensure that the focal point of the theoretical and CGT frameworks were adhered to in the development of the possible theory.

**Phase 5:** Constructivist Grounded Theory development. This phase established the outcomes and results of the whole research output, the substantive theoretical contribution.

**Phase 6:** Writing of the discussion and conclusion of the thesis is the final analytical act. In the light of the phases 2-5 the final grounded theory is presented to effectively capture the development of the participants socially constructed reality (Charmaz, 2006).

Overall the process was not linear, it is determined to be a recursive process where movement is back and forth as needed, throughout the phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006:86).

#### **4.14 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the overall approaches to the methods that have been applied in this research. Based upon a CGT method, the design was developed to serve the research questions by collecting data from various stakeholders using the most appropriate techniques of focus groups and interviews. This study used a grounded theory method with focus groups and interviews to collect data that will be analysed using a qualitative approach. Data analysis and interpretation was undertaken in a phased approach using the NVivo software tool for data management. Finally, in support of the methods approach the important factors of research quality and ethical considerations have been accounted for and implemented as part of the research process.

#### **4.15 Summary of the research method approach**

This table summarises the research methods applied based upon an interpretivist philosophical paradigm. It brings together a summary of chapters 3 and 4, which support the justification of the research and its conduct. Each philosophical assumption that was applied in the study is listed and the corresponding researcher perspective and action for conducting the research is summarised.

<b>Philosophical assumption</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>	<b>Researcher perspective/intention</b>
Ontological assumption (the nature of reality)	Social reality is subjective and socially constructed.	Philosophical basis/framework: The conceptual tools of Bourdieu. Shaped by our perceptions and experience
	There are multiple realities.	Multiple realities expected from participants. The research reports upon different themes, developed from the findings.
Epistemological assumption (what constitutes valid knowledge)	Knowledge comes from subjective evidence from participants.	Undertaking of focus groups and interviews for participative inquiry to gather opinions. Interpretive belief determining what counts as facts.
	The researcher interacts with the phenomena under study.	Researcher is professionally applying teaching of the phenomena examined within the research
Axiological assumption (the role of values)	The researcher acknowledges that the research is subjective.	Transparency is a feature of the research. Discussion of engagement, motivation and values basis is detail in section 3.5.1
	The findings are biased and value-laden.	Oriented to principles of CGT discussed within the methods chapter, following Charmaz (2006). Ideographic considerations of experiencing employability issues with HE.

Methodological assumption (the process of research)	The researcher takes an inductive approach.	The thesis is based upon exploratory research from which qualitative, empirical data will be used to build a theory.
	The researcher studies the topic within its context and uses an emerging design where categories of themes are identified during the process.	Constructivist grounded theory methods were applied capturing various dimensions or facets of a phenomenon as it appears to a number of people. Interview design emerged from undertaking initial focus groups followed by interviews of stakeholders.
	Patterns and/or theories are developed for understanding.	The research instruments used provide the data, designed to encourage respondents to reflect on their own experience. Understanding was developed from this and the analytical process.
	Findings are accurate and reliable through verification.	A quality strategy has been set out with interpretive awareness, transparency and peer review.

Figure 4-13 Table of assumptions of the interpretive paradigm & corresponding researcher justification *adapted from* Collis & Hussey (2014:46)



## **5 Findings and Analysis**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings for each of the data collection activities, with an analysis structured around the research questions. The findings and analysis of the data sets are presented in four major sections in the following order; student focus groups, student interviews, employer interviews and finally the staff interviews. The structure of this chapter follows the data collection and analytical phases of the CGT method. From each data set the findings and analysis for each research question is then presented based upon the main coding themes that were found from the data. The structure of this chapter therefore follows the outputs of the analytical methods detailed in Figure 4-12.

The aim was to represent the student voice that resulted from the focus group and interview process in order to generate a response from the employer and staff stakeholders. The development of the employer/staff interview questions will be detailed in this chapter as they form part of the findings. The discussion of the findings will be presented in the next chapter.

At the beginning of each section a table of NVivo nodes are presented representing the complete analysis of the data set. At the end of each major section a mind-map is used to illustrate the connections between the research questions, the main findings themes and theoretical categories that have been determined from each data set. The mind map is initiated via the research questions and then branches were generated from the analytical processes that follow the principles of CGT. Following the five phases of analysis, the branches of the mind map are constructed from the analysis of the data, each branch is therefore formed by being grounded in the data. The theoretical framework outcomes (depicted as green boxes) have subsequently been generated from the collection of branches that was framed and determined from the application of the theoretical framework (section 6.6). The final grounded theory categories will be explained in the discussion chapter (Chapter 6 and Figure 6-1).

## 5.2 Focus groups

On the basis of the research questions and literature (Chapters 1 and 2), interview questions for the focus group were developed to generate responses and capture views as follows:

- The meaning of employability for themselves:
  - What does the term employability mean in general and personal terms?
  - What is the value of employability to you?
  - What purpose does employability serve?
- How are the terms employability and employability skills understood?
  - What skills do you associate with employability?
- The students view of the development of their own employability skills:
  - Do they feel confident, indifference, work in progress or otherwise about development?
  - What are the views upon the availability of support?
  - Should employability development be part of the HE curriculum?

Using the practical advice of Krueger (1998) and Kvale (1996) an interview schedule was developed. Overall the sessions were structured with an opening phase to give the moderator clues about the participants' reality based upon the description provided. Then transition questions were posed to encourage participants to consider issues from the *field* or their *habitus*. This could include, for example, barriers for developing or understanding employability. The final element or closure of the discussion, aimed to allow for reflection based upon the idea of 'all-things-considered', allowing each person in the group to consider their own experience that they thought related to, or influenced their opinion of employability.

### 5.2.1 Development of focus group data coding

A significant amount of data was generated from 11 focus groups. From the initial coding process, 50 different nodes were created based upon the recorded discussions, covering a variety of different aspects of employability understanding

and experiences. A list of the codes are illustrated in Figure 5-1 which cover a range of findings, such as the need for a degree, aspects of university life that students felt connected to employability, support for employability within university and expectations from the external environment, the labour market and employers.

Following from the coding process for the student focus groups, Figure 5-1, illustrates the codes generated from the analysis of the data collected.

Name	Sources	References
Adjusting to University Life	1	1
Blagging it!	2	4
Confidence	7	10
Continuous Development	4	5
Emotional Intelligence	3	5
Extra-curricular activities	3	4
Family Support	6	18
Fees and cost of HE	2	3
Financial independence	2	2
Government policy for employability	8	18
Graduate expectations	1	2
Institutional reputation	3	3
International study & work experience	5	7
Job satisfaction	2	3
Job vs. career	1	1
Labour market competition	6	8
Graduate numbers	3	4
Lack of graduate jobs	2	3
Life Experience	6	16
Motivation	8	24
Goals or ambition	6	16
Part-time job experience	3	3
Placement benefits	7	15
Placement dilemma	11	32
Professional qualifications	2	2
Self-employment	5	8
Self-assessment - Organisational Fit	9	19
Skills - Adaptability	2	2
Skills - Communication	11	18
Skills - IT	2	3
Skills - Leadership	4	4
Skills - negotiation	1	1
Skills - Networking	2	6
Skills - Organisational	6	7
Skills - People Management	1	1

Skills - Problem solving	5	5
Skills - relationship building	7	10
Skills - teamwork	9	12
Skills - technical	1	2
Skills - Time Management	2	2
Skills to apply for a job	8	19
Skills to DO a job	6	10
Stress or pressure	5	14
Undergraduate degree value	8	20
Unique or standing out	7	11
University employability initiatives	1	7
University policy for employability	7	8
University support	9	43
Employability training	8	26
Work Ethic	2	2
Work experience	11	35

Figure 5-1 NVivo codes for student focus groups

It was realised through the recursive analysis process that some of the nodes either overlapped or provided a variation on the same idea or theme, these were then combined. The justification for the development of the nodes from the coding process were detailed in an analytic memo (section 4.13.4). Changes to nodes, development of nodes and justifications for the analysis were recorded as necessary. For example, 'motivation' was a node that was difficult to define/code initially as there were also comments about goals and ambition in relation to employability, in terms of students having or lacking in it. Again a parent/child node was decided upon, with 'motivation' determined as the need or significance of motivation. This was separated with a child node of 'goals or ambition', based upon achievement/goals that drive motivation and are related to employability.

Another example of nodes developing from the coding process is the topic of work placements. The undertaking of work placements did not form part of the focus group questions, however a number of conversations on this topic were initiated by the students. Issues surrounding work placements emerged as a range of topic areas such as development of employability skills, the need for work experience and improvement of job prospects. Initially 'work placements' was determined as a single node, however as more data was coded, the decision was made to separate into two nodes: 'work placement benefits' and 'work placement dilemmas'. The reasoning was that although many participants wanted/intended to take a

placement year, many comments were made with regards to the application process, stresses or uncertainty around securing and taking a placement.

In a theme of requirements for developing employability, 'work experience' was a common discussion element that many students thought was vitally important. This seemed to be key to employability meaning, and was later examined with the individual students, staff and employers alike.

The third phase of analysis took data and information from the analytic memo, to develop the overarching themes accurately depicted in the data. This allowed the formation of questions for the individual interviews. This theoretical sampling was important to allow focus and grounding with the findings but also to ensure questions could be developed that maximised the data collection process around areas that were important to students.

#### **5.2.2 Progression of focus group data analysis**

After the focus group data collection events, it was possible to present the research overview and initial reflection upon the focus group findings at the SRHE early researchers' conference 2017. This was an excellent opportunity to reflect and receive some initial feedback on this preliminary stage of the research and analytical process.

Findings presented at the SRHE conference:

- 'Requirement to have a degree'
- Life or work 'Experience'
- 'Personality' – Social skills
- 'Pressure' or 'Stress'
- 'Work Placements'
- 'Support from Business school'
- 'Blagging it!'

By progressing with phases 1 and 2 of the analytical method (Figure 4-12) and from putting together the conference summary in November/December 2017, it was interesting (if not surprising) to see some themes fall by the way side and others develop. For example 'blagging it', seen by students' as individuals using confidence rather than knowledge to develop employability skills, was only mentioned twice in

FG1 and 2, but initially seemed an important point. However, in terms of substance in employability, more comments emerged, whereby those students felt others did not take employability seriously enough. By their standards (those that 'blag it') it was felt that just that having a degree will be enough to secure a job. The development of other employability skills, beyond a confirmation of obtaining a degree was not a concern of those seen to be 'blagging it'.

On reflection this phenomena will be difficult to examine. Two factors come into play here, identifying such students for which 'blagging it' is acceptable, may be difficult based upon the confidential nature of the interviews and participation is voluntary. It seems unlikely under the circumstances to be able to identify such students. This point is also supported by the number of students that did not respond to the requests to participate in this research, furthermore a number of students that did volunteer, failed to attend a scheduled focus group. However, it remains that 'blagging it' could be a problematic area identified from a teaching practice and research measurement perspective!

It was important to be conscious that the focus groups, in addition to collecting data was a prelude to the individual interviews, where questions examining the phenomena can be developed from a broad group of students with various views. The principle in the research design was that the student voice is represented at all times.

There were a number of discussions about employability inputs the students were receiving which were of value to them. This relates to the professional development module (described in section 1.7.1), that the participants were undertaking at the time of the interviews. Discussions developed around how they have learnt to describe and present their skills, build self-awareness and confidence, and that the compulsory nature of the module 'gets you engaged'.

An example in an exchange between FG9-1 and FG9-5 illustrates this point:

- FG9-5: 'I was actually shocked that this was one of the modules to do at university.'
- FG9-1: 'Yeah' [stated in agreement].
- FG9-5: 'I wasn't expecting the professional development module as a part of the course.'

- FG9-5: 'It's kind of a good shock, because I...'
- VMH: Nice surprise?
- FG9-1: 'It was a reality check, the first lecture, wasn't it?'
- FG9-5: 'Because I was thinking you would use whichever CV you made, that's the one and now you are getting help with the CVs. I wasn't expecting any of this [the additional inputs from the module]. So it's kind of a nice surprise to get.'

### 5.3 What does employability mean to students?

It was clear from the analysis that students had got to grips with knowing what skills might be associated with employability, such as communication, team work and relationship building. From all the focus group data, the students were able to identify and discuss a variety of skills that have been described from the literature and are widely used in both HE and employment scenarios, e.g. Artess, *et al.* (2017).

Participant FG2-1 thought that employability meant that there were '*higher level expectations and professionalism for graduates*' and the roles they may undertake. This point could be linked with the node 'job vs. career' – the idea that a degree leads to a professional role and developing a career rather than an ordinary job, i.e. '*wanting to get a good job*', FG9-1.

The following point from student FG4-4 seemed to summarize these understandings and feelings. This comment generated agreement from most of the participants in this group:

'They all fall back...They are all interwoven. For a team, you need to communicate with people...You must be emotionally intelligent. You know your feelings and what you're feeling and what the other person is feeling, and be able to act humbly throughout. If you have that down, I feel you should be more employable than someone who is more reserved...No, no, I won't use the word reserved. Like someone who doesn't...Who isn't emotionally intelligent because...He wouldn't know how to handle certain situations in the work place'.

Upon evaluating the focus group data it was decided not to question employability 'skills' themselves in the individual interviews, as sufficient data inferred skills types were understood. Figure 5-1 illustrates the analysis coding, resulting in the identification of 13 different skill/competency nodes from across all the focus

groups. This decision enabled the meaning and value of employability for students to become the focus for individual interviews.

### 5.3.1 Skills to *get* a job/skills to *do* a job

As discussed in the literature review, there is a debate over the definition of employability with regards skills to *get* a job (known as the supply-side) and skills to *do* a job (the demand-side). Through the CGT process, from focus group number 4 onwards, the data linked to definitions that were interpreted under a node theme of skills to *do* and to *get* a job. The data is split along the lines of these two factors with students mentioning the idea of skills to *get* a job in terms of ‘selling yourself’ and using the tools/techniques such as writing CV’s and performing in interviews. Students specifically identified the key difference from *doing* a job, as ‘*beyond getting a foot in the door*’ and standing out as a candidate. Whereas working in a role, doing a job might be quite different and require the application of different skills.

The challenges students’ felt about *getting* a job are highlighted below:

FG3-1: ‘...because the hardest part about getting a job is getting the interview so you most definitely have to grab their attention with a CV then you have to shine brighter than everybody else for the interview, erm, once you are in a job you can develop yourself and learn skills that are required. But it’s getting a foot in the door, and making them see you, so you are in front of everybody else but it’s very hard to teach that I think.’

Such challenges and differences between *getting* and *doing* are highlighted by the following exchange in a discussion regarding comments from a guest speaker the students had received that day about conduct in the work place:

VMH: Do you see them as the same or different? Is it a different set of skills to get a job than to do a job, or do you think they overlap?

FG5-2: ‘I think in some bits they overlap, but you need different skills to get the job than to do the job. A lot of getting the job is selling yourself. Sometimes...’

FG5-2: ‘People aren’t very good at selling themselves. For lack of a better word, ‘blagging it’. Whereas in the job, you can’t do that.’

FG5-5: ‘I guess that sort of, that is the biggest problem for a recruiter, really. You can have everything. You can even have proof of someone’s skills jotted down on the paper, but unless you back that up with any workplace



experience, those skills don't matter. Yes, they overlap, but it's still a matter of bringing them together, and applying them.'

FG5-3: 'He [the guest speaker] was saying today that was the one thing you shouldn't be doing. You shouldn't be promoting yourself to be something that you're not, because you affect the organization. I think that's one of the most valid points I took from it.'

FG5-5: 'Exactly. You're not going to be happy in that role. If you get that job being someone else, you're going to have to be that person that's not you for years.'

FG5-2: 'The reason they ask for certain qualifications and certain skills is because that's what you need to do the job.'

Other focus groups, such as FG4, recognised an overlap between the ideas of *getting* and *doing* a job and debated the point between themselves:

FG4-6: 'There's skills that you do to get a job, and there's skills that you do to...'

FG4-4: 'Do a job.'

FG4-2: 'I think when you do a job; you actually acquire a skill that will help you get another job.'

FG4-4: 'I think [crosstalk]; you need IT skills to do your job... As well, you need to get the job, and you need to know how to write a CV online. I think for some things there is overlaps, like I went for this job interview. To get in the job, you have to work as teams. It was in a retail store. To get the job, you also had to work as teams. They will leave you guys in charge of the store for a week to just see how you guys fare together. I think as for personal experience, that's where I think there is an overlap of some kind.'

The analysis of the data relating to the central question provides a clearer link with a significant portion of the literature cutting across areas from employability aspects, definitions of student engagement, the responsibility of HE and capitals. All of which feeds into the supply and demand debate of skills to *do* and *get* a job (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

From coding the data to this node, it was decided going forward, based on the views emerging from the focus groups, the question can now be asked: how might students' interpretation of employability be understood by employers and staff? As a result it was determined, in the light of the research objectives (section 1.6),

employers and staff would be asked to respond to student views based upon employability meaning rather than identification of skills.

### **5.3.2 Undergraduate degree value**

When asked how a degree contributes to their employability, obtaining the qualification seems to be an important part of employability. For students it forms an element of being able to demonstrate employability and provides improved job opportunities.

For example, FG11-2 said:

'Without even the course [professional development module] itself doing anything which improves employability skills, the existence of a degree improves your employability because it's a minimum requirement for some jobs'.

FG3-2 has significant work experience in public sector IT. She expressed a dichotomy between the requirements for a degree and/or work experience for career progression.

'I've been in work for years and "it's all you need a degree, you need a degree"! But then when you are looking from a uni perspective "you need experience, you need experience". So it's like backwards and forwards!'

This participant concluded later in the session:

...'but you need that education, that's all there is to it'.

FG5-2 considered the decision to attend university as follows:

'Because everyone's got a degree, in certain industries. I want to be a teacher, so I have to have a degree. If teaching didn't have to have a degree I wouldn't be here...But there's no criteria of what classification of degree I need to have, I just need to have one'.

The analysis of these comments framed the decision to ask some questions about the decision making process for attending university and their choice of degree in the individual interviews. The aim was to establish views on the purpose of education and to determine if possible what influences various capitals may have upon participation in HE and where capital might be recognised or gained by the students.

### 5.3.3 Work or life experience

Based upon the participant's comments, work, life and university extra-curricular experiences sometimes overlapped or connected in some manner. Careful consideration was given to the initial analysis and coding in this area. Several students mentioned the context of life experience that would apply to life beyond work. This resonates with Biesta (2013); from the data, life experience was categorised on the basis that life does contribute to employability in terms of learning processes and understanding 'the real world', independence and ability to manage in different situations. From the focused CGT analysis, work and life experiences were coded for instances where students described a general requirement and importance of work experience in gaining employability skills.

Some students considered the need for appropriate work experience, for example:

FG2-6: 'I think like it's hard to get a job you want from employers because you don't have enough experience, so I think like people find it hard and get demotivated because they are not able to get to where they want to be or what they want to work in. So I think like employability helps with that but you need a lot of experience. Some people won't accept you because you don't have enough experience...'

With examples of life experience, FG4-2 stated 'life skills make you more employable as well. Being a well-rounded person'. According to FG5-5, meeting people from a range of cultures can affect the way people behave and communicate. Attending university was stated as an environment within which to experience a range of cultural experiences. FG5-3 felt that attending university has provided new life experiences that impact upon her skill development 'to live in a different city without having the restraints [of home and parents]' is a highlight. Whereas the ability to adapt to 'certain environmental situations' was a related factor for FG10-4.

It is difficult to separate life experience from work experience as FG7-3 states:

FG7-3: 'Experience teaches you the real life world. Skills is talking about it. Actually, you connect experience, work experience, and actually see what it's like to me, in the corporate world.'

There is a reciprocal relationship between work and life experience for FG9-5 stating:

FG9-5: 'It's kind of a support for life, isn't it? It kind of sets you up for life rather than just for the placement year'.

It was anticipated that 'experience' would be complex in nature with more than one factor influencing employability development. Therefore, students were asked what had been most influential in terms of employability from their range experiences. The following comment illustrates the points raised:

FG1-2: 'Part-time job and coming to university, it's like you have to survive in your own so erm...you kind of built up skills that you never had so like life skills. I've got a house, I stayed at the universities accommodation last year, I had to buy my own groceries, wash my clothes, so coming to uni has had a big impact on me obviously. Part-time jobs as well, it's like given me like skills that I have never had before such as communication skills, confidence, my confidence has increased since coming to university and getting a part-time job'.

From the analysis, it was becoming clear from the comments that several issues are interlinked. The students have undertaken some form of self-assessment from which various capitals are inferred (e.g. social, human and identity). In answers to later questions, confidence becomes a personal attribute that appears to be strongly linked with employability development. The idea of self-awareness, emotional intelligence and confidence (constituents of psychological capital), will need to be unpacked and analysed further across all data.

#### **5.4 Student opinion regarding their development of employability skills?**

The questions in this area attempted to determine how students felt in terms of their employability preparedness and expectations from employers in terms of employability. Initial coding was developed on the basis of specified skills but as the analysis continued, nodes were created based upon the provision of various support services for developing student employability.

Through the CGT process nodes were changed as more data was analysed, for example there was an initial categorisation of 'meeting employer expectations', which was then changed to organisational fit/personal attributes, an adjustment to account for the understanding of the data.

The participants talked about their experience of the professional development module and its impact upon their own development. This opened up discussions that reflected upon work experience (for those that had some) and upon undertaking work placements. Furthermore, as the discussions continued a general theme became apparent around the support available for employability development. When considering their own development, a number of students expressed that they felt stress or pressure because of the need to acquire employability skills.

#### 5.4.1 Self-assessment – Organisational fit

This area relates to students understanding of employer expectations and perceptions in terms of employability. From the initial coding, it was observed that students had reflected upon the requirements of employers and possibly their own skills that required further development. Further focussed analysis saw in the data the identification of specific skills to how employers expected a person to ‘fit’ into their organisation. Students spoke about self-assessment, emotional intelligence, personality traits and the emotional impact of developing employability.

Both focus group 6 and 11 talked about personality traits and aspects of workplace behaviour. Students concluded that how you are able to ‘fit’ in an organisation is reflected in career progress. For example, FG6-1 and FG-11 considered personality as being able to ‘*get along with everyone*’ in a professional environment and being able to stand out from others, are important aspects for employability.

FG11-2: ‘Like, if you fit the expectation then you automatically have an advantage over somebody else, like if you both have the same skill set, but there's a perception that person ‘A’ fits the criteria or fits the mould of other people already in that environment then they're gonna rise to the top.’

FG11-4: ‘I think my skills, they have developed a lot to be honest with you. I read about you know, self-improving and stuff like that. So, I know that part but I didn't know how to be a professional person and go to an interview and then just make kind of a picture of yourself to an employer.’

Behaviour in the work place was mentioned in several group discussions. For example in FG6:

FG6-5: ‘I think in relation to personalities, just your nature, including punctuality and trying your hardest and going the extra mile and taking ownership. Are you the kind of person that values your work and values yourself, that

you'd arrive somewhere on time and you'd work at work, if that makes sense?'

VMH: Yeah, yeah, it does.

FG6-5: 'Rather than sit about and do nothing.'

For FG5, there was a focus upon the importance of conduct and social skills in terms of employability skills:

FG5-5: 'Having social skills is very important, more important than people think. A lot of the time, a lot of people their aim is to leave with a first from university but at the end of the day if you can't conduct yourself...Not being able to apply yourself socially, it's not going to work.'

FG5-3: 'You're not going to be a manager or leader if you can't conduct yourself.'

FG5-5: 'No, no. I think there's more to the social aspect rather than skills in a way what's written down on a paper. I think it comes down to that the end of the day.'

FG5-3: 'Or emotional intelligence.'

FG5-5: 'Yeah exactly. That's a big part of it.'

#### 5.4.2 Self-assessment – Emotional traits

From the complexity of employability that is expressed both within the literature and from the participant responses, there are more ideas regarding emotional aspects of behaviour. This analysis refers to personal attributes, attitudes or dispositions. Such concepts cross the divide between definitions of employability and the ideas of the requirements to *do* or to *get* a job (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Cumming, 2010). From the analysis it appears that for the students there is an emotional element or impact when having to evaluate your own employability.

For some it is about a 'state of mind' where emotional intelligence is an important trait, from FG4:

FG4-4 'You must be emotionally intelligent. You know your feelings and what you're feeling and what the other person is feeling, and be able to act humbly'

FG4-6: 'Discovery of oneself, applied to the ability to adapt to certain environment situations and scenarios possibly, which could favour you as a person or make you more employable'.

FG-5 also discussed emotional intelligence in terms of being able to learn from failure, expecting and taking on board constructive criticism as effective for employability.

Finally, in this area, the following conversation from participants in FG5 serves to illustrate the emotional impact that employability has upon them, whilst trying to navigate their way in a working environment:

FG5-3: 'I feel like the word employability carries a lot of weight to it. For me, I'm thinking, "How would I describe my employability?" It just feels like I'm pressured to say more things than I actually want to say. It doesn't come across as real anymore. It just comes across as things that I've heard other people say. I need to match it up.'

'If I think of my employability in terms of my career, or what I want to do, that would come more from passion, or feelings. As far as the actual word employability, that makes me think of CVs or cover letters and stress. Not me as a person.'

VMH: It doesn't make you think of passion, or rather being interested in something for the sake of being interested?

FG5-1: 'I agree with that. It feels like the actual word employability feels like a rigorous task, but I'd rather just be employable than having to think about employability.'

FG5-5: 'Everyone, even the public sector, everyone needs to sell themselves in any way...It didn't use to be like that. I think that is also reflecting on us, the newer generation to go out there. Employability now all of a sudden is about you selling yourself and you being your own brand...We buy into it. I think that's where the pressure sits.'

#### **5.4.3 Impact of the professional development module**

Students were asked about opportunities and what support was available to them to develop employability skills whilst at university. No prompting took place about any of the existing support facilities during the interviews. Equally, students were not specifically asked about the professional development module (detailed in section 1.7.1), however across the focus groups the input from the module was raised.

The analysis of the approach of the University of Salford to employability resulted in some interesting responses regarding the structure of the module and the nature of student engagement.

Many students mentioned the module as a major input of employability support. Some students did not expect the module as part of the curriculum e.g., FG6-1, 'it wasn't really something I was expecting to do when I first did the degree'.

For several students they were sceptical about the value of the module:

FG6-1: 'To be honest, when I first started it, I didn't think it'd be that important. But now I've started doing it, it's been really helpful.'

FG10-5: 'I'm shocked how professional development is useful. I didn't expect it, it was such an awareness for me because you get prepared for so many things relevant to realistic situations, and there's so much stuff, and you can be prepared to mould you, they get professional people in, they lay out everything so nicely that honestly, it's a really useful experience.'

From the positive outcomes, participants were asked are there students that do not see the benefits of the professional development module. These students suggested:

FG4-3: 'I'd say why, because maybe they don't understand the value of it yet. Some people haven't applied for jobs or actually had jobs, and realised how hard it is to get a job. They underestimate the value of employability and think when they get the degree, the degree is going to get them a job, when they actually need the skills to go with the degree.'

FG-11-1: 'Yeah, like some people don't rate this module [as in Professional Development] but personally for me I feel like it's helped me a lot.'

Some students such as FG4-4 felt the teaching from the professional development module was key to helping them to gain a future role. Others had reasoned the combination of their degree *and* employability support are important:

FG11-2: 'So, without even the course itself doing anything which improves employability skills the existence of a degree improves your employability because it's a minimum requirement for some jobs.'

Several students commented upon this module being unique to the business school and commented upon the advantages such employability inputs might provide for them over other degree programmes:

FG6-5: 'For professional development I know other courses don't seem to have any support in that area...I've got a flatmate that says she's never written a CV in her life.'



FG9-4: 'If there's 150 people applying for a job, you want to be the one of the few to get the interview, to stand out. I think this module on employability, in general, will help you do that. Because some universities won't have this module...I know several of my friends, who won't do this module, so I suppose it'll help us who go to this uni stand out from them.'

One participant expressed concerns with attitudes relating to family support that might lead student to think employability is not important:

FG5-1: 'Some students their families that I'd say...I'm Pakistani, Pakistani families do a lot of businesses, so their children, their parents give them the businesses so they think, "Oh, I don't have to go to work," or "I'll work in my Dad's business". Mine have businesses, but I'll go and do things for myself. But there all these people, a few more friends still are, "Oh, I'll just get my dad to do this, I'm all right for life.".'

#### 5.4.4 **Employability support**

The employability support at the University of Salford includes a university careers service, forming part of the larger 'AskUS' student support services (University of Salford, 2019a). There is also a university wide online portal, known as 'Salford Advantage' from which student can sign up to email job alerts, career service support and other training such as IT skills courses (University of Salford, 2019b).

An employability hub, supporting the work placement and internship process, provides specific provision for the business school. It also provides a variety of employability events, including job fairs (University of Salford, 2019c).

There is a mixed picture of student views when it comes to employability support outside of curriculum-based teaching (such as the professional development module).

Many students commented that they were aware of the services but only use them if they see a specific need. The opinions expressed suggested that support was available and there was a good level of awareness, however effective processes of communicating the value of such services and student engagement were of concern to students.

In a recent development, level 4 students are provided with work placement drop in advice sessions. These students' formed focus group 8. The conversation below summaries the view:

FG8-5: 'I think this uni has a really substantial focus on employability. Especially because I feel this is an industry-focused school, in terms of the courses they offer.

That's why they've introduced this [referring to the placement drop in session].'

VMH: You feel it's beneficial to start thinking about work placement right now at this early stage?

FG8-5: 'Yeah, I think so. At least having an idea of where you want to go. I feel like that takes a long time. If you have one idea right now and let it simmer for a little bit, you might realise that actually this place isn't for me, rather than you have an idea and then you apply and then you realise this place isn't really for me.'

For level 5 students, engagement with the support services seemed to be problematic, comments from FG8-5 regarding the employability hub:

FG8-3: 'People don't really engage in it that much. We do get the information that we need, but people just don't use it.'

VMH: Okay. Is it in terms of what the business school provides or is it how students use it?

FG8-3: 'I don't think it's that. It's just because they don't really know how to approach us because of just our age and what we're currently going through in life...I think it's hard to get the message across a lot, like how important it actually is.'

Looking at employability support across the focus group data, there were some shared views:

Overall students consider there to be a good range of support, but email communication is problematic, with many students not regularly checking student email e.g.

FG8-1: 'I don't know what it's like for everyone else, but I haven't really looked at my Salford email [the university email system] very much. I know I should look at it more because, I've got 20 emails that I've not looked at. It's not on purpose. I just sort of forget about it.'

When analysing employability support provision, the business school employability hub was mentioned a number of times. Students seem to have some difficulty with the employability hub. From FG7, this conversation took place:

- FG7-5: 'Sometimes they are quite hard to get hold of.'
- FG7-6: 'Yeah, that's true.'
- FG5-7: 'Last year, we went there and we were told that somebody would get back to us and we still haven't heard.'

In comparison, not many students mentioned the careers service; however, the following comments did support the value of the careers service:

- FG7-6: 'The careers service are much better as compared to Employability. When you try to see them they give you time to see your CV, or where you need help.'
- FG9-2: 'Actually, careers service in university helped a lot. They put on different sessions like CV's and presentation skills. Just like little extra things.'

