

Problem representations of employability in higher education: using design thinking and critical analysis as tools for social justice in careers education

Emily Róisín Reid & Bo Kelestyn

To cite this article: Emily Róisín Reid & Bo Kelestyn (2022): Problem representations of employability in higher education: using design thinking and critical analysis as tools for social justice in careers education, British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, DOI: [10.1080/03069885.2022.2054943](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2022.2054943)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2022.2054943>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 11 May 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 511



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Problem representations of employability in higher education: using design thinking and critical analysis as tools for social justice in careers education

Emily Róisín Reid ^a and Bo Kelestyn ^b

^aSenior Teaching Fellow, Director of Student Experience, Employability and Progression, Unit for Social Sciences and Systems in Health, Division of Health Sciences, Warwick Medical School University of Warwick, Coventry, UK;

^bSenior Teaching Fellow, Director of Student Experience, Department for Chemistry and Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

ABSTRACT

We present an analysis of narratives that emerged from a recent interdisciplinary design thinking careers intervention exploring how employability is represented within one UK University. We conducted a critical discourse analysis using a policy analysis framework that revealed four emergent problem representations. These exposed tacit assumptions about students' lack of employability skills and the responsibilisation of 'employability', amplified silences around opportunity structures and highlighted unquestioned expectations about employability in the neoliberalist paradigm. The need for critical discourse is foregrounded, as is the importance of collective engagement in reframing these narratives. Design Thinking shows promise as a novel intervention for future career education practice, enabling practitioners and individuals to begin to co-create a new critical consciousness.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 October 2021
Revised 11 March 2022
Accepted 14 March 2022

KEYWORDS

Career development; careers education; social justice; employability; critical consciousness; design thinking

Introduction

"Employability" in Higher Education (HE) in Western neoliberal society is a education juxtaposed with consumerist expectations of postgraduation careers and value for money that are promulgated by a society dominated by a neoliberalist paradigm. Career guidance practitioners are expected to weigh-in on this critical discourse (Hooley et al., 2017, 2019), and yet oftentimes feel conflicted due to competing policy aims; for example, in the UK their success is measured by "graduate outcomes". As a result, in-curricular employability and careers education can be misrepresented, misunderstood and misplaced.

Research aims, objectives and central question

Our aim in undertaking this research was to explore how individuals studying or working at one UK Higher Education Institution experience institutional and societal narratives of employability. Our objective was to produce a nuanced evaluation of the ways in which employability and careers

CONTACT Emily Róisín Reid  e.reid.1@warwick.ac.uk  Senior Teaching Fellow, Director of Student Experience, Employability and Progression, Unit for Social Sciences and Systems in Health, Division of Health Sciences, Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

discourses in higher education may serve to reproduce and frame opportunities, approaching this using Critical Discourse Analysis. We seek to answer the central question: what implied problems are represented in the narratives of employability at the University of Warwick, as experienced by individuals studying and working there? In order to achieve this, we conducted a learning intervention based upon Design Thinking to help students and staff from both academic departments and professional services to come together to explore their experiences of Employability. To analyse the emergent data, we chose to apply Bacchi's (2009) policy analysis framework "What is the problem represented to be?", which foregrounds unveiling the assumptions and tacit expectations that policy interventions, such as "Employability" strategies, are designed to solve. The result is an exposition of how these narratives are enacted both at individual and organisational levels.

We firstly will explain current policy discourse relating to employability in higher education institutions in a UK context. We will then introduce and explain the rationale that underpins the methods chosen for undertaking this research, and the provenance of the data selected for analysis. Afterwards, we present the findings of the analysis introducing each of the four identified problem representations, before leading into focused discussion around the implications of these findings, particularly in the light of social justice.

We start by providing an overview of the literature that expounds the current policy context in which employability and career education are situated within UK Higher Education Institutions, before introducing Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to be?" approach (WPR) we will use to produce our analysis.

Literature

Employability within the UK Higher Education Sector

As financial funding models have changed in the UK Higher Education sector, institutions and careers services have become increasingly pressured to prove that they "add value" (Nijjar, 2009). In the UK, the student fees structure has changed significantly over the seven-year period of 2005-2012: rising from costing £1000 per year in annual tuition fee costs to £9000 per year from 2012 onwards (with rises since). UK government-instituted metrics rank Universities on their students' performance after graduation; fuelling students' expectations of value for money and prospects they should achieve upon graduation. Metrics classify "good" career outcomes by measuring student salaries and their achievement at the higher echelons of Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) coding system. There remains heated debate about the crude use and value of these metrics as a proxy for either degree quality or post-university preparedness, particularly within subjects allied to the arts which are historically underpaid and under classified on SOC coding (among others: Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Donald et al., 2019; Healy et al., 2020). Academics have argued whether graduate employment rates present an inadequate snapshot of graduate preparedness, taken at a moment in time with little qualitative insight into the extent to which graduates are equipped to succeed in their careers (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Donald et al., 2019; Healy et al., 2020). There remains considerable ambiguity between what is meant by employability, often used interchangeably with a person's ability to secure employment as an outcome. For the purpose of this article, employability has been defined as being about an individual's preparedness to engage in employment; relating to a gamut of personal attributes, qualities, characteristics, professional behaviours, development in addition to situational factors at play which either support or constrain an individual's ability to enact their career plans (Clarke 2018; Donald et al., 2019; Healy et al., 2020).

