
GiLE Journal of Skills Development

Shifting the Narrative: Towards a More Holistic Approach for Learning

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1. Problem Statement

The neo-liberalisation of higher education places significant emphasis on the employment of graduates. Such discourse is often dominated by the rhetoric of a skills agenda. Yet, we believe there is a need to consider a combination of factors that moves us beyond a skill-centric focus, thus helping a variety of stakeholders to enhance their understanding and subsequently engage more effectively to meet the demands of the future of work (Cole & Hallett, 2019).

2. Shifting the Narrative: Graduate Capital and a Taxonomy for Employability

A model of human capital, careers advice, and career ownership was conceptualised in 2014 and empirically validated between 2015 and 2017 via a sample of undergraduate students by adopting a mixed-methods approach (Donald et al., 2018; 2019). Their findings showed that human capital comprises six dimensions: social capital, cultural capital, psychological capital, scholastic capital, market-value capital, and skills. Informed by this research and several other key conceptual models, Cole and Eade in 2020 developed the learning centred and integrated Employability Redefined Taxonomy (cited in Cole & Coulson, 2022). The taxonomy aids thinking around a more holistic and nuanced view of what education should be addressing for all learners. Both the model and taxonomy can act as scaffolding to support educators and students in shifting their thinking and subsequent narrative about the combination of crucial areas of learning needed for the future of work and beyond. Specifically, whilst 'skills' are part of the challenge for all graduates, the acquisition and operationalisation of a wider set of resources can facilitate career sustainability (Nimmi et al., 2021) by acknowledging the interactions of person, context, and time (De Vos et al., 2020). This includes an awareness of labour market constraints and the need for graduates to be capable of signalling the true depth of their employability to prospective employers. Concurrently, the structured inequalities in education, society, and the workplace need to be addressed to provide a context that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion (Byrne, 2022).

3. The Role of Higher Education Institutions

Jakubik (2020) calls for higher education institutions to create value for work and society by fostering deeper collaborations with organisations to extend human capital beyond university boundaries. The adoption of authentic assessment, effective approaches to developing reflective practice, and greater recognition of the importance of lifelong and lifewide learning are all important to support learning for employability in the curriculum in practice. Crucially, the approach we are advocating is designed to reach all students and can relieve concerns that students who need access to careers guidance the most are often those least likely to seek or receive it (Donald et al., 2018). The model and taxonomy discussed here can create a frame of reference for learning and curriculum design that will support consistency at an institutional level yet can still provide flexibility at a course level and personalisation at the individual level.

4. Conclusion

We believe that a greater focus is urgently needed on moving beyond the narrow and restrictive lens of skills alone (Byrne, 2022), shifting the narrative towards an understanding and language for learning that embraces a more diverse range of outcomes for graduates. This can empower educators to enhance their current approaches and graduates to take ownership of their careers, both committing to and recognising the importance and value of lifelong and lifewide learning to promote career sustainability in preparation for the future world of work and life beyond.

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