#### 5.4.5 Stress or pressure

When asked to consider their own employability development, it was noted early on that students felt stress or pressure when confronted with the consequences of the concept. For example:

- FG4-5: 'I know people who avoid thinking about it on purpose because they want to live in the moment, in the present. Why do you want to think and plan everything? You don't have control over every situation, but they are just afraid to reflect on who they are because that's quite scary. They may realise that you're not ready for this, and you haven't worked on yourself enough. It's quite scary to realise those things about yourself because you realise you're not perfect and you need to work on yourself. This means to go out of their comfort zone and do things that you don't like, but then this scares people and they don't want to do that. That's why they don't think about it.'
- FG-5-5: 'That there's so many options out there now, so it's hard to define what is employability because it depends, and things are going to change and they're going to keep changing quickly.
- Quite frankly it's stressing me out [laughs].
- That's why it's terrifying, I think. We all know it's important. It's a lot of pressure at the moment. It can feel like it's becoming more of stress than something that's actually there to help you.'

When considering the action required to improve or develop employability, the conversation with FG10-5 illustrates the nature of stress that students feel:

- FG10-5: 'I think we live in such a competitive world, and the university environment is so competitive. It even gets on the overwhelming side. For example, I admit that I get very cold feet about placement. I was very up for it, and it hit me like, oh, maybe I should just go with my degree. You get overwhelmed, because you're here all the time. I think it's crucial, because once we leave this university, we're going to have to get hired by someone. It's all going to determine our future.'
- VMH: Thinking about it now for you is important for you later on?
- FG10-5: 'Yeah. It's really emotional for me and overwhelming at the same time to think about.'

## **5.5 What is the role and influence of capital elements?**

Capital elements in 'academic terms' were not specifically identified or defined to the students during the interviews. Evaluative questions were designed in an attempt to elicit responses that may reveal students' recognition of various capitals that could enable an analysis of its role in influencing employability.

Across the focus group data there is an interconnection between the various capitals that have been identified as being inferred by the students, such as human capital gained from understanding skills to do and to get a job with social and cultural capital gained from HE, along with work and life experiences. However only confidence, a form of psychological capital is explicitly and repeatedly expressed by the students. It was found that students made a close connection between confidence and motivation, driving employability goals or ambitions. The findings are discussed in this section, with issues surrounding work placements, since the analysis suggests a number of related capitals found to be associated with this area.

### **5.5.1 Confidence**

It has been seen that employability is a challenging aspect to student's experiences in HE. This is apparent in the multi-faceted nature of the understanding of employability students described; in addition, students have also raised the challenges of emotion. One aspect that was discussed from various angles was a form of psychological capital; confidence which is key to coping in challenging environments (Rattray, 2016).

In order to be able to get a job FG8-5 commented, 'You need to have a certain level of confidence, I think, because you need to be able to say, "I'm good at this and I can do this."' suggesting that without confidence it would be difficult to gain a

professional role. Others, e.g. FG4-7, felt that they did not feel confident about their employability because 'I don't really have any experience', and for FG7-7, he felt that you needed confidence in order to get a job.

One common source of confidence appears to be their participation in the professional development module. An example of this is the discussion from FG 11, for FG11-7 his confidence was helped because the module made him think about his skills and where he needed to improve, going on to say 'I already think I've improved in the last year'. FG11-6 agreed with this point, saying he felt 'more prepared for the outside world', knowing now what to expect from the recruitment process, 'it gives me a lot of confidence'.

The process of applying for jobs (or placements) can also have a negative impact upon confidence. This is illustrated by the conversation from FG7, where FG7-7 commented that he felt it a bit draining, 'I spend two hours with an application form and then you're rejected in seconds'. Other participants, FG7-6 and FG7-5 agreed that the rejection and competition can impact upon your confidence.

Given the number of references to confidence in the focus group data sets, this was determined to be a key theme, to be followed up in subsequent data collection activities.

### **5.5.2 Motivation**

During the focus groups students were asked about the importance of employability and how employability might fit into their own degree course or career plans. From the analysis, the data nodes were developed around the themes of motivation and comments associated with goals and ambition.

Being motivated seems to be important for employability, demonstrating a good level of motivation; some students suggest that you might be more successful to get the job you want, compared with 'people with better degrees' (FG10-2).

For many students employability was a means to support goals or an ambition, which are achieved by obtaining a degree and therefore having improved prospects or success post-graduation. Being motivated to improve your employability could allow a person to go beyond the norms expected:

FG11-3: 'I'm from Malawi and everything's...There's a norm. And your studies kind of stop at 'A' levels and I guess you get married or whatever. And for me it's not good enough I want more from life. And I want to achieve things that a lot of people in my country haven't.'

In a similar vein, FG11-8 and FG4-2 felt it is necessary to be motivated to improve employability for a better job, better pay and even a better life.

Following the discussion, a participant expressed the importance of motivation and goals, beyond completing his degree as essential for success and building confidence. Coming from Cyprus, the student has worked in his father's business but wanted to have a business of his own:

FG11-7: 'The reason I'm doing this degree is because my goal is to have something on my own at some point, so coming here and being more prepared, building my confidence and improving my employability, gets me more closer to my goal.'

### 5.5.3 Work placements

As mentioned in section 5.2.1, coding around discussions relating to work placements, presented a dilemma for students. It was realised many students recognised the potential benefits of undertaking a placement but on the other hand expressed concern over the effort involved in taking such an opportunity.

Within this area there appears to be the involvement of a number of capitals. These include aspects of human capital to be gained through experiential learning, social capital in terms of using networks to find opportunities and psychological capital in terms of the motivation and resilience required to pursue this avenue.

FG9-5 considered the benefits of undertaking a placement for improved graduate prospects:

FG9-5: 'I feel like, nowadays, more people are bothered about your experience rather than your qualifications...or something'

VMH: The experience is a real focus, you think?

FG9-5: 'I think so, yeah. That's one of the reasons why I really want to do a placement, so that I have, even if I don't get a job offered at the end of it, I'll have a full year of experience.'

Several participants from FG4 expressed a desire to complete work placement, however there was a perception of challenges in finding a role. Students questioned the effort required to gain a placement, the impact of time for taking a year out of their studies and probability of success.

Even with support from the university, the students in the group felt that 'the process is so long and complicated' (FG4-5) and that competition means only a small number of students are successful. There was a suggestion that there was not enough work placements for the number of students. Hearsay from FG4-1, suggested a student got a placement after '56 applications, and that's just demoralising.' There was no evidence presented that a student had actually made 56 applications, however this kind of belief clearly has an impact upon motivation and ambitions for placements.

For others the decision to undertake a placement is a struggle, some student felt that without a placement there would be detrimental effects upon their graduate employability:

FG10-5: 'It's really emotional for me and overwhelming at the same time to think about. That's how I feel. I feel like I have to get a placement, otherwise you won't be handling your own life. I won't be able to find a job later on graduation.'

Others took a more positive view in that taking a placement could result in continuous employment with that firm:

FG1-4: 'Because we are doing Accounting & Finance we have to get a placement in that area, so that when we do finish our degree we could maybe work for that firm. So it's not just like applying for a random job. It's getting in that specific field so that, I could develop my skills in that area.'

Stress and pressure was also a feature of the work placement process, for example:

FG4-5: 'For me it is really stressful. Everybody talks about finding a job, finding a placement, which is great. I love the idea of having a placement, but then the process is so long and complicated.'

Other groups felt that employers should provide more support in helping students to gain placements:

- FG6-3: 'It would be better if more involved firms actually offered placement years, and had more focus with universities to offer that to students. That would be better for them as well. They would be able to see if someone was employable'.
- FG2-7: 'I think like it's hard to get a job you want from employers because you don't have enough experience, so I think like people find it hard just to get demotivated because they are not able to get to where they want to be or what they want to work in'.

Overall, the outcomes of student opinion supports the premise that employability is complex particularly when students were asked to consider the progress of their development. A large number of theoretical categories have been generated, illustrated in the mind-map Figure 5-2. The findings from this data set were used to generate the individual student interview questions, the findings of which are detailed in the next section.

Figure 5-2 below illustrates the theoretical categories of the student focus groups, developed from the CGT analysis of the data. The main branches of the mind map are the research questions and further branches are formed from the categories that related to each question. By applying the theoretical framework to the categorisations, the outcomes for the consideration of habitus, capital and field are highlighted (displayed in green boxes).



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Figure 5-2 Mind map of focus groups CGT analysis theoretical categorisation & theoretical framework outcomes (green boxes)

## 5.6 Individual student interviews

Following the focus groups and reflecting on the initial analysis outcomes, a set of twelve questions devised for the individual student interviews (appendix 9.3), covered the following areas:

- The decision to attend university, the nature and choice of degree
- Opinion on general employability meaning and focus within HE
- Support provision for employability
- Development/influences upon their own employability
- Experience (work or life) that contribute to their employability and skills
- Views on work placements

As determined from the focus groups it was not necessary to ask questions about specific employability type skills such ‘teamwork’ or communications’ but rather to focus upon developing an understanding of the richer meaning of the concept from the participants.

Following from the results of the focus groups, employability considerations and meaning appears to begin with the decision to attend university. Therefore, questions examined influences of employability meaning beginning at this time. The interviews progressed with series of questions to explore the range of influences upon meaning and development for the students.

### 5.6.1 Development of student interview data coding

Initial coding was carried out to identify the key employability issues, both common and uncommon, that were important to students. Fourteen individual student interviews were conducted (see Figure 4-6). From the transcripts 27 nodes were generated from the coding process, a list of the nodes are illustrated in Figure 5-3.

A number of nodes were developed from the discussions about the journey to university, including the decision to attend the University of Salford, the choice of degree and adjusting to university life in becoming an independent adult.

As stated above, specific skills definitions or identification was not questioned but coded under a general heading of employability skills and workplace competencies that appeared necessary for employability to *do* or to *get* a job.

From the initial analysis, the following list is a summary of the key discussion outcomes:

- Personal attributes
- Confidence
- Concern over grades vs. gaining skills and standing out to employers
- Balance between personal and employability development (stress or pressure)
- Placement dilemma and benefits

An initial node labelled ‘meaning of employability’ rose out of students discussing skills that related to the process of getting a job. When progressing to focused analysis, given the complexity and connections surrounding employability in the data, further nodes were created to capture the association with the research for capitals. As a result, confidence and motivation developed as part of the larger picture of employability. Meaning also included a mixture of issues such as degree value and grades and the identification of specific skills.

Focussed coding saw the data divided between the meanings of employability that related to personal attributes, development opportunities supported via the professional development module and taken from life or work experiences.

Figure 5-3 below lists all of the nodes that were coded resulting from the phased grounded theory analysis of the individual student interviews.

Name	Sources	References
Adjusting to University life - Becoming independent	8	17
Barriers to employability or employment	5	8
Capital of University	12	29
Choice of degree program	14	27
Choice to attend University of Salford	14	24
Confidence	10	18
Decision to go to University	14	19
Employability - Life experience contribution	7	11
Employability - Personal attributes	14	53
Employability as part of formal teaching	13	27
Employability inclusion in HE	13	22
Employability skills - Degree based development	12	33
Employability skills - e.g. teamwork	11	29

Employability support beyond graduation	1	1
Meaning of employability	11	26
Motivation	13	49
Outcomes of employability	10	30
Professional development	14	47
Reality of working in chosen field or industry	6	12
Role of employers	12	28
Skills to do - skills to get a job	4	7
Stress or pressure	9	20
Subject Knowledge development	7	15
University employability support services	13	70
Value of undergraduate degree	14	28
Work Exp. part time non-graduate vs. professional	14	38
Work Placement benefits & dilemmas	14	47

Figure 5-3 NVivo nodes for individual student interviews

## 5.7 What does employability mean to students?

Based upon the results from the focus groups, concerns about employability begins with the decision to come to university in the first instance. Employability may not have been the main driver of the decision but exploration of this starting point allowed ideas about employability to crystallise from reflecting upon the decision making process.

Interviews began with a series of questions aimed at exploring the journey to university and the value students considered their degree to have. Some participants came to the realisation that a degree might broaden horizons based upon the necessity to make a decision about the next stage of their life.

### 5.7.1 Journey to University

The students came from a variety of different backgrounds and told interesting stories about their journey into HE and the subsequent developments in employability that they had experienced whilst at the University of Salford. Although it may not have been the original intention of all the students to attend university, ultimately the decision was made on the basis of general expectations, as a natural progression from school (or college) and/or to obtain a better job, for example:

STU-4: 'I was always stuck between, I either was going to try and go into a trade, or go into something to do with business. When I saw it was either a choice between an apprenticeships, or going to university, because I found at the time when I looked, there weren't really as many business apprenticeships as there are now.

So, yeah, uni was the next step. To be fair, I wanted to just carry on in education, because I quite enjoy the whole learning aspect of it.'

STU-8: 'Well, to be honest, at the time it seemed to be about what the general trend of what everyone was doing...And there was a lot of talk about how hard it can be to get a job without a degree, or a certain level of job.'

For STU-12, the step to university also meant a chance to come to the UK from mainland Europe:

'Well, it just seemed like a natural step after you finish school 'cause the way...I mean, just seems natural.

Like, in today's society to come to uni is important and I was just really fascinated about the UK. I just thought if I'm not gonna come now I'm never gonna do it. So I thought I'll apply to universities here.'

STU-10 and STU-5 also agreed and commented on the 'linear progression' from school. For a couple of other students, the choice was not direct but university was the ultimate destination:

STU-1: 'I'm gonna be honest with you that university wasn't my initial plan, simply because none of my family members went to university. I was the first one to actually go to higher education so it was never in my mind.

In college, like they encouraged me and they talked about the process, how easy it was and the benefits of it. That gave me an idea to actually stay in education a bit more and maybe expand my knowledge but, yeah, it was a great decision for me.'

STU-2: 'Well, it's a bit of a last-minute decision really. I think when it got to leaving, year 11 and year 12, you sort of panic and think, "Well, what am I going to do now?" sort of thing, like, "Where am I going to go after school?" Because I went to the sixth form, that was the same as my secondary school. So, even then, that was sort of a last-minute decision because I didn't know where I was going to go. I had no idea of what was on offer, really.

So, I just sort of thought about it and then spoke to my mum about it, and she said maybe university's a good way to go'

STU-14 is another European student and her decision was influenced by parent pressure. She went on to state that getting a degree was ‘necessary’, but did not feel it gave an advantage as ‘everyone has a degree’.

There were 3 mature student participants, including one international student (STU-6); their reasons for attending university was to achieve improved employability. STU-11 had been working in personal finance and wanted promotion, this was not possible with his BTech in sport qualification; ‘I wasn't really heavily qualified at all. So I thought I have the opportunity to go to university, so I did.’

STU-13: ‘Initially, it was more to actually be around one of my best mates, to be honest.

I did two years of working full-time [as a builder]. Then my best friend has come over here [to Manchester]. I kept coming to visit him and then I just enjoyed being around him so much and seeing what he was doing that I wanted to have a go’.

‘Having a degree means a lot to me, obviously. I'd prefer to be getting my graduate job rather than, like before, working a bit in fast food, or else I'm on building sites and whatever.’

STU-6: ‘Because I want to improve my knowledge of study, and have a better life for myself, and really, for my family too. Majorly for myself cause it is what I want to do. In Nigeria, I have studied Estate Management in the University of Lagos. I have a degree. But it's not what I want to do. Because that's what my father wanted me to do. So I had to do it, and then I wondered. Now I am doing what I want to do.

Because leaving Salford, I want to go back to Nigeria, have my own business. One day I aspire to be, the Minister for Aviation in Nigeria.’

### 5.7.2 Undergraduate degree value

There was an understanding that a degree is a means to obtain a professional role, alongside other aspects of employability derived from the analysis. There were mixed feelings about the value of their degree, from being highly valued or as an ‘insurance policy’ demonstrating qualifications (e.g. STU-10). Other students placed less value than they originally thought due to the number of people with a degree and employers approaches to graduate recruitment (e.g. STU-11). For some students there was also personal value to obtaining a degree. Career progression was the driver for STU-11; however, he thought that a degree alone would not fulfil employer's requirements.

STU-11: 'It's just kind of more...I see the degree now as more of just a signal that I've been to university...You then need to train [within a particular role] again after that.'

For participant STU-7, an undergraduate degree provided a competitive edge:

STU-7: 'I think a degree is like a foot in the door, isn't it? Now, a lot of employers will expect you to have a degree. You feel like you've got something that makes you be able to compete in the job market.'

To achieve a graduate role, other participants felt that perhaps a post-graduate degree might be required. STU-4 was uncertain of the impact post-graduation but stated an undergraduate degree demonstrates 'dedication' and 'good knowledge':

STU-4: 'I'm in two minds, because I'm sort of like, I don't know if I want to go on and do more education after a degree and do post graduate things, or just to go into a job or travel.

It's a hard thing because a lot of people have degrees now. You've either got to get a really good degree, I'm close to getting a first, hopefully, overall. That will be important when it comes to the next stage, but then I know a lot of people now say it's important to get a post-graduate degree as well, because that helps.'

For other participants, there was a more personal aspect to the value of their degree, but they did question if further qualifications are need:

STU-1 'I know for some people it might be just having a degree, having it on paper, saying oh, I've got a degree. But over the time, obviously I have been two years now in university, I realised that university can actually encourage you to be a better person.'

STU-9: 'I think it really depends how you look at the degree, as well, because for me personally it's really valuable, because I'm the first one from my family to go to university.

So it probably means a lot more for me than compared to someone else, but it's something I see as a first step, because it then allows you to go to do master's or maybe apply for graduate schemes or stuff, whereas if you haven't got a higher education or degree, you don't have that many options.

So I think it just opens more doors, and you just feel more prepared to enter the job market.'

### 5.7.3 Adjusting to university life – Becoming independent

A notable aspect of the discussions regarding the journey into HE were the comments about the changes in life at school or college to university. The process of learning to live and learn independently, alongside the move to adult responsibilities has an impact upon employability considerations. As seen in the previous two sections employability has influenced the choice to attend university. However, within the first year of study it appears to be difficult to consider employability when you are trying to settle into a new lifestyle and becoming independent:

STU2: 'You're just sort of overwhelmed by everything. And at the same time, you're sort of trying to fit in with your housemates, your flatmates, wherever you are. You're just sort of finding your way around anyway.

But it's not even that [in terms of employability], I just think it's really daunting anyway, being at university, and trying to fit in or where are you going to fit in ultimately. But I think it's just sort of a whole new world that you're just trying to get used to, and then you're having like, "Oh, we've got this on offer, we've got this on offer," and it's like I don't even know where I'm going to go in the next three years.'

For STU-8, independence was initially a major change, although he was living locally with his parents. He had friends that dropped out of university, which made him consider his own challenges:

STU-8: 'There's a massive adjustment. Well it was personally for me anyway. Because it was sort of forcing yourself to be more independent at the same time. And in the back of my mind, and I know it was not a very good attitude, but first year didn't count. I can pass all these and then happy days I can do what I want.

But then second year, third year, that's when it all really starts to get in motion and click.

I think the independence does help a lot of people but it can also be very detrimental to a lot of people as well. And so that independence can be a little bit detrimental to some people because they can't just handle it yet.'

For both STU-7 and STU-8, moving from a small village to the city was a significant life change. For STU-7, 'It was hard to adapt to living here full-time. It's a bit overwhelming at first. I think after my first year, I really got used to it.' STU-8 made



a similar point in adjusting ‘The ups and downs with friendships, relationships, money, having to look after yourself’.

STU-8 was studying in his final year and working part-time with the company where he completed a placement year:

STU-8: ‘So I've learned to have to manage everything together. Now I think I'm, I think I'm quite good at managing my time now. But I never would have come through, not having to just get on with it and manage my time.’

#### 5.7.4 Skills to *do*/skills to *get* a job

In discussing the meaning of employability, as with the focus groups two elements emerge from the data, skills to *get* a job, the recruitment processes and then skills to *do* a job. For skills to *do* a job, the responses in most cases pertain to understanding how to apply your skills and yourself in work place situations.

STU-3: ‘I think employability is about knowing things and knowing how to apply them, professionally. I think it comes with different paths, employability in my mind obviously, is getting a job. So it's talking the talk but then also using your knowledge to walk the walk’.

Several participants felt that employability also came from understanding yourself, personally and professionally, through self-assessment and therefore knowing how you might fit in an organisation:

STU-10: ‘More so than just the actual work and hard to get work, it's your own skills and how you apply them to your work. How you first get to the job, how you apply for the job; and then how you perform in that work as well. And a lot of it is like self-review for you as well. You've got to look at what you've done in your life in experience, in education or even outside life as well. How that will put you at an advantage or disadvantage at work. And how that affects your work performance as well. Just the different aspects of that. And yeah, so your own skills pretty much and how that fits into the working system.’

VMH: So you think employability is also a process of understanding yourself as well?

STU-10: ‘Yeah, like where you fit in in the working environment as well.’

STU-4 explained that employability meant a combination of aspects of employment, i.e. applied skills, knowledge and work experience:

STU-4: 'I definitely think it's a two part thing. Obviously, and the degree helps, a lot of job. But then I think also, for me personally, because of the job that I do now, and the skills of that. Because even though it's the title of a customer service manager, basically I run the shop...so it's given me a lot of skills in that way that I think would definitely help me.'

VMH: You think it's the degree, the education, but also skills as well?

STU-4: 'And I think its experience. Because I've been a customer service manager for two years now, so that'll set me up if I'm working in a team or independently. It gives me those skills and the experience to...But I think it's also having a bit of a varied background as well, because I've worked at McDonald's and that teaches me very different things than what this [my degree] has taught me.'

For STU-11, self-assessment, work experience operated alongside a combination of skills to *get* and to *do* a job in constituting employability meaning. This student had a number of years of prior professional work experience and felt he could apply learning from a variety of experiences, including work experience, for employability:

STU-11: 'I think the skills you would need to be employable. Essentially the skills about transfer, to more situations in your life, and meeting new people. Entering new situations, it's kind of, learning to apply. Introduce yourself, put yourself across in a way that you want to. These are things that are important to employability. I personally, I would want to come across in the right way, in conversations that we have there.'

STU-11 went on to say his past experience was important:

'What I've done before has helped. Though I'm not saying I haven't gained any experience from university, especially the professional development module, and things like CV writing and going through the recruitment process, things like that... Being prepared is something that I've gained from university and the value of being prepared for an interview, or for a situation where you've got to sell yourself essentially, is massive. I found that I've been much more prepared for the interviews that I've been to since being at university.'

STU-13 felt the focus was a requirement to demonstrate your skills to *get* a job to employers:

STU-13: 'Well, I best candidate to it for a job I suppose. I don't know. From a personal stance, employability's probably trying to convince someone to hire you...

Because especially I mean I'm 24, so I'm a builder, not the typical third year or even second year. You want to show off everything about you at once, you know? Now I've kinda learnt to summarise job roles I've had before, the CV's, how I've done them...just because you just want to get your information across. They're just happy to know that you're a normal person who's willing to work a harder job.'

In addressing the central research question, this first section of analysis comes together to build a picture of the meaning of employability. A number of factors appear to contribute to employability; it is not a simple case of separate skills to *do* or to *get* a job. The decision to undertake HE has allowed students to consider how the HE experience supports employability development in terms that might not be initially obvious. This includes skills developed in having to adjust to an independent life away from school or college but also from home. Managing your own time, money and developing new friendships can have an employability contribution.

Overall there seems to be a theme regarding balance; between developing employability skills against degree subject knowledge, between developing as a person, which includes becoming independent, learning life skills, making friends and enjoying university life.

## **5.8 Student opinion regarding their development of employability skills?**

Having explored the meaning of employability the research sought student opinion for employability development. Students were asked if they regarded employability inputs as required and necessary to support their development whilst participating in HE. The following findings highlight a number of influencing factors from the analysis:

### **5.8.1 Employability focus in HE**

Overall, there was a positive reception to the idea of employability embedded within the HE curriculum, although there was some debate about when this should be included across their degree programmes. Several participants suggested some additional support in the final year is required; however, some were happy to leave employability considerations until much closer to graduation.

The employability inputs and professional development module seemed to provide an appreciation of the other careers support services that the university offers. The compulsory nature of the module seemed to provide motivation for a topic that initially appears to the students to be outside of their normal degree programmes. The support and feedback processes from the professional development module seemed to hold benefits.

To begin, students were asked, should employability form part of teaching in HE and therefore be compulsory?

- STU-10: 'Yes definitely, especially if you have not worked, you don't know your own skills and how to stand out'.
- STU-3: 'It gives me confidence that if I was ever in that situation in the future, I'm equipped with those skills. But I think it's giving me new little building blocks that I want to build on'.
- STU-5: 'Yeah, and I feel like without uni [in reference to the professional development module and other experiences in HE], without my job, I couldn't put them together.'
- STU-7: 'A lot of people have different views on things like that. People purely want to come to uni to learn the theoretical side where some people want to just get a job. It's hard to balance'

### **5.8.2 Impact of the professional development module**

After reflecting and analysing the discussions for teaching employability in the HE curriculum, the focus turned to the professional development module (section 1.7.1). In conducting the interviews, students were not asked or prompted about this aspect of the students' teaching. This topic, and therefore the category arose from interview questions relating to opinions about employability development and whether there should be any focus for employability in HE (appendix 9.3).

Following from the discussion regarding the value of her degree, STU-1 discussed the practical activities and application that came from the teaching:

- STU-1: 'The only module that was very practical to me was obviously the professional development...'
- 'I also feel like the professional development really affects my employability. How they implemented the LinkedIn, the mock interviews, the assessment centre, psychometric test, I think that was very successful. Initially I was

like, I don't really want to do it. I was getting out of my comfort zone. It was a really good experience.'

VMH: So it was valuable, at least. And do you think it built confidence?

STU-1: 'Yes, absolutely. I think practise really builds confidence. I think that's what teachers were aiming at. I think it has contributed to my confidence. It's been reflected in my internship application and currently I've got an assessment centre, with Enterprise Rent A Car.'

STU: 2 'Even the professional development course we did, that was so helpful to me because it's sort of given me a better understanding of what I'm going to do if I ever do go for an interview or anything, even just go for a job or whatever. So I think there needs to be more courses like that that are based on how you're going to be employed.'

STU-7: 'Then, as well, I'm not sure if it's something that you can be taught, but the employability thing. I know when I first did professional development, it kind of made me think, okay, I can actually apply for these jobs and I can hopefully get interviews with my CV and at least know how to articulate what I've got right now, to these people. But it's also gave me that drive, I guess.'

STU-5: 'So it's like, I think having that employability and the people come [guest speakers] in and things like that, it opens your eyes up of what you're going to be facing. Cause currently I am at McDonalds so, all I had to do was turn up for an interview, and that was basically it.

Now they've done things like assessment centres, which I've never done. Also psychometric tests, which I've never even heard of it. And it helps prepare you for the future.'

STU-10 had a significant amount to say on the subject of employability support, in addition to the development opportunities from the professional development module, he considered that some structured support in the final year would be valuable (this was also suggested by STU-3):

STU-10: 'Yeah, yeah. It should definitely [taught compulsorily]...I think, it should be core as well. It should be something that's definitely done for everyone.

Because some people, you'll hear it and they'll say, "I didn't like professional development." But it'll be like seven years down the line they realise that, "Oh wait, I learned that in professional development."

After giving examples of the gains made from the module, STU-10 went on to say he felt the employability support should be formally followed up across the rest of the

degree, 'it's just something that you check into and have like a doctor's check-up almost but like a midterm check-up that says, "Oh, you're progressing with this."...'

The professional development appeared to be valuable to international students, from countries with different recruitment systems:

STU-6: 'Last semester we had was a module called professional development. I did so well in that module. And I did not know that I had such qualities. So it's a way of building you up for the future, for the labour market, I'll say.

The professional development module has really, really helped me. So much. Like getting here I didn't know anything about the psychometric tests, because back in Nigeria it's different.'

STU-14 is a European student and had also undertaken both an Erasmus exchange plus a European summer internship (Erasmus, n.d.). She did not undertake the professional development module due to these activities, but commented:

STU-14: 'I think it should be part of the teaching. I think it's very good that they put it in second year, because that's when most students understand that they will need to get a job. Like first year you're fresh and don't really think about it seriously, but then it's the end. The time passes so fast.'

### 5.8.3 Work placement dilemma

Discussions emerged from the focus groups about the undertaking of work placements. A theme formed from the debates about the employability development benefits that can result from work placements. However, many students raised concerns about the process and time required to secure a placement. From the CGT analysis a picture of a 'placement dilemma' formed. For students, work placements had clear benefits, however many comments were made with regards the issues, stresses or uncertainty around getting and taking a work placement.

The individual interview participants were a mix of students that were currently applying for industrial placements, those not pursuing this avenue and those that had completed placements. Therefore, the following findings illustrate the range of views that form the placement dilemma.

The benefits of work placements are accepted in terms of gaining employability skills such as communication and team working but also in the potential for securing employment soon after graduation (Mason, *et al.*, 2003; Wilton, 2012).

This research was reflected by STU-3, who after a successful work placement had secured part-time work during his final year and the offer of a graduate role in the same company. As perhaps expected, this student was an advocate for work placements:

STU-3: 'I think, obviously taking the placement was something I really wanted to do. It's an extra year but when I finish that year that goes on for life. It's not really a long time.

I think just because of my experience and placement stuff as well, I think people who aren't really interested in doing placement, I just want to shake them a little bit, like it's really, really useful. I don't know, I guess you can't force people to do things they're not interested in.'

During the interview, the student reflected upon the work placement process, the influence of the professional development module, the benefits and impact upon his longer-term employability. The professional development module was cited in helping him secure a work placement, 'To stay on there, I still really attribute that to my placement'. STU-3 made it clear that he maximised the opportunity, as the placement progressed through motivation and drive.

STU-3: 'I think because I had gotten the job, I was excited, I was like oh my god, how has this happened? I think that drive, and I kind of made it really clear, that if there are any jobs, I would love to stay here, and then they kind of realise that he's not going away.

I definitely think the tools that I learned, and am still learning at Uni, matched up with my motivation and the company's view on its people, I do feel quite employable.'

For other students, undertaking a work placement posed several dilemmas, they appeared to be concerned about the intense competition for roles and the time consuming nature of the application process. Adding to the dilemma were concerns for taking time out of their studies to make applications.

This participant understood the benefits of professional work experience but was concerned about time scales for prolonging her studies. As a result, she had taken as shorter placement:

STU-1: 'Actually, the Enterprise Rent a Car place I applied for simply because I changed my mind about a placement...I'm still not sure whether I want to

do three months, I agreed with the managers that I can do it for three months and then I can extend it if I like it.

In my opinion, I would love to finish my university and get into employment, and start building my career. Prolonging that process is kind of scary for me, but I still think it's vital to do a bit of that professional experience.'

Whereas STU-8 wanted to complete his studies and enter a graduate work scheme, despite thinking the idea of placements are 'great':

STU-8            'So there was a number of things but I think the main one is I'm done with education for the time-being because I've been in it for 20 years now or 16 years or whatever you want to call it. I feel like I'm ready to get a job.'

STU-1 also gave some thought to the stress created by applying, undertaking a placement and the anxiety of not securing a placement:

STU-1            'You learn more in a year than you will learn in three months. It's a big dilemma, doing a placement. I feel like we get pressurised, because all we hear about, all the emails that we receive, it's all about placements. When you actually haven't applied for anything or you've not got any offers, you actually feel bad.