Bacchi's (2009) What's the Problem Represented to be? policy tool

The "What's the Problem Represented to be?" approach (WPR) was developed by Bacchi originally in the early 1990s as a tool and resource to critically interrogate public policies. It has since been revised to include six questions (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), with an emboldened emphasis placed on the *represented* aspect to this tool. Bacchi contends that public policies contain implicit

representations of what the problem is considered to be, known as “problem representations” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

WPR foregrounds that what someone proposes to do about something (such as public policies, education strategies etc.) reveals what they consider “needs to change” (i.e. that which is *problematic*), through their choice and focus (Bacchi, 2009). These choices automatically include some matters, exclude others and are built on series of assumptions, presumptions, silences and gaps. Bacchi argues that this approach is not the governing body’s best attempt to “solve” problems (Bacchi, 2009). Rather, that in the act of policy creation, these problems are reproduced with particular meanings for individuals, systems, those who occupy spaces of power and the ways in which different groups are affected (Bacchi, 2009). That only through questioning the unexamined conceptual bases that lie at the heart of such problem representations, in addition to being mindful and reflexive of our own as we approach these, are we able to understand more about how these so-called problems are constituted. Moreover, that these problematisations in turn reproduce and shape the ways lives are lived (Bacchi, 2009).

Methods

Critical Discourse Analysis

The method chosen for undertaking this research was Critical Discourse Analysis. We found it important to choose a method that focuses on the “social construction of discursive practices that maintain the social context” (Salkind, 2010). We were particularly interested in the balance of power between students who were experiencing employability strategies and narratives, staff members who were equally both experiencing these and enacting them as part of their paid roles, and societal narratives that interacted at both individual and organisational level.

Discourse analysis as a method acknowledges the plurality of texts when considering and acknowledging the social contexts in which they emerge (Stevenson, 2004; Taylor, 2001). In order to best explore these dynamics of how students and staff experience policy interventions around employability, we designed and created a learning intervention which we called the “Warwick Employability Challenge”. The purpose was to bust open the discourse and co-construct plural and multi-dimensional understandings of employability at the University of Warwick; specifically so that students and staff could work together as equal partners to attempt to co-create new meanings together. The strength of this method in foregrounding the social context was especially important to us, considering the emphasis we placed to enable more pluralistic and balanced power dynamics, such as through the employment of student facilitators and interdisciplinary student-staff teams with a blend of students from different programme levels mixed with academic, professional services and administrative colleagues.

During the course of the challenge, a collection of representations of were collated, which we then analysed using the WPR policy analysis tool as a framework for conducting the critical discourse analysis. In this section we justify our rationale for choosing Design Thinking as the conceptual underpinning for the Warwick Employability Challenge, the provenance of the data we collected, the reasoning for using WPR as the data analysis framework, and our approach to analysing the data.

Design Thinking as conceptual basis for the Warwick Employability Challenge

The purpose of the challenge was to begin to open dialogues across the institution relating to different considerations in our employability strategy, with a means for engendering and welcoming different cross-institutional narratives and re-framing immediate power dynamics at institutional level by making students and staff equal partners in the learning experience. We wanted to create a means for forging teams of interdisciplinary groups of staff and students to work together to scope out and elicit the problematisations of employability and careers education at Warwick,

thereby enabling a collective understanding of how we are all positioned in relation to institutional and societal narratives. We chose to create the challenge around the conceptual basis of Design Thinking (DT), which offers a critical, reflexive, open and questioning approach that is widely acknowledged to support deeper understanding amongst stakeholders, to inspire creativity and unlock assumptions and silences (Dickinson, 2020; Dunne, 2016; Healey et al., 2014; Kelestyn & Freeman, 2021; Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2019; Ries, 2011).

There are five steps of the DT methodology: Empathise (listening to others and challenging existing knowledge), Define (giving words to the problems uncovered), Ideate (questioning and exploring insights), Prototype and Test (iterative feedback loops of validated learning which are used to challenge biases, assumptions, presumptions, silences and gaps). As the co-Leads of the institutional Employability Learning Circle, we were conscious that if we were to facilitate the workshops it might unduly influence the course of the outcomes; given the research aims we were conscious at every step to be reflexive of the assumptions we were making, and power that we occupied in this space. We therefore successfully gained funding to pay four student interns who had been trained in the DT methodology to lead on the delivery of the workshops. The student facilitators supported the teams through the first three stages of the DT methodology across two design-thinking half day workshops; the first of which members were placed in an interdisciplinary team, the second of which was in a team of their choosing (still including staff from academic and professional services backgrounds and students from different levels and programmes of study). The activities completed during these stages included: empathy mind mapping (where participants were prompted to question their own assumptions, hidden needs and silences), storytelling exercises sharing reflections and experiences of employability and “how might we” problem-framing activities. They were then given time and support to go through the last two stages of the methodology within their teams, supported by the student facilitators to create a poster or short e-video oral presentation to share this learning across the institution. We advertised this University-wide challenge to all undergraduate and postgraduate students and all staff from academic, administrative and professional services roles, from all departments across the University.

Data Source

All teams were required to submit a final problem representation of employability in their team contexts. 12 teams were formed, each comprising academic and professional service staff in addition to undergraduate and postgraduate students ($n = 62$) from departments across the institution to engender co-creation. The data we selected for inclusion in our analysis took the form of all written artefacts connected to the workshops. This included 24 of the teams’ annotated workshop slides containing participants’ observational notes, the reflective notes from the student facilitators that we collated in three post-session debrief meetings, our own reflections and annotations, and information we had provided to the participants and facilitators over the course of the workshops. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and student facilitators for the use of the data for this purpose prior to taking part in the challenge. This study has been designed in line with the 2019 British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines. We received Ethical Approval on 9th June 2021 from the Biomedical and Science Research Ethics Committee at the University of Warwick (BSREC 98/19-20 AM01).

