



EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLORING CONTESTED RATIONALITIES

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PRESENTATION TO THE EMPLOYABILITY IN PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT CONGRESS,
BARCELONA



'EMPLOYABILITY'
ISN'T REALLY MY
FAVOURITE TERM

*'Workers of the
world unite;
you have
nothing to lose
but your chains.'*

Karl Marx



The background is a dark, textured surface with a grid of puzzle pieces. A silhouette of a person is shown in the center, holding a large puzzle piece that is slightly offset from the grid. The text is overlaid on the puzzle pieces.

I PREFER TO USE TERMS LIKE
'CAREERS' AND 'CAREERS
EDUCATION'



THERE WOULD
BE VALUE IN
MUCH MORE
DIALOGUE
BETWEEN
'CAREERS' AND
'EMPLOYABILITY'



Five ways to build a rewarding career
economictimes.indiatimes.com



Portfolio Career Definition, Pros and Cons
flexjobs.com



Career - Travepediaonline
travepediaonline.com



10 Steps to a Successful Career Change
thebalancecareers.com



How to Navigate Your Career
careertool.com



Definition of Career
moneycrashers.com



20 Great Career Fields for the Future
moneycrashers.com



Why focusing on your career path is the best
theladders.com



Career Planning- Complete Guide (2019)
mygreatlearning.com



support career development
realvnc.com



Advancing Your Career
thrive.com





BUT I DEVOTE A
LOT OF TIME TO
REDEFINING
THIS
PROBLEMATIC
TERM

CAREER IS OUR
JOURNEY(S)
THROUGH
LIFE, LEARNING
AND WORK



CAREERS MATTER

In our careers we try and make our lives, and the lives of those around us, better.

We also exert control (within limits) over the direction that our careers progress.



Lifelong

Lifewide





REAL CAREERS ARE TWISTED
AND COMPLEX

THEY ARE A JOURNEY NOT A
RACE



THEY ARE WHERE
WE NEGOTIATE
WITH POWER,
INSTITUTIONS AND
STRUCTURES



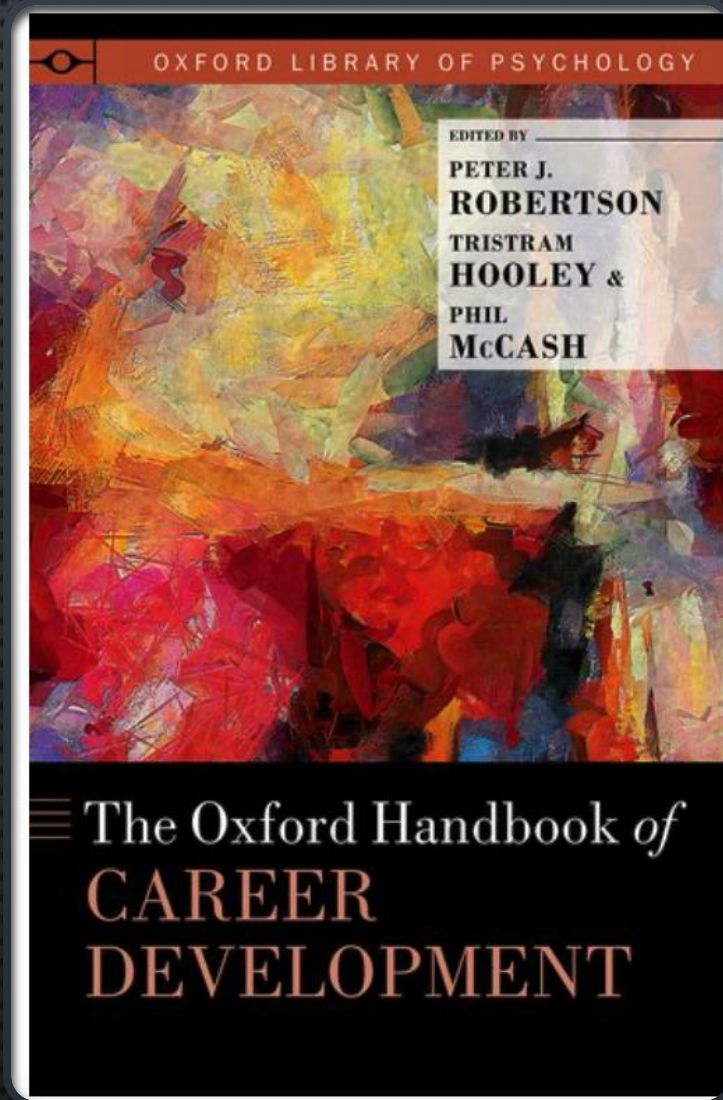


THEY ARE
SOCIAL, NOT
INDIVIDUAL

CAREER IS NOT JUST ABOUT PAID WORK

CAREER IS WHERE WE
BALANCE ALL ASPECTS OF OUR
LIVES





IN SUMMARY

Career is not a single moment of decision when we choose one job over another. It is deeply woven into the ongoing fabric of our lives. Our careers are conducted continuously, and they develop in social and political contexts that provide contrasting opportunities and limitations. Career is all around us and there is no escape from it, because it describes the coming together of our life, our learning, and our work. Career is important to the lives of individuals across the world and to the societies in which they live.

