Employability in Education Studies: Developing a critical and educational approach?

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This paper reports on findings from a collaborative research project on employability and Education Studies in the UK. Whilst employability has become an important agenda for higher education as a whole in recent years, its manifestation has varied considerably across subject areas. Education Studies occupies an interesting position in this landscape, as a subject that has its roots in teacher education, but has developed into a distinct academic subject in its own right (McCulloch, 2002). It is often positively framed as a degree which ‘keeps options open’; preparing students for a specific career whilst also opening up alternatives to teaching (Hodkinson, 2009). Within this context, our project sought to explore the perceptions and experiences of Education Studies relating to employability, as well as the impact this had on engagement with their studies. Conducted as a student-lecturer collaborative enquiry (Bland and Atweh, 2007), the research took an interpretative approach and employed qualitative methods of data collection including interviews and focus groups at 15 HEIs across England and Wales. Data were analysed thematically.

Interpreted via a theoretical framework that drew on critical perspectives on employability (e.g. Brown et al., 2002), theorisations of employability as learning (Yorke, 2006) and insights from the ‘New Literacies’ literature (e.g. Lea and Street, 2006), our research highlights how students developed a variety of ‘employability literacies’ over the course of their studies, which could also be enhanced through critical literacy practices. Findings illustrate that expectations and perceptions varied between students (particularly ‘mature’ and ‘traditional’ students) and over time; many students began their studies with a view to a career in teaching but found that this changed and their view of career options expanded. The findings also reveal how students engaged critically with pre-course literature on the employability ‘value’ of programmes and how this acted as a contested site for competing interpretations. Work based placements were found to have a distinct, experimental nature on Education Studies programmes.

Our research suggests that Education Studies is well placed to offer an educational approach to employability characterised by criticality, experimentation and reflective learning. Implications include the integration of academic content with employability provision, foregrounding the experimental nature of the placement as a distinct educational approach, and the deployment of critical literacy practices including student reading and writing groups. Further research into employability on comparable courses (e.g. Health Studies, Law Studies) may indicate the value of our findings beyond the immediate context.