It is important to have that real life experience, and to have that on your CV. I know why they're emphasising that. I understand both sides of the argument.'

STU-2 and STU-7 provide examples of deciding not to take a work placement despite the benefits, reasoning the process was too time consuming and it impacted upon their personal life:

STU-2:           'I mean, a lot of people have said, "I'm not going to bother because I just can't be bothered with the stress and whatever." I didn't want to get to on a placement and then think, "Oh God, I've got to do this for a year." And again, it's sort of like your personal life as well. For me, I'd want to graduate with my friends and whatever.'

'It's time-consuming as well. You've got limited time to do it. You've got to have your applications in by November and whatever, so I think it's just an added stress that students don't really need. I would much prefer just get three years done and then just go wherever I decide to.'

STU-7:           'It would have been one more year of university, which would have been good but...I was just having such a good time...'



I'm working [part-time in his chosen marketing field], and having a good time, I'm in a band. Getting a placement might have been an end to all of those things.'

For the mature student participants, adding additional years to their degree was something they wanted to avoid:

STU-11: 'It was a three month Internship, so I understood the value of getting the, with professional experience, added to my degree, but I didn't really want to take any additional years. I've told you I've come back to university and the idea was coming back to get on with the next chapter of my life and the career I was going to commit to. I didn't really want to take four years, so I was looking at a three month internship, and for me it was...I got offered a year placement with a company.'

#### 5.8.4 Work experience

The participants discussed employability development that other forms of work experience can provide. This mainly focused upon considering the skills gained from part-time work undertaken to fit around their education. There was recognition that this might not be the type of work experience required by graduate employers, but had value in developing skills:

STU-4: 'But it's stepping stones to get the other job. I think it puts work in perspective a bit as well...I've already spoken to managers in work, and they said there could be a good chance I could go down to London to work for the Ladbroke's one [graduate scheme], but I'm not that keen.'

STU-1 and STU-10 felt they had lots of part-time work experience, having taken more responsibility in those roles, but their next step is to gain experience in a professional environment:

STU-1: 'I do have a part-time job. Personally, I feel like my employability skills are very high. I've been working since I was 16, so I've expanded that over the years (with a promotion to senior sales assistant). However, in a professional field I feel like I'm not quite there yet.'

'I shouldn't be just focused on university, I need to do something on the side and build up my CV as professional as possible. I don't have that much experience in uni of the professional jobs.'

STU-12 states, 'I think that my part-time job has developed me personally a lot' by building confidence, communications skills and problem solving. STU-12 was due

to undertake an internship to build experience in her chosen professional environment of HR.

## **5.9 What is the role of and influence of capital elements?**

Careful consideration was given throughout the interview and analytical process to address the research question for capital elements. As stated, capital elements were not specifically identified to the participants, but rather the concept ideas were embedded within the questions to elicit responses. From the analysis, it was seen that capital elements permeate through the results in forming student views.

The coding determined that a series of influencing factors regarding personal attributes and the importance of 'how you come across to people' or 'how you behave in a professional environment' were important for employability. Through the analysis and evaluation the findings show psychological capital elements, which included confidence and motivation, impact upon outcomes of employability development.

### **5.9.1 Personal attributes**

The participants had an understanding that the meaning of employability is complex and that personal attributes are important. This was expressed as a 'persona' (STU-1) or a personality that could fit within an organisation, and could be ascribed akin to identity and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017a). These findings follow from the analysis of the focus group data as an aspect that was underpinned by self-awareness/understanding:

STU-1: 'I think a lot of things contribute to employability. It's that complex. I think it's wide, it's that work persona the set of things that build you up, the way you are. It can affect the particular way you react, and how you perform with other people. I don't know if that makes sense.'

STU-10: 'A lot of it, I'd say self-discovery as well. You get to understand who you are as a person.

You'll have those things that push you, like whether it's money or other values that push you, like friendship at work; or even the job role you're doing, that pushes you in that direction.

And the better you are at understanding your own employability skills and your own individual drivers, it makes you almost a better worker...

If you can learn from mistakes and then the failures as well then yeah, you're constantly on this upwards path. And you're learning more as well because you realise that, "Oh this happened. So I have to learn something to do it."

STU-2: 'I mean, obviously we work through school to meet deadlines and things like that, but at the end of the day you've got to do that with anything really. So, I think it's sort of like, "How do I fit in? How do I go about doing this work?" Yeah, and how you work with others is really important, I think.'

The comments from STU-6 suggested psychological capital, in the form of self-efficacy and self-control, allowed a person to adapt to a particular environment:

STU-6: 'It gives you some knowledge of how to handle some day to day situations. Because if you don't come together with people like, in the workplace you work as a team. You learn how to manage people's character and you deal with so many types of people. And it gives you an idea of different, types of people's behaviours. And I think that is a very, very good thing.'

STU-6: 'Yeah. And from your job you can make friends who would be friends outside the job...It's very difficult for you to work in a place and you don't have friends that you keep outside the work.'

STU-9 had participated in a university industry-mentoring programme and had made considerable efforts to develop his employability. His points contend that personal development is important:

STU-9: 'I think it's...it's not just getting a job but also developing as a person, as well. So I think that's really important, that it...it doesn't always mean that you will end up working for a company, you might start your own business or you might do something different.

So it's still valuable, it's still good to have those employability skills, because you will use them anywhere around the world.'

VMH: So there's a transferability...it doesn't necessarily matter what the experience is, it all comes together eventually...

STU-9: 'All comes together, yeah.'

Some students commented that the university environment had aided personal development, for example:

STU-8: '100% I'd say uni. And since I've come to uni, I've actually got a lot more mature.

I used to be awful when I was in college. I never tried, I never came in. But I think because all my friends went to unis here, there, and everywhere. Not that they were bad influences, I was just lazy. And then, now I have to get up and force myself to drive in, just sit there in traffic like, "Why am I coming? Why am I coming?"

But even the simple things like that, it's made me get a lot more mature...So I've always been quite sensible. I've never been an idiot. But I think uni and work has just enhanced and pushed me. So I actually forced myself to do more work and I've actually matured more as well in both aspects.'

### 5.9.2 Confidence

Confidence is a theme that continued to develop from the individual interviews; it seems to underpin the meaning of employability for students. From the data, confidence is a key issue for both developing and demonstrating employability skills. From the analysis, confidence is linked as a personal attribute that appears to be bound with other factors such as motivation. As found within the focus groups, building confidence can also bring stress or pressure in terms of needing to develop employability.

The sources seem to be multi-faceted, but confidence has been built through the professional development module processes, but also from part-time working, involvement in extra-curricular activities such as sport, being a member of societies or from undertaking a work placement. Confidence was also gained from learning to be independent whilst at university (e.g. STU-5).

STU-4 and STU-13 felt confidence is an important factor in employability:

STU-4: 'Being confident or not believing you can do it, then I think people see that a lot if you're doing an interview. You can see if someone's confident or if they're not...'

STU-13: 'You just get the impression sometimes. They [employers] are literally looking for perfect, which nobody is. Not often, but it sometimes does cross my mind what are they looking for, just in the sense of am I allowed to make a mistake at all, you know? Because it does happen. Am I allowed to...I naturally make mistakes in everyday life, but...Am I allowed to do this, and as long as I'm confident about it, is it fine, you know?'

In the conversation highlighted below, confidence gained from learning about recruitment could help to overcome stress:

- STU-3: 'But I know that I can go and give it my best chance because of the techniques and skills that we were taught.'
- VMH: It's given you that opportunity?
- STU-3: 'Yeah, it's given me the confidence to try.'
- VMH: So do you think confidence is an important part of the employability?
- STU-3: 'I think it is, but...I'm not sure how this sounds. Because I think I can get really anxious and stressed out about certain things. But, I think what I've learned in terms of employability, how to mask it for that half hour interview, or even if I was coming across quite visibly nervous, still remembering what I might have to say.'

This point was also made by STU-10, having been taught employability skills and having to assess yourself: 'You feel more confident as well and ultimately that's going to affect how you perform in interviews and tests and all that stuff.'

Two students realised during the professional development module that they had developed skills from their sporting activities and learnt that confidence gained from those skills could be applied in employability situations:

- STU-13: 'I mean it is linked to rugby again, but I've got a different role this year, which is tour organiser. But I'm able to bring in a little bit because this time it involves going abroad and having to lead people and I'm the leader. You know, I have to tell them what we're doing. If it weren't for the professional development, I wouldn't have even thought of adding that one in as well'.
- STU-8: 'When I was in my final year of college when I was actually captain of that rugby team. We were quite successful. But I think that's helped given me a lot of leadership attributes...So, like I said, I can trace it back to the rugby. But it's just having that confidence to go out there as well and know you're doing the right thing'.

STU-12 mentioned that the learning from the professional development module had increased her confidence, but that this had additionally impacted upon her abilities in her part-time job:

- STU-12: 'It means like, having the right skills to be able to know what a certain...what's expected of you in a certain job and having the confidence to go into an interview. Displaying your skills in an interview, too, to make yourself more employable.
- My confidence has definitely improved, in the interview. I used to be like, really shy and really nervous and my voice would shake a lot but now I'm

much better and I can have a conversation much more easily. I think it might be also what I do, like as a part-time job, 'cause I work as a bartender, so it involves a lot of communication.'

She later went on express how a combination of experiences, skills and knowledge contributed to her confidence and employability skills:

STU-12: 'I think the university has offered me the base, the basic knowledge that I to perform the job so I think it's a combination of the two.'

### 5.9.3 Motivation

Motivation is another area that seems to form a large part of the employability picture. As with the analysis of the focus groups, goals and ambition but also becoming actively involved in their own employability drove motivation:

STU-3: 'I think, obviously Uni set me up with drive, motivation, and the tool kit, I guess, to go out and find a job.'

Then, as well, I'm not sure if it's something that you can be taught, but the employability thing. I know when I first did Professional Development, it kind of made me think, okay, I can actually apply for these jobs and I can hopefully get interviews in my with my CV and at least know how to articulate what I've got right now, to these people. But it's also gave me that drive.'

STU-5: 'You can get so far with motivation but I don't know, you're having a long road going around instead of just jumping straight there. Cause you've ... That's why I wanted to do the degree, because I didn't want to have to wind all over the place. I wanted to have the skills to back me up. And then use it to help, well, use my motivation to implement those skills in the future.'

In a longer conversation about attitudes and personal behaviour, as associated with goals and motivation, STU-9, a student course representative, offered a view from other students about the impact upon employability:

STU-9: 'I feel like it comes down to personal behaviour, or individuals...some people have a clear idea and they know what they want to do, and they know what sort of direction they need to go, and what things they need to do to get there.'

Whereas some people are really unsure, and I have spoken to friends or other students throughout our university as well, and they're just not sure what they need. Because for example, in business and economics...because I'm the student rep for my course as well. So, I would say out of 35 students

in our course, maybe less than 10 know why they chose economics, or what they want to do with this course.

Whereas, others just did it as a course...maybe they didn't know what else to do, so I think that obviously then impacts on what grade they get, if they are employable or not. Because they don't have a motivation behind it.'

STU-4, had ideas of what employment he wanted after graduation but felt it was hard to ask for help during his studies, which he thought impacted upon his motivation:

STU-4: 'I find it really hard...And that's the worst bit. I hate to say, if I've missed a few seminars, I feel really awkward to come back in the next time, because I don't want the teacher to be like, "Oh, I haven't seen you in a while." I would be like, it makes me feel really awkward. Because I know I should have been. That's why I liked the professional development, because you don't have to reach out to them. It's in front of you, and you can just go to it. It was one of the ones I attended most, to be fair.

#### **5.9.4 Benefits of employability**

The students described a range of benefits and outcomes for employability, this included confidence, the ability to be able to speak about yourself and describe your skills (e.g. STU-2). On the theme of relationship building, STU-6 (quoted in section 5.9.1) and STU-14 felt the benefit of employability extended from inside the work place to beyond it in terms of making friends. Many, (for example STU-9), felt that employability is not just about jobs but it is also about developing as a person, gaining skills that are transferable across many situations. STU-13 felt it gave them a better outlook in work and in life in general.

Many of these comments relate in some manner to capitals, especially social capital, but also are future looking, not just about getting a job but also supporting development for a life beyond work. From the analysis there appears to be a strong link between benefits with personal and emotional growth outcomes.

Economic capital was not a major focus of employability for the students, it was recognised as a benefit but other aspects such as social capital emerged:

STU-14: 'It's not just making money because that's the idea of getting a job, but growing as a person, meeting people, you might find a best friend, your future husband, I don't know, in your job. And it's very, very good. It provides this social interaction that everyone needs to not lose their minds.'

STU-3: 'The idea to come to Uni was to expand, not only my personal life and meeting new people and grow as a person, but at the end of the day I've come here to try and do the best that I can, so that I am more employable. It'd be nice to have a job where you can go on holiday every year, or you can look at buying you a house, that kind of thing.'

The students also spoke about the transferability that employability skills may have:

STU-9: 'I think it's not just getting a job but also developing as a person, as well. So I think that's really important...it doesn't always mean that you will end up working for a company, you might start your own business or you might do something different.

So it's still valuable, it's still good to have those employability skills, because you will use them anywhere around the world.'

STU-3: 'So it gives me confidence that if I was ever in that situation in the future, I'm equipped with those skills. But I think it's giving me new little building blocks that I want to build on. Maybe the more basic ones from when I first started about, roughly knowing some theories and having an interest in business, see how I've built on that. I guess it kind of unlocks the answers to some questions but it gives you some more.'

Considering life beyond work:

STU-1: 'Security is another attribute of employability. Securing a place in life. A sense of safety, as well. You are confident of your skills, of your experience, I have a degree, I've recently been promoted, I've got this experience, I can do this and that, I've been on this course. You are building your confidence. The feel of safety, you'll have more chance to find a job.'

Another student cited the mental health benefits that might arise from employability outlook:

STU-13: 'Well, getting a job probably...Not to go too deep, but probably keeps you mentally a bit more stable, knowing that you got something to do every day, especially if it's work which actually makes a bit of a difference. I know when I'm working full time, the little periods out of going in between the jobs were a lot more boring than when you have a job. Yeah, when you have a job, all you want to do is moan about, about, how bored you are, so...'

VMH: Oh yes, "I don't want to go in today!"



STU-13: 'Exactly, like it's only Tuesday, God. Yeah, I think it does give you so much more of a better outlook on just...It's a weird thing you pick up as you've grown older. You actually want to work, rather than when you're younger you're avoiding anything to do it. Getting a job one thing, but if you having something to do every day it does help. The workplace around you probably affects it hugely as well, if you've got good people around you.'

#### 5.9.5 **Balance**

Balance is another theme emerging from stress or pressure that is induced by considerations of employability, which developed across these interviews. For the students, this appears to arise from a number of factors, the need to develop skills, encouragement to undertake work placements and overall trying to find balance between life, university studies and employability development.

The student below discussed her efforts to ensure she did well in assessments in order to get a good grade, wanting to balance academic and work experience achievements:

STU-5: 'So it's kind of like, I don't know...It's a lot to take in all at once. So it kind of panics you into wanting to focus that much on the university that you don't...It kind of blocks your view on doing other things, like what to do with your future.

I was so worried about university because I was one of those people where I have to put the effort in otherwise I'm not gonna get the results, it's not just natural...

I get a first and stuff like that, but it's kind of the experience side of what I'm struggling with. 'Cause I do realise how hard it actually was to get onto placements and stuff like that, and how much time and effort needs to be put into the applications.'

During the interview with STU-7, there was a real focus on life/university balance for this participant. They chose to study a subject they enjoyed, in a city they were keen on and that allowed them to develop hobbies and friendships outside the university sphere. They were clear about the importance and the need and focus upon employability, but felt their part-time job was sufficient work experience at that time:

STU-7: 'I think there's a really big focus of it in second year when people are getting placements and stuff. University is about getting good grades it's not about employability, that will come later you need to get a good grade first.

I'm working, and having a good time, I'm in a band. Getting a placement might have been an end to all of those things, it probably might not have done but I'll finish uni and then I'll find somewhere else after.

'Cause I know it's only a part-time job but I love working in the museum, I couldn't have given it up at that time.'

STU-2 highlighted the pressure to balance commitments:

STU-2: 'So, it's sort of like you just have to really think about what you want to do from a really young age, I think. It's a lot of pressure.

Obviously being at university, you've got a lot of pressure on you anyway. Then if you got a job, you've got pressure to work, to perform there as well. So I think it's a lot of pressure to deal with.'

As with the focus groups a large number of theoretical categories were generated and are illustrated in the mind-map below (Figure 5-4). The findings from the focus group and individual interview data sets were used to generate the interview questions for the employer and staff. The findings of which are detailed in the two next sections.

Figure 5-4 below illustrates the theoretical categories of the individual student interviews, developed from the CGT analysis of the data. The main branches of the mind map are the research questions and further branches are formed from the categories that related to each question. By applying the theoretical framework to the categorisations, the outcomes for the consideration of habitus, capital and field are highlighted (displayed in green boxes).

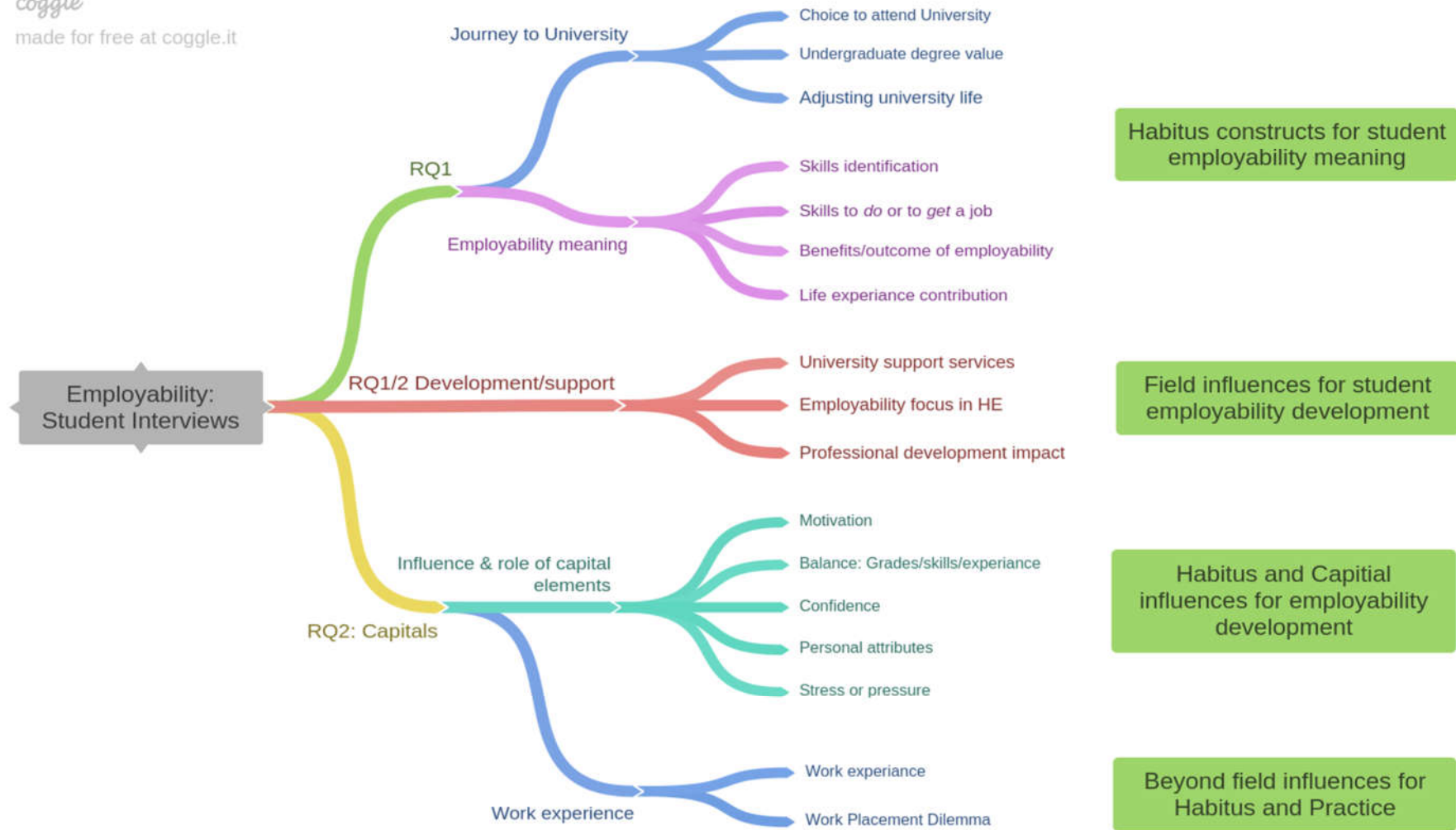


Figure 5-4 Mind map of student interview CGT analysis theoretical categorisation & theoretical framework outcomes (green boxes)

## **5.10 Employer interviews**

Six employers were interviewed from a range of different industries, from both private and public organisations (Figure 4-7). All of the data from this phase of collection was processed and analysed using the phased approaches described in the method chapter (section 4.13.5).

As detailed in the method chapter, the employer interview questions were constructed and the interviews conducted to elicit responses to the student voice. The purpose of employer interviews aimed to answer the research sub-question number 3: is there any variation in opinion regarding employability from different stakeholders?

From the overview of the student perspective, interview questions were developed into the following areas:

- What is work-readiness, are there specific expectations for (under)graduates?
- What is the purpose of HE?
- Should employability be included for undergraduates in the HE curriculum?
- What role (if any) should employers have in terms of input to HE?
- What do you consider the barriers to employability for graduates and how can undergraduates avoid them?

At various points during the interview a short summary of student views were presented to each interviewee, the above questions were then posed and the responses recorded and analysed according to the CGT method.

### **5.10.1 Development of employer interview data coding**

The results of the NVivo coding is illustrated in Figure 5-5 below. Based on the responses from employers, the initial coding highlighted some common themes:

- Work ethic
- Confidence
- Work/ life experience
- A degree proves that a person can apply themselves
- Purpose of HE is a means to get a job

- Concerns of HE marketisation impact

The employer interviews began by establishing a response to understandings of employability and being work ready, before moving on to the purpose of a degree and the role HE may have in terms of supporting employability development. This resulted from the data of a broad agreement that confidence, personality attributes, organisational fit and relationship building are important aspects for students.

As with the student interviews, skills such as communication and networking were identified, employers focused attention on the ability to use such skills to describe employability attributes. Following from the focussed analysis, student-employer engagement issues emerged from the data. All of the employer participants have some form of relationship with the University of Salford either via university campus events or as work placement providers. Employers saw these processes as important opportunities to develop employability skills and for seeking potential future employment.

Aspects of the contribution of work/life experience and extra-curricular experiences towards employability were discussed at length. Making the most of these experiences was emphasised as important by the participants, with work experience being an essential part of employability.

One question that emerged from presenting some data at the University of Salford *Work, Careers and Employability Colloquium*, had students considered employability as a form of continuous development? Students in this study did not explicitly identify this but the analysis showed this to be a feature of employability recognised by employers.

Finally, both EMP-4 and EMP-6 spoke extensively about and advocated the benefits of degree apprenticeships in terms of employability. The provision of degree apprenticeships, combining full-time paid work and part-time university is relatively new and is expected to grow (Knowles, 2017; UCAS, 2018). Such provision was only mentioned in passing by one student focus group and questions remain in the HE sector about access, retention and fees (Rowe *et al.*, 2017; Office for Students, 2018). Therefore, it was determined that this issue, although coded, is beyond the scope of this study.

Figure 5-5 list all the nodes generated from the phased coding of the employer interview data.

Name	Sources	References
Ability to describe employability attributes	4	9
Academic qualifications vs. interpersonal skills	6	13
Balance	4	8
Barriers to employability	6	21
Communication	3	4
Confidence	6	19
Continuous development	4	17
Defining employability	5	12
Degree apprenticeships	1	4
Goals or ambition	4	8
HE - Employer relationship	6	21
Inclusion of employability in HE curriculum	6	27
Labour market factors	3	7
Life - extracurricular experience contribution	4	11
Marketisation of HE	6	16
Maturity	4	12
Networking	2	7
Organisational fit	4	7
Personality attributes	5	15
Purpose of HE	5	26
Relationship building	3	6
Stress or pressure	4	7
Student- Employer Engagement	5	15
Work ethic	3	18
Work experience	6	17
Work Placements	6	27

Figure 5-5 NVivo nodes for employer interviews

## 5.11 What does employability and development mean?

An overview was provided to each employer regarding the initial analysis in terms of the student's journey to university, being that for most participants entering into HE was a normal expectation after school or college. The view was that attending university was a route to improved job opportunities. The issue of balance between academic success, developing independence and enjoyment of the student experience was something of concern to many of the students interviewed.

It was explained that the results show students consider the meaning of employability as complex or 'interwoven'. Students understood the need for a persona and an approach towards employers that will allow them to fit within an organisation, alongside having the ability to build relationships. Tied within this meaning is confidence and knowledge about their own skills in preparation for the job market by describing their mix of skills.

#### 5.11.1 **Work readiness, defining employability & organisational fit**

The initial response from many of the employers was that they agreed that confidence and the ability to build relationships is important for employability. They then went on to discuss the importance of enthusiasm or passion for roles and the company. For EMP-3, the ability to build relationships, by talking with others is dependent on an individual's upbringing and that confidence is key to this skill. EMP-1 commented:

EMP-1: 'It is a confidence thing. My interactions with university students is they tend to have their own groups and they want to be at least with one friend and they won't go anywhere else without them and you can't really do that in work. So I think that's a big step in terms of confidence and being able to be yourself. Being open as well. Um, you know, enthusiastic to, to try new things and putting yourself in those positions...'

'Um, and it is about finding your fit and finding yourself as well as that personality that's there and it is challenging going from students to employee.'

EMP-6 considered recruitment for a variety of job roles, stating that firstly a candidate should demonstrate some interest in your company. Such an approach could give an indication of a person's potential fit beyond qualifications:

EMP-6: 'You can take that person, that raw person and you can develop them into that role...It's that whole package. You come in and you say to me straight from university, I've seen this job, I've done some research, I could do this.'

EMP-1 made an interesting comment about the term employability itself and thought that continuous professional development (CPD) would have better meaning for students:

EMP-1: 'I think it would change the perception as well because it's like "I'm doing my degree, but there's this thing called employability that they've just landed on me." Whereas if CPD as part of your degree, then it's a bit more fluid and a bit more approachable than all, but "you've got to be employable", to

you've got to learn this but you've got to be employable and they don't seem to be gelling...'

'We are all students so that to me that CPD is, is a better descriptor. That can be carried on into the workplace. We don't talk about employability in the workplace because you're already in the workplace.'

The term employability was also questioned by EMP-4, considering employability to be about creating passion and people as economic drivers, rather than simple employees. The participant, a digital entrepreneur, was concerned that the current understanding does not equip the workforce for the 'modern and the future economy, whether those economies are in the digital economy or the gig economy.'

EMP-4: 'I have a real issue with that concept anyway. Yes, indeed not least because I don't think the primary goal should be to make employees, we should also be looking at making employers and entrepreneur drive the economy and it shouldn't be just about creating a good employee.

So most employers, their number one top priority is when we're recruiting is what was the thing that you are genuinely passionate about, you genuinely care about because if you're passionate about it, you're probably going to learn about it. Doesn't matter if you have not learned it yet. So that's something you're going to keep driving yourself and been taught about.'

A common theme, which came with a sense of frustration for some participants, was the ability to be able to describe skills as a key part of employability, especially in an interview situation:

EMP-6: 'Sometimes on the application forms where you think hmmm and then you think you bring them in and knowing what you're trying to encourage it. Interrogate a little bit more that they haven't got anything to back it up. So it's themselves they let down because know it's obvious that they haven't got the evidence or the knowledge to be able to.'

EMP-3 'Today it's so competitive out there. You've got to be able to differentiate yourself from someone with a degree of life, who's also got a degree, so what's going to make you different? Even just getting a part time job at 15, going to wash some pots at your local Brewers Fare or whatever. Well you started as pot washer, but ended up being a supervisor. Okay, so you can show leadership there, but they don't realize that. There are so many companies where they do both of those things but they don't even put it on their CV so they can't talk about it.'



EMP-5: 'I've interviewed a lot of the times, people undersell themselves a lot and I found that anyway. I don't think students realize that, how their work experiences kind of link to certain things, but it's that knowledge again.'

EMP-1 had made a similar comment to EMP-6, 3 and 5. She went on to conclude that taking on board feedback from the recruitment process was important:

EMP-1: 'So feedback is very important, you know, how are you performing? ... And I think sometimes employers are at fault because they don't give feedback.'

However, the view from an employer based outside the UK, EMP-2, felt the maturity and preparedness of UK students was good:

EMP-2: 'I mean I've done a lot of interviews with interns from the UK. It seems to me that they're much more mature and much more ready than a couple of interns from Denmark. They seem much more serious. STU-3 for example when he was an intern with us, I mean he came across so professionally, well rounded and knowledgeable, you know.

That's my point, someone who doesn't come to the interview with a nose ring and jeans but seems very serious and also um, fit into the workplace but also has a lot to offer. Because they've just gotten out of school and they've got some different ideas and different ways of doing things, a different way of looking at things. I think young people are very, very employable because of the freshness and the ideas that they bring in the different diversity that they bring into the organization as well.'

### 5.11.2 The purpose of Higher Education

Employers were asked for their view about the purpose of HE. It was explained that from the results students primarily saw HE as an opportunity to get a job in a professional field. Students went on to express that university can provide a place for personal growth, but are concerned that the focus upon employability may tip the balance away from this experience.

The purpose of attending HE to get a job was the view from all the employer participants. Both EMP-1 and EMP-3 commented that having a degree proves a person can apply themselves at a certain level and intellect. For EMP-4, a degree is a demonstration of learning ability:

EMP-4: 'Going and getting a degree qualifies you to continue learning in the workplace where you've shown you can learn.'

EMP-3: 'But ultimately coming to university is trying to get them set up for work from day one.'

For EMP-2, it was also a case of developing a stronger person:

EMP-2: 'I think it is preparing you as a person and also giving you kind of topping off your education so to speak and getting you ready to be a grown up I think... And that's why university should be difficult it, shouldn't be easy like it is in Denmark. It should be difficult because it's kind of like boot camp your becoming stronger because you're having to go through something that is very difficult.'

Only Emp-5 added that the purpose of HE is to help individuals pursue careers in areas that they feel a passion. This participant also felt strongly that participation in HE has a contribution to knowledge and society:

EMP-5: 'Again, the purpose of higher education *is* to increase employability, I think to be more inclusive and diverse and I think that's really important. I think higher education is going to set people up for the future as well. I think it's important because the more of a diverse country we are becoming...

It's sharing knowledge, you know what I mean? It's creating a better future for the country, for our people, just why would you not?'

### 5.11.3 Employability in the HE curriculum

All but one of the employers agreed that employability should form part of the HE curriculum. Importantly employers felt that this should focus upon the processes of recruitment, i.e. skills to *get* a job, any inputs should be practical and based on 'real world' examples. This is logical given that the results show that for employers the purpose of HE is to get a job.

