

Employers as stakeholders in postgraduate employability skills development

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Abstract

This article explores the position and views of employers as a critical stakeholder group in postgraduates' employability skills. The intention is to raise the important issue of the gap between the skills developed on postgraduate programmes and employers' stated needs of postgraduates. Also, it is hoped the paper contributes modestly to narrowing the gap in this. The focus of the generative research design has its foundations in a professionally accredited MSc in Human Resource Management. While the primary work is limited in sample size, it offers some insights. The ten core employability skills that emerge for this postgraduate programme from the authors' primary work on employers' expectations are prioritised by employer line managers. Overall, communication and problem-solving emerge as the two core skills most important to employers. The key point made in conclusion is that employers themselves can increase their stake in employability skills development in two ways: by working in partnership with universities on the core and component skills they seek from postgraduates; and, by assuming their share of responsibility for the development of these skills. In balancing employer expectations in such a way, it is levelled that the general standard of postgraduates' employability skills may be enhanced.

Keywords: employability skills development; postgraduate skills; employers' role; HRM

Introduction

The current emphasis on the national skills agenda and development of employability skills is not a new pre-occupation for educational providers or policy makers (Cranmer, 2006). Indeed, the subject is now a firmly established policy item for governments and higher education institutions (HEIs) alike (Lees, 2002) and it has possibly never been more important (Rae, 2008; Treleaven & Voola, 2008). The importance of employability skills is well documented in an era which demands a value-added approach (Harvey, 2001, 2003; Knight & Yorke, 2001; Morley, 2001; Cranmer, 2006). Emphasising an urgent national need for improving the UK skills base, the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) highlighted that employability skills are not only essential to business competitiveness but also for prosperity and fairness. Recent general media interest underscores the topicality of employability skills and employer dissatisfaction with graduates, who they believe lack key skills (Clark, 2008). The basis of both the recognised importance and the topicality of employability skills is,

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fundamentally, the gap between the skills graduates present to their employers on career entry and the skills employers expect from these graduates. Put another way, there is a general need among employers for graduates to possess and demonstrate skills that are relevant and applicable to working in their organisations, but this need is not being met. The implicit assumption is that graduates will arrive in the increasingly competitive workplace with skills developed for ready manifestation as required by employers, emphasising human capital value and justifying policy investment (Morley, 2001).

The basis for improving employability skills development at university level arguably lies in appreciation of the context of the key drivers of the nationwide employability agenda. Expansion of the UK skills base, employer needs of graduates, government policy informing learning and teaching strategy, and specific programmes of study all feature in this, as can be seen in Figure 1. This diagram indicates a triangulation of participation in skills development that involves HEIs, students and employers. It also suggests that HEIs, graduates and employers in concert are, or should be, involved in employability skills development. Sharing responsibility for skills development is an important principle according to Leitch (2006).

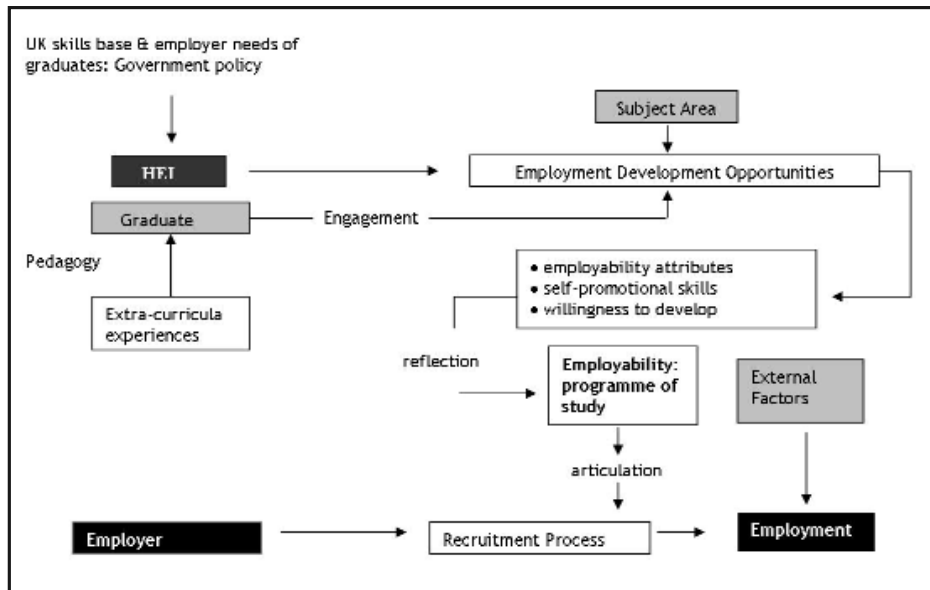


Figure 1: Model of graduate employability development (adapted from Harvey *et al.*, 2002, as cited in Lees, 2002)