McCash, Hooley, & Robertson, 2021



BUT IF WE CAN
REDEFINE CAREER,
SURELY WE CAN
ALSO REDEFINE
EMPLOYABILITY



SUCH TERMS ARE
WHAT ERNESTO
LACLAU CALLS
EMPTY SIGNIFIERS

ALONG WITH MANY OTHER KEY TERMS

RONALD SULTANA TALKS ABOUT 4 'DIRTY WORDS' THAT WE USE WHICH APPEAR SIMPLE, BUT WHICH PROVE TO CARRY A LOT OF HIDDEN MEANINGS THAT NEED MORE CRITICAL EXAMINATION


- RESILIENCE
- ACTIVATION
- VULNERABILITY
- EMPLOYABILITY”



SO, WHAT DOES 'EMPLOYABILITY' SIGNIFY?

[Open Access](#) | [Published: 18 November 2022](#)

Rationalities that underpin employability provision in higher education across eight countries

[T. J. Hooley](#), [D. Bennett](#) & [E. B. Knight](#) 

[Higher Education](#) (2022) | [Cite this article](#)

WE STARTED WITH YORK & KNIGHT (2006)

EMPLOYABILITY 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'.

BUT THERE ARE ALSO LOTS OF OTHER DEFINITIONS WHICH UNDERSTAND EMPLOYABILITY IN DIFFERENT WAYS

- 'THE ABILITY TO FIND, CREATE AND SUSTAIN MEANINGFUL WORK ACROSS THE CAREER LIFESPAN AND IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS' (BENNETT, 2020)
- HAVING THE 'SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES THAT MAKE A PERSON MORE LIKELY TO CHOOSE AND SECURE OCCUPATIONS IN WHICH THEY CAN BE SATISFIED AND SUCCESSFUL' (DACRE-POOL & SEWELL, 2007).
- BODEN AND NEDEVA (2010) ARGUE THAT EMPLOYABILITY IS DISCURSIVELY CONSTRUCTED AND SHIFTS THE POWER BALANCE IN EDUCATION TO EMPLOYERS IN WAYS THAT DISRUPT PEDAGOGIES AND DO NOT BENEFIT STUDENTS.
- EMPLOYABILITY IS ALSO SUGGESTED BY SOME TO BE A EUPHEMISM FOR CULTURAL CAPITAL AND A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL REPRODUCTION (DOWNS, 2015; MORLEY, 2007).

SO EMPLOYABILITY IS...

Practices

A set of pedagogic practices within higher education designed to smooth student transitions to work and prepare them for a career