Rationale for choice of data analysis framework and approach to analysis

We were inspired by Røise’s (2020) recent application of WPR to the field of careers education, and found that this methodology held promise for the analysis of this Design Thinking challenge that was implemented at the University of Warwick in 2021. We decided to apply Bacchi’s “What is the problem represented to be?” (WPR) methodology (2009) as a framework for interpretation of these problem representations.

This WPR analysis builds upon Bacchi's six core questions as displayed in [Table 1](#).

We followed Bacchi's approach to analysing the data, taking the decision to include all of Bacchi's six questions in our analysis to ensure our approach was robust. We collated all data sources together as detailed above and conducted an analysis of these data with respect to each question in a constant comparative fashion. Both authors applied a step-wise approach to reading and re-reading the data in depth independently, drawing out possible themes in a word document detailing notes against the six questions of the framework. We met on three occasions to synthesise these interpretations into problem representations in the style of WPR, using the question: if the employability strategy at the University of Warwick is the solution, what are the implied problems? At first we agreed upon five problem representations, which upon re-analysing over a final pass of the data with respect to Bacchi's questions, we collapsed into four problem representations. The representations we synthesised from the data were: students lack employability skills, Universities and courses must support students become employable, students must work, students must want to work. We will now turn to our discussion of each of these problem representations.

Findings

We present our analysis of the four problem representations that emerged through an institution-wide challenge focused on constructing new interdisciplinary meanings of employability at the University of Warwick. We applied the lens of Bacchi's WPR framework to expound the differing ways in which employability and career-related education is being represented across the institution. Four problem representations were identified, and are outlined in full in [Table 2](#). In the following section, we review in turn each of the four identified problem representations and the assumptions, suppositions origins and silences contained within these implied problems and then discuss the implications for these with respect to practice and social justice.

Students lack employability skills (micro level)

When asking the question: "if employability is the solution, what is the implied problem?" the first problem representation that emerged from the narratives of employability we collected was the implication that students lack employability skills (cf. [Table 2](#)). This is framed at micro (individual) level. Reviewing the presumptions that underlie this narrative, it's clear to see that this positions the responsibility for developing "employability" at individual student level, alongside the burden of worry and stress that comes with this perceived additional responsibility. Students who took part in the workshops discussed feeling that they needed to address a deficit relating to employability which appeared to hang over them as their time at university progressed. Words such as "overwhelmed", "anxious", "burdened", "stressed" and in "poor mental health" were used to explain the emotional burden caused by the perceived responsibility. Column five of [Table 2](#) evidences some of the ways in which student participants' mental health has suffered as a result of the pressure they have experienced, being overwhelmed by expectations placed upon them.

Table 1. Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' policy tool.

What's the Problem Represented to be?' policy tool

1. What's the 'problem' ... represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
 2. What presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
 3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
 4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
 5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
 6. How/where is this representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?
-

Table 2 . Summary of problem representations which emerged from the analysis of the data.

What is the problem represented to be?	What presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?	How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?	What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?	What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?	How/where is this representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated and defended?
1. Students lack employability skills (micro level)	Students are generally not employable without specific interventions on employability. Whether students are 'employable' or otherwise is down to themselves as individuals. There exists a patriarchal undertone – that institutions 'know better'.	Individual lecturers, tutors, support teams, institutional narratives, wider (parental influence, advertisements, governmental information). League tables which have been created to 'measure' Universities against each other for example using graduate outcomes metrics/ data. Hierarchical narratives – there is uneven societal value assigned on graduate level employment. Media reports favour some careers and not others, government policy increases funding for some courses and withdraws it from others e.g. Arts degrees. Internal University income generation capacity also plays a role.	Employability is not fair and equal. Silence around opportunity structure (that not all students have equal chances of getting jobs). Silence around students from some backgrounds have more opportunities in the labour market than others. E.g. those from higher socio-economic backgrounds having increased social and cultural capital enhances opportunities made available to them in employment chances in comparison with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who cannot benefit from the same opportunities.	Some problems remain unaddressed. Students mental health can suffer as a result; students experience pressure, being overwhelmed by expectations placed upon them.	Universities' employability strategies, minutes of meetings that individuals had attended, websites, prospectuses, social media. Reproduced by other institutions, the government, requirements or expectations of employers and outwardly in society via the media.
2. University courses and institutions should prepare students for employment (meso level)	Assumes that employability is something that can be 'taught' and that it's the responsibility of courses and institutions to do so. Linking to marketisation of higher education, there is an assumption that Higher Education should and does lead to students having better jobs at the end of it. By extension therefore, students and their institutions are 'failures' if they students do not exit with good jobs.	University wide documents, publications e.g. WONKHE, Higher Education social media, policy documents, league tables, advertisements, governmental information, national press.	There appears to be a push-pull factor between education (critical pedagogy) and preparation for the workplace. There appears to be disconnect in narratives, intentions and language of the different stakeholder groups (students, academic staff, professional services, senior management). There is a lack of clarity relating to definitions of employability and accountability which staff and students find problematic. There is lack of acknowledgement of diverse needs and ambitions (e.g.	There becomes a hierarchy of subjects and its pathways related to the employability of their graduates. More broadly in society, the Higher Education system perceived as performing if it doesn't prepare students for work. Courses or Universities are considered a 'failure' if students don't exit with good jobs. Students can be more strongly encouraged to pursue further education which 'skews' graduate outcomes. Mixture in sources	Careers services can see Employability as the way they can gain 'buy-in' from academic departments and justify their roles within the University, thus reinforcing and re-producing this effect. Rhetoric from Universities, news outlets e.g. Times Higher Education, uncritically assuming this should be the case.