In another widely acknowledged model of employability, as can be seen in Figure 2 (Yorke, 2001, as cited in Lees, 2002), the focus is placed on graduates’ skills development through their subject of study in order to achieve employment. Again this links graduate, HEI and employer responsibility in that the end point is employment. Therefore it could be contended that the skills development has to be led by employer demand, another of Leitch’s (2006) principles which underpin skills development.

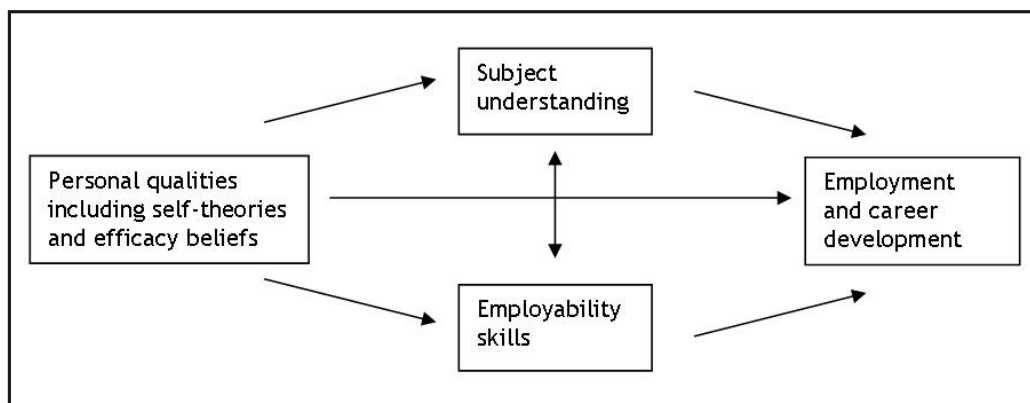


Figure 2: Model of employability (adapted from Yorke, 2001, as cited in Lees, 2002)

Thus employers are explicit in the first model and implicit in the second. Leitch (2006) expressly recommended a stronger employer voice in skills development, together with increased engagement and investment in skills development. Further, integral to both models is the specificity of subject of study. Milner and Hill (2008) made the point that subject focus, in their instance accounting, is one of three interest sets in employability skill development. Another interest set in what they call a “tripartite of interests” (Milner &

Hill, 2008, p. 13) is a profession. The remaining interest is vested in higher education funding councils. Drawing from such subject and professional focus, the primary work included in this article concerns the subject of human resource management (HRM) as covered in the MSc in HRM programme delivered at Glasgow Caledonian University. Successful completion of this programme secures graduate membership of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). The CIPD is a UK-wide professional body for HR practitioners. It is conceded in the literature that much of the academic work on employability skills has historically centred on undergraduate provision (Dacko, 2006). Therefore, more of a postgraduate locus, using a programme of study such as the MSc in HRM, is called for in the employability debate and in this the perspective of employers as key stakeholders is important, as asserted above (Leitch, 2006).

The purpose of the article is then to explore employer expectations of employability skills development in general and in particular as an output of a professionally accredited MSc in HRM programme of study. It is hoped that the exploration contributes, albeit in a modest way, to narrowing the gap between the skills employers need in their postgraduate recruits and the skills presented in the workplace by these recruits. In order to achieve the purpose, the literature review on which the primary work is predicated highlights the principal stakes in employability skills as regards locus of responsibility for skills development, definition and selection of skills, and particular skills for the MSc in HRM. Next, the empirical research methods and the results are delineated. Lastly, the findings are extended to a section on discussion and conclusions.