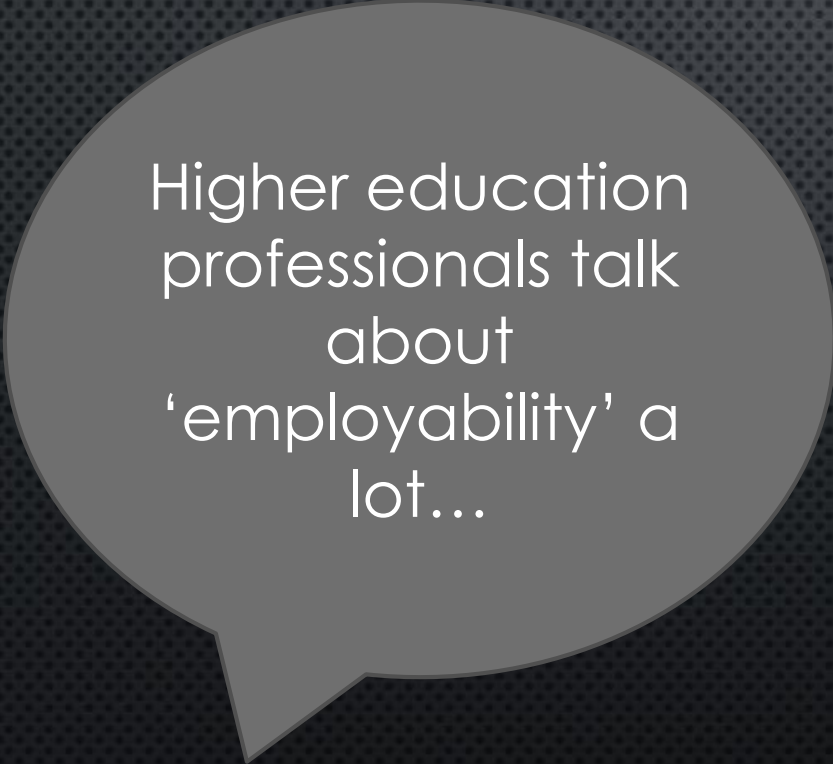
Personal attributes

And a set of personal attributes that individuals are advised to acquire in order to access the good life.

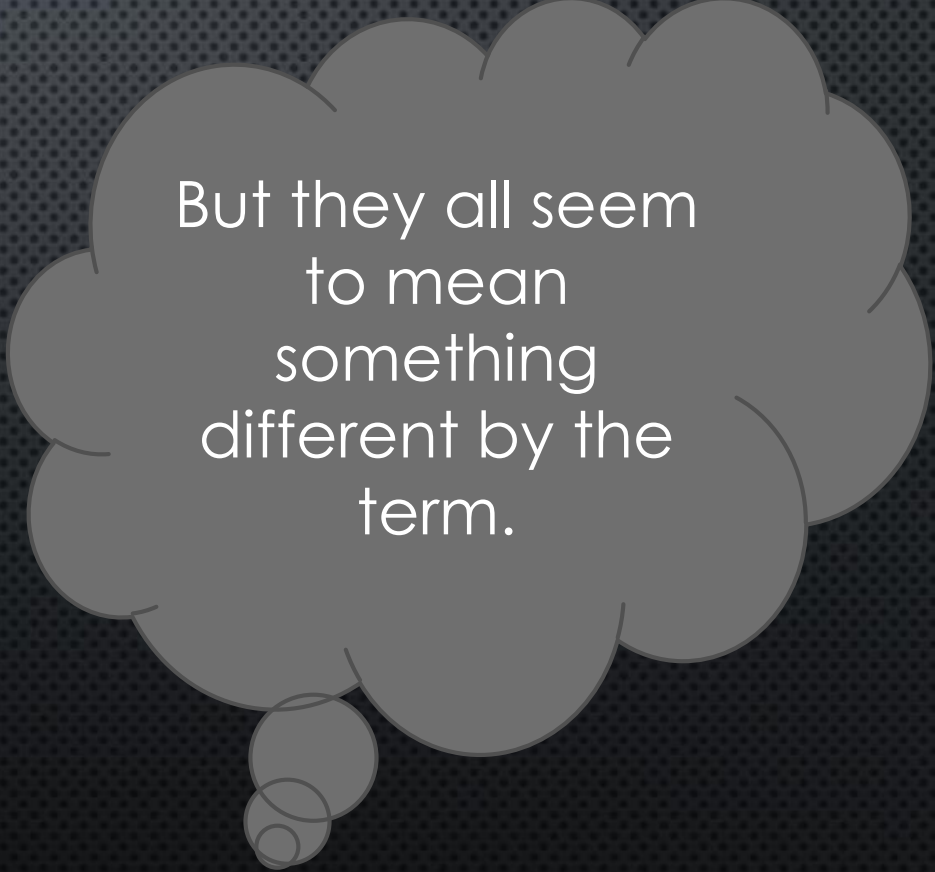
Progression

But also an imagined life journey beyond the institution where they are currently being educated.

BUT IN PRACTICE (ACROSS 18 UNIVERSITIES AND 8 COUNTRIES)



Higher education professionals talk about 'employability' a lot...



But they all seem to mean something different by the term.

SO HOW DID THEY UNDERSTAND EMPLOYABILITY?

Technocratic

Humanistic

Emancipatory

Drawing on Sultana's (2014a, b, c, 2018) typology of rationalities which in turn builds on Habermas (1971) and Watts' (1996).

TECHNOCRATIC RATIONALITY

- TECHNOCRATIC RATIONALITIES FOCUS ON FITTING THE INDIVIDUAL INTO THE ECONOMY AND IMPROVING THE SUPPLY OF SKILLS AND LABOUR REQUIRED BY EMPLOYERS.
- IN SUCH A MODEL, THE PURPOSE OF EMPLOYABILITY INTERVENTIONS IS TO HELP INDIVIDUALS TO 'IDENTIFY THEIR SKILLS PROFILE AND TO MATCH THIS AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE WITH THE (PRESUMED) NEEDS OF THE LABOUR MARKET' (SULTANA, 2018, P. 64).