Although EMP-1 prefers the term continuous professional development rather than employability, she commented that as a minimum employability should be integrated into the degree rather than separate from it:

EMP-1: 'I think there is a way that does the basics does the nuts and bolts and then it sort of up to that individual to develop themselves. It's giving them that structure to be able to do that.'

EMP-6 agreed that developing interview skills is important during HE studies but mentions the responsibility of employers to develop skills:

EMP-6: 'We expect there's very few people out there going to have this set of specialists skills. But we can see by the person that you are, you've got them. We can help develop the specialist skills and that's about knowing that no one is going to walk into a job with a 100 percent of it. So you have to go for that 80:20 to development. And if you're not developing someone then we as an employer aren't doing it right.'

Reasoning that compulsory employability inputs may distract from the main curriculum, EMP-2 thought employability should be offered as support via a careers service or as elective modules. This participant studied journalism before moving into marketing and stressed the different needs from different degree programmes and vocations. Concern was expressed that exercises such as interviews can be taken as 'very artificial' and therefore not valued by students.

EMP-2: 'I wouldn't think it would be good to replace part of the curriculum, How to get a job 101, by which I mean it should be kind of maybe more of an integral part in, you know, maybe there's a career centre or people shouldn't be forced on them. Maybe elective, something that they do in their spare time.'

#### 5.11.4 **Barriers to employability**

One of the closing questions was 'what do you consider the barriers to employability for graduates to be?' Given the challenges of employability raised by students e.g. organisational fit and competition for roles, most students mentioned the lengthy recruitment process as a challenge to gaining employment.

The suggestion that students need awareness to understand the recruitment process, requirements of the role and the employer was a key theme from the analysis. The building of confidence and experiences was an important aspect involved in this area.

EMP-5: 'I think it is a two way thing recruitment, but students need to come in prepared. I've had it so many times where they just don't know what the role is, what's your understanding of the role, lack of research, lack of understanding, lack of passions straight away.'

EMP-2: 'I do say to students, you know, you must push as much as you can to get some kind of feedback. But that's the only way you're going to learn. It's the only way you're going to build your confidence. And so it's putting yourself out there and doing it time and time again.'

The company of EMP-3 has a year round graduate recruitment cycle and has increased the number of placements and internships it offers:

EMP-3            'Work is work and you're competing against so many people now. Everyone's getting a degree. You've got to separate yourself and if you don't do it now, [engage in their own development] it could be too late once you got your degree. You'll get a job, but it won't be the job that you probably want because you've probably let yourself down.'

For this company, recruitment is competitive but he argues that successful applicants are those people that are pro-active and understand the company purpose:

EMP-3:            'It will be that the ones that want to be more proactive. It's funny though, what is stopping them actually phoning up saying, can I speak to the recruitment team please. I just want to know a bit more about your business. Can you help me?'

#### 5.11.5 **Balance**

Employers responded in an empathetic manner to the concerns of balance that students had raised. For employers they felt that it's not just a case of academic study vs. employability development but to balance between many more factors. Balance was a feature in a more complex picture of development for students. Gaining qualifications, work experience and interpersonal skills combined with other factors can cause stress or pressure. Some stress was seen as positive in terms of driving and learning development forward.

Importantly, part of the bigger picture for longer-term ideas of continuous development illustrates the different language that could be applied to the understanding of developing employability skills. Employers saw employability development resulting from becoming independent and cultivating personal attributes and attitudes seen as fit for the work place.

Finally, overall there is not a significant amount of variation in opinions in responses in comparison to student views of employability. However, across the interviews there is a sense of frustration when students/candidates are not pro-active in taking development opportunities, lack work ethic or at the very least be prepared to demonstrate work readiness.

## 5.12 What is the role and influence of capitals?

In the same manner as the student data collection processes, capitals were not specifically identified as a concept by the employer participants. Employers were asked to respond to the findings of student opinions resulting from the initial analysis.

Students understood the need for personal attributes and confidence for employability. They identified with the need to build relationships, but found networking difficult. In this area, it seemed there are emotional aspects of capitals for developing employability and in some cases results show stress or pressure for the student.

Following from these results, employer interview questions were designed to explore these findings and were analysed with respect to functions of capitals. From the analysis, a series of nodes developed from the various elements of behaviour and employability developments associated with capitals.

### 5.12.1 Student-Employer engagement

From the analysis, results seem to converge upon issues that link to social and psychological capital. The student-employer engagement coding emerged from the experiences of employer contact with students at career type events. Analysis shows employers think that students should improve their engagement, an attribute that requires confidence.

In terms of confidence and personality:

EMP-1: 'I will go and stand in front of a cohort of 100 students' maybe and talk to them. Some will never look at me. They will be on their laptop or their phone. Some of them struggled to stay awake. Definitely there'll be, if I'm lucky maybe half a dozen who were taking it all in, being first to ask questions and you just know I haven't got a clue what their grades are. You just know that they are going to do well no matter what they do. They've got it. And it's hard to quantify.'

'So it's enthusiasm, wanting to learn, just being alive and open to stuff. Whereas the ones who are struggling to stay awake, you just think, crikey, yeah, it might have been a late night the night before, but if it's not stimulating, why are they there?'

In terms of building evidence of skills to *do* a job:

EMP-5: 'I think if they're not looking to do a work placement or they're not successful, then try something else. What else is out there? Is there voluntary work you'd rather do if you don't want to take a year out of uni? What about from the May to September where you're not at uni? What have you got planned for then? It's a big massive gap. So much you can do in 4 months...

So what you're doing then, are you opening yourself up to opportunities, are you putting yourself out there to employers?'

### 5.12.2 Maturity

It was explained during the interviews that students felt that attending university was also a process of becoming independent that contributed to the development of skills and attributes. From the responses, employers accepted this perspective and they added the point of maturity developing from becoming independent. Maturity is important in contributing to the development of behaviours expected in the working environment.

EMP-5: 'I think university really does help in that sense because I think it gets you ready for the workplace through different means, but more if people are leaving home and going to uni. It helps them become a bit more independent.'

EMP-1 was glad to hear students taking development seriously stating a lack of maturity would be the 'biggest barrier' to function in a work environment:

EMP-1: 'Of course they're going to come across young, because they are and that a good thing, that a wonderful thing, but at the same time they shouldn't be immature. And so I think that having the confidence that it is incredibly important for them to be able to talk about why they would be able to participate and contribute in the job. That maturity and coming across as taking it very seriously and not, you know, sitting on your phone looking at Facebook while you're waiting in the reception area for a job interview.'

Some concern was expressed that perhaps students are not benefiting from the full experience of moving away from home to attend university (due to widening participation and needing to save money due to the student loan system), for example:

EMP-3: 'I'm sure less people are moving away and then more people go to university closer to home, to me is a bad thing because that person's being stopped

from experiencing life and maturing because you have to mature at uni, you know. Um, it's got to be an actual skill to look after yourself.'

### 5.12.3 Stress and pressure

There seemed to be some sympathy with the notion that needing to develop employability and managing your studies caused some stress or pressure for students. However, there was a general agreement that some form of stress or pressure was a positive point. Employers felt university is meant to be challenging where learning and development of skills will result. Employers also stated that getting involved with activities beyond their studies might add additional stress but it is vital in terms of developing employability:

EMP-1: 'That's what will stand out. What else have they done? It might be hard and yes, there might be a lot more pressure, but again, the ones who can stand that pressure, the ones who are going to do well and they're the ones that the employers want to talk to. So it's pushing yourself, isn't it? And they understand that the degree is very important. I'm not belittling that. It is first and foremost. But there's more to that three year or four year experience maybe than they first realized.'

EMP-1: 'So I think, you know, stress and you know, having to juggle a lot of tasks and classes all at once and I think that that actually makes you a stronger person on the other side. I mean, of course it is not pleasant as you go through it, but I think it should be kind of kind of difficult.'

EMP-3: 'Well, to me personally there's experience, exposure to differentiate, themselves. So, what they've done during their life so far and how can they link that back to competencies, like leadership, communication, um, those types of things. Confidence is a big thing. Um, it comes from you being pushed out of your comfort zone and not being allowed to give up.'

## 5.13 Is there variation in opinion with employers regarding employability?

This research question arose not only from the complexity of employability but also from the argument that there are misunderstandings regarding how employability is defined, but also what constitutes the dimensions of employability from across various stakeholder views (Tyman, 2013; Sin and Neave, 2016).

Analysis of the data shows complexity in terms of the factors that contribute to and affect employability development. Students and employers agree upon several factors including the purpose of HE and including employability in the curriculum.

However, the question of variation aimed to identify key points of difference of opinion, from the data this appeared in the form of work ethic, the need for some form of work experience and the relationship between HE and employers. One significant idea discussed was continuous development, that developing employability does not just stop with obtaining a degree and a first graduate job, but is a career or even life-long process.

The key driver behind much of the difference in opinion is being able to balance many different factors that participants considered as part of the fabric of employability.

#### 5.13.1 **Work ethic**

When responding to the student opinions, the employers interviewed suggested that having and demonstrating work ethic is an important aspect of employability. Work ethic was discussed in terms of wanting to work, working hard and maintaining positive engagement with a company. Employers acknowledged that it can be difficult to demonstrate this aspect fresh from university, however some form of prior work experience in combination with good degree grades seems to be key to demonstrating work ethic in employability terms. Work ethic was not something specifically that students mentioned, although it was found that the purpose to have a degree was to get a job. As detailed, personal attributes and confidence appears to be more important in terms of employability for students.

All the participants quoted here had spoken about their own work experiences as students, prior to university, as a way of building demonstrable work ethic. EMP-2 stated that having good grades *and* some form of work experience (i.e. 'you've not just been sitting in a classroom') reflects the type of person they are:

EMP-2: 'Job experience...It doesn't necessarily have to be within the same area that their studies were, but I think that shows to me that they are hard workers and they, that they have a work ethic.'

EMP-3 considered work ethic as very important for working in his organisation and so asks candidates at interview, 'how do you support yourself at university?' from which he is looking for some demonstration of work ethic:

EMP-3: 'It's interesting when you talk about work ready and what that means. Of course everyone's going to be different. And probably the generations are



probably changing...I can't stress how important that is to show the work ethic that they want to get out of bed.'

'When someone tells me I don't have time to do a job as well as doing uni in the back of my mind that worries me because have they got the work ethic and are they going to be able to work hard in a work environment? They've got to somehow explain or come back to me with a pretty good answer and why that isn't the case because I know for a fact you've definitely got time at university to have some sort of work that's going to help you become work ready'

For EMP-4 the type of people he wants to employ are individuals that are driven but also 'have a good work ethic, first and foremost and are passionate about something'.

### **5.13.2 Work placements and work experience**

There was no doubting from the results that some form of work experience, even from part-time jobs prior to university and/or during university, was an essential aspect of developing employability. To those students that wanted to wait until graduation to think about work experience or were concerned about the competitive process of applying for work placements, employers were clear, appropriate work exposure will stand out from other graduates. Appropriate work experience provides evidence of work ethic in their opinion.

All employers agreed on this point, furthermore they were all advocates of work placements or internships as part of university courses. They dismissed concerns of time, making/losing contact with friends and competition over the future benefits of undertaking work experience:

EMP-1: 'Actually the students that go on placement when they go back in their final year, the penny has dropped, they know exactly what they need to do and they are a dream for the tutors to teach.'

EMP-2: 'I think doing an internship is very important because you need to make sure it's what you want to do, especially if what if you've taken a degree and then you find that you hate marketing, that would suck and what a waste of money!... It could be a horrible experience but still you get to see if you're good at it and the interest in it or the passion for it.'

EMP-4: 'One of the things that we do here is certainly when we take on industrial placements, we did a lot to try to demystify what they think the world of work is like and what the world is like for employers and try to bring those two into some kind of harmony.'

EMP-5 was clearly an advocate of work experience, having completed a work placement during her degree, she is working within her chosen field of recruitment. Interestingly she felt the competitive aspect of applying for a placement to be a motivator for those gaining a placement. EMP-5 felt the competitive process illustrates the extent of the talent pool within the undergraduate population:

EMP-5: 'I think me doing a placement, it's the best decision I've made. It helped me so much in my final year helps me now when I'm on campus in the role that I do now. And it helped me bring a lot of theories to life. So doing placement year that make use of that will make you stand out from other students as well.

I think it's amazing that placements are competitive maybe I'm just on the other side, but I think it's so good...I love the fact that it's competitive. Um, so I think students who then secure placements, I think that's a motivating factor for them to say that look how competitive it was and look how I got it. Those that don't and I think it's really important for them to then ask for feedback from employers and say why.'

One of the concerns of students, taking time out particularly a whole year out from your degree, employers did concede that work placements could have some flexibility. For example, EMP- 3, 5, 6 and EMP-1 agreed that flexibility in timescales, not just 12 months but also other shorter internships, across the summer for example could be beneficial.

EMP-3 has described the introduction of 3-month internships with their company as highly successful:

EMP-3: 'I absolutely love placements. And if I was at university, um, I would encourage everybody to do a placement because it adds on the CV and they can get what they want out of that. This is another opportunity for them to have a fulltime job at the end of it. If they play their cards right, if they build the right relationships. So again talking about being work ready, we're making them work ready in our business. It's up to them whether they stay on...'

### 5.13.3 HE-Employer relationship

Relationships between universities and employers have long been established in various forms particularly with traditional careers fairs and events for graduate recruitment. The findings show students feel the purpose of undertaking HE was to

get a job and employers agree with this general outcome. Given this result, since they will be responsible for providing the jobs, should employers have any input to HE? The response to this question saw the greatest variation in opinion.

Both EMP-3 and EMP-5 operate an ongoing recruitment process through established university relationships for both work placements, internships, graduate recruitment and even a newly established scheme of student company ambassadors. These employers also work with a variety of universities to provide employability support:

EMP-3: 'We do so much stuff at universities, we do careers fairs we do this, we do that. We do talks on this. We do talks on that. That's a lot more beneficial because our time's precious and it's costly, but as long as we're giving something back and we know it's worthwhile.'

EMP-5: 'That we get involved in with Unis, not just in terms of marketing, it is for the future of your own company business, you know, these graduates will eventually go on to work for your organization.'

For EMP-2, although her company employed work placement and intern students, she did not feel that employers should be involved largely with HE, accepting that HE provides a quality education:

EMP-2: 'No. Because every employer is so different and has different needs. I think the education should be based on what the university thinks and not what employers would think. I would hate that because you would hear so many conflicting things, like we're very international and very scientific focused and it would just be impossible to listen to that. You'd get so many different opinions on what makes someone employable.'

#### 5.13.4 Continuous Development

The principle of continuous development was a theme that was discussed by all the employers interviewed. It underpinned the responses to the meaning of employability and feeling about development. A brief mention by students of continuous development occurred in the focus groups (Figure 5-1). This was mainly as a recognition of the notion of future career development in terms of skills, for FG1-5, 'there is always room for improvement', and for FG1-1, commented 'it [development] doesn't stop'. Continuous development did not feature specifically within the individual student interviews.

CPD was particularly important for EMP-1 (as a representative of a professional body), as this is an aspect fundamental to the purpose of most professional bodies. As highlighted in section 5.11.1 for employers the principle of continuous development had consequences for the definition for employability. EMP-1 felt CPD was a better process to aid student's development:

EMP-1: 'I mean I totally get why they use that term [employability] and totally get why it is becoming very 'en vogue' and I think that's why I jumped on the term CPD at the beginning because to me it was music to my ears because the sooner they get on that, the better.'

'And then it was quite interested in you saying about a lot of the words that they were using in terms of what does employability mean, it was all about their personal attributes. So to my mind, maybe CPD is a better term because it is continuing that journey from student to professional.'

VMH: It's that journey, isn't it? It is interesting what you're saying in terms of moving from being a student to a professional?

EMP-1: 'Then we're on the process. You've given them the right habits that hopefully, you know, they'll cultivate them and continue. Its balance, the balance that changes, that shifts.'

EMP-4 took the perspective that continuous development and learning is key to being employable in a changing workplace and economy. Following from his comments on future skills requirements (section 5.11.1), he believed:

EMP-4: 'What we do know is all the research has shown there's no such thing as a job for life anymore and so we have to depend on people for constant change. It's probably the most important skill. A lifelong learning. So the concept that you go to university to learn what you need to know is fundamentally foolish in the modern economy, doesn't work like that.'

EMP-6 had the expectation that training and development is continuous from the outset of employment. Her view was that development during work builds upon the basic skills gained whilst at university.

Figure 5-6 below illustrates the theoretical categories of the employer interviews, developed from the CGT analysis of the data. The main branches of the mind map are the research questions and further branches are formed from the categories that related to each question, which include variation in opinion. By applying the theoretical framework to the categorisations, the outcomes for the consideration of habitus, capital and field are highlighted (displayed in green boxes).

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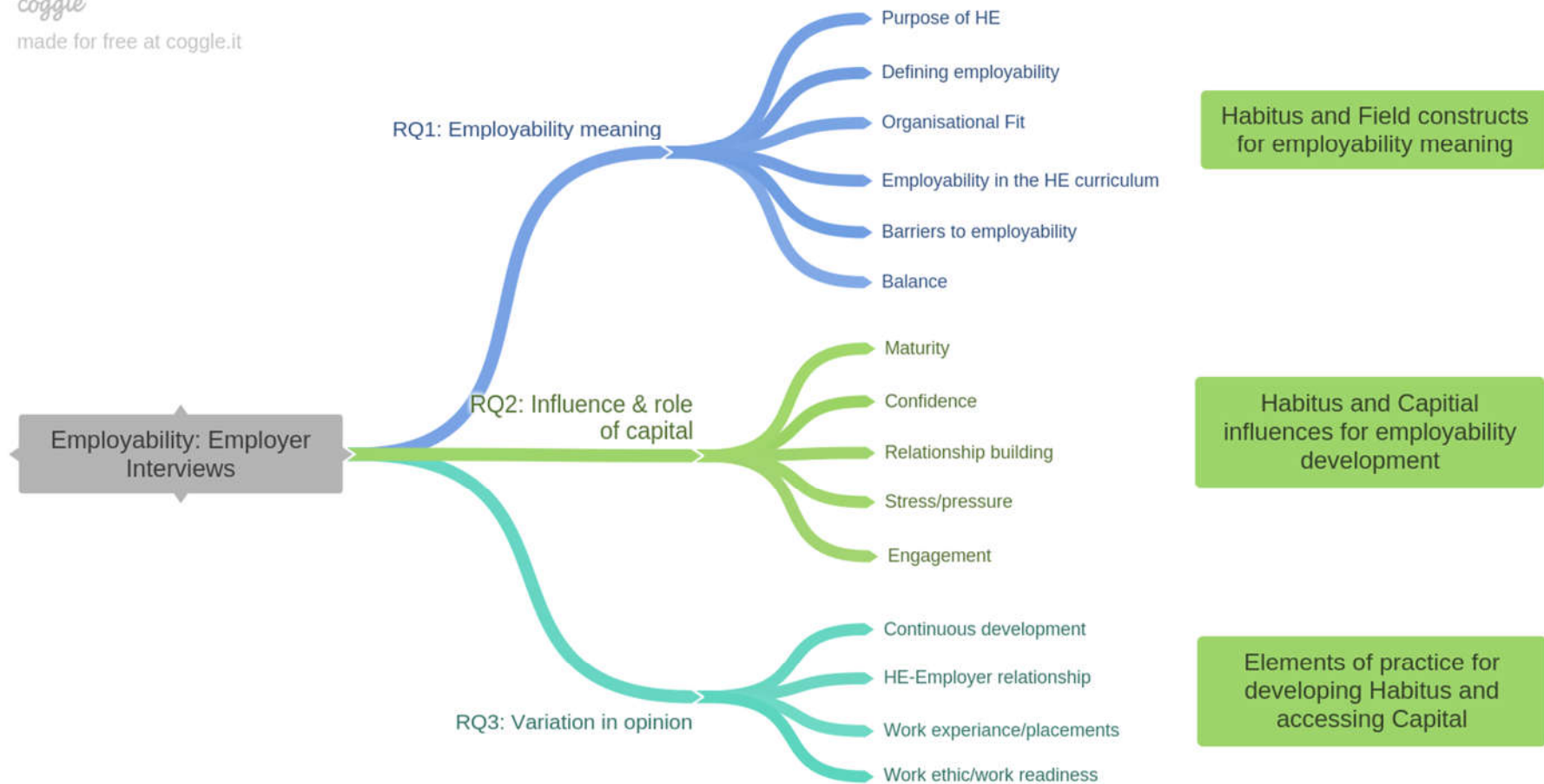


Figure 5-6 Mind map of employer interview CGT analysis theoretical categorisation & theoretical framework outcomes (green boxes)

## **5.14 Staff interviews**

Four members of staff were interviewed (Figure 4-8) and as with all the other data collected, each event was coded and analysed as detailed in section 4.13. The staff members interviewed had been actively involved in teaching and supporting the professional development module as part of their lectureship roles (section 4.11.1).

It was determined that in order to maintain the principle of listening to the student voice, for consistency the same set of questions and approach was applied as in the employer interviews. This is detailed in section 5.10.

### **5.14.1 Development of staff interview data coding**

A key focus of the interviews was the context of the HE *field* in which students develop employability; this arose from the central questions linked to the meaning of employability. The data reflected the current HE environment, the function of teaching employability and support which is now a feature of all degree programmes within Salford Business School. The resultant discussions were in the light of widening participation, increased student numbers and the student loans system (as highlighted in the literature review, chapter 2) for which all staff were acutely aware. During the analysis, nodes for teaching of employability, support for widening participation and marketisation of HE were created.

The nodes for teaching employability required some careful consideration, as within the discussions were questions about inclusion in the curriculum (of which all staff agreed). In addition, issues were raised about student engagement and ensuring that teaching has an applied practical element. Rather than adding complexity when coding, given the general agreement from students that employability should be included in the curriculum a single node, teaching of employability, was created.

In responding to student views regarding employability development, teaching and support, discussions developed around the recognition of various skills that could be classed as employability. This was coded as self-awareness/assessment, as in the ability to recognise and describe skills that would appeal to employers as relevant for employability.

In common with both the student and employer interviews, capital elements

emerged from the data. This includes confidence and personality attributes for which the same coding criteria was applied.

From a review from the initial coding phase some common responses from staff developed from the data:

- Self-confidence, being pro-active
- Student ability to recognise and describe skills
- Changes in HE and labour markets are significant and competitive
- Consideration of professionalism
- Teaching of employability
- Balance between university, work experience and extracurricular activities
- Engagement with employers to create opportunities for work experience is difficult but important.

Following the completed analysis the table below details the final coding results for the staff interviews:

Name	Sources	References
Academic qualifications vs. interpersonal skills	3	8
Balance	3	3
Barriers to employability	4	8
Communication	2	3
Confidence	3	8
Continuous development	4	10
Defining employability	4	12
Feedback	1	1
HE - employer relationship	4	13
HE employability support	2	3
Marketisation of HE	2	6
Maturity	1	2
Personal attributes	3	8
Professional conduct	3	12
Purpose of a degree	4	10
Purpose of HE	4	15
Self-awareness or assessment	2	6
Support for widening participation	3	7
Teaching of employability	4	24
Work experience	2	5
Work Placements	3	7

Figure 5-7 NVivo nodes for staff interviews

## **5.15 What does employability and development mean?**

In response to student views as to the meaning of employability, the analysis of the staff interviews drew upon a theme of the skills of self-assessment and abilities to describe appropriate skills. Staff understood the student view that the purpose of HE is for getting a job, but in the main staff felt there is a wider purpose for HE in terms of individual development and a contribution to society. These findings are evaluated through 3 of the nodes employability self-awareness, the purpose of HE and the teaching of employability.

### **5.15.1 Employability and self-awareness**

Following from this final set of interviews, the conclusion that employability is complex remains undisputed. For staff (as with employers) it was acknowledged that the meaning of employability goes beyond listing skills such as teamwork and communication. In response to the student views all staff participants stated the importance of the ability of employability for self-assessment, describe skills and in doing so recognise their own development needs.

Staff-1: 'What it means? I would say initially a very basic point, it's having self-confidence.'

Staff-3: 'Work ready covers a number of issues as far as I'm concerned. Firstly, it's about the skills that the individual has and the individual actually recognizing that they probably gain those skills in a number of locations and circumstances...

And be honest in their assessment of where they are and then being clear in their own mind what they need to do to get to where they need to be.'

Participant Staff-4, prior to teaching at the University of Salford, had 40 years experience as an HR manager and responded to student views and the teaching experience as follows:

Staff-4: 'I think they are sort of a funny mixture in sometimes they're quite naive and another time they come across as being full of themselves, very confident. There is this peculiar mix of them.'

In terms of organisational fit, her impression of some students is one of naivety or immaturity towards the real world (which was also a concern for employers):



Staff-4: 'So I thought they find it quite hard sometimes to get that. I think some of them thought that could just wing it on the basis of personality, it's all going to drop into their laps.'

In terms of describing and relating skills to apply in different scenarios:

Staff-2: 'So I would say that a student who is involved, engaged, and, um, you know, focused, disciplined, all of these things is, a student who would most definitely make a good employee.'

'Students need to know their own ability. You know, I hate the word selling yourself, so don't want to say that. But really just knowing yourself, not selling yourself, but knowing yourself... it's not so much about gaining skills as much as it's about understanding your innate skills'

Staff agreed with all other participant groups; balance is of particular importance in developing employability. Students needed to balance academic work, part-time paid work and developing employability, but this should also be combined with some form of extra-curricular activities allowing students to gain access to the full student experience. Overall, the data sets suggest that balance is between activities that potentially contribute to employability development.

Staff-4: 'You need that balance between yes you need reasonable grades, but yes you need to demonstrate that you've done other things.'

### 5.15.2 The purpose of Higher Education

Staff understood the thinking that the purpose of HE and obtaining a degree was to get a job, which was expressed by both students and employers (with education having a social purpose for EMP-5). Analysis found that staff agree *one* function of HE is to get a job *but* overall the thinking is that it has wider purposes. There were concerns raised that the marketisation of HE was driving the views that a degree is only a path to jobs. All staff participants made similar comments, that university is an opportunity to get involved in other things beyond their studies before life commitments become a priority.

Staff-1: 'Until you've got the experience [and built up confidence], it's difficult and I think the university's job to a certain level is to give as much of that experience as they can.'

'It is a big one [the purpose of HE]. I mean I think it's a kind of multi-layered thing. I think one thing that we're doing now is, were discriminating against

certain groups. That's become more and more evident, even though no politician would ever tell you that that's true, but sort of adopting that kind of American model of charging the large fees.'

'I think now with the people believing that a degree is a natural progression, route through and the entry tariffs are a lot lower to get in. I think you hit a lot of challenges for a lot of students who think it's gonna be easy.'

Staff-3 felt strongly that HE has a wider purpose, including building confidence if students are to be 'meaningful citizens' and 'create a worthwhile career for themselves.'

Staff-3: 'The degree is, is only an indication of attainment... it has to be for the well-being and the development of the economy, and society that we have an educated, skilled workforce its purpose to take us into the next millennium, that level absolutely and push back the boundaries of knowledge and be creative and innovative.'

Staff-4: 'There is an element of getting a qualification, learning some new stuff, more about developing your ability to problem solve or whatever else. So think it's a lot. For them it's about the opportunity to develop themselves.'

'The student loan, probably going to work into your eighties, so better make sure that you do things you wanted to. You could be doing it for a long time.'

The conversation on this topic with Staff-4 also covered careers support and considerations of the journey to university, where she commented:

Staff-4: 'So I think it is really helpful and I actually think you should be doing more of this [careers support] before they come to university because that's the point where they also ought to think about going back to your other question is, do I really need to go to university? What do I want to do? And is going to university going to help me or is just going to get me a big loan.'

Although students had discussed aspects of becoming independent by attending university, Staff-2 wanted students to embrace life and the full student experience:

Staff-2: 'You know, university is your time to shine and to do everything that you want to do because you know, bills and mortgages and all the rest of your life's burden, not burden, but the responsibility that you have.'

'If you like basketball and you like swimming and you like cricket and you like dancing and you can't decide what to do, do them all, you know? If you, want a part time job and you also want to arrange a rock concert, do them both. It will give you a clearer sense of who you are and it will broaden your

horizons massively and you will know what your strengths and weaknesses are only by trying out these different things.'

### 5.15.3 Teaching of employability

Teaching of the professional development module at Salford Business School was a theme of the discussions relating to employability in the HE curricula. Overall, it was agreed between staff and students that employability should be taught as part of the curriculum. As stated, the professional development module covered the development of skills to *get* a job but staff were under no illusion that it may not be possible to teach some of the skills required to *do* a job.

When asked whether employability should form part of the taught HE curriculum, staff reflected upon their experiences of working with the students and the feedback from them. Staff thought, in order for students to understand employability, they should make efforts to engage in as many development opportunities as possible. This, they conclude is to develop as wide a range of skills based upon practical experiences (e.g. 'real world experience', Staff-1), building upon the taught elements from not just employability curricula but across their degrees.

Staff-2 felt 'employability' to be a very complex, broad term and reflected upon her experience of student engagement, alongside the employability messages of HE:

Staff-2: 'There are two types of students, ones that are sceptics and ones that are enthusiasts. So, the sceptics which did exist in my PD groups, say, what's the point of this? I want to be doing a module learning about say law if they are a law student. I don't want to be doing this. Then the enthusiasts are. 'Oh my God, this is so good! What do I do to ace this module?' Because I can ace this module and it would bump up my mark overall. And it's an easy pass.'

'What we have to think about as higher education what is our message on employability? And that I think is very complex, intricate and not a black or white system that can be taught because what you don't want to do is to give off the wrong message.'

In terms of the content of the curriculum for employability:

Staff-3: 'We need to constantly evaluating our program and its relevance, its content and we need to engage with our industrial partners to make sure we are continually on point. We cannot be complacent because you know, we won an award in 2017. What will hold good into 2027?'

## 5.16 What is the role and influence of capitals?

In maintaining consistency across the data collection process, capitals were not specifically identified as a concept in the staff interviews. As with the employer interviews, staff were provided with an overview of the student views that have links to aspects of capitals determined from the analysis. This included student views for personal attributes, confidence and the difficult skills of relationship building and networking.

### 5.16.1 Confidence

The analysis shows all participant groups, in fact virtually all participants described (or agreed with the point) that building confidence is essential to developing employability skills of many types. For staff, confidence relates to the point made earlier, of recognising skills and undertaking self-assessment to build confidence:

Staff-4: 'Kids here tend to be self-supporting and lots of them work hard they seem to do a full time job and a full time university course. You've got to say there's a lot of experience there, but they underestimate themselves. I think that goes back to your confidence thing. It's just been able to articulate that in a way that's meaningful.'

It was recognised that confidence is something that is built over time. Staff-1 thought self-confidence is key and students need to be prepared to move out of their 'comfort zone', particularly in undertaking optional work placements.

Staff-1: 'I would say initially a very basic point, it's having self-confidence. Then you do tend to see that the characters that take it up have a reasonably good level of confidence and equally those that engage in exchange activities are very similar types of character that they've already come with a certain degree of confidence. They're not fully confident, but they are at least confident enough to take on the challenge.'

Staff-2: 'We need to be very clear about what our message is and that should be that you need to concentrate on the person you are becoming as well as your degree, but not details of how and where. Because I do think that life needs to teach them that they should be equipped for it, but they will learn.'