<p>3. Students should work (macro level)</p>	<p>There exists a neoliberalist assumption that students should be supported to work and that work is <i>the</i> way to engage in society. University is represented as a conveyor-belt for moving student to the labour market. By extension, that students should be prepared for work and to enter the labour market. UK Governmental regulatory frameworks such as the Teaching Excellence Framework Graduate Outcome metrics assume that Universities must have a role in this space. The Standard Occupational Classification codes which the metrics rely on offer a clear hierarchical judgement on which careers are considered 'worthy' of graduates i.e. graduate level are levels 3 and above. Assumptions that the workforce is competitive – students will need to 'stand out' to compete. Assumptions that this should be from the start of their degree – that there is a right or wrong time to engage with employability.</p>	<p>entrepreneurship as employment)</p> <p>Policy documents, league tables, advertisements, governmental information, national press.</p>	<p>of narratives that causes ambiguity at employee level. This leads to confusion, inertia and lack of accountability. People feel reluctant to take action.</p> <p>Employability (outcomes) influence rankings, desirability of the courses, and therefore recruitment and demand for specific courses, degrees, Universities, (and local economies). 'Matching' of degree subject and level to employment (e.g. Law student must become a lawyer; Doctoral student must become an academic) and pressure to not deviate from these existing matching.</p>	<p>Relates to an individual's 'value' or how they might experience being 'valued' or 'valuable'. Some students on courses which were less vocational reported feeling less 'valuable' Students perceive that they are 'failures' if they don't exit this degree with good (graduate) job.</p>
--	---	--	---	---

(Continued)

Table 2 Continued.

What is the problem represented to be?	What presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?	How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?	What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?	What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?	How/where is this representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated and defended?
4. Students should want to prepare to work and engage in employability development (permeates all levels)	<p>Government policy documents, regional development strategies, business development (Midlands Engine, Northern Powerhouse).</p> <p>There is a mould of employability that students should fit into. That there are assumptions of what is normative or expected for 'typical' graduate employment e.g. working as an accountant with global firm KPMG is expected vs. working self-employed or a on farms etc are not normative. There are assumptions made about what students want, mostly assuming that students want the same things; particularly from their degree. Students should make most out of time at University – an inference that they attend University to become employable. Students should be willing to do what it takes to be 'employable' e.g. unpaid internships, volunteer work etc</p>	Individual lecturers, tutors, support teams, institutional narratives, wider (parental influence, advertisements, governmental information).	Experienced by students as 'fear', being 'overwhelmed'. Success is objectified. Societal narratives – parents ask 'what is your child going to do after?'. Asking students what they want or need might not be enough. Students might not be able to articulate, or not have the experience to understand what is needed. Traditional student engagement tools operate on this line of questioning, which often leads to validation of existing provision and perpetuation of some of the silences.	Isolation, alienation, discrimination, mental health cost is high for students that do not feel that they succeeded to fit into in the image of employability that is expected of them.	Students' support networks, those that are positioned to be complicit (e.g. marketing from employers, recruitment agencies) as well as careers services, volunteer agencies.



In line with Bacchi's questioning, to review how this representation had come to be, groups examined the rhetoric used by the institution in the Employability Strategy (given to participants as part of their pre-workshop reading). One team noted that this document frames the responsibility for development of students' employability at individual student level: "We will ensure that our students understand the importance of taking personal responsibility for the development of their employability" (University of Warwick, 2021). Not only does this directing of responsibility towards individuals shift the onus and accountability away from the institution onto the individual, it seemingly assumes that all students have equal opportunities for doing so, when in fact opportunity structures mean that so many different factors are interacting upon each individual that this responsabilisation in turn serves to re-produce these inequalities. For example, a student cited that their friend from a higher socio-economic background with increased social, economic and cultural capital had an easier task taking personal responsibility for their employability than in comparison with themselves as a student from a lower socio-economic background, for whom this expectation assumes a pre-existing level of connections and cultural capital that puts them at an automatic disadvantage. This silence was surfaced within other narratives, with one team asking "Who is able to access these opportunities?" Careers guidance professionals discussed the nature and person-centred support they offer to help students make a plan and support students to access opportunities. Whilst well-intentioned, this person-centred approach can serve to support the notion of individual student skills deficit, and again through this focus on independent agency neglects the role of opportunity structures and how these operate e.g. structural racism, gender pay gaps. One student reflected on advice relating to unpaid internships, and having the financial capital to be able to do this given their individual circumstances meant that this was not something they could consider, but is just assumed within their intended career discipline of journalism.