Literature review: Raising the stakes

Responsibilities for employability skills

According to Fallows and Steven (2000), HEIs have a particular responsibility in employability skills development:

Higher education in particular must provide its graduates with the skills to be able to operate professionally within the environment required for the “learning age” or learning society. (p. 76)

Many HEIs have certainly assumed this responsibility (Morley, 2001), responding to the “increasing pressure to address the employability needs of students” (Evans, 2008, p. 45). Cassidy (2006, p. 508) suggested that “employers consider it the responsibility of educational institutions” to develop the requisite skills. Thus, it is clear that there is both an assumption and presumption about the key role played by HEIs in improving standards in employability skills to those sought by employers. However, the question of the responsibility of employers themselves has recently been raised (Johnson, 2007), compounded by the statement that, according to Fisher (2007, p. 3), “of the £33bn spent by employers annually on training and education, only about £5bn of this is spent within the higher education sector”. As the criticism of deficiency in employability skills frequently stems from employers, there is arguably a role, even a need, for employers to guide HEIs on which skills they require. This reinforces the role of employers as stakeholders in employability skills development as stated in the introduction to the paper. This is not to imply though that skills development is wholly directed by employers, for there are arguably several potential issues with this. For example, varying employers’ may have varying needs; employers may be too narrowly focused on the short term training needs of graduates instead of longer term development needs; the educational responsibility of HEIs may be called into question by employers who expect graduate entrants to perform immediately at a high level. Instead, it is to suggest that employers as well as HEIs have a key role in employability skills development, especially in informing the general direction of employability skills development during the educational process.

Moreover, identification of skills is likely to be best informed by employers who have a close proximity to the programmes they recruit from and to the perceptions of academic staff delivering these programmes where specific skills are relevant (Stephens & Hamblin, 2006). Dialogue between employers and academics is therefore central to HEI provision of employability skills development. Evidence suggests that students are likely to respond well to opportunities presented by HEIs for development of their personal and specific employability skills (Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Johnson, 2007). In a sense therefore, this places employers at the hub of responsibility for said development. Basically, managers in organisations who recruit graduates and postgraduates are key stakeholders in employability skills. Their understanding of employability skills and their specific needs of them underwrites the efforts of HEIs in improving their students’ skills. As a consequence, it is necessary to define employability in terms that have meaning for employers and to select skills that have resonance for employers.

Defining and selecting employability skills

For all the topicality and importance of employability as a concept, it remains stubbornly challenging to articulate. Lees (2002, p. 1) noted “employability a difficult concept to define succinctly and comprehensively”. However, it is possible to narrow down a definition of employability for the purposes of this article. Harvey and Knight (2005, p. 5) stated that employability can be defined in two broad approaches: “employability as job getting [and] employability as developing attributes for graduate employment”. They pointed out that the former approach is problematic to academics whereas the latter is

an area where academics can make a contribution. Therefore the focus is on the latter approach here, whereby employability refers to graduate attributes that “will assist in getting, retaining and developing in a job” (Harvey & Knight, 2005, p. 5). In Lees’ (2002) terms, employability centres on post-graduates’ job capabilities. In extension, this article concentrates on employability as: individual postgraduates’ skills that may be developed during a programme of study and subsequently applied in their employment and careers.

In translating the definition of employability into specification of employability skills, Harvey and Knight’s (2005) point about the sheer number of skills or attributes that employers seek is apposite. They note that the number can be as high as 80. However, this could be reduced by concentrating on management and business skills which “can be taken from one job role to another [and] used within any profession and at any stage of [the individual’s] career” (Raybould & Sheedy, 2005, p. 259). Also helpful are the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2007) benchmark statements and Lees’ (2002) categorising of employability skills into personal qualities, core skills and process skills. Personal qualities include independent learning, willingness to learn and reflectiveness. Bar these aspects which centre on learning, personal qualities are beyond the definition of employability adopted for this article, as delineated earlier, but the core skills and process skills categories are informative in identifying relevant employability skills on the postgraduate programme under scrutiny in this study. Also contributing to the identification of key employability skills, Raybould and Sheedy (2005, p. 259) drew attention to “the fact that employers are looking for vital soft skills in graduates which are obtained during study and periods of work experience”. This point was also highlighted by Scott (2007), who found that employers actively seek soft skills at the point of selection and, in some cases, prioritise these over the more traditional easier to measure hard set of skills.