We just have to give a message that is you be your best self and you learn how to highlight your skills. Why should I hire you over the other people? Even if you're not confident, what do you have that they don't?'

### 5.16.2 Work experience

Staff were asked to respond to student views upon the types of work experience (professional and non-professional) and how this could be relevant in terms of employability skill development. Staff responded to comments upon the reality of the contribution of part time, non-professional work for employability.

For staff the differences in these two sets of experiences draws upon a number of issues. Staff considered the recognition of relevant skills from the various experiences, and the link to the meaning of employability (in section 5.15), but staff also discussed the drivers and importance of gaining tangible and transferable occupationally relevant work placements. Staff consider work placements to be the best opportunity to realise human capital and harness the knowledge from their degree learning to develop applied employability skills (Tomlinson, 2017a).

Staff-1 and Staff-3 were concerned about misconception of transferable skills from part-time work. For example, there will be a lack of managerial and responsibility experience that is needed in the ‘real world’:

Staff-1: ‘Some students still believe that working, and no disrespect to certain companies, behind a McDonald's counter, for example, is work experience. It's a transactional functional structure around a McDonald's job. They think, "That's what they're doing and I am working, therefore I'm equipped for the workplace", but that doesn't really fit.’

Staff-4: ‘I think it goes back to what I first said they are quite naive in a sense of not really understanding that step into the real world. Although they have quite a lot of work experience working part time jobs and setting up their own little businesses. But I sometimes think that has given an unrealistic expectation of what it's like to get into a career role.’

Comments from Staff-3 highlight one of the main themes regarding the balance of recognising skills *and* being able to describe them in an appropriate employability context:

Staff-3: ‘It's getting the students to recognize that in the various facets of their life, whether it's social, whether it's an employment that they are actually gaining skills and developing relationships, the working in teams in a number of context. All skills which are transferable in the workplace...’

Within Salford Business School all students have the option to undertake work placements. Students are responsible for obtaining the placement for themselves

and support is provided in the form of a dedicated business school employability hub (in addition to the campus wide careers service). All staff agreed that this is something that more students should undertake, despite the concerns expressed by students regarding time and effort required.

Staff-1 had responsibility for international student recruitment and also managing student exchange programmes, for example the Erasmus European exchange programme (Erasmus, n.d.), as well as supervising work placement students. He commented on the importance of these programmes particularly where skills should be embedded within the HE curriculum but are not. Staff-1 added that the programs bring beneficial life experiences when leaving the ‘bubble of university’ and ‘facing a difficult big world challenge’ and it is something most students enjoy:

Staff-1: ‘To give you a few examples, working with overseas partners certainly within countries like Finland, they have to do a work placement, there's no option. They also have to do international experience, so they have to travel overseas. It's not on every course, but a lot of the business related programs. That isn't just Finland. That's across quite a lot of European universities.’

VMH: So that provides them with a whole raft of potential development doesn't it?

Staff-1: ‘Oh, it's immense. Take any exchange student and that are completely different person when they come back. Their outlook is different, their level of professionalism is different. Their enjoyment is different. Sometimes it's difficult to rein them back into UK education life because they've got this new outlook on the world and they want to get back into it as fast as they can.’

### **5.17 Is there variation in opinion with staff regarding employability?**

The final element of the analysis examines the possible variation in opinion that may have arisen from the discussions in response to the student voice. As stated this is based upon the premise that employability and the discourse that surrounds it is complex depending on the interpretation by different stakeholders (Tyman, 2013; Sin and Neave, 2016).

There is agreement or even empathy with the views of students around the challenges that developing and describing employability requires. Both staff and employers consider some stress or pressure in facing challenges to be key to development. The knowledge required to demonstrate one's own employability

skills can be difficult to construct. The stress or pressure of realising and describing employability by students has been described as an important aspect of the student's learning process, encountering troublesome knowledge, in constructing their own employability through threshold concepts (Procter and Harvey, 2018).

Staff do feel that employers should engage further with HE to provide adequate opportunities for work placements, since work experience is considered to be so important to employer stakeholder groups.

Staff were in agreement with employers that recognition of the importance of employability as a process of continuous development could alleviate some of the stress from the student's experience. As discussed in section 5.13.4, continuous development was not a key area of employability considerations for students.

The main difference of opinion between the participant groups seems to be between the language terms used, i.e. personal attributes (for students), work ethic (for employers) and professionalism (for staff). These points are analysed in the sections below.

#### **5.17.1 Professional conduct**

One of the themes seen in the student data sets that refers to the meaning of employability, concerns certain behaviours expected in the workplace. For students this related to aspects of personality and organisational 'fit' and skills such as building relationships. Both staff and employers agreed with the necessity of such behaviours. The analysis shows that staff felt it was important to highlight acceptable behaviours that are normal expectations of the workplace, i.e. turning up on time, active engagement in the work and workplace, abiding by dress codes and managing workloads.

Staff-3 suggested being work ready included a recognition of skills gained from the many situations and facets of life and by understanding how they are transferable. Staff-2 comments that positive personality aspects are required to get a job but also to keep and do a job. Moreover, Staff-2 felt it was important to 'be liked' (be personable) to sustain a job.

Staff-2: 'So I would hope that my students would get more work ready by being a more holistic individual rather than a star student who has no social skills and couldn't hold the conversation with the next person...'

'You know, the quote that stays with me is that if you want an amazing career, you can't have a minimum job work ethic.'

Staff-4 explained her view of professional conduct by considering the idea of conformity, adding there is likely to be a core set of attributes for every workplace, certain things you have to do, such as turn up on time and work in a team:

Staff-4: 'Unfortunately, the majority of industry sectors I've worked in there's a degree of conformity, meaning conforming to being an accountant type which is different to being in the university. Sometimes they [students] do not appreciate that, although university's all about developing yourself and becoming an individual, at some point you may have to compromise that.'

Staff-1 points out with respect to the role and organisational culture there is a 'cultural shift with students' from HE into the workplace. Staff-1 added that 'we can't teach them what it is like to get out of bed at 6am' and other realities of working life.

#### **5.17.2 Barriers to employability**

Across the data collection, staff were the only participant group to mention social background and ethnicity as barriers to employability. The only exception was a single mention of ethnicity from STU-6. Staff felt that there is potential for social barriers to be overcome by the efforts of the students, willingness to engage in self-assessment (as in section 5.15.1) to make the most of the support they receive:

Staff-2: 'Honestly I think that the only barrier is yourself. I think that if a student is facing barriers in meeting those things, I'm not taking away from the other barriers like gender inequality, race, class. Working Class, you know, generational family, all of those factors can be barriers for people, right? Finance, self-confidence, etc. All that put to aside, I think the only barrier is the will and I think that if there is a student who, despite having these barriers, has the belief...The dream to do something, to be something, if they have that, I think that the surface level barriers can be overcome.'

Staff-3: 'Barriers? I suppose part of it is social background of the individual. Middle class kids will do better, because of social interaction. The parents would have had a different experience and inculcated that social confidence.'

Students expressed that the lengthy recruitment process was a barrier to employability. The structure of the professional development module is designed to allow students to become familiar with the multiple approaches to selection and recruitment, whilst considering their employability self-assessment. Staff-1 wondered if there is another cause to this thinking, for some students:



Staff-1: 'You are going to be an assistant something and you're going to have to go to work and you're going to have to do a boring, mundane day to day activities at the same time every day for a while. That might go on for several years before you move on. So I think that kind of idea for this instant gratification society that we've got now is a big barrier to accepting what employment is going to be. No, they don't want to think that they have to pass assessment centres. They don't want to think that they have to do presentations. They don't want to do interviews, they don't want to do psychometric tests. They don't. They don't want that experience.'

'We should be a little bit more honest in what life is going to be like. You know, it's, very, very difficult to get that point across that this is what you're more than likely end up doing for quite a bit of time.'

Students did not specifically mention identifying with the label of widening participation, however in their discussions regarding the journey to university, it was clear that many of the participants are the first in their family to enter HE. On this basis social capital issues are of consideration (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2017).

Staff-3 commented upon the influences that might affect the decision to attend university:

Staff-3: 'So it very much depends on the individual, where they are themselves and the support networks and social environment from which they come with so many other variables that influence them...We need to take account of the influence of the family. The student groups now, certainly from my experience of teaching are so much more diverse than they ever were. So if I, had difficulties understanding where I wanted to go from my white middle class background, heavens above what it's like from a young Muslim from Bolton.'

Staff-4 made a connection to the importance of students recognising their skills and being able to articulate them well:

Staff-4: 'They get very concerned about the fact they don't think they've got any experience worth talking about. And again, it's back down to saying to them all experiences worth something...I think that goes back to their confidence thing.'

### 5.17.3 HE-Employer relationship

Students expressed that they would like employers to provide more opportunities from employers for work placements (as detailed in section 5.5.3 and 5.8.3). Although all of the employers interviewed were supporters of work placements, this

is only a small sample. Staff agreed with the students view; this is where employers could have an input in supporting HE in developing employability:

Staff-2: 'Employers most definitely should take that upon themselves as well to do their bit...I think that the best way that employers can do that is by opening up as many voluntary places within their organizations as possible.'

Staff-3: 'Absolutely [in agreement to more work experience opportunities] and internships, it is a two way process, it's about the university extending and developing the relationships with employers, the confidence in knowledge transfer partnerships something that the University of Salford have engaged in productively. And that builds the relationships.'

Staff-1: 'It can be done. It is resource heavy and I think you can teach employability skills, but you can't do it in isolation. You need to meet with industry without a shadow of a doubt, you need to engender this idea of being a professional.'

#### **5.17.4 Professionalism/Continuous Development**

Continuous development was not a theme that resulted from the student opinions (explained in section 5.13.4). All staff participants considered the topic to be of importance for employability development. An overall point made was students must understand that even in graduate roles, employees have to 'start from the bottom' and 'work their way up the ladder' (Staff-1).

To develop employability, staff-4 suggested, there are the 'tools and techniques to be able to get a job', but also the 'personal development side of it, what are you doing personally...that in itself has a knock-on effect, on your ability to be employable'.

Furthermore:

Staff-4: 'But it's difficult to come up with a word that would describe that, so professional development as far as any though is what we use, but personal development it is a bit too touchy feely for me I don't like that term.'

Staff-1 also spoke about the idea of employability as a 'toolkit', going on to mention the importance of confidence building:

Staff-1: 'What they do at university is build up a tool kit that they carry around with them for the rest of their life...so you need to be able to pick up those skills as best as you can in different ways. These are all things that you build up through life. It doesn't end with university.'

'Confidence thing is one of the big things for them. That is very much a personal development thing. But I think put it on the umbrella of professional

development in a sense is a good idea because it makes it sound quite concrete and nothing too airy-fairy.'

Finally, the comment from staff-4 sums up the views of both staff and employers in response to the students opinions for developing employability:

Staff-4: 'You're not the finished product. You know you are still only the ingredients of the cake, you are not baked yet. You may be slightly cooked, but you definitely need to be put back in the microwave. You know, there's some people that knuckle down and go, yeah, I appreciate that, but there are some who are a complete pain and with that and it can just be a nightmare, you know, and it's just makes an unhappy work situation.'

In essence, staff did not dispute many of the points the students made about employability and their development. However, staff felt students should understand employability is a continuous process and build confidence as the main factors for future success.

Figure 5-8 below illustrates the theoretical categories of the staff interviews, developed from the CGT analysis of the data. The main branches of the mind map are the research questions and further branches are formed from the categories that related to each question, including variation in opinion. By applying the theoretical framework to the categorisations, the outcomes for the consideration of habitus, capital and field are highlighted (displayed in green boxes).

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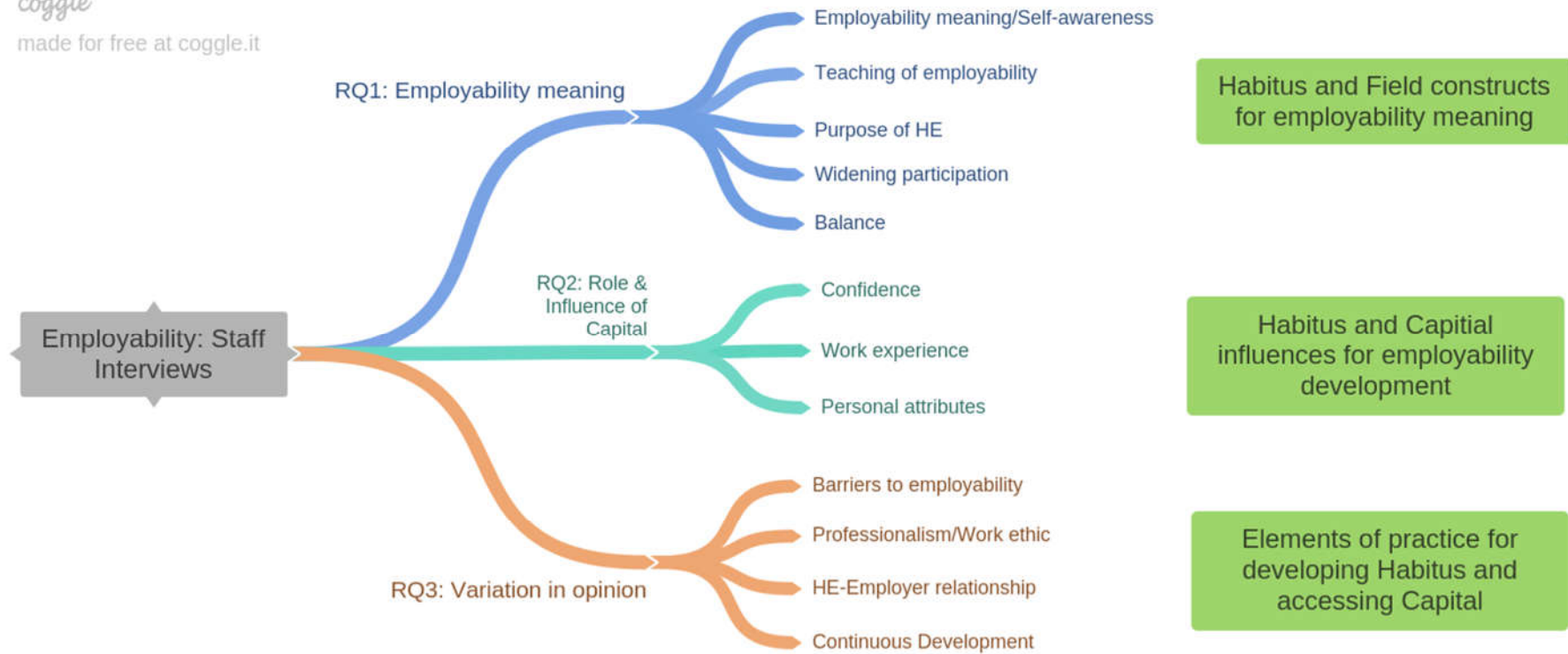


Figure 5-8 Mind map of staff interview CGT analysis theoretical categorisation & theoretical framework outcomes (green boxes)

## 5.18 Summary

The table below synthesises the culmination of the analytical phases to highlight the key results that have been found for each of the research questions using the CGT approach. The final phase of developing grounded theory from these substantive findings will be presented in the next chapter.

Research Questions	Results
What does employability mean?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employability involves a number of factors and is interwoven in nature</li> <li>• Distinction between skills to <i>do</i> a job and <i>get</i> a job</li> <li>• Skills developed from work and life experiences, becoming independent by attending university all contribute to developing employability</li> <li>• Self-assessment that evaluates both personality and emotional traits are important for understanding one's own employability</li> <li>• Achieving a balance between academic and employability development is challenging</li> <li>• The purpose of HE and obtaining a degree is to get a job. University is a natural progression from secondary education</li> </ul>
1. What is the student opinion regarding employability development?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employability should be included in HE curricula</li> <li>• Employability development is a cause of stress or pressure.</li> <li>• Developing employability has benefits beyond working life</li> </ul>
2. What is the role and influence of capitals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employability teaching experiences have are important for building confidence and motivation</li> <li>• A situation where a work placement dilemma occurs, influenced by factors of human and psychological capitals</li> <li>• A lack of maturity can be a barrier to employability</li> </ul>
3. Is there variation in opinion with stakeholders?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employability should be described as a continuous development process</li> <li>• Appropriate work experience is important to develop employability</li> <li>• Achieving a balance between academic and employability development should be challenging</li> <li>• Barriers to employability include demonstrating organisational fit, describing skills and understanding recruitment processes</li> </ul>

Figure 5-9 Findings synthesis from the primary data

## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter will bring together the analysis of the primary data findings and relevant literature, to present the substantive theory resulting from the research. In line with the application of grounded theory, the results have been constructed from the findings and now blended with the literature in the light of the theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014).

The methods of the CGT process applied in the findings chapter continues with the final phase of analysis to develop this discussion chapter (detailed in section 4.11.2). The completion of phases 1 to 5 resulted in the development of a series of theoretical categories, as the process moved the research from data collection to focused coding. The tools of NVivo, used for data analysis and to illustrate data outputs, and Coggle, used for data mapping and result illustration, show the theoretical categories resulting from each of the data sets (in chapter 5). Figure 6-1 illustrates the seven major theoretical categories co-constructed from the participants' meanings of employability. In accordance with the constructivist stance, comparative analysis to constitute the core of the grounded theory, has been undertaken via a process of successive levels of abstraction (Charmaz, 2014).

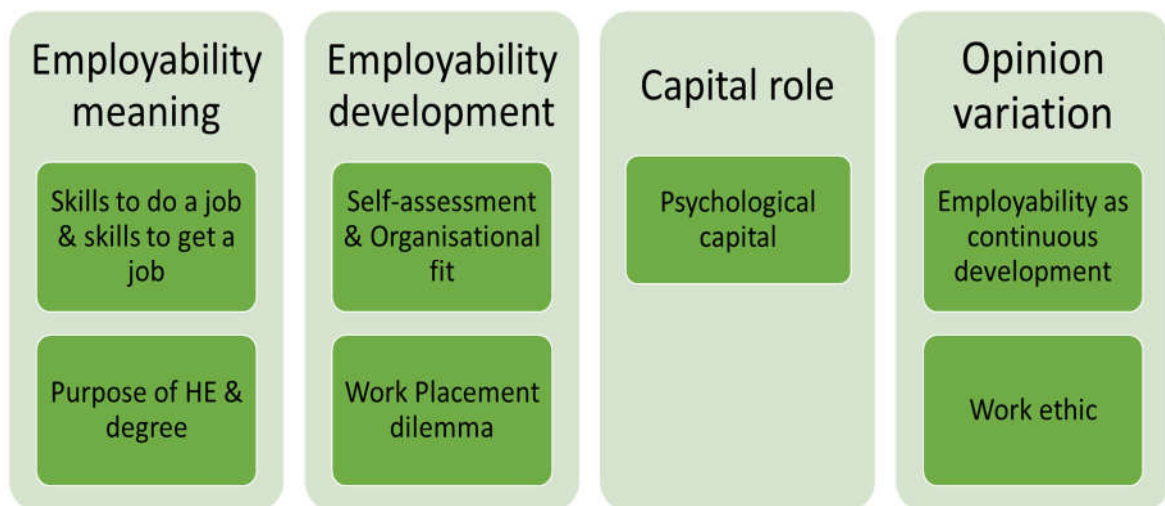


Figure 6-1 Summary of the major theoretical categories

The discussion captures the development of the major categories in order to answer the research questions and create theory, as a final step in the research model

(Figure 3-1). The writing of the discussion was also an iterative process of revisiting the data findings, and categorisations, for positioning within the theoretical framework. Therefore in line with the method, the discussion development is based on the constant comparative method (detailed in 4.3.7 and 4.13).

The findings chapter presented the primary data and the summary table of the resultant major findings that form the basis of the theoretical categories (Figure 5-9). This section begins with the discussion of the major theoretical categories in relation to the central research question and the three sub-questions, which synthesises the key literature with the findings. The position of the constructivist grounded theory from the research in relation to the theoretical framework is presented in the final section of this chapter.

## **6.2 Central question: What does employability mean to students?**

### **6.2.1 Skills to *do* and skills to *get* a job**

The picture for students for employability overall is complex and meaning is constructed from many influences, this is consistent with the findings from the literature. Initially in the focus groups, when asked about employability, discussions quickly began by simply listing skills, but then moved towards the challenges of getting to grips with the many aspects of employability. The findings show the students understood the complexity and attempted to communicate the ‘interwoven’ (FG4-4) or ‘overlapping’ (FG5-2) nature of what employability meant to them.

There are several terms from the literature used to describe employability, including ‘transferrable’, ‘generic’ skills and graduate ‘attributes’ (Yorke, 2006; Biggs and Tang, 2007). As seen from the literature review, in particular the conclusion from Williams *et al.* (2016), the debate continues in attempting to define employability and the associated skills. It is therefore important to recognise that skills have a broader relevance beyond an employability context and have a bearing in HE and in everyday life.

Within the literature the development of employability as a concept has moved from simply a person being employable, to include a whole range of stakeholder perspectives. This includes terms which have subsequently been used

interchangeably and relate to differences in outcomes of ‘skills’ and outcomes that can be described as ‘attitudes’ (Barrie, 2006).

The driver behind the central question therefore reinforces the point made by Williams *et al.* (2016:878) ‘in reality, one must first identify the perspective from which the term is being applied’. The perspective that was missing in the literature is that of the student voice (Artess, *et al.*, 2017). This research adds value by allowing a comparison to the current literature perspectives by asking students to consider an employability meaning of their own. Through this thesis, it is now possible to add the undergraduate perspective.

The findings show that from all the focus group discussions, students could clearly identify a variety of skills for employability. The evaluation determines those factors the students considered to have an impact upon the meaning of employability. The most commonly listed skills included communication, teamwork, IT and organisational skills. The analysis generated a list of skills nodes from the data, subsequently interpreted as skills to *do* a job, as seen in Figure 5-1 and Figure 5-3.

It is not surprising the students began by identifying specific skills before going into more depth of meaning, as this is quite often what students are presented with in HE. A review by Tymon (2013:844) summarises skills and attributes from a number of employability frameworks, highlighting that indeed communication and teamwork are the most commonly cited. Other writers with a critical stance of employability suggest the concept is frequently presented simply as skills identification, and therefore any skills description merely results in a ‘tick-box approach to the acquisition of skills’ or that employability becomes a buzzword (Wilson *et al.*, 2013:1223).

Therefore, by asking students ‘what does employability *mean* to them’ rather than *what* it is, it allowed the participants to reflect further upon their experiences (for most students this included the learning from the professional development module), whereupon students made the distinction between skills for *getting* and *doing* a job. The interview approach enabled deeper meaning to be stated. The results from the individual interviews reflect the distinction as a common element, where students understand employability as two processes rather than the identification of specific skills. For example, STU-3 described the different paths of



*getting* and *doing* a job in relation to employability skills as ‘talking the talk and walking the walk’.

The student views reflect the literature in terms of the connection between employability skills for *doing* and those for *getting* a job. This invokes the views of Gazier (1998a) that the concept of employability in this particular study setting, has a dynamic adaptive and multidimensional nature. The students understand that employability is complex with interwoven aspects, from which they need to adapt their approach if they are to demonstrate their own capability to employers.

The findings show that employability skills to *get* a job include the need for competence in elements of the selection process, for example producing CVs, and performing well in assessments and interviews. For participant FG3-1, the idea of ‘getting a foot in the door’ and ‘grabbing the attention’ was an important aspect of employability for *getting* a job. Based on the agreement of several participants, the theme developed as one of being able to ‘sell yourself’ and your skills as an employable person to employers.

In terms of the two processes, the overlap in the findings is not just a simple matter of listing skills you may possess that are associated with *doing* a job. The analysis shows that rather it is a case of using skills to *get* a job and to be able to provide evidence of your ability in terms of skills to *do* a job. This dual purpose for employability means that ‘a lot of getting a job is selling yourself’ (FG5-2) to employers. STU-13 articulated that the ability to demonstrate that you have skills for getting a job is ‘trying to convince someone to hire you’. The students were clear that they understood skills to *do* a job could be developed later whilst in the workplace. As participant FG3-1, pointed out ‘once you are in a job you can develop yourself and learn skills that are required’.

From the literature review, it is possible to see the development of employability concepts shifting over time. From its roots based upon economic policy determinations of employment and unemployment, related to labour market factors of ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ are discussed by Hillage and Pollard (1998) and shifts to what McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) suggest has become one of a singular focus upon the individual and their skills.

As the agenda has developed across HE systems globally, the articulation of employability has shifted according to the needs of a wider stakeholder base (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015). Placing the research focus upon the ‘supply’ side means that consequently concern lies with the individual to develop employability through possessed assets of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Hillage and Pollard, 1998:1).

In taking the student’s perspective, the interpretation of the findings in this particular area can be attributed to the meaning, derived for employability perspectives as the supply-side, to *get* a job and a demand-side, to *do* a job. Going beyond *getting* a job, the findings which explained the meaning of employability for *doing* a job relate to the application of skills in various situational contexts. For example, the students linked this combination or ‘overlap’ by detailing how their own employability skills might apply in the work place. Students explained how they should articulate proof of their individual skills, as it is difficult to convey employability without application or realisation of contexts of skills to *do* a job. This is where the shift from ‘selling yourself’ to demonstrating your ability to perform occurs, thereby adding to the complexity and challenge of what employability is and what it means.

As FG5-5 commented, you may have skills on paper (i.e. a CV) but felt they are meaningless without back up from some work experience. STU-11 felt it was important to draw upon experience to show that he was employable. Students provided examples of their range of work experiences, where skills such as team work and customer service, in companies such as McDonalds (STU-4) or in the retail industry (FG4-4) can be ‘transferred’ and therefore applied to a graduate role context.

In terms of connecting to the literature, this ‘overlap’ or connection between skills to *do* and to *get* a job is attributable to the idea of ‘transferrable skills’ (Yorke, 2006; Biggs and Tang, 2007), as the application of particular skills in more than one situation. The demonstration of possessing employability, the realisation of some of the meaning associated with employability for students, links to Cumming (2010) in his description of ‘contextualised performance’. Cumming (2010:406) defines contextualised performance as an ‘enactment of skills in particular circumstances’, demonstrating skills to others, whereby those skills should be considered in the context to particular settings, such as a variety of workplaces.

The article from Cumming (2010:406) which develops contextualised performance, aimed to generate a more in-depth understanding of skill development, attempting to shift the discourse away from listing skills. The concept of ‘contextualised performance’ is pertinent in relation to the findings, where students explain their understanding in terms of *getting* a job. Employability in terms of ‘selling yourself’ as understood by using examples of skills and experiences that best demonstrates ability to employers.

However, it is important to note at this stage of the discussion that students explained that they were aware that employability does not only have to come from work experience. The students discussed life experiences and education that could contribute to their employability. The primary data confirms that students have gained an understanding of what skills they need and how those skills strongly connects with their exposure to employability within the curriculum. This is examined in the next section.

The nuances of students understanding of employability increased as the focus groups and interviews progressed. The construction of the picture of employability began with generalised meanings; however, there are a number of structures and external influences contributing to the meaning of employability. This point was argued by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), in their analysis of employability as a framework built upon ‘individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors, which acknowledges the importance of both supply-side and demand-side factors.’

#### **6.2.2 Requirement for a degree and the purpose of HE**

It was found from the focus groups that obtaining an undergraduate degree was seen as an important element of employability. The comment from FG11-2 expresses the theme that developed: ‘the existence of a degree improves your employability because it's a minimum requirement for some jobs’. After the initial analysis of all the focus group data sets, it became apparent that obtaining a degree is significant in terms of gaining a professional role. An example was the degree requirement for teaching roles, which was the particular driver for FG5-2 entering into HE. In the interviews, the need for a degree was followed up in order to explore further attitudes towards the purpose of HE (discussed in 5.3.2). Therefore this area is presented as a theoretical category.

As the analysis progressed, it became clear that the majority of students and employers agreed on this point, whereas staff agreed in principle, but expressed a wider social and economic purpose of HE. The findings show that across the student participants a degree provides a 'signal' (STU-11) or 'quality' (STU-4) of attainment to employers. Employers confirmed a degree demonstrates a person can apply themselves at a certain level (EMP-1, 2 and 4). Given the general agreement between students and employers that the purpose of HE was to get a job, this is a concern that in this case employability is reducing the purpose of HE as a mechanism to get a job.

Staff responded to these outcomes with some concern. There is an agreement that a degree is 'an indication of attainment' (e.g. Staff-3) and along with Staff-2, suggested perhaps some students are not making the most of student or university life. Time at university should also allow students to 'squeeze out all your potential' and develop 'confidence to be meaningful citizens' (Staff-2 and Staff-3). Only one of the employers, EMP-5 felt that HE had a broader purpose of expanding knowledge and contribution to society.

The marketisation and cost of HE did not pass unremarked, in fact all groups at some point during the discussions raised concerns about the funding changes that have taken place (summarised in Figure 2-1). For students, their ability to attend is facilitated by the overall expansion of B&M degree programmes and in particular at The University of Salford, where widening participation is a key policy (Wilton, 2011; Molyneaux, *et al.*, 2017). There were several students identified as benefiting from widening participation and several commented they are the first in their family to attend university (STU-1, 4 and 9). For most students costs are of concern but the fact that they attend HE suggests a form of acceptance; however in order to support themselves whilst studying many of the student participants felt the need to take part-time jobs. Some students felt that holding a degree creates personal value both from the perspective of developing as a 'better person' or having a sense of achievement, for example STU-1 and 9.

It is impossible to ignore the weight and significance of the policy changes that surround HE. The decision to attend university, for students in the study, driven by the employability policy agenda, shows that attending university is a natural progression from school or college. STU-8 commented, attending university was a

‘general trend’ at the time he was leaving school and mentioned perceived difficulties of getting a ‘certain level of job’ without a degree. Likewise, many student participants, such as STU-12, agreed that university was the next step; ‘it just seemed like a natural progression’.

Mature students that participated in the study (e.g. FG3-2, FG5-5, STU-11 and STU-13) have been ‘told’ by industry that a degree is a requirement for career progression. They therefore felt that they needed to attend university. FG3-2 shared her frustration that after several years working in public sector IT, progression to managerial levels still requires a degree.

Staff responded to the points made by students about the expectation of attending university. One interviewee, Staff-4, raised some questions that they thought students should be asking themselves, ‘do I really need to go to university? What do I want to do and is university going to help me or will it just get me a big loan?’ Such questions are important in terms for the potential to develop multiple capitals and the benefits that could be realised in terms of employability. If going into HE is a ‘natural progression’ and the purpose is to get a job, the questions posed by Staff-4, are ones that all students should be asking. From the analysis it appears students have not asked themselves such questions.

The results show that employers accept and require the human capital that a degree bestows, and students are following the advice of the wider education and policy environment by attending university to gain this capital. Importantly, it is clear from the study that students understand that a degree (or the human capital pertaining to it) is not the only requirement for employability. The manner in which students distinguish skills to *do* and to *get* a job demonstrate the articulation that a higher level of academic training requires the identification of ‘broader skill sets that can be converted productively when they enter working life’ (Tomlinson, 2017a).