BUT THIS CAN'T ACTUALLY GUARANTEE AN EMPLOYMENT OUTCOME

“WE ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN CAREERS OR CREATING THEIR OWN WORK FOR THE FUTURE THAT WE’RE ABOUT DEVELOPING THEIR ABILITY AND THEIR CAPACITIES TO CREATE WORK, OR TO SECURE WORK BUT WE ARE NOT ABOUT ACTUALLY MATCHING THEM TO WORK AND THAT TO ME IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STUDENTS HAVING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES.” (AUST1)

TECHNOCRATIC RATIONALITIES ARE INFLUENCED BY

- POLICY
- EMPLOYERS
- STUDENTS AND PARENTS KEEN TO ACHIEVE A GOOD LABOUR MARKET MATCH
- INSTITUTIONAL METRICS AROUND EMPLOYMENT

HUMANISTIC RATIONALITIES

- SUCH INTERVENTIONS EMPHASISE 'PERSONAL GROWTH AND FULFILMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL', 'SELF-DISCOVERY AND FLOURISHING OF CAPACITIES AND ASPIRATIONS' (SULTANA, 2018, P. 64).
- ALTHOUGH PAID EMPLOYMENT REMAINS AS AN IMPORTANT CONTEXT FOR HUMANISTIC EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAMMES, IT IS A MEANS TO AN END RATHER THAN AN END IN ITSELF.
- OTHER ACTIVITIES ARE ALSO VALUED, PROMPTING A NEED FOR INDIVIDUALS TO BE ABLE TO CRAFT AN APPROPRIATE WORK/LIFE BALANCE THAT CAN UNDERPIN SELF-ACTUALISATION.



HUMANISTIC RATIONALITIES ARE OFTEN AN EASIER 'SELL' TO ACADEMICS

'I COME TO IT FROM AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE AND WAS TRYING TO SELL THIS IDEA TO ACADEMICS TO TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. AS SOON AS YOU START TO TALK TO ACADEMICS ABOUT HELPING PEOPLE GET A JOB, OR THIS IS ABOUT CAREERS, A NUMBER OF PEOPLE JUST TURN OFF AUTOMATICALLY, THEY GET QUITE ANTAGONISTIC BECAUSE THAT'S NOT WHAT UNIVERSITIES ARE ABOUT. WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE EMPLOYABILITY TERMINOLOGY AND WHAT IT LEADS TO IS THAT IT'S MUCH MORE ABOUT ASSISTING STUDENTS TO RECOGNIZE WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT THEM, AND ESPECIALLY FROM THEIR DEGREE, THAT MIGHT HELP THEM IN THEIR FUTURE CAREERS AS WORKERS GROW AS MEMBERS OF SOCIETY... ONCE YOU START TALKING IN THAT SENSE THEN ACADEMICS, IN MY EXPERIENCE, START TO BUY INTO IT. '(AUST3)

PRESERVING LIBERAL TRADITIONS

- ATTENDING TO THE HUMBOLTIAN TRADITIONS OF LIBERAL HIGHER EDUCATION.
- 'WE DON'T WANT TO CONVERT OUR UNIVERSITY INTO A JOB/KIND OF EDUCATION CENTRE'
(GER1)
- THE FOCUS TENDS TO BE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL RATHER THAN ON THE PROGRESS INTO THE LABOUR MARKET.

HUMANISTIC RATIONALITIES ARE INFLUENCED BY...

- HISTORIC CULTURES AND WAYS OF THINKING WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY
- ACADEMICS' ATTEMPTS TO ALIGN THE 'EMPLOYABILITY AGENDA' WITH THEIR EXISTING PEDAGOGIES AND TO CREATE EDUCATION THAT IS GENUINELY EMPOWERING
- ACTIVE FORMS OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION (STUDNETS AS PARTNERS)

EMANCIPATORY RATIONALITIES



- EMANCIPATORY RATIONALITIES RESITUATE EMPLOYABILITY ACTIVITIES AS A FORM OF CRITICAL SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT
- ITS 'KEY PREOCCUPATION IS TO DEVELOP THE KNOWLEDGE THAT LEADS TO FREEDOM' EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO 'DECODE THE WAY IN WHICH THE ECONOMY AND LABOUR MARKET FUNCTION' AND CHALLENGE SOCIAL STRUCTURES 'IN THE HOPE THAT THEY ARE, ULTIMATELY, TRANSFORMED' (SULTANA, 2018, P. 65).