It is worth noting that most of the literature on employability does not distinguish between undergraduate and postgraduate employability skills (Lees, 2002). Research activity on business skills development on postgraduate programmes is also reported to be in its early stages (Dacko, 2006). Together, these two points reinforce the relevance of the primary work in this paper, in its crucial consideration of identification of programme relevant and specific employability skills (Evans, 2008). The source of employability skills for the PgD/MSc in HRM programme is a distillation of data offered by the QAA (2007), Lees (2002), Raybould and Sheedy (2005) and, significantly, the CIPD professional standards (2005a). It is worth noting that skilled performance, hence skills development, is inherently important in the work of HR professionals (Boselie & Paauwe, 2005). Notably, previous case study work on employer expectations of postgraduates was also informative in flagging up the main employability skills (Maxwell & Williamson, 2007). Distillation from these key sources allowed the identification of ten core skills areas for the empirical study, namely:

- communication skills
- decision-making skills
- independent working skills
- information retrieval skills
- leadership skills
- numerical skills
- personal learning and development skills
- problem-solving skills
- strategic skills
- team working skills

The study

As previously indicated, the empirical work explores employer expectations of employability skills on a professionally accredited MSc in HRM programme of study. This programme may be reflective of, or informative for, other postgraduate business management programmes. The empirical study reported here is a continuation of previous work which explored the views mainly of students, but also of some employers, with regards to the MSc in HRM (Maxwell & Williamson, 2007). Respectively, questionnaires and one-to-one interviews were used to collect the data from these two constituencies. The article concentrates on employers as line managers and key informants in organisations employing or engaging postgraduates of the programme. The goal in this generative research into postgraduate employer expectations is to identify the particular nature of employers’ expectations and priorities in the skills areas, not the level of skill attainment expected.

In order to capture the views of the stakeholder employers, dual methods of data capture were used, namely interviews and questionnaires. This approach was deemed appropriate in order to attempt to achieve both depth in interviews (Creswell, 1998), and scale and reach in the questionnaires (Fowler, 1993). Further, spanning qualitative and quantitative data can be helpful in HR research (Anderson, 2004). For the interviews, 12 line managers whose organisations provide work placement experience for full time, pre-HRM experience students on the programme were invited to participate in the study. These students are required to complete an employer placement during the programme. As a result, nine face-to-face interviews were

carried out, the first of which was treated as a pilot. All of the interviewees had direct line management responsibility for students on placement during the programme of study. In contrast to the questionnaire format, a series of open questions were put to the managers in placement organisations on their involvement in and expectations of students' employability skills development. The open questions centred on: their reasons for hosting a student placement (Leitch, 2006); organisational gains from having placement students (Boselie & Paauwe, 2005); their contribution to graduates' employability skills development (Leitch, 2006); and their expectations of the skills placement students bring with them (Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Maxwell & Williamson, 2007). Additionally, these key informants were asked about the relative relevance of the ten core skills identified above, and if any component skills within were particularly important. Notes and key quotations were recorded for each interview, most of which lasted between half an hour and an hour. From these, a content analysis was done around recurring words and themes (Creswell, 1998). The interview findings helped to confirm the content of the questionnaires.

The questionnaires concerned current, part time PgD/MSc in HRM students, all of whom have HRM work experience on entering the programme. On the basis of convenience sampling these 100 or so students were invited, in class, to forward to the research team the name and contact details of their immediate line manager, with appropriate permissions. These managers usually support, if not financially sponsor, students on the part-time PgD/MSc in HRM programme. Following piloting, 63 questionnaires were sent to self-selected line managers of current part time MSc in HRM students, either by email or post, depending on their preference. The yield was 26 usable responses, a 41% response rate. Given the link the employers had with the university and the relevance of, and need for, employability skills development on the MSc in HRM programme of study, a higher response rate was hoped for. Also, the questionnaire was designed for ready completion so as to encourage returns. For example, binary questions were posed to establish if the listed skill components constitute employer expectations and there was only one open question. Nevertheless, the questionnaire did try to penetrate each of the identified ten core skill areas as they were sub-divided into several component skills. The component skills were categorised as either hard (outcome) skills or soft (process) skills, reflecting terminology used by the CIPD (2005a), and others (Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Scott, 2007), with the added benefits of giving some description to employers about the meaning of each component and of grouping the skills as other HR orientated skills and competency studies have done (e.g., Pilbeam & Corbridge, 2002; Boselie & Paauwe, 2005; Tang & Sun, 2008). (Refer to Table 1 in the findings sections for details on the core and component skills). The resulting data was collated using SPSS although the relatively modest response rates preclude statistical analysis.