In terms of the review of the more recent literature, the human capital approach, of knowledge and skills, remains the focus of UK HE and skills policy (*Higher Education and Research Act 2017*). However, the economic policy (rather than a skills policy) for HE funding has dominance in the current climate, with the latest Augar review maintaining this position (Department for Education, 2019). Much of the commentary surrounding the reviews anticipated impact, from an HE

perspective, concerns the sustainability of institutions and accessibility for prospective students of all backgrounds (Morgan, 2019). As a result of the Augur review there is a possibility of further policy changes, therefore some uncertainty remains within HE.

## **6.3 RQ1: Student opinions regarding employability development**

### **6.3.1 Self-assessment and organisational fit**

Prominent models proposed by Knight and Yorke (2004), and Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007), saw much of HE subsequently engaged in developing employability support across its student services or even embedding employability within the curriculum. The intensification of the employability agenda for HE, particularly in B&M education, continues with changes in Government policy as advocated by reports from Dearing (1997) and Leitch (2006). The pressure for universities to remain a supply-side producer of skilled labour seems set to continue with the more recent Wilson review (2012). Reports state that in terms of employability universities must improve in the 'landscape of collaboration' to align with business needs. It is for this reason students were asked their opinion about employability development whilst they remain in HE.

Across several sources, one of the concerns highlighted in the literature was the suggestion of a lack of graduate work readiness (Wilton, 2008; Jackson, 2012). Reports from the CIPD (2014) and the CBI (2015) identified a skills gap for non-technical areas such as critical thinking, teamwork and communication. However, both employers and students did not raise skills gap as a problem.

The findings and analysis have shown that there are many factors that students feel underpin the development of their employability. Opinion focused upon development and the findings were broadly based around the themes of self-assessment of their own current employability, personal attributes and work experience (sections 5.4.1, 5.4.2, 5.9.1 and 5.8.4). The factors analysed include meeting employer expectations, personal attributes and questions over the need for work experience. The findings show that they gave rise to stress and pressure for the students.

Within the literature, there is a significant focus upon ‘attitudes and dispositions’ for work place performance (Cumming, 2010:407). During the interviews, students were asked to evaluate their own employability development. Students stated that self-assessment, undertaken during the professional development module was a process that allowed them to consider how they might fit within organisations. By evaluating their skills, the students were attempting to determine how they might meet employer expectations; for example FG11-2, STU-1 and STU-2, felt that by meeting the employer criteria a person can be successful in that organisation. However, they had concerns in being able to demonstrate organisational fit and being able to develop those requisite skills. This point was also summarised by STU-10. Self-assessment was important to determine organisational fit: ‘How you first get to the job, how you apply for the job; and then how you perform in that work as well. And a lot of it is self-review for you.’

As stated by the literature, personal attributes that result in how a person behaves within a work environment contribute to employability (e.g. Tymon, 2013). The analysis shows that students consider personality and a capability for social skills to be related factors. As stated by FG5-5 (and agreed across the group); ‘having social skills is very important’. Therefore it is understood by the students that the ability to work with others in a professional work place context is essential. Furthermore, within the theme of self-assessment, a contributing personal attribute for employability was emotional intelligence.

The areas of employability development have been categorised in the theme of self-assessment and personal attributes using CGT. As previously discussed students were able to identify a range of skills, and analysis of the primary data highlights the close connection to the previous section regarding the meaning of employability (sections 5.3, 5.7 and 6.2.1).

Questions therefore remain over how skills can be developed effectively outside of the workplace, which forms a compounding element in terms of how to define skills and employability. The findings have implications for generalisation of the skills approach and conclusions of some literature that employers require ‘oven-ready’ graduates. Indeed, to what extent are these views representative of the skills gap suggested to be an issue for employers?

Comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that the development of personal characteristics and abilities are understood by students and are required by employers. If employers have an expectation of skills beyond personal characteristics (organisational fit), students therefore felt employers should provide more support to gain work experience for skills development. Cutting across the CGT categories it was evaluated that there is an agreement from all stakeholder participants that personal characteristics are important for employability. This point is also addressed by Jackson (2014), challenging the skills versus personal capability development, in the light of inconsistencies between employers wish lists and recruitment processes.

Jackson (2016) attempts to model skills transfer in graduates and provides empirical evidence to show that the skills gap remains limited. The perception of employers is potentially caused by narrow definitions that fail to capture graduate readiness. In line with Tymon (2013), the points raised in this thesis by both the student participants and the literature confirms that employability concerns several issues. Employability can therefore be challenging to define and has different meanings across stakeholder group perspectives.

#### **6.3.2 Opportunities for further development - Placement dilemma**

There are arguments that suggest employability cannot be developed within HE. This follows from a significant volume of literature stating that employability should be embedded in the HE curriculum (summarised by Artess *et al.*, 2017). The likes of Cranmer (2006), Mason *et al.* (2009) and Tymon (2013) share the view that employability is best developed via structured work experience, casting doubt on the ability for HE teaching to be effective.

The results show students reflected upon a wide range of experiences that may contribute to their own employability. Analysis shows that students made a connection between their taught experiences and those outside of HE, such as part-time working and professional experience (where applicable). This section addresses the concerns raised both within the literature and by the students of the issue of gaining appropriate work experience in order to develop their employability.



Despite the challenges in the literature, The University of Salford has responded to changes in the internal and external focus in relation to employability, particularly towards B&M undergraduate degree provision. As the number of students has expanded, the Business School has implemented a compulsory professional development module undertaken by all undergraduate students. As detailed in the introduction, section 1.7, within the curriculum the module follows the typical recruitment process. The module aims to develop skills, attributes, knowledge and capabilities in students so that they gain confidence and competence in identifying and addressing their own employability needs and goals.

The analysis has shown that some students were sceptical about a non-subject specific core module. Some of the students were not expecting to study this subject (e.g. FG9-5, FG5-10), nor did they expect to find the inputs valuable to their development, e.g. STU-1 stated ‘initially I didn’t want to do it...I was getting out of my comfort zone’. After some further discussion the student explained how her confidence had grown out of the practices in the module and, despite some hesitation, she was about to undertake an interview for a work placement internship. This resonates with Crebert *et al.* (2004:162) stating that students can develop employability if provided with ‘real-world’ examples and applications, i.e. opportunities to practice. For students, STU-1, STU-3, STU-5 and STU-9, employability development is shown to be gained from within HE and from taking opportunities to practice in authentic workplace settings, as suggested by Crebert *et al.* (2004). The results have shown, for the student groups studied, employability inputs have had a positive impact, being of value in terms of self-assessment and preparation for the graduate labour market (e.g. FG6-1, FG10-5 and STU-7).

Furthermore, the analysis shows that work and life experiences are also important for developing employability, and this topic has been part of the debate for defining employability for some time (Yorke, 2006). There lies a dilemma that has been uncovered across the data as students expressed a range of attitudes towards employability development from work experience. A CGT category of ‘work placement dilemma’ was inducted from the data for this area. Analysis showed that although each student was convinced of the need for employability skills and the development and benefits a placement could offer, serious concerns were raised about its undertaking. Even those participants that had undertaken a placement

(e.g. STU-10) or internship (e.g. STU-9) still needed to consider the time and effort that was required to obtain a placement and then complete it.

Analysis from the focus groups showed that students recognised a range of employability skills developed from a variety of sources such as their learning in HE, part-time work experience and from becoming an independent person through adjusting to university life (detailed in sections 5.3.2, 5.3.3, and 5.7.3 respectively).

However, during the focus groups students raised a number of concerns; it is 'hard to get a job without experience' (FG2-6). In a similar vein, FG6-3 said it would be better if more firms offered placements, a point on which the whole group agreed. Stress is another theme that arose (discussed further in the next section) but in relation to placements, FG4-5 stated that she found the process of gaining a placement 'really stressful', it being 'a long and complicated process'. For some the placement application process resulted in demotivation (FG2-7). FG1-4 was convinced that a placement would aid the transition into a graduate career, but that the application process detracted from her studies.

By probing the undertaking of work placements further, the individual interview data confirmed the inference of the existence of a 'placement dilemma'. STU-10 had undertaken a placement and was a passionate advocate. He cited motivation and drive to succeed that came from gaining a placement, resulting in having improved his employability. This student struggled to understand why other students did not want to take that opportunity, and gain the lifelong benefits he felt resulted from the work placement. STU-10 wanted to pass the message on to other students that although challenging the benefits were clear. The results show that both employers and staff were also advocates for work placements, therefore emphasising the point made by STU-10. This particular finding is an example that suggests the student has been able to construct an improved understanding of his own employability by taking a work placement. Seen through the lens of threshold concepts, this result could be interpreted as a transformative and irreversible threshold, and one that integrative, where the work experience has brought together different aspects of employability for the student (Meyer, *et al.*, 2016).

The 'placement dilemma' may be framed in terms of a troublesome threshold concept in relation to employability. Meyer and Land (2005:377) argue that in some

situations the troublesome or stressful knowledge may prove beneficial. The inference being that the challenge of undertaking a work placement and the knowledge gained will develop a student's overall employability, and increase the likelihood of realising the threshold of employability. However, the troublesome knowledge in this case could include the various kinds described by students, such as competition for placements, time and personal life impacts, which contribute to the presence of the 'placement dilemma' (Perkins, 1999). As detailed in sections 5.5.3 and 5.8.3, it appears that some students are 'stuck' and are not so sure about the opportunities for employability development and remain uncertain, hesitating to seek a work placement (Meyer and Land, 2005:379). The 'placement dilemma' may therefore impact upon the ability to achieve the threshold of employability as described by Procter and Harvey (2018).

Another student (STU-1) had changed her mind following the professional development module and decided to pursue a work placement. However, she was concerned about timescales, not wanting to take a whole year out, therefore only wanting a short internship. The issue of time taken out of their degree was a concern for many students when considering work placements.

A different viewpoint came from participant STU-8, who wanted to exit education at the earliest opportunity, however he hoped to gain a graduate role and develop employability without firstly undertaking a work placement. Other participants felt taking a year out on a work placement impacted on their personal life established at university (STU-2 and STU-7). Overall, there was a general agreement amongst the students that the process of gaining a work placement was a time consuming and competitive process, resulting in stress.

There are two arguments that could be made to explain the work placement dilemma. Considering the wider influence of the field, although HE provides support in this case, perhaps more support from employers is required. The students themselves have commented they feel employers could create more opportunities by perhaps increasing the number of placements, changing the recruitment and selection process and making available shorter placements or internships. In fact, on this final point EMP-3 responded to such comments by stating that his company has been increasing the number of summer (3 month)

internships. Employers collaborating with HE and students in this way is a key recommendation of reports such as Wilson (2012).

Another reason for a placement dilemma could be a perceived lack of fit with employer requirements at the mid-stage of their degree studies. Wilton (2012) suggests this could be where some of the stress is generated; impacting upon motivation due to the combined competitive nature and effort needed to meet the different employer requirements for each placement application.

## **6.4 RQ2: Role of Capital**

The function of capitals has been the subject of a number of theoretical and empirical studies that examine the role and influence of capitals upon developing employability, for example Williams *et al.* (2016) and Tomlinson (2017a). In some cases, the acquisition of capital has been conflated with the discourse of employability attributes and skills and so called 'graduateness'. For example, Holmes (2015) and Kalfa and Taksa (2015) focus upon cultural capital in attempts to improve the ways in which HE addresses employability support. The complexity of capitals and the interplay between them adds to the challenge of ensuring the development of these key resources through any employability input or initiative.

The objective of research sub-question 2 was to understand the impact of employability and the role and influence of forms of capital. The results have shown that capitals are a feature of many aspects of employability. The findings are broadly in line with the literature, in the interpretation that various capitals accumulate from developing employability. This section will discuss the results in relation to the various forms of capital, considering the research implications. A final section at the end of the discussion will examine capitals in relation to the theoretical framework.

### **6.4.1 Human capital**

Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills acquired through formal education and experiential learning (Becker, 1962). From the results, students have in some form been influenced by the human capital focus of the UK skills and HE policy. The results show students have taken on board the advice from schools/colleges and even parents in choosing to attend university. Questions over the transmission of capital centre on the need to gain human capital based on a

desire for higher-end professional jobs. The value and need for a degree seems to be a shared understanding across all stakeholders interviewed and across the wider network of fields from secondary education, tertiary education and family support networks.

Students have accepted that, as according to Becker (1962), human capital requires investment in cautiously accepting the funding arrangements of the higher education system. The financial situation has led several students to undertake part-time work and may contribute to the accumulation of this form of capital from which the students note some employability skills development.

The practices of skills to do and get a job, framed within employers needs and self-assessment, seems to provide a field setting in which there is an alignment for formal 'hard skills' and career-building skills that Bridgstock (2009) and Tomlinson *et al.* (2017) suggest is essential in order to realise human capital. The role of human capital (supported by other forms) is recognised by the students in gaining a position in the field. The findings show that students understand this as the struggle to convince someone to hire you, in 'selling yourself' to an employer in recruitment situations. It is also seen in the understanding expressed in the ideas of organisational fit discussed by the students.

#### **6.4.2 Social capital**

Social capital is identified as a durable network of relationships, enacted, maintained and reinforced in exchanges (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu suggests that social capital is 'never independent' from economic and cultural capital. He argued that the volume of social capital depends upon the size of the network and the volume of other capitals (Bourdieu, 1986:249). The networking effect of social capital can help to mobilise graduates' existing human capital (Tomlinson, 2017a).

With respect to employability, social capital is often described as a form of graduate capital, where networks and relationships are mobilised from to gain access to labour markets or enhance functionality in graduate roles (Williams *et al.*, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017a). The undergraduate position in the social space is one of development and is recognised in some part by the students. For example, the results show students understood the need to build relationships as an

employability skill, and to have attitudes and dispositions for future organisational fit.

Given the focus placed upon HE for developing employability and the association with social capital, what role does it play in the field? Tomlinson (2017a:343) supports the position that universities are required to provide opportunities to enhance social capital. This has relevance to this study, given the widening participation and socio-economic make-up of the student population examined.

Both the literature review and findings show that efforts have been targeted towards social capital at the University of Salford. The professional development module was cited as influential by the students and strongly suggests the opportunity to harness social capital. The module requires the development of a LinkedIn profile, which several students (e.g. STU-1) felt was important for employability development to support professional networks and employer engagement. The module also included inputs from careers services and managed employer engagement through guest speakers, along with broader careers fairs and networking events.

Beyond the taught curriculum there is some evidence that students made efforts to build social (and cultural capital) through engagement with mentoring schemes, societies and student representation roles (e.g. STU-9 and FG5-2). In these examples, the students recognised the benefits of the activities in developing their employability skills. Both employers and staff responded to the student views, expressing the need and value of increased engagement with employers and opportunities for work placements in order to build experiences to take advantages of relationships upon graduation.

The ability to build social capital in the form of networks external to HE was only recognised by some of the students. The weak recognition of social capital serves to reinforce the theoretical category also interpreted from the data, of the placement dilemma, where students missed opportunities to build this form of capital.

#### **6.4.3 Cultural capital**

For Bourdieu (1977a) the possession of cultural capital varies with social class and education. Social class and education foster the possession of cultural capital and social reproduction but does not create it. What is notable from the literature is that the fostering of cultural (and social) capital is a challenge for HE. For example, Kalfa

and Taksa (2015) proposed using a Bourdieusian conceptual framework for the social construction of cultural capital using various teaching methodologies. The study focused upon employability development for business students and concerned skills transferability. However, the inclusion of cultural capital into teaching frameworks by Kalfa and Taksa (2015), are yet to be followed with empirical support.

For students (and other stakeholders) in this study the key findings show that the cultural or symbolic value of obtaining a degree is to get a job. Some students raised concerns that given graduate numbers, the need to stand out to employers beyond their qualification is of concern. The analysis has shown that students understand that other personal attributes are required. A theme of organisational fit, and uniqueness or standing out seemed to be critical for students in the capacity to demonstrate employability. This has a strong connection with social capital and networking effects discussed in the previous section.

Tomlinson (2017a:594) suggests that the role of HE with respect to cultural capital could be to 'build students' confidence and self-perceptions of value'. Confidence and self-assessment are key themes in the findings, dispositions that have been shown to be supported through the professional development module teaching. These findings could be explained from the ideas of Tomlinson (2017a) that 'formal recruitment training' and employer engagement has exposed students to the cultural realms of employers, providing opportunity to develop and practice dispositions and behavioural competences of the demand-side of employability.

In response to the student view, a theme that concerned employers was the need to demonstrate work ethic. Notably students did not mention work ethic in the context of the meaning of employability. This is discussed further in the next section, however, although limited in the literature, work ethic could be perceived as an aspect of workplace cultural capital. Tomlinson (2017a:345) argues that cultural capital may be sourced through technical knowledge but an awareness of cultural practices and orientations is also an important dimension. The behaviours of time keeping, engagement and demonstrating keenness to work hard for an organisation, are found to be an important element of employability for employers in this study. It was not suggested by employers that HE could or should be responsible for

teaching work ethic, but that work ethic is an important employability advantage for candidates.

#### **6.4.4 Identity capital**

Identity capital is a psycho-social form and is often associated with being a graduate rather than becoming a graduate (Holmes, 2015). Critically, academics such as Tomlinson (2017a), Holmes (2015) and Jackson (2016) suggest that for identity to be realised and supported by the skills based approach to employability is inadequate. This is based on the premise that graduate or professional identity is socially constructed and emerges from work and life experiences rather than just from skills.

Discerning identity capital, the findings support the idea that students are developing this capital, as understood from the themes associated with the idea of skills to get a job. In this case, this links to capital in terms of the articulation of identity as an asset through the production of CVs, LinkedIn profiles and narratives that connect skills with evidence of employability. Other associated themes include those linked to other capitals (social and cultural) such as the impact of self-assessment and confidence.

In the analysis, students expressed the concern that upon graduation they should be fully competent (i.e. FG-5 and STU-13), possessing all the capitals that might entail graduate identity (sections 5.4.5 and 5.9.2). This perhaps invokes the suggestion of an ‘oven ready’ graduate from some employers and is underlined by a theme from the findings that students felt under pressure to fully develop their employability at graduation (Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017).

However, the employers and staff in this study support the idea that employability should be viewed as longer-term continuous professional development. From an identity capital perspective, this is supported in the literature as an emergent lifelong journey. This could mean that identity is constructed *from* becoming a graduate and then developed the transition into the labour market and through subsequent career progression (Holmes, 2013, 2015; Jackson, 2016).

#### **6.4.5 Economic capital**

For Bourdieu (1986), economic capital is measured by monetary capital but also by non-monetary forms such as ‘spending’ time and effort developing oneself. By



considering economic capital as the root of all other capitals, the accumulation or transmission of cultural and social capital (plus the broader forms applied in this study) hold more importance. This might be a possible explanation for Tomlinson (2017a) excluding economic capital from his graduate capital model.

Although the funding of HE is part of the current landscape, the findings did not have a significant focus for direct economic capital. The findings show that investments in HE and the need to develop employability skills are of value to the students having a strong focus upon the means to get a job.

The results infer the impact of economic capital upon developing employability is a means to 'better pay, better job and a better life' (FG4-2), but students did not express views in terms of excessive wealth gains. Economic capital was not observed as a significant theme influencing employability in and of itself beyond the acceptance of fees and loans and the time invested in their degrees. In terms of time invested, economic capital is a possible factor for some students in creating the placement dilemma described in other findings (sections 5.8.3 and 5.13.2). Alternative forms of capital have emerged as more significant for the evaluation of employability and the student voice.

#### **6.4.6 Psychological capital**

From the literature review (section 2.4), the theoretical understanding of capitals feature in many studies that conceptualise employability, with psychological capital cited as 'capacity offering strengths within the job market' (Williams *et al.*, 2016:890) or to 'adapt and respond proactively to inevitable career challenges' (Tomlinson, 2017a:347). More fundamentally, psychological capital has features that impact upon a positive situation for personal development (Çavuş and Gökçen, 2014). Confidence or self-efficacy is a basic component of psychological capital that an internal locus of self-control can exert resulting in motivation and positive behaviours (Luthans *et al.*, 2006).

As stated in the findings chapter from very early on in the data collection, it was found that confidence developed as a significant theme, as an important factor in determining self-perceived employability for students. The building of confidence and motivation in the field of HE was found to emanate from a number of situations identified by the students. One aspect is the knowledge and understanding of

employability as processes (skills to do and to get a job) and their current abilities. For example, FG8-5 stated 'you need to have a certain level of confidence to get a job', and that the learning from the professional development module gave a sense of confidence and preparedness for tackling the job market (detailed in sections 5.5.1 and 5.9.2).

From an employability standpoint, psychological capital is closely associated with human and social capital affecting the individual ability to perform well within a given role, and adapt to change, alongside drawing upon relationships in the workplace (Luthans, 2002; Luthans *et al.*, 2006; Williams *et al.*, 2016). Psychological capital is also said to be a form of psycho-social resource that allows career adaptability and resilience when faced with career challenges (Tomlinson, 2017a). What is most applicable in this research is the differentiation made by Luthans *et al.*, (2006) that psychological capital focuses on 'who you are becoming' rather than 'who you are'. This point is important in terms of the focus upon undergraduate development as applied to employability and the future graduate self.

Confidence and motivation were linked by the students to several different aspects of employability and was said to impact upon the ability to get and to do a job. According to the students, confidence builds from a number of sources and for many, confidence was boosted by participating in the professional development module. From the comments, two activities gave the students confidence. Firstly, in undertaking a self-assessment and secondly via gaining understanding of the overall awareness of the recruitment process. The successful completion of these activities built confidence as students became clear in knowing what is required from employers and themselves. These aspects are the subject of several discussions in FG11 (section 5.5.1) and with STU-12, STU-3 and STU-13. The results show that through their learning experiences they have an understanding of the strategies for future job seeking and coping with the challenges of the job market. For some students, it could be said that the psychological capital gained from starting to develop employability skills has allowed them to establish a high locus of self-control (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Tomlinson, 2017a:347).

Often in discussing confidence, motivation was an associated factor that resulted from developing confidence. FG11-7 stated he has built confidence from his

development at university that he felt brought him closer to his goal. This point was reiterated by FG4-2 by improving his employability he could meet his goals of a 'better job, better pay and a better life', but he also said that you needed to be motivated to achieve these goals. The literature demonstrates that the combination of motivation and confidence building are forms of psychological capital that are linked to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). Self-efficacy can therefore be an important factor in how these students perceive themselves and use the employability skills to achieve their goals, whilst they are developing within HE (Tomlinson, 2017a:347).

The results show that success for many students, beyond obtaining a degree is dependent upon motivation and building confidence through work experience. Several participants also raised part-time working, undertaken whilst at university, as a source of confidence. STU-12 for example, said her part-time job built confidence in communication skills, dealing with problems and managing people. As a result, she felt employability skills are transferable into her chosen field of human resources. However, some students were concerned and felt less confident by not having any work experience, FG7-4 for example, worried about her 'lack of experience'.

As discussed, work placements are a source of confidence, even though it caused a dilemma for some students. Comments from STU-3 illustrate the point; the gains from his work placement in terms of skills has given him confidence and 'new little building blocks that I want to build on'. The confidence of having developed skills and the motivation that drives future career plans, and becoming a graduate, form the key elements of psychological capital seen from the interpretation of the data. This also ties in with the literature in terms of self-efficacy from Bandura (1995). Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) have applied the concept concluding that 'mastery experiences' such as work placements are a key source of generating self-confidence and motivation. Furthermore this accords with earlier observations from Crebert *et al.* (2004) and Jackson (2014) stating confidence building is a factor in work placement outcomes. However, the employability model of Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) and the research cited above, does not consider confidence as a form of capital, only a factor of employability.

Other facets of developing confidence and generating motivation are identified in the data as originating from; life experiences (e.g. STU-4), becoming independent

by attending university (e.g. STU-5 and STU-10) and students having realised employability skills can be developed from extracurricular activities such as sport (e.g. STU-7 and STU-13). As has been discussed across this chapter, other forms of capital interact, such as social and cultural capital, but the results show that confidence is also generated from the type of experiences that occur beyond direct learning in HE.

Counter to the positive psycho-social aspects of developing employability that has been presented from the primary data, analysis shows a potentially negative element of stress or pressure. As presented in section 5.4.5 and Figure 5-3 all the participants, through the curriculum have been required to consider their own employability development. Psychological capital applied to the context of employability is significant, based upon the emotional demands that extend from the job seeking process (Tomlinson, 2017a). Based on the results, emotional demands form part of the undergraduate landscape; as FG10-5 states ‘we live in such a competitive world and the university environment is so competitive’, for this student and several others this can be ‘overwhelming’ and ‘stresses them out’ (FG5-5). The need to develop employability for many students can cause stress and pressure, which will test the level of psychological capital that is developed.

Rattray (2016) connects the emotional demands of psychological capital needs to the threshold concept of liminality. The ‘overwhelming’ (FG5-5) impact of employability lies in the development of resilience, adaptability and emotional security. As detailed in the literature review (section 2.6.5) from the perspective of threshold concepts, the fluctuations in the emotional state could lead students to the liminal space, where uncertainty or difficult ideas are grappled with (Rattray, 2016:67). Within the liminal space the ‘messy journey’ of learning takes place and the discomfort of employability development is felt. The development of psychological capital by the student, will therefore impact upon the inclination of student to persist in developing their employability or give up and remain in the liminal space and ultimately be unable to master the threshold of employability.

Following the likes of Holmes (2015:219) this study aimed to look at the capitals that are recognised as important at the undergraduate level, with a view to gaining a better understanding of employability. The understanding should not be encumbered by what he describes as the ‘flawed notion’ of complex network of

“skills” and “attribute” definitions. From this study, confidence was seen to be by far the most valuable form of psychological capital that can support employability and therefore employment.

## **6.5 RQ3: Variation in opinion**

From the literature review and across the discussion so far, it is clear that employability relates to a wider range of factors. Employability is interpreted from a number of different perspectives, from skills in terms of how they are defined and how they might be applied in various scenarios, to conceptualising employability in terms of capital resources, all of which are said to be interpreted differently by various stakeholders (Tymon, 2013).

The literature showed that not only are there misunderstandings surrounding the definition of employability across the supply and demand-sides (section 2.3), but the debate continues as to how best to develop employability in HE. Sin and Neave (2016) distinguish between employability as an individual responsibility versus a ‘comprehensive context-aware construct’. They suggest some form of consensus is required if all stakeholders are to benefit. By posing the student voice to both employers and HE staff, in this research there were some broad areas of agreement in that the purpose of HE is to educate people in order to get a job and that, contrary to Tymon (2013) employability teaching should be included in the HE curriculum. The evaluation highlights this, with the exception of one or two individual differences detailed in findings sections 5.10 and 5.14.

From the analysis, two notable areas of variation in opinion have been identified between students and other stakeholders, one concerns the concept of employability as a continuous process, beyond graduation, and the second a need to demonstrate work ethic.

### **6.5.1 Employability as a continuous development process**

There was only a brief mention of continuous development during the focus groups, coded for the analysis as seen in Figure 5-1. However, in one manner or another, the analysis shows that all of the employers and staff interviewed mentioned the principle of continuous development with respect to employability development. The principle of continuous development is that employability is for life rather than just obtaining a first graduate job. In revisiting the literature of the widely cited work

of Yorke, (2006:3) he clearly states that ‘employability is not merely an attribute of the new graduate. It needs to be continuously refreshed throughout a person’s working life’. However, in the employability definition adopted from the work of Yorke this point is not explicitly stated. The idea is carried forward but only in the broader policy for employability frameworks produced by the HEA (Cole and Tibby, 2013:), where it is stated ‘making the components [of employability] explicit to students to support their lifelong learning’.

Given that students describe various personal attributes and organisational fit as important for the meaning of employability, EMP-1 responded to students’ views, by questioning if continuous professional development (CPD) might be a better descriptor. Where professional development occurs and learning continues throughout your career, EMP-1 suggested a CPD process would be useful for current students to understand the transition that takes place from student to a professional. Comments from other employers concurred with the importance of ‘lifelong learning’; EMP-4 and EMP-6 made the point that training begins immediately in the work place and therefore skills, and by implication employability development, is continuous.

The findings show that staff agree with employers that, the term employability does not capture the ongoing nature that could instil the importance of continuous personal development. Staff-4 and Staff-1 agreed with the students’ consideration of employability as skills to *do* and to *get* a job. They added that it is not just about the first graduate role but describe these elements as ‘tools and techniques’ or a ‘toolkit that they carry round with them for the rest of their life’.

Given the interconnections between employability skills, labour market factors and employer demands (literature review section 2.3.5), defining employability as a continuous process may shift the focus of individual responsibility for development, to one where employability becomes a joint responsibility. Not just of HE or students themselves, but in terms of ongoing training and development received whilst in employment. By taking this outlook, it may be possible to better balance the supply and demand-side in relation to understanding employability needs. It is worth considering if such a shift could allow employers and policy makers to avoid the jobs mismatch that is currently cited (CIPD, 2015; Ball, 2019). This could be achieved by moving away from the requirement of ‘oven ready’ graduates, but

creating employment in which continuous employability development is reasonably expected when progressing from HE.

The responses were produced from both employers and staff with a sense of exasperation, i.e. Staff-4 stating that they would like students to understand they are not the 'finished product', and further development is required across their working lives. Using a baking analogy Staff-4, went on to say, 'you are not baked yet...more work and effort will be required to continue development building the ingredients you have'.

#### **6.5.2 Work ethic as an employability attribute**

Another area of opinion variation found within the data was the principle of work ethic. Responding to the student views of employability, discussions regarding the need to demonstrate and have a work ethic became a theme that was important to both employers and staff. The term work ethic was not used by any of the students that took part in this study, but rather personal attributes or behaviours such as personality, organisational fit and building relationships were stated, which could perhaps be translated as 'readiness to work'. Staff on the other hand responded by referring to professional conduct in terms of standard acceptable behaviours for the workplace. This lack of agreement may be a source of tension or misunderstanding between students, staff and consequently employers.

On the question of work ethic, there are limited discussions in the literature. From an academic (supply-side) perspective it is conceptualised in a few studies as an aspect of employability relating to graduate attributes, traits or dispositions (e.g. McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Williams *et al.*, 2016; Artess, *et al.*, 2017). More specifically McQuaid and Lindsay (2005:209) set their own framework that included differences in individuals' characteristics in terms of 'readiness' for work, which they defined as individual factors including 'essential attributes' such as willingness to work, reliability and so on. Within their framework they also mention the need for the existence of a work culture, a background which is encouraged and supported by family and wider relationships (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005:209).

In contrast, upon returning to the literature because of the findings, at least one industry (demand-side) report, determines work ethic as a workplace/life skill. The

report goes on to suggest that organisations surveyed believe that work ethic should be taught by schools/colleges or universities (CIPD, 2013:26).

In this study, the findings show that contrary to the demand-side view in the literature, employers considered work ethic to be a personal attribute, an approach or attitude that might differ across individuals (EMP-3). The employers such as EMP-2, EMP-3 and EMP-4, agreed that work ethic may be difficult to demonstrate, but good grades and some form of work experience can be an indicator of how hard a person might work and how willing they are to work.

The findings show that staff refer to professional conduct, rather than work ethic, and discussed professionalism in conjunction with a range of behaviours or skills to encapsulate this point. Staff-4 made the point that a certain level of ‘conformity’ is required in the work place, dependent on the organisation and role type.

The findings, with respect to personality and organisational fit, are consistent with the views of the students. Staff-2 suggested that being a ‘more holistic individual’ i.e. having a range of skills, including social skills, enables work readiness and that it is important to be liked as a person to sustain a job. Overall, there was an emphasis that professional conduct is seen as normal and acceptable behaviour for the work place.