THE FIVE SIGNPOSTS TOWARDS SOCIALLY JUSTICE CAREER GUIDANCE



Build critical consciousness

- Help people to understand the situation, not just to react to it on a personal level.



Name oppression

- Help people see injustice and organise in solidarity to access a decent career.



Question what is normal

- Spend time discussing what normality means and whether it is necessarily desirable.



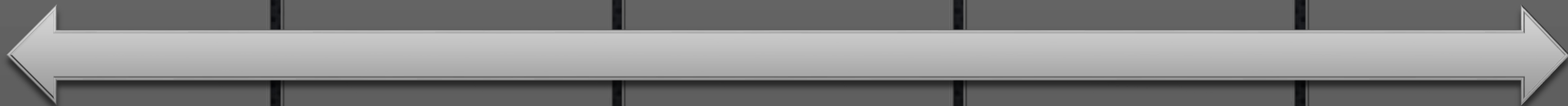
Encourage people to work together

- Facilitate social interaction and collaboration



Work at a range of levels

- Intervene into individual, group, organisational, social and political systems.



THERE ARE A RANGE OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF EMANCIPATORY EMPLOYABILITY

- STUDENTS AT THE MOMENT IN THE COUNTRY ARE LEADING A NATIONAL REVOLUTION CALLED THE DECOLONIZATION OF THE CURRICULUM ... AND THAT IS PROBABLY THE MOST NOTICEABLE. AND WHEN WE THINK ABOUT DECOLONIZING THE CURRICULUM, DECOLONISING THE CLASSROOM, DECOLONISING A SYSTEM, DECOLONISING ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY. SO, NOT ONLY ARE STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THIS INITIATIVE; IT IS INITIATED BY THEM. (SAF2)
- WE REALLY HAVE TO MOVE BEYOND THE FACT THAT IT'S JUST TO HELP STUDENTS FIND JOBS. ... WE'RE A DEVELOPING ECONOMY: WE'VE GOT ONE OF THE HIGHEST GINI COEFFICIENTS IN THE WORLD, SO THE GAP BETWEEN OUR RICH AND OUR POOR IS MOSTLY HIGHER THAN ANY OTHER NATION. SO, WE DON'T ONLY WANT TO BRIDGE STUDENTS IN TERMS OF GETTING A JOB. WE REALLY WOULD LIKE TO CHANGE THEIR MINDSET IN TO BEING JOB CREATORS. (SAF2)
- I THINK THERE IS LOT OF THINGS AROUND EMPLOYABILITY WE DO WANT TO CREATE: GLOBAL CITIZENS, WE DO WANT THEM TO BE CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIETY. IN OUR CAREER CENTER, WE DO COMMUNITY SERVICE, LEARNING, SOME ARE GAINING SKILLS, BUT THEY ARE ALSO GAINING CITIZENSHIP AND ARE GAINING AWARENESS OF THE VARIETY OF SOCIETAL ISSUES AND THINGS LIKE THAT. (CAN2)

EMANCIPATORY RATIONALITIES ARE INFLUENCED BY...

- ACADEMIC CRITIQUE (THIS POSITION IS STRONGER IN THE LITERATURE THAN IN PRACTICE)
- UNEQUAL CONTEXTS
- A 'SUPER-CHARGED' HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE THAT VIEWS INDIVIDUALS WITHIN SOCIETY
- STUDENT ACTIVISM

RATIONALITIES CAN BE WOVEN TOGETHER



- INSTITUTIONS RARELY CONFORMED COMPLETELY TO ONE TYPE.
- THE MULTITUDE OF STAKEHOLDERS, DRIVERS AND APPROACHES MEANT THAT MANY ENCOMPASSED MULTIPLE RATIONALITIES
- TO SOME EXTENT IT IS POSSIBLE TO ACCOMODATE THESE IN A UNIQUE WEAVE
- BUT THERE CAN ALSO BE TENSIONS



CONCLUSIONS

- THERE ARE DIFFERENT WAYS TO DO EMPLOYABILITY.
- THESE SUGGEST DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO DELIVERY AND DIFFERENT WAYS TO ARTICULATE IT AND ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS
- MORE IMPORTANTLY THEY ASK US TO THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY ABOUT WHY WE ARE DOING WHAT WE ARE DOING AND WHAT INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES WE WANT TO COME OUT OF IT?

SO

- WHAT RATIONALITIES INFORM YOUR EMPLOYABILITY PROVISION?
- AND... ARE YOU HAPPY ABOUT THIS?

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