Across the two data collection methods, employers were encouraged to express their expectations of postgraduate students' employability skills. The research design echoes the first two of the three stages of data capture advocated by Robinson *et al.* (2007) to forecast future competency requirements. Their third stage, critical incident technique interviews, was not feasible due to the timing of the research and student placements. Limitations are, nonetheless, readily acknowledged in this research design. One is the ultimately arbitrary, albeit theoretically informed, selection of the core skills and components. However, a counterpoint for consideration is that in both the interviews and questionnaires, respondents were also asked about other skills that they expect. Another limitation is the non-probability, self-selected sampling method which would hinder any claims of wholesale generalisability of the results, irrespective of response rates. Access to employer databases with strict data protection protocols proved challenging, therefore employers were asked at a university event if they would like to take part in the research. Similarly, accessing line managers via part-time students proved difficult as some students believed their employer might make an evaluation of their personal level of employability skills, despite reassurances to the contrary. Both of these issues had an impact on the overall response rates. As a consequence a third limitation became the total number of research respondents, comprising nine interviewees and 26 questionnaires. This relatively modest response rate leads to the findings being set within the parameters of the primary study. In the following results section, the numbers of informants are given absolutely and not in percentage terms in recognition of the response rates.

Results

The interview and questionnaire findings are set out in turn. While both data sets are generalised across the respondents, the qualitative interview results include quotations in order to illuminate and illustrate aspects of the findings. The quotations are attributed according to the informants' preference for declaring or disguising their organisation.

Interviews: Employers of full-time students

Analysis of the interview data was three-fold. It was carried out in relation to: employer expectations of the ten core skills MSc in HRM students bring from the programme of study to their placement; their priorities within these skills; and their role or stake in development of the HRM students' employability skills. A summary of both employer expectations and priorities in the core skills are shown in Table 1. Evidently, all of the skills are of some importance. Most important overall are "communication", "independent working" then

“problem-solving”, “personal learning and development”, and “teamwork”, while least important are “strategic skills”, then “leadership” and “numerical skills”. Again, this finding validates the chosen ten core skills.

Skill set	Skills which placement students are expected to bring to the placement workplace	Three most important skills	Three least important skills
Communication	8	9	-
Decision-making	8	1	1
Information retrieval	8	1	1
Independent working	8	5	1
Leadership	3	-	5
Numerical skills	4	-	5
Problem-solving	8	3	1
Personal learning & development	8	3	1
Strategic skills	3	-	6
Teamwork	7	3	1

Table 1: Frequencies of interviewees’ responses on placement students - employer expectations and priorities

It is apparent that communication at different levels of the organisational structure is considered the most important skill. This finding emerged from asking the employers the open question on what employability skills they expect their placement student to bring with them to their placement, before presentation of the list of 10 core skills in the interviews. Project skills, as part of this “communication” grouping, topped the responses with four employers each citing both of these. The BBC Scotland manager interviewed posited that:

They [placement students] need to be... able to communicate to executive board members... [so] we expect them to have the ability to interact competently.

The computing company interviewee expanded on the nature of communication skills:

Communication, definitely, at different levels... managing people politics, interpersonal skills, written communication like email, phoning people. If the placement involves interviews then getting on with others is important or the placement might involve constructing a survey so that [type of] communication is important.

Also, with reference to project skills and communication skills, the respondent manager in the international financial services sector organisation raised the importance of placement students having:

the ability to know what they are looking for [in a project] and how to go about it... how to compile a report. Also, being assertive and confidence in going out there [with HR clients] and asking questions and asking for help if they need it.

Notably, the responsibility for the students’ employability development of project skills is perceived as being largely vested in the university. This was most apparent in the responses to the questions concerning reasons for hosting student placements and organisational gains from the placements. Mostly there is an organisational task need for a project to be carried out (seven responses centred on this), as typified by the Land and Environmental Services interviewee in Glasgow City Council:

Such [MSc in HRM] students are given specific projects to carry out... They require less coaching than under-graduate students [and] have more initiative and confidence to run with a project.