A prior study from Wilson *et al.* (2013:1223) describes ‘professionalism’ as a graduate attribute that enables transformation or formation of character and identity. In their study Wilson and colleagues report upon shared and contested meanings for professionalism between stakeholders, and found that student perspectives showed varying understandings of the meaning and application of professionalism. This also accords with the earlier observations, which showed variations in opinion.

Contrary to the views of the demand-side, that work ethic should be developed within educational establishments (CIPD, 2013:26), the overall results show that all the participant groups agree that work ethic (or work readiness) is dependent on the individual. The results did not indicate that employers felt that HE should be responsible for teaching work ethic or professional behaviours. However, the opinion of staff and employers state such attributes can be supported and developed via activities such as work experience and work placements (e.g. EMP-1, EMP-3 and



EMP-5). Staff were clear on this point, as Staff-1 stated ‘we can’t teach them how to get out of bed at 6 am’, however work and practical experiences (from within the curriculum) can allow for development and help students to realise the cultural shift between HE and the professional work place.

There are two possible explanations for the results which can be linked to other findings. Firstly, for students, rather than a lack of work ethic, professional conduct awareness or skills, it could perhaps be a lack of appropriate work experience that results in the absence of these terms from the results. Referring to the discussion in section 6.3.2, students are shown to have an appreciation of the value of work experience for developing employability, but there is a theme of having a placement dilemma for some participants. It may be difficult therefore to appreciate the workplace and an organisations expectations without some opportunity to practice and therefore develop. This theme has some resonance with a range of literature from Crebert *et al.* (2004), Yorke (2005) and Jackson (2014) which advocate the value of realistic opportunities to practice.

The second possible explanation may lie in the complexity and terminology of the language of employability. The literature review, as stated at the beginning of this section, suggests that there are misunderstandings surrounding employability across the stakeholder divide (Tymon, 2013). The difference in opinion between staff and employers may reference different attributes, but as Wilson *et al.* (2013:1224) note, employability is a major feature of graduate attribute rhetoric for universities. Indeed, The University of Salford is no exception, with the business school embedding a core module of professional development within all of its B&M degree programmes. Both the literature and the analysis show that there is variation in the language surrounding employability. Within the opinions expressed in the study, there may be comparable underlying meanings but the analysis shows a potential lack of shared understanding between stakeholders.

In allowing the student voice to be heard by connecting to the wider stakeholders that influence employability development, it could be possible to avoid the assumptions of Holmes (2017:360) of vague and implicit understandings. By understanding the student perspective, possibilities for improved common ground between the supply and demand-sides can be realised. From this improvements to the frameworks for student support could be made, with practical action that

addresses employability needs, according to a shared meaning. The theoretical framework and the conclusion will address these final points in the next section.

## **6.6 Theoretical development**

The development of the theoretical framework is outlined in the introduction and literature review; the works of Bourdieu have been used as a lens to examine the data. Bourdieu's (2004) thinking tools for socio-analysis, *habitus*, *field* and *capital*, form part of the theoretical framework. The tools have been applied in the context of employability in order to contribute to the understanding of the social reality of the participants of this study.

So far, through the CGT analysis, the *role* a range of dynamic forms of capital were connected to the meanings that students have associated with employability. This section will address the *impact* of capital dimensions of the theoretical framework. For Bourdieu (1986) there are three essential forms of capital; economic, cultural and social. Given the results of early initial analysis in this project, based on the student views, it became clear that other dynamic interactive forms of capital were important. Thus the theoretical framework was expanded to include human, identity and psychological capitals based upon the work of Tomlinson (2017a). With respect to employability, the approach to broaden the examination of capitals beyond Bourdieu's work has proven valuable in this case.

Based on the social constructivist approach to the data, the results show that the development of employability and its meaning is created from a range of factors. The structures that contribute to meaning for students are understood to be contingent upon the operation of the HE system (the field), and the way it is experienced by undergraduates (habitus).

In this case, they are applied to the development of employability skills, together the elements of habitus, field and capital forms as a system of forces that determine practice. In the literature review, an account for understanding of structure and agency, the three central tools in relation to employability were explained (habitus, field and capital).

The application of Bourdieusian social theory is set out via the schematic for his logic of practice:

[(habitus + capital)] + field = practice

Bourdieu, (1984:101)

The following sections will examine each element of the schematic applied to formulate an understanding of the student voice also based on the social constructivist approach.

#### **6.6.1 Habitus, employability meaning and development**

Habitus can be understood fundamentally as norms, values and dispositions (Burke, 2016a). Habitus is said to be durable, formed and directed by a number of influences, and according to Bourdieu (1977a), family and education systems are two of the most influential forces (followed by the environment and peer groups).

Upon examining the findings, it appears the requirement and therefore the subsequent meaning of employability develops with the progression from secondary education to university. Bourdieu (1984:15) states ‘academic capital’ is the ‘guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school (the efficiency of which depends on the amount of cultural capital that is directly inherited from the family)’.

In order to establish if there is a connection between habitus and capitals in terms of employability, questions about the journey to HE became pertinent as a way to evaluate and research this area. The primary results show students have a disposition or habitus that the journey to university was a natural progression from school or college. Therefore, it can be inferred that the need to develop employability places an influence upon the habitus stated by the student participants as a ‘normal’ trajectory by attending university (detailed in section 6.2.2). In addition, even those students that came later to university still felt a degree was necessary in gaining desired employment or to progress in a career, e.g. STU-11 and STU-13. The opinion of the students overall has a theme that suggests the purpose of HE is to get a job. Employers and staff are in agreement with this viewpoint. Only one or two participants suggested that HE has a cultural capital impact upon improving knowledge and contributing to society.

The perceived need to attend HE or this disposition of habitus could be said to be formed and influenced from the field of HE. The development of human and economic capital perspectives resulting from HE expansion policies is perhaps

compounded by a response to labour market skills shortages (Leitch, 2006; BIS, 2009), resulting in a changed HE system and attitudes towards it. This may be particularly acute in this case based upon the widening participation makeup of the student body at the University of Salford.

Additionally, the forces from the field has extended from HE to the labour market and the wider education system. It could be argued that cultural capital transmission from secondary education and family results from the effect of a stronger influence from the wider field. This finding has support from the secondary data, the literature review. The wider field influence is seen in the early policies that were implemented to expand HE, such as the Robbins report (1963), the 1988 Education Reform Act and Dearing report (1997). The resultant attempts to link skills supply to labour market demand may not have been completely successful from an industry perspective, following recent criticism from professional bodies such as the CIPD (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017). However, regardless of the changes in funding (from 2004 onwards, Figure 2-1), students now see entering HE as the 'norm' and the option to attend university has been reinforced by schools, colleges and even parental influences.

Following Bourdieu (1986), it is possible that the disposition to enter HE that is seen in these students is an 'effect of power'. The decision is not a 'conscious, deliberate act' but a cultural capital dimension resulting from schools and colleges 'adhering to rules of the game' in terms of perceived academic capital (Bowers-Brown, 2016).

On the one hand the experiences of the student, their habitus has been influenced and capital gained by employability inputs, resulting in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and dispositions. On the other hand, the framing of the employability agenda mediated by policy and practices may have created a collective habitus or disposition from the students and employers, that the purpose of HE is a means to get a job. This finding suggests there is a tension between the teaching practices for knowledge versus those for skills.

Rawolle and Lingard (2013) have considered Bourdieu's sociology in the context of education policy and Bourdieu prompts us to ask what kind of knowledge is valued in the field, what groups hold power in the system and what do they assume education is for? As proposed by Wheelahan (2015) potentially HE is being reduced

to skills needed to get a job and for work, resulting in the subordination of knowledge. In this situation, it may be possible that the capital resources in the field are not fully realised because the focus of HE is distorted in favour of employability.

As Bourdieu (1986) explains, to gain cultural capital (in this case from academic capital) in the form of the institutionalised state, acquisition is via the embodied state, a disposition of self-improvement. It could therefore be said that cultural capital is inculcated by the influence of the field and the benefits of having a higher education and what it can bring. This is despite the cost, time and ongoing arguments relating to the value of degrees and HE (Christie, 2015/2016; Ball, 2019).

In terms of the practical meaning of employability for students, the analysis has shown that via learning from the field they have an understanding of employability. For most participants, knowledge has been gained and developed on the basis that employability is a concept understood as ‘interwoven’ with factors that principally requires skills to *do* and skills to *get* a job.

This reflects the possession of human capital as stated by Hillage and Pollard (1998) as knowledge, skills and attitudes for actions. However, Coombes *et al.* (2000) argue that human capital emphasis on employability decontextualizes, generalises and isolates skills from the learner’s world. The students themselves have concluded that inputs into the curricula, in the form of a professional development module have had a positive impact upon other capital aspects, primarily with regards to psychological capital. From a theoretical perspective, the findings have important implications for capitals gained from the field. Employability inputs from the field have shaped the habitus for dispositions, knowledge and skills that could be translated into the field of the workplace (Bourdieu, 1977b).

The expansion, supply and economic policy has created a focus upon employability for HE, adding pressure to invest, develop employability support and include it in the curricula. Employability has become a force within and emanating from the field of HE influencing habitus and capital interactions.

#### **6.6.2 Field, employability meaning and development**

The University of Salford business school has responded to the wider HE system recommendations to include employability within the curriculum. A professional development module forms a core element of all the undergraduate degree

programmes, detailed in section 1.7.1. From the participant interactions, the results show that the module has influenced students to consider their own employability and develop understanding of the processes of recruitment and selection.

Continuing with the theory of Bourdieu (1984) the field is the context or setting in which habitus and capital interact. The schematic developed (described above), stresses the relationship between a field and its habitus, Bourdieu maintained that 'habitus must not be used in isolation. Rather it must be used in relation to the notion of field' (Bourdieu, 2005:47). Taking this point as part of their employability development the student participants were required to undertake a skills self-assessment and had provision within their degree programme to complete a work placement. Both of these forces from the field seem to have had different impacts upon formation of habitus.

Via the curriculum, the HE field has created a situation where the student participants are required to engage in an employability skills self-assessment. The results show that self-assessment was recognised as a method to determine the current skills and achievements, or personal attributes allowing the consideration of organisational fit. The comment from FG4-6 (section 5.4.1) provides a good indicator of the self-assessment categorisation: 'Discovery of oneself, applied to the ability to adapt to certain environment situations and scenarios'. STU-10 mentions 'self-discovery' of their skills and future learning needs, whilst other participants spoke about self-assessment for organisational fit with respect to the required employability skills (sections 5.9.1 and 6.3.1). Other stakeholders from the field, staff and employers agreed with the students on this aspect, stating that self-assessment is an important factor in building self-awareness (for organisational fit) and confidence (sections 5.15.1 and 5.11.1).

The students' voiced the opinion that self-assessment was a necessary and a positive approach to constructing and developing their employability. By applying the theoretical lens, students' are being asked to examine their current agency and capital resources through their engagement in the professional development module. Consequently, the engagement in the field has enabled them to consider their needs for future development of employability skills that will be applied to practices required in the work place.

However, some students found the interaction with the field and within it the concept of employability emotionally challenging. STU-7 described it as 'overwhelming', and others spoke about the need for 'emotional intelligence' in the application of employability skills. Indeed, Bourdieu describes the field as a 'space of conflict and competition', analogous with a battlefield in which individuals are required to negotiate, manoeuvre and even struggle to access the resources or available stakes (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:17). Therefore, the outcome of engaging in the field could be a level of emotional stress and adjustment when students undertake an assessment of themselves and their capabilities. The findings illustrate an example where dispositions (habitus in term of self-awareness) and psychological capital (in the form of emotional resilience) are effects from the field.

Bourdieu's theoretical link between habitus and field is of particular relevance to the findings for student views that infer a placement dilemma. The analysis and resultant evaluation of the data describes the 'placement dilemma' in sections 5.8.3 and 6.3.2. This phenomenon was determined whereby the participants expressed a range of dispositions towards opportunities to development in a work placement. Although virtually all participants, including staff and employers agree on the benefits, a range of student views was seen from a level of indifference to enthusiastic advocacy.

The placement dilemma could also be framed by the threshold concepts of troublesome knowledge and if the placement dilemma is overcome, the knowledge gained could be transformative and irreversible (Meyer and Land, 2005; Meyer *et al.*, 2016). The issues that students describe that create the placement dilemma is troublesome knowledge, however there is potential for the development employability knowledge and skills that could transform the student view (or habitus). The result of taking a work placement could allow students to realise the threshold of employability, change dispositions towards professional work and offer opportunities for the development of capital.

The findings raises some questions over the willingness or access to opportunities for students to take action in developing their own learning with consequences for ontological and epistemological positions. Despite knowledge of their developmental needs there seems to be hesitation to take opportunities to develop capital that could be gained from moving temporarily into a professional field.

Based upon the data the impact of the field on the habitus, the thinking behind the work placement dilemma is less clear, for some uncertainty lies in the investment that is required in terms of work placements.

Bourdieu would perhaps argue that it is not just the individual but also the 'structure of the game', therefore the system of forces that places influence upon the field in which the habitus is formed. The data highlights various issues such as time/cost, competition for placements, 'difficult' recruitment and selection practices and a conflict with balancing academic work and placement applications, as major areas of resistance to work placements. There is a possibility that there is a lack of placements available for the number of students.

The relationship between habitus and field is twofold. On the one hand, the field structures the habitus, as explained above, and on the other hand, the habitus gives meaning to the field; it makes it a world worth investing one's energy in (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 44). Drawing on the work of Kalfa and Taksa (2015) the choice of undertaking a placement is seen as a positive developmental action by the field of HE and is supported by many employers including all those in this study. Perhaps it is taken for granted that within the support structures of HE and the workplace field there is an absence of a framework to sufficiently assess students' needs and perceptions of work placements. Perhaps it is the case that as an undergraduate there is a capital deficit (social, cultural and psychosocial) in that the support required to access the workplace field, return to the field of HE to complete their studies and completing the journey to become a graduate cannot be realised. In other words if there is an alignment of the habitus to the field and sufficient support from the field to undertake employability development the placement dilemma could be eliminated for some students. However, if the strength of capital in relation to practice is reduced, it can create a situation of uncertainty or the placement dilemma.

In Bourdieusian terms of practice, the effect of a field on an agent is dependent on their habitus, their position in particular fields (regardless of the evidence of benefits placements can bring) and the strength of the field relative to other fields in which the agent is active (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008:732). The placement dilemma is of particular interest when considering the notion that B&M degrees are semi-vocational, the provision of education for a range of occupations that suggest



some form of managerial responsibility as part of the role. In which case some form of occupational experience will be valuable in responding to an employability agenda that demands skilled graduates. Therefore, rather than taking a functional human capital approach, placements will allow access to other forms of capital, rather than a narrow view or subordination of academic values to business and market needs. Kalfa and Taksa (2015) argue that HE needs to incorporate considered learning practices if it is to avoid the limitations of the current employability agenda. HE therefore needs to move beyond an economic capital and contextualised human capital approach with respect to employability inputs.

Since Bourdieu argues that habitus is a socialised subjectivity, a work placement could provide durable and transposable dispositions associated with the 'perceptions, appreciation and action' in a professional setting (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:126). In the absence of realistic experiences (Crebert *et al.*, 2004) the habitus of the individual is bounded by the lack of information about how the professional workplace operates in reality. This is perhaps why some employers argue graduates have a lack of practical skills to make them 'work ready'. However, with realistic experience for the transmission of capital and knowledge, the context of interactions is important, and students will therefore be able to construct the graduate self (Bourdieu, 1986).

By recognising the need for students' access to the social processes and wider capital of the work placement field this may be a pathway to resolving the placement dilemma for some. Rather than focussing singly upon skills, employers and HE need to work together (as a network of fields) to understand how to facilitate students to assess their capital resources and determine how these might operate in practice. Therefore it may be possible for the agents to recognise the requirements of the workplace, by shedding light into expected actions and behaviours, to overcome issues of work-readiness, allowing the opportunity to practice work ethic.

### **6.6.3 Capital, employability meaning and development**

The previous sections detail the likely social interactions and situations (the relationship between habitus and field), where capitals may be accumulated and therefore have influence upon practice. Figure 6-2 below summarises the connections that have been determined between the different forms of capital and the roles they have served in relation to employability in this thesis. In the mind

map, the theoretical categories have been linked to each of the related form of capital. The outcomes have been determine by the CGT method.

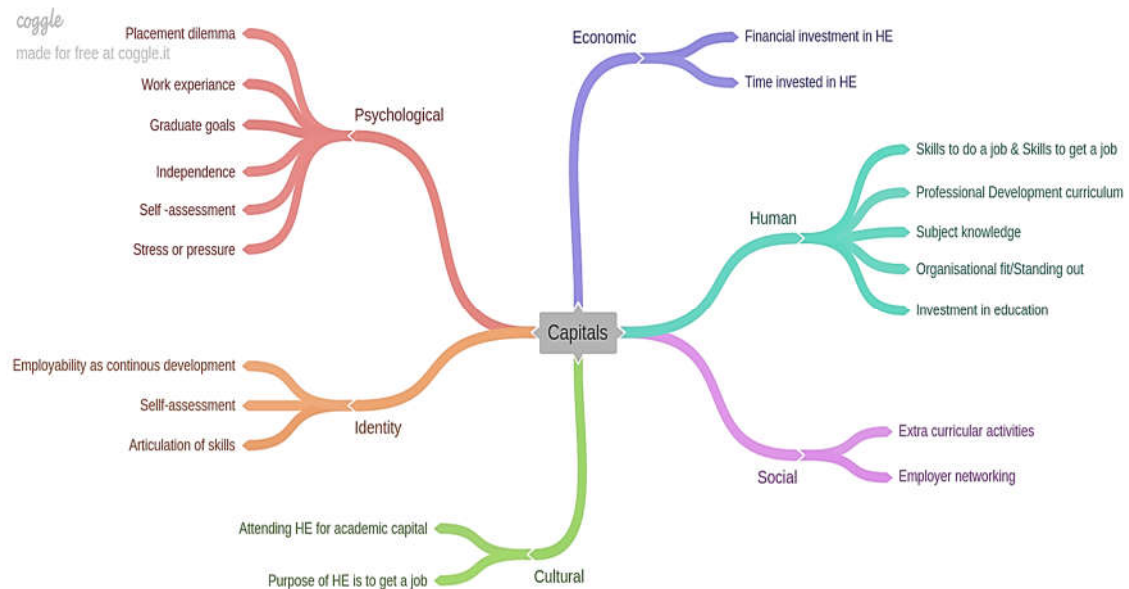


Figure 6-2 Role and impact of capitals

Two points are important in the modelling of capital beyond the core of Bourdieu's concepts of economic, cultural and social capital. Firstly, as Reay (2004:57) points out, capitals are a relational concept, existing in conjunction with other forms, they therefore cannot be understood in isolation. The transformation of one form of capital to another is central to the idea of Bourdieu (1986). However, the accumulation and transmission involves complex processes not easily achieved, and is dependent upon networks of relationships, volumes of capital and position within the social space (Bourdieu, 1986).

The second point is the structure of the social world and reality in which capitals are being examined. Here the theoretical framework draws upon Tomlinson's (2017a) graduate capital model to build the sociological approaches that underpins the thesis. In addition to expanding the range of capitals under consideration, Tomlinson's model offers an 'alternative vocabulary' for understanding employability in HE, by extending beyond the 'conventional graduate skills approaches' (Tomlinson, 2017a).

From this perspective, the results have highlighted the structures of the social world consisting of the field of HE, interconnected with family, schooling and the work place in which capitals were being examined. Based on an approach of the social constructivist reality, the data is in keeping with Bourdieu's theoretical approach, wherein field, habitus and practice refer in a sense to 'bundles of relations' (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008). Habitus provides the stimulus for predispositions (along with capital) and indicates a socially developed capacity to act appropriately in a given field (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008:731).

Levels of capital are said by Bourdieu to be crucial for understanding levels of aspiration and expectation when moulded by habitus and are thought to enable or restrict what individuals think or know they can achieve within the 'field of the possibles' (Bourdieu, 1984; Burke, 2016b:12). Capitals can also explain patterns of practice. For example, in considering employability, students can use capitals to determine what investment to make in their practices that can be gained from the field of HE.

Several students suggested that the building of confidence also came from self-assessment and the emotional responses to this process. This significance of confidence for employability was supported by employers and staff. This aspect was discussed in section 6.4, in relation to interactions primarily between the field and habitus. Students also expressed that confidence can be developed through work placements, although for some there is uncertainty (the placement dilemma is created), determining what can be achieved in this particular field (discussed in section 6.3.2).

From a psychological capital perspective, the student view infers an emotional reaction to examining their own employability and the consideration of needs to develop. Evaluating the findings with the literature has shown that confidence emanates from the outcomes of the meaning of employability, from skills to do and skills to get a job and is closely linked to motivation. From the students perspective motivation drives the potential to meet future goals or ambitions in relation to graduate success.

Psychological capital could therefore play a role in influencing the students to consider what is possible for them beyond the field of HE. Developing psychological

capital is important for overcoming employability challenges of being a graduate but also for building confidence as an undergraduate. Being prepared and developing an understanding of the self, builds upon strengths to pro-actively take opportunities that can develop the locus of self-control, thereby embracing the advantages of employability. For Luthans *et al.* (2007:33), psychological capital focuses upon ‘who you are becoming’ rather than ‘who you are’.

This positive construct of psychological capital encapsulates hope, resilience, self-efficacy and optimism. This is an important factor in differentiating between undergraduate and graduate employability frameworks. The theoretical framework places the focus on the need to consider how sources of confidence/psychological capital can be identified and developed whilst in HE, before exiting into professional work and a life beyond work.

The focus upon this alternative form of capital may also address the concerns of students in relation to the negative aspects of stress and pressure. Development of psychological capital could support the development or transmission of other forms of capital for sustainable employability development as students move towards the graduate labour market. This combination of findings provide support for the conceptual premise that psychological capital is an important resource for developing employability in students.

## **6.7 Interrogation of the definition of employability**

The discussion culminates in the interrogation of the definition of employability based upon the new insight that has been brought together from the findings and the literature. This action was enabled through the evaluation of the major theoretical categories (via the CGT method) in the light of the theoretical framework (Figure 6-1). The work of Bourdieu and Tomlinson, particularly in relation to capitals have provided a robust framework to examine employability, where there was much debate over employability skills and definitions.

The definition of employability that provides the reference point for this thesis is as follows:

‘A set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their

chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.'

Yorke (2006:8)

On the basis of the interpretation of the data, the definition of employability should include a long term outlook and take account for the role of confidence in developing employability that is of any consequence to the individual. Therefore a definition could be described as:

*Employability is a set of skills, understandings and personal attributes, **achieved through continuous lifelong development. Success requires support for positive psychological capital to build strengths that are used to one's advantage.** The results make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.*

It can be said therefore that within HE it is possible to provide curricula support for developing skills to *get* a job and the development of human and psychological capital. This leads to improved employability and possible labour market outcomes. In terms of employability practice, it is continuous in development when entering the workplace using skills to *do* a job and skills that contribute for a life beyond work.

In pulling together the various threads of this thesis, the revised definition takes account of the student voice and incorporates the stakeholder response. The revision presents an opportunity for a common easily understandable language, i.e. instilling the idea of continuous development, and employability does not end with the degree award or the first graduate job. In order to improve support for undergraduate students, HE must emphasise the continuous development aspect of employability; getting a degree is not the end but rather one of the steps of developing the practice of employability. HEI's should work with employers to support the principle of lifelong learning. Moreover, this point supports both the philosophical and practical perspectives for the sustainability of skills and knowledge for a life beyond work.

## 6.8 Summary

The discussion chapter brought together the literature and findings to present new insight into the student voice for employability and the substantive theory. Seven major theoretical categories were developed from the analysis which addressed the research questions. Overall the answers, discussion and categories provide the basis for the research contribution of this thesis. It was found that a range of factors have influenced how students understand the meaning of employability and view their development. By asking participants to consider what employability *meant* to them rather than *what* it is defined as provided a deeper insight into the current views of employability.

For the students the central research question of the meaning of employability was firstly a construction of skills to *do* (supply-side) and skills to *get* a job (demand-side) (following from Hillage and Pollard, 1998). For students the challenge they describe is developing the ability to articulate proof in ‘selling yourself’ (FG-5-2) and to being able to demonstrate skills to do a job (STU-3). Secondly students and the other participants broadly agree that the purpose of HE was to obtain a degree that was necessary for a professional role. Through the evaluation of the literature it was determined that the significance of the policy changes, combined with the employability agenda has contributed to this outcome.

When examining the findings relating to the area of employability development, two major theoretical categories were determined from the findings analysis, one of self-assessment and organisational fit and another of a work placement dilemma. With respect to organisational fit, this category was interpreted from a range of factors that students felt underpinned the development of their employability, for example personal attributes and work experience. The work placement dilemma is the range of students’ views that highlights uncertainties for undertaking a work placement.

As explained the range of capital forms examined were expanded from Bourdieu’s core of social, cultural and economic capital to incorporate the dynamic forms determined by Tomlinson (2017a) of human, identity and psychological capital. Examining the various capitals was important as they accumulate from developing employability and the findings were broadly in line with the literature. From an

undergraduate perspective confidence was developed from a number of experiences and as a form of psychological capital was determined to be the most valuable.

The final research question set out to determine if there was any difference of opinion between stakeholders. Key categories of employability as a continuous development process and work ethic as an employability attribute were discovered. The disparity between the demand and supply-side definitions of employability are addressed at length within the literature. From the study employers (demand-side) were of the view that employability should be a continuous process, developed beyond graduation. Whilst work ethic was not used by any of the students both employers and staff discussed the requirement of 'readiness to work'.

Considering the findings within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's (2004) thinking tools for socio-analysis, *habitus*, *field* and *capital* were used as a lens to examine employability. With respect to habitus the expansion, supply and economic policy has created a focus upon employability for HE, adding pressure to invest and develop employability support and include it in the curricula. The field is the context in which habitus and capital interact. The discussion focusses upon a number of factors of employability (e.g. self-assessment and stress/pressure) that have been impacted upon by the field. Figure 6-2 illustrates the connections between the different forms of capitals and the relational nature of the concept. Capitals also explain patterns of practice (Bourdieu, 1984) and as discussed from the students' perspective psychological capital plays an influencing role in the development of their employability.

The culmination and key contribution of the study is the interrogation of the definition of employability. A revised definition shown above (section 6.7) has been presented based upon the evaluation of the insights, theoretical categories and the application of the theoretical framework. The revised definition ensures that the student voice and stakeholder responses are accounted for by including the continuous lifelong process and positive psychological capital.

## **7 Conclusion**

This chapter makes the case for the contribution the research has made to understanding employability for undergraduate students. The chapter begins with a review of the research aims and the approach to answering the research questions empirically. The chapter draws together the outcomes of the research for both theoretical and practical contributions. It goes on to scrutinise the research design and methods before identifying areas of limitation and potential future work. The chapter finishes with a reflection about the research journey.

### **7.1 How well was the aim met?**

The aim of this PhD was to discover the voice of undergraduate students relating to employability within tertiary business and management education. The literature review demonstrates that a significant amount of space is given to the inclusion of employability within the HE curriculum. This includes emphasis on graduate outcomes. Understanding the needs of undergraduate students has clearly been shown in this study to be important if employability initiatives within the HE curriculum are to be effective.

To achieve the aim the following research questions were developed:

Central question: What does employability mean to undergraduate students with tertiary business and management education?

Sub-questions:

1. What is students' opinion regarding their development of employability skills?
2. What is the role of capitals in employability for students?
3. Is there variation in the opinion of employability from stakeholders such as employers and lecturers?

This PhD used qualitative primary data to explore the opinion of B&M students of the meaning of employability and development as undergraduates. This aim was met by gathering empirical data from this constructivist grounded theory based study. The questions were answered by collecting data in the form of student focus groups, followed by individual interviews. This approach, underpinned by an



interpretive philosophy, was effective in eliciting responses from the students shedding light on the research questions to create theory.

#### 7.1.1 **Constructing the meaning of employability**

With respect to the meaning of employability for the students, two important aspects of the findings determined the concept as principally skills to *do* and *get* a job. Unlike some of the literature, students understand that employability has a connectedness and complexity that goes beyond a skills listing approach, but rather concerns the *application* of skills and dispositions in work place situations.

It seems a need for enhanced employability has influenced the students, driving their entry into HE. Students in this study are of the view that the purpose of HE is to get a job, however whilst on this journey they have developed independence and life experience skills that they see contributes to their sense of employability. The picture for students of employability overall is that, as the literature consistently suggests, employability meaning is constructed from many influences. It is not simply a case of gaining or listing skills.

The study also aimed to investigate the response of other stakeholders, employers and staff, to student views. This aim was met by creating interview questions to elicit responses to views expressed in the focus groups and interviews. This proved to be a successful strategy, with the applied methods enabling the student voice to be heard. The response from the stakeholder groups centred on confidence, continuous professional development and work ethic.

Employers and staff supported the view of the purpose of HE is to get a job, with some limited support for the wider HE knowledge contribution to society. However, the key difference in opinion was the findings supporting the principle of employability as continuous development. This contrasts with some studies that suggest employers demand ‘oven-ready’ graduates. It was found that students in this study did not explicitly consider longer-term professional development, but rather felt stress and pressure to achieve employability as a new graduate.

In general, the literature acknowledges some complexity in defining employability from a range of perspectives. Nonetheless, the continuous aspect is lost from employability discussions though it appears in the supporting discussion of the influential work of Yorke (2006). Continuous development does not appear in the

definition of employability from Yorke (2006) which remains widely cited today. A revised definition that explicitly includes continuous professional development has been put forward that could affect a shared understanding of employability. The revised definition addresses continuous development for both sustained employability (skills to *do* a job) and recruitment (skills to *get* a job).

### **7.1.2 Constructing employability development**

Employability development aspects, which are important and even challenging to the students, include self-assessment and considerations of future organisational fit. In considering their own development, the employability inputs received (in the form of a professional development module), were shown to be important to students in understanding their own skills and how they might transfer into the work place.

In response to the student views, employers accepted that self-assessment for organisational fit is an important aspect of employability. Employers recognise these personal attributes but place greater emphasis upon ‘readiness to work’ and the behaviours of work ethic. Staff did agree on this issue but referred to the term professional conduct. The analysis shows students did not explicitly mention the term work ethic or professionalism but focused upon personality aspects. All participants agree such behaviours cannot be taught and are the responsibility of the individual. It can therefore be concluded from the study that there are some differences in the terminology used when describing aspects of employability. The literature presents a mixed picture of both descriptive terms and responsibility for work ethic (Tymon, 2013; Wilson *et al.*, 2013). The views of employers are in contrast to demand-side reports suggesting work ethic should be taught in schools and universities (CIPD, 2013).

This work contributes to existing knowledge that appropriate work experience could provide opportunities for employability development by providing experience of professional work places (Jackson, 2014). The empirical findings also support the view that employability includes the development of skills as well as dispositions for conduct in the workplace and understanding the requirements of organisational fit.