This problem representation of responsabilising students for a lack of employability skills seemed to emerge from a range of sources, such as the tacit and not-so-tacit messages that students are exposed to throughout their degrees. Participants with employer-facing roles or those working in alumni engagement suggested that employers give the message first-hand to students that students are not "work-ready" upon graduation through alumni talks, recruitment websites and social media, and that they perceive a need for employability skills to support students into the workplace. Student participants felt this emanated in the rhetoric used by employers relating to seeking the "best talent", which serves to reinforce notions of competition to students. Rather than putting the power and responsibility on employers' abilities to train, develop and retain their talent, this is instead shifted towards problematising the student. Some staff members referred to governmental policy relating to regional skills gaps, where again the responsibility is divested away from the government, and co-located with the individual. The mismatch between skills sought and jobs available is seemingly solved by individual malleability, rather than business diversification. According to one staff member, students need to be "more adaptable, versatile and agile".

Academics discussed skills that student develop during their degrees, such as critical thinking skills, and how these relate to employability. However the discussions within teams of students and staff elicited a presumption of a clear "hierarchy" of degree subjects, with vocational degrees considered to help students become "more employable" than degrees which offered more varied career paths such as arts and humanities subjects. One student participant explained they felt they must undertake work in whatever "employment paths are available to degree/study you have chosen" with an undertone within some teams that some degrees are perceived as more useful to society than others. The media and governmental policy appeared to be sources for some of these messages, and others relating to the need to secure a good graduate job were internalised by students through peer groups and family networks, which have been reproduced and propagated from their parents' and guardians' own lived experiences spawned from various labour market changes over the past few decades. One student indicated that this began for them before starting study, when "choosing a degree based on enjoyment vs careers. Doing a degree because we feel we should do it". The effects produced by this problem representation

were evidenced to be felt at individual level. The internalisation of these processes by each student serves to make the many who try and fail to make the cut to feel inferior. Student participants expressed that they need to “fit in” to “get on”; echoing rhetoric that they have heard in the media which is replicated by the institution.

The data from the challenge indicated that the greatest reproduction of these effects was within the university itself: the employability strategy, meetings that individuals had reported to attended where this was cited, institutional websites and the marketing messages contained therein, university use and replication of social media. Outside the university, participants expressed that these were reproduced by other institutions, employers and their recruitment campaigns, statements and briefing papers produced by and for the government, and outwardly in society via the media.

In summary, the employability discourse positions students as lacking employability skills, which problematises students’ as the source of this “lack”. This has been internalised by individual students as a stressor, which serves the purpose of forcing them to compete in the neo-liberalist market force. The unfair distribution of opportunity is silenced; the dominant narrative assumes a fair and even playing field relating to opportunities students have to develop their employability or to obtain employment. Students are barraged from messages by their own familial and peer support networks, university services including careers units, academics, employers, forms of government and the ever-present echo-chambers of social media which all in turn serve to re-produce the overriding narrative of student deficit. Factors underlying this and subsequent narratives will be discussed further in the discussion section.

University courses and institutions can and should prepare students for employment (meso level)

If employability is the solution, then it is implied that UK University courses and institutions have a duty to, and are able to, prepare students for achieving success in their futures. This is framed at meso (organisational) level. Linked to the marketisation of Higher Education in the UK, the government has levelled this particular challenge and placed the onus onto Universities to take responsibility for demonstrating value for money. The development of employability skills is therefore seen as a mechanism by which they can achieve this; with graduate-level employment frequently cited as a proxy for value for money (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Donald et al., 2019; Healy et al., 2020). Institutions can be deemed as failing by regulatory bodies if their students do not exit with good jobs; with Office for Students assessing Graduate Outcomes and Longitudinal Employment Outcomes data as part of the UK regulatory framework.

Following Bacchi’s line of questioning, emerging from the data was an underlying assumption that engaging in Higher Education should and does lead to students having better jobs at the end of it; this is seen as an expectation of students in return for paying significantly higher fees. Within the data, employability is seen by students as something for which the University and subject disciplines should be responsible for them developing during the course of their studies. Some students expected “value-added” employability support within their curriculum, such as more “individual journey support”, “access to one-to-one appointments”, “organised placements to be part of everyone’s university journey” which were seen as helpful support to enable them to develop their own employability.

There also appeared an assumption that employability is something that can be “taught” and that it’s the responsibility of courses and institutions to do so, by students and staff participants. When reviewing how some of these assumptions and presuppositions came about, it appears that policy changes to education, the withdrawal of government funding, implications of new governance mechanism such as the “Teaching Excellence Framework” which foregrounds graduate employment have all played a part.

In terms of silences or matters that appeared to be left unproblematic, there was discussion about the inherent value of education for the individual’s own personal benefit. The dominant narrative

emerging across the challenge equated the value of education to its seeming ability and need to prepare students for entering the labour market, with one group in the minority observing “tensions between value for money and how students can be supported to understand ‘life’ value”. Arguments were presented which emphasised that education is a great equaliser in terms of social mobility, and that only through engagement in higher education for the purposes of developing critical thinking are students best placed to be able to exit their degrees with their eyes open to opportunity structures and forces acting upon them; critical thinking is seen as tool that can support individual agency in being able to navigate systems. Education was seen by two teams to be the vehicle that enabled individuals to begin to dismantle systems. However, this was seen as in opposition to the need for institutions to be developing students’ employability skills.

There was also a lack of agreement around whose responsibility employability should be. The logical extension being that if universities unquestioningly take responsibility for this, they are complicit with the tacit neoliberalist paradigm. Becoming uneasy bed-partners with this paradigm means accepting that the award of the degree is no longer purely an exchange of learning, it is a product with a price tag that confers certain benefits; of which one is developing greater employability.