With a hint of recognition of employer-centred responsibility (Johnson, 2007), the Entertainment Company informant, as an exception, explained:

I’ve been on the programme myself... so I want to give someone else an opportunity and to get the feel of how great our company is.

Corresponding with the general project rationale for taking students on placement, all interviewees were clear that the primary gain is completion of a project which is valued by the organisation, as illustrated by an NHS interviewee: “from the project viewpoint, a great end product... we are really pleased”. That stated, one interviewee, in BBC Scotland, explicitly recognised employer responsibility in providing students with

placements:

There is a lot of change going on right now in the working world and we have a duty as employers to look at what we can do, in a meaningful way, for tomorrow's employees.

While all interviewees except one were limited in insight into employer responsibility for employability skills development, most (six) interviewees were of the opinion that their postgraduate placement students' employability skills developed while on the placement. Specifically, students are considered to develop in communication skills and in exposure to "real life" working and business environments that allow connections between theory and practice. Mirroring this, the Glasgow City Council manager opined that: "The placement is essentially about how organisations work... their culture".

Work placements being a particular opportunity for making connections between academically based theory and work based reality arises as a strong theme, with six interviewees emphasising it. That these employers consider university learning as wholly theoretical and implicitly "unreal" possibly calls into question their confidence in HEIs to develop the very skills they hold as important (Dacko, 2006). This point arguably signals a need for greater communication between HEIs and employers, though the respondent employers do not raise this.

Overall, the interviewees appear to have expectations not only of the university in the development of pre-placement employability skills but also in the level of development of these skills. This can be summed up by the comment that: "We're looking for 'next level' skills, not basic [level]" (BBC Scotland) for instance. Therefore there is a generally high level of employer expectation of the skills demonstrated by students on their placement, hence a high level of expectation on the university to ensure development of the skills. This is important as the placement employability skills are the very skills the respondent employers expect of their postgraduate career entrants. Such employer expectation can be seen in this quotation, for example, which again reflects the real world aspect noted above:

The skills would be pretty much the same, communication including taking ownership and being proactive, dealing with problems and challenges and not expecting everything to be perfect. [Entrants] need to be open to improvements - we're all on a [learning] journey! - and to be able to build rapport and tap into others' expertise. (Entertainment company)

This view chimes with the definition of employability adopted in this study, namely: individual postgraduates' skills that may be developed during a programme of study and subsequently applied in their employment and careers. However, from the modest sample presented, employers are indicating that most of this responsibility resides with the HEI (Fallows & Steven, 2000), with employers contributing a sort of work reality check. In contrast, employer expectations of skills development by the university in leadership and strategy are lower. The interviewee comments, of First Scotrail and NHS respectively, capture this:

Leadership, strategy - these would be developed in the job/role over time.

Leadership, strategy and decision-making are only needed at a basic level. They can be developed later and depend on the role they take on.

What is not made clear is the locus of responsibility for skills development here, although there is an inference that the development takes place in employment. While the interview findings are informative in themselves and for the questionnaires on specific core skills on the MSc in HRM (Johnson, 2007; Evans, 2008), it is apparent that there are only traces of evidence of employer recognition of their responsibility in employability skills development.

Questionnaires: Employers of Part-time Students

The questionnaire data was analysed in three ways. Firstly, the collective respondent rankings of the component were analysed, then the hard (outcome) and soft (process) skills (CIPD, 2005a). The results constitute employer priorities in the elements of the core skill. They are presented in summary in Table 2 below.

It is clear that all ten core skills presented are validated as employer expectations of postgraduates' employability skills, linking to the interview findings on programme relevant skills (Evans, 2008). Indeed more than two thirds of the respondents stated that they expect all but two of the component skills, namely "determination of the direction of others" and "management of team performance", both of which reside in the leadership core skill, to be developed. Further, the respondents are unanimous in their expectations of five identified component skills, namely:

1. Effectiveness in influencing and negotiation (core communication skill);
2. Analysis of business problems (core problem solving skill);
3. Proposing solutions (core problem solving skill)
4. Use of decision techniques (core decision making skill); and,
5. Analysis of new information (information retrieval skill).