Another major conclusion is the presence of a work placement dilemma. The opinion that emerged in association with employability inputs, suggested that

further development gained by taking a work placement has created a dilemma, based upon the spectrum of participants' views. The theory developed, led to the conclusion that uncertainty, along with concerns over the time/effort and likelihood of obtaining a placement creates a dilemma that prevents most students from pursuing this avenue. The placement dilemma occurs despite comments that expressed clarity over the benefits of employability development outcomes resulting from professional work experience.

Critically the literature advocates the benefits of work placements if they are authentic opportunities to practice. Additionally, Government reviews suggest that universities and employers should work in partnership to enhance this provision. Although all the employers interviewed were involved in the provision of undergraduate work placements and internships, students felt concern that there were not enough placements (discussed in 5.5.3). This alongside the competitive process, seemed to exacerbate the work placement dilemma, seemingly reducing their chances of successfully gaining a placement. Through the literature, the discussion has shown that an approach to understand the placement dilemma is to consider it in relation to threshold concepts. On the one hand, the placement dilemma is troublesome knowledge but on the other hand, the development of employability knowledge and skills gained from a placement can allow for the threshold of employability to be realised (Meyer *et al.*, 2016; Procter and Harvey, 2018).

The dilemma was a surprising finding in the study and has potential implications for the provision of work placements in HE. This raises questions of how experiential employability development is implemented and supported in HE, and further work is required to establish the extent of the work placement dilemma.

### **7.1.3 The role of capitals**

The study aimed to understand the impact of employability and its influence and role upon forms of capital with respect to the construction of employability meaning and development. A range of capitals formed a set of constructs that connected across the research questions and theoretical framework. This aim was met by broadening the range of capitals beyond the core of Bourdieusian theory of practice. The theoretical framing followed the principle stated by Bourdieu (1986) that forms of capital are not isolated but are interconnected. Furthermore, Bourdieu envisages

a process in which one form of capital can be transformed into another (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 2004). This was particularly significant as from the early stages of analysis, confidence developed as an underpinning theme of the students' employability. The findings of this study suggest confidence and the associated self-efficacy are forms of psychological capital that students felt was important. Gaining confidence supports being able to demonstrate their own employability but drives motivation to meet goals and ambitions as a future graduate.

Psychological capital is often associated in the literature as capacity for work place and organisational performance, and indeed the students recognised this function. In other literature, the aspects of resilience and adaptability of psychological capital is highlighted as important for graduate employability (e.g. Tomlinson, 2017a). The theme of psychological capital in the form of confidence developed in the study as a much more fundamental resource, reflecting the position of the undergraduate student. It is therefore concluded that psychological capital for building confidence is important as it focuses on 'who you are becoming' rather than 'who you are' (Luthans *et al.*, 2007). This outcome draws together the threads of employability as a longer-term development process, which by focusing on developing confidence rather than just a wish list of skills can better meet the need of students. The inclusion of psychological capital in the employability discourse has the potential to reduce pressure on students and their perception to be an 'oven ready' graduate.

The experience of the students saw them reflecting upon the meaning of employability and development needs, through the challenges of self-assessment and understanding of recruitment processes. Students claimed that much of the confidence they gained, was supported by the curricula inputs in the form of a professional development module.

The emotional demands of developing confidence and employability can also be viewed through the lens of threshold concepts. Challenging learning experiences are viewed by Rattray (2016) as the threshold of liminality which she suggests can be mediated by psychological capital. For this study, the development of psychological capital can lead to the desired learning outcomes where the threshold of employability is realised.

Overall, the inclusion of the positive language of psychological capitals is included in a revised employability definition alongside continuous development. This could allow employability to be framed in an advantageous way and encourage access to the other resources in the field of both HE and industry. The combined new vocabulary lays the groundwork for improved collective understandings and responsibility for employability development. This is particularly significant based upon the situation for the students, where they sit in the gap between supply and demand-side for employability requirements in their HE journey.

## **7.2 Key contributions**

The following list suggests a summary of the contribution of this thesis to the ongoing employability agenda, distilled from the data presented and discussed. This study has made an original contribution by exploring the views of undergraduate B&M students with respect to employability. The key contribution from this study was to increase the understanding of the meaning and development of employability from the perspective of undergraduate students rather than graduates.

To reiterate, the aim of this PhD was to discover the voice of undergraduate students relating to employability within tertiary business and management education.

To address the aim and research questions for this study the following objectives were set out:

- To investigate the opinion of the meaning of employability for students and stakeholders within the field of HE
- To understand the impact of employability skills and the role and influences of various forms of capital
- To investigate the response of employer and stakeholders, to students opinion of employability
- To interrogate the definition of skills within employability to understand the relative emphasis in an HE context.

The following details the contributions that address the aim and objectives that allow the student voice to be heard:

1. Undergraduate students understand that employability involves a number of factors, having an interconnectedness of skills to *do* a job and to *get* a job.

Meaning is constructed from many influences and includes behavioural and emotional aspects.

2. Employability development is challenging for students. Undertaking further development through a work placement was not a clear binary choice but one of a placement dilemma. This conclusion has consequences for the uptake of employability development opportunities.
3. Building confidence is an important aspect of employability development. Students state that confidence can be gained from employability inputs taught within the HE curriculum.
4. Confidence has been theoretically framed as a source of psychological capital which can be transformed and transmitted in conjunction with other forms of capital.
5. Employability definitions should be reframed to include longer-term continuous development. This has potential benefits for an improved consensus as to employability requirements upon graduation and a shared responsibility for development across stakeholders.
6. Employability definitions should emphasise the importance of positive psychological capital. Psychological capital has been found to be of significance for undergraduates in the development of employability.

#### **7.2.1 Theoretical contribution**

To date, few studies have either examined the student voice or adopted a theoretical framework beyond the core of economic, social and cultural capitals. The theoretical model developed presents an original application of Bourdieusian social theory in a formation that illustrates alternative forms of capital as resources. Support for alternative forms of dynamic capital was provided by Tomlinson's (2017a) extension of Bourdieu's capitals. The outcome highlights the value of an examination of a wider range of capitals and builds upon Bourdieu's theory of the interconnectivity between social and cultural capital. The theory presented here illustrates the influences and inclusion of dynamic capitals such as psychological capital, and the formation of identity capital that could affect the transmission of core capitals.

The theoretical contribution in this case draws upon the later work of Bourdieu (1988) that characterises HE as a field, placing the focus upon students as agents attempting to position themselves within this social space, in the light of the

employability agenda. Bourdieu views the participants in education systems are at the same time products of those systems, whereby students' dispositions and capital access are largely formed by their prior experiences. Bourdieu's thinking tool has been applied to ask the questions what is the role and impact of capitals? Based upon the student voice, are some types of capital more important than others within HE?

By the application of Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice, most students' views have therefore determined that psychological capital is more important than other forms of capital in developing employability and determining the chances of success. With support from employability taught in the curriculum, the study provides some insights to student learning and practices. The argument as stated in section 2.5, is that skills will allow students to acquire their own insights and enable them to link back to their own world, supporting their ontological reality and epistemological learning needs (Freire, 1972:30). The impact of employability learning is also important in terms of the interconnected nature of capital development and transmission. The psycho-social nature of psychological, identity and cultural capital enable an understanding of the requirements of the labour market to construct a locus of self-control and sense of purpose in life, when moving between fields (Kupfer, 2011).

It is acknowledged that Bourdieusian theory is a popular focus in many fields of research, with education being no exception (Abrahams, *et al.*, 2016). However, an original theoretical contribution has been developed from an analysis of the data to critically address the lack of student voice within B&M education in the application of Bourdieusian social theory.

### **7.2.2 Original contribution**

The study was constructed to hear undergraduate student voices and the research approach was developed to capture other stakeholders' response to those opinions. The choice of constructivist grounded theory allowed the social reality for students to be seen through this lens. The particular approach to seek employer and staff responses to the students, rather than direct opinion is also an original approach to examining the employability agenda.

In response to the student views, the research has discovered that despite rhetoric that suggests employers expect graduates to be ‘oven-ready’, on the contrary this is not the expectation. The results suggests the possibility that work ethic combined with employability as continuous professional development could provide an improved shared understanding of employability.

The data collection methods were designed to embed the CGT approach. Data was first collected from students via focus groups (11 in total) and further data was then collected from individual interviews (14 in total). Following the analysis of these large data sets, interviews were designed to pose the student views to employer stakeholders and staff (6 and 4 interviews respectively). All of the data was then processed using the phased analytical method set out in section 4.13.5. A large number of studies on this topic have focused upon graduate outcomes rather than undergraduate views and this study has made a contribution in addressing this gap. None of the studies cited have adopted the particular strategy and methods of this research as a successful approach for social construction.

### **7.2.3 Implications for policy and practice**

Employability is a topic that covers many areas from policy in HE through to ideologies, practices and models to embed employability within the curriculum.

This study has shown that in simple terms employability is recognised as important, and there is a stakeholder consensus that employability should be included in the curriculum. Current Government policy places significant pressure on HE to deliver value in this area and this is ideologically bound with a purpose for individual economic benefit. The latest post 18-education review (known as the Augur report) appears to continue to reinforce the economic value of HE and to reduce the impact upon the public purse (Department for Education, 2019). It is not clear how the current proposals will be implemented or how it may impact upon the widening participation agenda or those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

In response to student views, employers and staff suggested that employability should be considered a long-term form of development. Themes of lifelong learning form part of UK skills policies, however professional bodies such as the CIPD are critical of participation rates and a lack of commitment and direction from Government (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017). Additionally, lifelong learning or



continuous development does not appear to be explicitly linked to employability skills definitions in the literature.

The findings from this study would suggest that continuous lifelong development should be included in employability definitions but should also feature more strongly in HE curricula and policy. A refocus upon the ideas on lifelong learning could allow for a sustainable view of skills policy and shift the focus of responsibility from education providers, in particular HE, to a wider range of stakeholders. For employers in general the literature review shows that there does need to be an improved commitment to organisational learning, training and development. The commitment to life-long learning should not just apply to new graduates but form development that occurs across the period of careers. If this is considered alongside a shared vocabulary for an understanding of employability meanings and needs, there is scope for improved shared responsibility and investment.

The latest proposal in the post-18 education review suggests increasing flexibility and lifelong learning, with the introduction of a 'lifelong learning loan allowance' (Department for Education, 2019:38). For the UK Government to avoid criticism of the past, it might be worthwhile considering the policy objectives of the ILO (ILO, 2019). The CIPD in particular were critical of Government in a lack of a consistent and coherent policy for skills to develop a competitive workforce (Brinkley and Crowley, 2017). In the ILOs latest report examining the future of work and skills, in addition to a 'universal entitlement to lifelong learning that enables people to acquire skills and to reskill and upskill', the ILO proposes a shift away from economic human capital approaches to work. Rather the ILO proposes a human-centred approach that 'strengthens the social contract by placing people and the work they do at the centre of economic and social policy and business practice' (ILO, 2019:11).

#### **7.2.4 Implications for the student experience**

In the light of policy and practice there is a need to focus upon the student experience going forward. It has been shown that students find the development of employability challenging. However it has also been shown that with support from within HE development can be supported.

The proposed change to the definition of employability (to include continuous lifelong development and positive psychological capital) can be used to manage the expectation of stakeholders. This section examines the impact of the contributions for students and employers.

For the students that participated in this study the forms of employability development experienced from the curriculum have been shown to build psychological capital. However, what is also clear is that some form of 'real-world' work experience is important for employability development and in supporting the student transition from undergraduate to graduate.

Due to the findings of this thesis one of the next steps is to make the connection between work experience and the graduate labour market. Employability development for students is raised in the issue of the placement dilemma and suggested efforts to overcome this. For employers and HE overcoming the placement dilemma could develop the connection between work experience and their future utilisation of the available graduates in the labour market.

Considering the issues of the supply and demand-side of employability critically Ball (2019) states that the UK is not using its stock of graduates as effectively as it could and that there is a problem in the pipeline of supply. With respect to the student participants of this study, this point is particularly pertinent when considering the opportunities in the local North West labour market.

When discussing the local labour market prospects for graduates in the North West are relatively buoyant with Greater Manchester having the biggest graduate labour market outside London (Ball, 2019; Cunningham and Christie, 2019). Further labour market analysis from Ball (2017) suggests that, in theory, it is possible to find any category of employment in the region (and indeed Manchester alone) as all occupational sectors are represented. The placement dilemma shows though that this positive view of the labour market is not being necessarily realised or understood by the students. One contribution of this thesis is an understanding of this disparity. It can be concluded that there needs to be greater focus on the local labour market and the opportunities and jobs within it.

This has an impact on HE and local employers, specifically small and medium enterprises (SMEs), as there needs to be much stronger efforts to collaborate on a

range of different work placements. Consequently this would follow from the recommendations of both the Leitch (2006) and Wilson (2012) reports for optimal skills development along with business and university collaboration. This would form an attempt to bridge the gap between supply and demand-side needs. Such business types must increase their engagement with students at an earlier stage of their education to communicate the wide variety of jobs, skills and opportunities within the local market. Whilst this is a more complex function for HE to deal with requiring the management of an increased volume of smaller company relationships rather than working with a lower volume of large companies. However, the resources required would be of benefit to the students in the development of employability through realistic opportunities to practice (Crebert *et al.*, 2004).

The development of a more accurate view of the labour market, feeds into the calls from the likes of Ball (2019:64) to generate ‘a much clearer, systemic and granular view of occupational demand’. This is needed to tackle the ‘often-underappreciated and overlooked role’ of important local employers (Ball, 2017). This granular view does not come without increased costs to employers both in time, marketing and recruitment costs for SMEs but the research suggests there will a return for such efforts.

By drawing on data from the DHLE survey, it can be seen that 58% of graduates from 2016 went to work in the region they studied in and 69% went to work in the region they were originally domiciled. Only 18% of graduates went to work somewhere they were not already connected to (Ball, 2017). This demonstrates the significant impact of HE supply-side that favours the local rather than national labour markets.

It is therefore of vital importance that the format of the local labour market is understood by the students during their undergraduate studies, many of whom are focussed on large international/national companies rather the local firms in their area.

The HE role needs to evolve to develop the perceptions of both undergraduate students and employers in order to overcome the issues of the placement dilemma. A shift in perception to realise the opportunities that are mutually beneficial for undergraduates to gain experience. For graduates the improved employability skills

for the labour market are important sources of skills and labour for employers in terms of valuable human resources. Such an approach will mean that employers have an active stakeholder relationship and are directly involved in the development of the type of skills required in their particular organisations through a more effective work placement ecosystem.

Overall this is a contribution that can support the improvement of employability frameworks and the student experience from both a policy and practice perspective.

Another implication for practice is in relation to the support offered for work placements. The findings surrounding the work placement dilemma raise some questions about the process and number of opportunities to take a placement, given that this is offered to all students at the University of Salford. In addition the conclusions regarding the emotional challenges stated, there are two key considerations for practice, firstly the expectation that students are managed effectively with respect to work placements and their studies? Secondly, with respect to resources, how effective are they? How are valuable resources such as careers advisory services, professional bodies and employer relationships being harnessed? If work experience is important to employability development, ensuring appropriate systems, services and support for work placements should be a priority for integration with employability frameworks.

These findings raise intriguing questions regarding the nature and extent of psychological capital in the meaning and development of employability. The challenge is to identify and create focus across the wider curricula (not just for specific employability inputs) for students to build confidence and psychological capital.

### **7.3 Evaluation of the conduct of interpretive research**

The interpretive philosophy with a commitment to the 'real-world' has been an effective approach to this study. The aim was to explore the human meaning, and the inductive and exploratory approach has allowed answers and theory to be generated from the data. The principles for conducting interpretive studies set out by Klein and Myers (1999) were applied to guide the process and ensure a robust approach to the philosophical stance (section 3.6). They highlighted that this is not about finding truth, but understanding human thought and action in social and

organisational situations. Klein and Myers (1999) suggest this approach can create deep insights.

The methodological approach has accounted for each of the seven principles, where principle 1, the hermeneutic circle is fundamental to all the others in interpretivist contributions. This was achieved through the iteration between different parts and making meaning from the rich primary data by considering them against the various components of employability. This included the outcomes for meaning of employability for students and the interrogation of the definitions of employability to reflect the major theoretical categories. The iterative process was supported in the structure of the interviews to capture the student voice and meaning and by placing capitals as a unifying theme.

Principle 2, the principle of contextualization has highlighted the impact of the social and historical policy background to employability and the focus in HE. The application of principle 2 has helped to shed light on the student view for the purpose of HE (obtaining a degree is to get a job) which reinforces the need for employability inputs and has highlighted the future directions in this area.

The interaction between the researcher and the subjects (principle 3) was important in this case and the role, motivation and values of the researcher have been set out (section 3.5). Supporting the aspect of reflective practice, within the CGT method analytic memos were used to consider the facts as the data was analysed and to review the conduct and progress of the research (section 4.13.4).

The idea of truth or untruth is problematic for interpretive research, therefore care has been taken to ensure through principle number 4; abstraction and generalisation, that the theories generated are related to concepts applied to multiple situations. This is supported by the application of CGT to test the findings in an iterative and constant comparison process to arrive at the theoretical insights. The philosophical assumptions and research methods were made transparent (summarised in section Figure 4-13) in order to conduct the research in accordance with principles 5 and 6, dialogical reasoning and multiple interpretations. The data collection methods used alongside the interpretive approach ensured multiple stakeholder perspectives were sought, therefore remaining sensitive to possible differences in interpretations.

The final principle of suspicion (number 7) remains for researchers to follow or not, and is left open by Klein and Myers (1999). This principle was applied on one occasion in the analysis of the data from EMP-4. This participant had a particular interest in degree apprenticeships and this became a significant discussion topic during the interview. Since none of the student participants were studying in this manner, this area of the data was excluded from the findings since it was beyond the scope of the study and may distort the picture of the meaning of employability.

To support the conduct of the research, a model for research was developed (Figure 3-1). Although ultimately valuable in setting out the strategy for the study, developing the model was not without its challenges. Working through the range of opinions, approaches and models was difficult, however to overcome the perceived deficits, the researcher developed their own model. Through a series of iterations the model developed proved to be a good guide to the study. It allowed the focus to be kept upon the integration of the various processes that were bound by the interpretive philosophy and CGT for the development of the contributions of the study.

Reflecting upon the overall approach to the methods, the concurrent nature of the analysis allowed the researcher to immerse themselves in the data early on the project and make decisions about the conduct of the data collection activities. This approach also ensured that the aim of discovering the student voice remained central to the method, particularly when moving on to interview other stakeholders. The initial data analysis allowed a picture of student views and the development of theoretical categories that informed the structure of the stakeholder interviews and to maintain focus upon the research aim and objectives (chapters 4 and 5).

### **7.3.1 What are the limitations?**

Whilst precautions were taken to remain objective and ground the findings in the data, this study is the interpretation of a single researcher. As would be the case in any PhD study, had others undertaken the work, their different experiences and approaches are likely to have resulted in some different interpretations.

All the participants for this study were volunteers, which meant a certain level of engagement, or interest was taken by the individuals that impact upon the results. The nature of volunteering may also mean that the student were self-selecting,

already demonstrating a level of employability interest or engagement. Being able to study student participants that are not engaged with employability issues would provide an interesting challenge and potentially provide a different perspective upon the meaning of employability.

A single case study institution, the University of Salford was the source of participants for the study, which may limit the generalisation of the results. Further studies are recommended to compare the results. Furthermore, the results could be tested and compared with other HE institutions, having a different student populations and approaches towards employability development.

According to several scholars for example Morgan (1988); Myers (2013) and Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (2015), there are limitations to qualitative data collection methods such as focus groups and interviews. These include: control, group dynamics, trust and data analysis issues. However, the robust design of the study means that insights from the findings, especially the theoretical contributions have a wider relevance.

The CGT approach was applied to ensure that from a participant perspective sufficient theoretical sampling had taken place. However, this is a judgement based upon a single researcher; another researcher may have decided more data could have been collected from participants, particularly from employers and staff.

## **7.4 Future research**

The design could be replicated in terms of the student focus groups and individual participant interviews. It would be valuable to explore and compare the views of students and staff from different student cohorts, different faculties from across the University of Salford, and even different institutions (particularly elite institutions). This approach would also allow for the inclusion of a wider range of employers from different industries to respond to employability views in HE. This type of study would add further empirical research for the student voice, following the conclusion Artess *et al.* (2017), and also provide further data upon what shapes employers attitudes to employability (following from Cai, 2013).

There could be scope for a longitudinal study to look at different student cohorts in business schools, across a number of academic years to compare and contrast views against this original study.

This study could be followed up with some action research (originally considered as a possible research method in section 4.3.1) applied to the employability curricula of the professional development module taught within Salford Business School. It may be possible to collaborate with module leaders and staff to examine the life-long learning emphasis of the teaching to embed the proposed revised definition of employability onto the curriculum (section 6.7). At the same time, research could be conducted to find or develop methods to enable a focus upon building confidence and psychological capitals for students across employability and other curricular.

An action research collaboration could also be undertaken to examine the practices of support offered for work placements and, tackling where necessary the work placement dilemma. If undertaken at Salford Business School the research should involve the employability hub staff and could be extended further to a collaboration with employers.

Research that focuses upon psychological capitals in relation to employability is currently limited. This could be an area to build upon both theoretical and practical implications for this concept and the relevance in employability development. There is further research that needs to be carried out to explore the theoretical combination of capitals from Tomlinson with respect to the Bourdieusian model of social theory.

The concept of continuous development is not new, however employability as continuous development or as life-long learning lacks emphasis in the literature. The examination of this concept and role of stakeholders in this process, with the aim to improve shared understanding and collaborative processes, would be an interesting extension of this project.

The discovery of a work placement dilemma from this study, requires further work to establish if this is a generalizable phenomenon or only found in these particular circumstances. Further studies of the placement dilemma could draw upon the principles of psychological capitals and threshold concepts as mechanism to generate supporting or new theory.



## **7.5 Researcher reflection**

A first-person perspective will be adopted for this final section of the thesis. It will offer a reflection of the research journey which links to the motivation and value basis for my engagement as a researcher.

Undertaking this study and participating in various PhD activities, such as research conferences, has been challenging but rewarding. I have worked in the field of training and teaching for almost 20 years, so to be able to peel back some layers to examine what happens 'behind the scenes' in education has been rewarding. I now have a clearer picture of what our students experience in their journey through HE, I hope this will enable me to be an empathetic and skilled practitioner. I was conscious of my combined role as a HE tutor and researcher. I was glad therefore that I was able to build trust with all the participants, especially with the students to obtain the data I needed. I feel I was able to tread a careful line in my roles to achieve the thesis objectives by adopting a reflexive approach and method to the research.

With this in mind I was able to manage the issues associated with being an insider researcher. Taking more time to recruit volunteers and emphasising the purpose and confidential nature of participation was key to successfully balancing my roles. For many participants my researcher role and subject knowledge provided the added benefit for trust to be built and a level of legitimacy for the project which had a positive impact for collecting valuable data. However, the tutor role may have resulted in some students deciding not to volunteer to participate as they may have felt uncomfortable or had concerns about the impact upon their teaching by being interviewed by a member of staff. Processes for analysing and reporting the data were carefully followed, reported and peer reviewed whenever possible.

As an advocate for HE, my research has exposed me more fully to the issues that surrounds the sector for public policy and institutionalisation. I was disappointed to hear the views that HE for many is primarily a means to get a job, rather than for the enjoyment of learning or other social and cultural development reasons. I realise some naivety on my part, as the economic and human capital discourse has become dominant and is set to remain so.

A cornerstone of Bourdieu's work is researcher reflexivity. The thesis findings have highlighted my own journey through HE in becoming a researcher, being one that lacks the social, cultural and academic capital based upon my own family background. By the current definition, as a student I would be classed as coming from a widening participation background as no member of my family has attended university. I was drawn to the practical application of Bourdieu since my managerial background and development began with on the job practice, rather than by learning any form of theory. I hope therefore, I too can access the psychological and identity capital I have gained in developing as a researcher to manage my career and successfully disseminate the results of this thesis.

In summary, the data collected illustrates how the meaning of employability goes beyond listing skills towards an understanding of the practical application of skills. The study has also uncovered the emotional aspects for developing employability. The research shows that the form of employability support in the curriculum the students' received has been of value. Meaning was developed from self-assessment and understanding employers' expectations with respect to recruitment and selection processes. The findings are in contrast to some literature (Tymon, 2013, for example) that suggest employability skills cannot be taught. In this case it can be seen they have an understanding of employability as skills to do and skills to get a job that the students themselves claim to have contributed to their overall employability development and confidence.

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## 9 Appendix

### 9.1 PhD research information sheet



#### **The student voice in employability within tertiary business and management education**

##### **What is the research about?**

I am conducting research into the current understanding of employability for students within the wider field within Higher Education. The focus of this research is to ask your opinion and experience of the concept of employability and development of outcomes.

I am interested in your views as students who are currently experiencing higher education and therefore the teaching practices and university support available. This is in the context to your personal and professional skills development for employability and life beyond work. I hope through your participation I may be able contribute to the understanding Universities have for supporting student needs in relation to employability.

##### **How will you be involved?**

You will be asked to participate in a focus group along with 5-8 of your fellow students. Subsequently by agreement you may be asked to undertake an individual interview. All meetings will be arranged at a mutually agreed time and location on the university campus.

Although we may have met as a result of the professional development module, your answers do not need to relate to this module but can go beyond in terms of your experiences and reflections of employability. This is not part of the module and does not impact upon your studies.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice and without providing a reason. If you have already participated in a focus

group/interview, permission will be sought to retain and use any data collected as appropriate.

**What information will be collected?**

The focus group will be audio and video recorded and the data collected will be analysed for the development of my thesis. There is a possibility that the results from the data will be published in journal papers. However, all participants' data will be anonymised as part of any form of dissemination, individuals will not be recognised in anyway. Video recording will only be collected to aid the transcription process. Data files securely stored, archived and only accessed by myself as the researcher for the duration of the PhD programme.

**Who is organising and sponsoring the study?**

This study is organised and funded by myself, **VICKI HARVEY** as a student at the University of Salford. I can be contacted as follows:

**Office location: M614a**

**Email: [v.m.harvey@salford.ac.uk](mailto:v.m.harvey@salford.ac.uk)**

There is a separate consent form for you to complete and sign before the focus group commences.

Thank you for your participation.

## 9.2 Interview consent form



### The student voice in employability within tertiary business and management education

V1 09/02/2018

<b>Please tick the appropriate boxes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Taking Part</b>		
I have read and understood the research information sheet dated DD/MM/YYYY.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the research. Taking part in the research will include being interviewed and audio recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Use of the information I provide for this research only</b>		
I understand my personal details such as my name and email-address will not be revealed to people outside the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I will maintain the confidentiality of the fellow participants in this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Use of the information I provide beyond this research</b>		
I agree for the data I provide to be transcribed and archived by the researcher and stored according to university procedures.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>So we can use the information you provide legally</b>		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this research to Vicki Harvey.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant [printed]      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher [printed]      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Contact details for further information: VICKI HARVEY: Email address: [v.m.harvey@salford.ac.uk](mailto:v.m.harvey@salford.ac.uk)



### **9.3 Individual student interview questions**

Q1. Please introduce yourself (name, age, programme of study, where are you from?)

Q2. Why did you choose to come to university?

Q3. Why did you chose this degree and to come to Salford?

Q4. What is the value of the degree to you?

Q5. What do you think employability is about?

Q6. Do you think employability should be a focus in HE?

Q7. Do you think employability should be part of your degree, in the teaching and curriculum?

Q7. How do you feel about your current employability?

Q8. What type of things have you done to improve or develop your own employability?

Q9. What else could be done to help you?

How are going about developing your employability skills?

Q10. How is the university supporting you in terms of developing employability?

Q10. How do you think your experiences (work or life) contribute to your employability and skills?

Q11. In your view, what other benefits will employability bring to you?

If applicable, additional question:

Q12. Placements? Why do you want to do one, how do you feel it will benefit you, overall and from an employability perspective

## 9.4 Student interview participant biographic data

ID	Degree Programme	UG Level	Gender	Age	UK/EU/ International	Ethnic Group	Widening Participation Status
STU-1	Business & Tourism Management	5	Female	18-24	England	White: Any other white background	Yes
STU-2	International Event Management	5	Female	18-24	England	White: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	No
STU-3	Marketing	6	Male	18-24	UK	White: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	No
STU-4	Marketing	6	Male	18-24	Great Britain	White: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	Yes
STU-5	Business & Financial Management	5	Female	18-24	UK	Mixed: White and Asian	No
STU-6	Business & Tourism Management	5	Female	25-34	International	Black / African /Caribbean /Black British: Any other background	No
STU-7	Marketing	6	Male	18-24	UK	White: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	No
STU-8	Marketing	6	Male	18-24	UK (England)	White: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	No
STU-9	Business & Economics	6	Male	18-24	UK	Asian or Asian British: Pakistani	Yes
STU-10	Business & Economics	5	Male	18-24	England	Asian or Asian British: Pakistani	Yes
STU-11	Business & Economics	6	Male	25-34	UK (England)	Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	No
STU-12	Human Resource Management	6	Female	18-24	EU	White: Any other white background	No
STU-13	Marketing	6	Male	18-24	UK	White: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	No
STU-14	Marketing	6	Female	18-24	EU	White: Any other white background	No

## 9.5 Research outputs

Date	Event	Output	Publication
28/06/17	SPARC conference 2017: Retrospect & Prospects	Salford PGR conference: Attendance and research paper presentation	Harvey, V & Procter, C (2017) <i>Tensions in understanding employability and skills with tertiary business and management education</i>
05/12/2017	SRHE early careers researcher annual conference: Higher Education rising to the challenge	Attend and present at 1st conference	Harvey, V & Procter, C (2017) <i>The student voice in employability within tertiary business and management education.</i>
12/06/2018	7th Biennial Thresholds Conference: Thorny thresholds: Identity, transfer and assessment. Ohio USA	Attendance and research paper presentation	Procter, C. & Harvey, V. (2018) <i>Realising the threshold of employability in Higher Education</i>
20/03/2018	Internal Research Symposium: Research sharing: Careers, Work and Employability	Attendance and research paper presentation	
04/07/2018	SPARC conference 2018: Internationalisation and Collaboration	Salford PGR conference: Attendance and research paper presentation	Harvey, V. & Procter, C (2018) <i>Hearing voices: Practice and lessons in conducting focus groups and interviews.</i>
05/07/2018	Advance HE Teaching and Learning Annual Conference: Teaching in the spotlight: learning from global communities	Attendance and research paper presentation	Harvey, V. & Procter, C (2018) <i>The student voice in employability within tertiary business and management education.</i>
20/07/2018	Book chapter publication in Nov 2018	Thresholds research work, joint supervisor publication: Higher Education Computer Sciences	Procter, C. & Harvey, V. (2018) Realising the threshold of employability in Higher Education. In J. Carter & C. Rosen (Eds.), <i>Higher Education Computer Science: A Manual of Practical Approaches</i> pp203-220. Switzerland: Springer
03/07/2019	Advance HE Teaching and Learning Annual Conference: Teaching in the spotlight: Innovation for teaching excellence.	Attendance and research paper presentation	Harvey, V. & Procter, C. (2019) <i>Listening to the student voice: consideration of capitals in employability teaching and learning in Higher Education.</i>
09/07/19	Journal article: Accounting Education	Under review	Rattenbury, J, Christie, F. and Harvey, V. (2019) <i>Using Figured Worlds theory to explore identity and perceptions of employability.</i>