The effect produced by the fact that universities are caught in the bind, is an ongoing impasse relating to employability. In the data, this emerges as ambiguity over whose responsibility this should be, definitions of what it is, what the goal was or for whom. From the engagement of the 12 teams in the employability challenge, there remained a distinct lack of consensus around core definitions of what employability is, what should be taught within the curriculum, by whom, when and for whose benefit. Participants used words such as “ambiguous”, “vague”, “general”, “confusing”, “restrictive”, “ostracising”, “unhelpful”, “intimidating”, “challenging” and “unequal” to describe their understanding of what employability is. Definitions from both students and staff participants included: “developing skills for work”, “challenging oneself”, “developing an awareness of opportunities”, “exploring career paths”, “improving your skills to sell yourself on your CV”, “improving existent skills to meet employers changing needs”. These definitions replicate narratives perpetuated by the institution (and beyond), which can be found in the career services marketing “offer” through websites and newsletters. All of these appeared to place the impetus back onto students to be the main actors in their own employability.

In summary, this representation suggests that institutions hold a certain responsibility to prepare students for their future careers as a part of their degree. This is not something that has yet found a consensus in all quarters of the institution. Silences emerge around the role and value of education in its own right. The need for students to develop employability skills remains unquestioned. The effects of this serve to reinforce students beliefs and expectations of their entitlement to graduate level employment and support to access this from their institutions, only to later have this forced back to become an individual responsibility.

Students should work (macro level)

Across the dataset, it went unquestioned that work is *the* way to engage in society and that students should go on to work after their studies. This is framed at macro (societal) level. Employability is seen in the UK and across the neoliberal-dominated West as an essential step in an individual’s journey towards work, and it is assumed throughout the data that students must work (by both students and staff). One student described feeling that “your experiences, knowledge, and personality traits are there to aid your ability to become employed”, and that University itself was the conveyor-belt for moving students to the labour market. At societal (macro) level, there is a very real financial imperative that students feel like this; in that the student loan system requires graduates to pay back their student debt, which only becomes possible once students are earning above the linked earnings threshold. Within the dataset, there existed silences around alternative career and life paths which might be open to individuals, and again there were assumptions made

about opportunities being equally available to all individuals. The data focused around consideration of traditional “graduate jobs” or entry-level employment. No students or staff members referred to other options that might be available to them, such as self-employment. This is mirrored throughout UK Higher Education policy discourse and the metrics that underpin Governmental regulatory frameworks which determine what institutional “success” looks like. For example, the Standard Occupational Classification codes which the Graduate Outcome metric uses as an input offer a clear hierarchical judgement on which careers are considered “worthy” of graduates. The effects of this serve to channel institutions and consequently students into feeling that they must obtain graduate level employment. For students, this feels like a requirement to have an individual responsibility for developing the required attributes to “fit in” to this mould; any failure to do so is internalised. Students expressed hearing they need to “stand out” to compete, because the workforce is “competitive”, with one student experiencing exorbitant pressure to learn “how to stand out from other applicants, how to portray yourself as a good candidate”. This stress is expounded by the very real demands that students face upon graduation, such as repaying student debts, which cause this threat to be felt at individual student level, and was borne out in the earlier finding relating to a perceived student deficit in employability skills. Furthermore, it assumes these jobs are equally available to all students, when structural and systemic barriers mean this is not the case. As such, this has particular ramifications for particular student groups for whom considerable structural barriers can play a role; such as the case of institutional racism affecting the career opportunities of graduates of Black Heritage (Hooley, 2021).

Students should want to prepare to work and engage in employability development

The final problem representation that emerged is that students should want to work and want to engage in developing their employability. This problem representation permeates all levels, as it touches on multiple parts of students’ lives, experience and identity, as well as relates to the previous three representations. There were assumptions of what is normative or expected for “typical” graduate employment e.g. working as a management consultant accountant with a global firm such as KPMG is expected, compared for example with being self-employed or working on a farm which are not seen as normative. These views varied across disciplines and departmental cultures, but common across them was that during the challenge, student outcomes and alumni employment were discussed in a very one-dimensional way. Assumptions were made about what students want; mostly assuming that students want the same things from employment. It also collides with certain wider societal, cultural expectations, which have evidently been placed on the students by the institution, their peers, families, etc. Students explained that they were expected to make most out of time at University – an inference pervading departmental and university newsletters, marketing, pre-arrival expectations as well as wider societal expectations – that required them to collect experiences and achievements in a very tokenistic way. For individuals, this impacts their entire student lifecycle and experience, creating pressure to be more selective with student activities, often engaging with provision that “looks good on a CV” instead of aligning with students’ interests and values. One student observed there exists a “common feeling that people are on a better path than you” with the implication that they ought always put the perceived benefits of employability ahead of pursuing opportunities based on what interests them; which again is intensified within certain disadvantaged student groups.

Students feel that they should be willing to do what it takes to be “employable” (e.g. unpaid internships, volunteer work etc). This excludes appreciation of the diverse student needs and circumstances prior to, whilst at and after their time at a university. Students indicated a feeling that employers do not understand the burden of an opportunity cost whilst they are supposed to develop their employability; their time is perceived to be free, available, and disposable. Students cited various industries exploiting these pressures by creating more unpaid opportunities which

students apply for in a race to gain experience, and vice versa, creating a cycle that propagates unhealthy narratives about employability in the very early stages of their career.

Discussion

When taken together, the problem representations that emerged through applying the WPR tool to the narratives of employability appear to position University education as means to an end – the means being the tokenistic collection of skills of value to an employer (employability), the end being a graduate job. In these narratives, neoliberalism is unquestioningly foregrounded and the need for students to develop employability skills remains unchallenged. The data does not reflect an understanding of employability as students' natural exploration of skills and interests as they are exposed to within new and multiple learning environments or the development of their critical thinking skills that comes through their various degree paths. Instead, employability appears to be reduced to a need for students to amass a set of dictated, seemingly arbitrary, "skills" that are currently en vogue with employers. Within these student and staff participants' narratives, employability does not emerge as a rich and fertile opportunity for interdisciplinary coming together and growth; it is instead framed as a tool to make individuals responsible to conforming to a mould dictated by market forces, and as a means to drive competition. Students are seen as responsible for developing their employability skills, and beholden to a range of expectations about their engagement during university as well as expected future engagement in the labour market upon graduation. Our analysis of these narratives reveals how the institution is positioned by governments and media outlets as responsible for the graduate outcomes of their students; a responsibility which since the marketisation of the sector, cannot readily be ignored. Despite this resting uneasily with institutions, and perhaps instead of pushing back and creating a new narrative for employability and education, it appears this pressure is instead cascaded down to students.

Without a clear rebuttal of this pressure, students are inundated by messages from their friends and family, university services and academics, employers, forms of government and social media which serves the purpose of forcing them to compete in labour markets. The unfair distribution of opportunity remains a matter that is silenced and underplayed. The dominant narrative assumes a fair and even playing field relating to opportunities students have to develop their employability or to obtain employment.

The nature of neoliberalism is such that there appears that there are no alternatives (Maisuria & Cole, 2017; Troiani & Dutson, 2021), however it is possible for universities and careers services to change these narratives. Design thinking as an approach could be incorporated into programmes of careers education to facilitate students to be able to bust open some of these discourses. By starting from a point of acknowledging some of the structural barriers in operation, in addition to the narratives foisted onto students that come through the media of policy discourses, students could be enabled to critically appraise and co-create their own narratives of employability. Design thinking could be used as an intervention as part of a careers education programme, potentially involving academics and employers as well involving students as partners could support efforts to develop a critical consciousness in this area.

Study Strengths

Through the use of a novel application of Design Thinking (DT) approach, we were able to bust open the discourse about employability in a way that would have otherwise not been possible, through engaging a variety of stakeholders in an objective career intervention. The first strength of this study is that having student facilitators leading workshops that generated the data enabled a range of different issues to be highlighted, creating a rich source of data to which we were able to meaningfully apply the WPR tool. Specifically, this was thanks to the interdisciplinarity engendered by different departments and services working together and the co-creation which was stimulated in

their new teams. The DT approach used enabled us to create a new space outside of the formal structures of individual courses and departments, Central Services and the Students' Union, and tensions associated with these structures. Finally, we foregrounded the use of complementary methodological tools to enable a rich exposition of these narratives of employability. WPR served as a powerful policy analysis tool and DT worked effectively as an underpinning methodology for generating the dialogue.

Using Bacchi's WPR tool (2009) allowed us to focus on the tacit assumptions built into the narratives around employability at micro, meso and macro levels, and by course how this is being internalised by individual students. From synthesising the findings, it is clear that the central emergent theme is that the neoliberalism maintains an unquestioned and unaddressed stronghold in this area.

Study Limitations

Firstly, this study is limited by the fact that it was focused on one pre-1992 Russell Group institution in the UK. There are considerable differences in employability strategies in different institutions both within the UK and internationally which have difference emphases, resources and operations. However, these findings are still considered to be one useful snapshot for the international community. Secondly, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Our initial plans for the collection of data had been postponed, truncated, and amended. We had fewer participants than originally anticipated, our study design meant that we needed to contract the length of our project due to funding requirements (which paid for our student facilitators), staff pressures due to increased workload meant that planned engagement was hampered, in addition to personal and health issues faced across the board; all of which served to limit the depth of engagement from the University. However, we are confident in the integrity and rich data that were collected.

The Warwick Employability Challenge, from which the data were gathered, was supported by a small bursary provided by the University of Warwick which funded the Student Innovation Fellows to lead the workshops.

Conclusion

Using the WPR policy analysis tool to understand narratives of employability at one UK HE institution has contributed new insight into the pervasive, unquestioned impact of the marketisation of education relating to social justice in higher education and employment outcomes. Students are problematised as having a deficit of key labour market skills, which they are then pressured into competing to acquire in order to "succeed" against pre-determined measures (such as metrics for "graduate-level" employment); which incidentally trigger the repayment of student loans in the UK. Governmental HE policies throw the responsibility to make students employable at institutions, without additional funding and above increasing existing commitments to teaching excellence. Students and institutions therefore remain at an impasse relating to what employability is, who is responsible for developing it and it's aims. Neoliberalism remains unquestioned in the policy objectives which are in turn individualised by students, who feel emotional pressure to succeed. Silences remain around who benefits most from efforts to develop "employability" skills; with students from widening participation backgrounds remaining worse off, and inequities being perpetuated.

Surfacing the unwritten narratives and giving voice to the voiceless are important in being able to question, clarify and re-negotiate the perceived problems policies are trying to address. Having explored four problem representations at micro, meso and macro levels, we believe these complex and enmeshed touchpoints between the students, staff and institution with their inherent silences that need to be surfaced and addressed. With this paper, we propose that Design Thinking could be used as one such way to challenge existing thinking and practice relating to employability and careers work. The values of design-thinking are aligned to career practitioner values, and enable a useful group-work activity which can create multi-dimensional understanding across stakeholder

groups. In the age that one-to-one counselling is becoming less easy to justify in terms of resource, upskilling in the DT methodology may be one useful means of surfacing some of the deep problems that plague Higher Education and begin to co-create meaningful solutions.

Data availability statement.

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

Disclosure statement

No conflicts of interest declared.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the participants and judges of the challenge for taking part, and the Warwick International Higher Education Academy for funding the Warwick Employability Challenge and supporting this project to go ahead. Specific thanks go to Dr Letizia Gramaglia, Head of the Academic Development Centre and the Director of the Warwick International Higher Education Academy for their ongoing support.

Funding

The Warwick Employability Challenge, from which the data were gathered, was supported by a small bursary provided by the University of Warwick which funded the Student Innovation Fellows to lead the workshops.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Emily Róisín Reid is a careers practitioner-researcher by background. She is now Senior Teaching Fellow and Director of Student Experience, Employability and Progression at Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, UK. Emily is passionate about the impact of career guidance and the role career guidance plays in social justice. Her research interests relate to medical careers, widening participation and social justice.

Bozhena (Bo) Kelestyn is a Senior Teaching Fellow and Director of Student Experience at the University of Warwick, UK. As Warwick's lead expert on design thinking, she holds an extensive portfolio of design thinking and innovation modules. Her research interests relate to design thinking signature pedagogies and the use of design thinking for innovation in Higher Education.

ORCID

Emily Róisín Reid  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7098-6803>

Bo Kelestyn  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7169-1740>

References

- Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Pearson Education.
- Bacchi, C., & Goodwin, S. (2016). *Poststructural policy analysis: A guide to practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bridgstock, R., & Jackson, D. (2019). Strategic institutional approaches to graduate employability: Navigating meanings, measurements and what really matters. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(5), 468–484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2019.1646378>

- Clarke, M. (2018). Rethinking graduate employability: The role of capital, individual attributes and context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(11), 1923–1937. <https://doi:10.1080/03075079.2017.1294152>
- Dickinson, J. (2020, January 6). Wicked problems: (How) does higher education solve problems for students? *Wonkhe*, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-does-higher-education-solve-problems-for-students/>.
- Donald, W. E., Baruch, Y., & Ashleigh, M. (2019). The undergraduate self-perception of employability: Human capital, careers advice, and career ownership. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(4), 599–614. <https://doi:10.1080/03075079.2017.1387107>.
- Dunne, L. (2016). Design Thinking: a framework for student engagement? A personal view. *Journal of Educational Innovation. Partnership and Change*, 2(1), <https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/317>.
- Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. *The Higher Education Academy*. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/engagement_through_partnership.pdf.
- Healy, M., Hammer, S., & McIlveen, P. (2020). Mapping graduate employability and career development in higher education research: A citation network analysis. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1804851>.
- Hooley, T. (2021, October 12). Universities have a key role in ensuring that Black Careers Matter. *Wonkhe*. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/universities-have-a-key-role-in-ensuring-that-black-careers-matter/>.
- Hooley, T., Sultana, R., & Thomsen, R. (2017). The neoliberal challenge to career guidance - mobilising research, policy and practice around social justice. In T. Hooley, R. Sultana, & R. Thomsen (Eds.), *Career guidance for social justice: Contesting neoliberalism* (pp. 1–28). Routledge.
- Hooley, T., Sultana, R., & Thomsen, R. (2019). *Career guidance for emancipation: Reclaiming justice for the multitude*. Routledge.
- Kelestyn, B., & Freeman, R. (2021, September 17). How to design our way to a better future. *Wonkhe*. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-to-design-our-way-to-a-better-future/>.
- Maisuria, A., & Cole, M. (2017). The neoliberalisation of higher education in England: An alternative is possible. *Policy Futures in Education*, 15(5), 602–619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210317719792>
- Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Bovill, C. (2019). Equity and diversity in institutional approaches to student- staff partnership schemes in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03075079.2019.1620721>
- Nijjar, A. (2009). Stop and Measure the Roses! Higher Education Career Services Unit. https://hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Measure_the_roses.pdf.
- Ries, E. (2011). *The lean startup: How today's entrepreneurs use continuous innovation to create radically successful businesses*. Crown Books.
- Røise, P. (2020). If career education is the solution, then what is the problem? In H. Haug, T. Hooley, J. Kettunen, & R. Thomsen (Eds.), *Erik career and career guidance in the nordic countries* (pp. 265–280). Sense.
- Salkind, N. J. (2010). *Encyclopedia of research design (vols. 1-0)*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412961288>
- Stevenson, C. (2004). *Theoretical and Methodological Approaches in Discourse Analysis*, 12(2), 17–29. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.12.2.17.s4>
- Taylor, S. (2001). Locating and conducting discourse analytic research. In M. Wetherell, S. aylor, & S. J. Yates (Eds.), *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis* (pp. 5–48). Sage.
- Troiani, I., & Dutson, C. (2021). The neoliberal University as a space to learn/think/work in Higher education. *Architecture and Culture*, 9(1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2021.1898836>
- University of Warwick. (2021, May). Employability strategy. University of Warwick website. <https://warwick.ac.uk/about/strategy/education/detail>.