With the exception of the first of these skills, all are hard (outcome) skills. Furthermore, in seven of the ten core skills the highest levels of employer expectations are seen in hard component skills as opposed to the soft component skills.

Skills	Number of respondents
<i>Communication skills</i>	
Effectiveness in influencing and negotiating (S)	26
Production of written/report information (H)	24
Appropriate interpersonal skills with people at all organisational levels (S)	23
Use of technology for communications (H)	23
Effective management of relations with internal and external customers (S)	22
<i>Problem solving skills</i>	
Analysis of business problems (H)	26
Proposing solutions (H)	26
Creativity in problem situations (S)	25
<i>Decision making skills</i>	
Use of decision techniques (H)	26
Creation of alternative options (S)	25
Evaluation of alternative options (S)	25
<i>Independent working skills</i>	
Production of work under own initiative (S)	24
Effective time management (S)	23
Confidence in carrying out own role (S)	23
<i>Team working skills</i>	
Contribution to team performance with respect to business needs (H)	25
Adoption of different team roles (H)	24
Contribution to team process (H)	23
<i>Leadership skills</i>	
Adoption of a proactive, forward thinking approach (S)	23
Application of appropriate leadership styles (H)	21
Determination of the direction of others (H)	16
Management of team performance (H)	16
<i>Personal learning & development skills</i>	
Motivation for life-long, independent learning (S)	25
Active pursuit of personal development planning (S)	24
Setting of personal goals in line with organisational goals (H)	22
<i>Strategic skills</i>	
Thinking critically & analytically (S)	25
Holistic understanding of complex business perspectives (H)	20
Formulation of long term plans (H)	18
<i>Information retrieval skills</i>	
Analysis of new information (H)	26
Generation of relevant information within the business context (H)	24
Awareness of ethical dimensions of information (S)	23
<i>Numerical skills</i>	
Interpretation of meaning from numerical data (H)	25
Presentation of information in numerical form e.g. statistics, models (H)	24

Table 2: Ranking of components in core skills
(H) denotes a hard (outcome) skill; (S) denotes a soft (process) skills

The second type of analysis related to the level of employer priority placed on the core skills themselves. The three employability skills that the respondent employers attach most importance to are communication, problem solving and decision making. Conversely, the three least important are strategic skills, information retrieval, and numerical skills, leaving as middle ranking skills (in no particular order) independent working, team working, and leadership. In addition, several respondents noted other skills they required. These additional skills cluster around aspects of intellectual and interpersonal skills in the workplace: knowledge, of the application of employment regulations and advanced IT software; ability, in general people management such as emotional intelligence and implementing change programmes; and awareness, of the diversity of the role of the HR professional for example in risk management. Moreover, the employer respondents commented

on the skills developed on the MSc in HRM and the skills they require in their workplaces. Without exception, in different ways, these comments centre on the employer preference for, and expectation of, contiguity between the skills developed during the course of the programme and the skills required in the workplace. The crux, as pointed out in the interview findings, is the need for theory to match practice in a realistic and real working-life way in teaching. The following comment provided in an open ended question illustrates this point:

Skill development [on the MSc in HRM] can sometimes be “too remote”. The reality of business is less of a problem with part-time students but very evident with full time students. [They] only have an academic grasp of HR. They learn the reality of decision-making and communication in the workplace.

Absent from the respondents’ feedback was any reference to their part (as employers) in the development of employability skills for their employees who are part-time MSc in HRM students (Johnson, 2007). Added to this in the interview findings it seems there is significant potential to involve employers more in the development of employability skills, at least among students of the MSc in HRM programme covered here, to the standard Leitch (2006) recommended.

Discussion and conclusions

In exploring the nature of employability skill expectations of employers connected to the MSc in HRM programme at Glasgow Caledonian University, it is evident that these expectations run high, and span ten core skills. Placement employers of full-time, pre-experience students prioritise “communication”, “independent working” and then, equally, “problem solving”, “personal learning and development”, and “teamwork”, while employers of part-time, post-experience students prioritise “communication”, “problem solving” and “decision making” core skills. Hence overall it is communication and problem solving which emerge as the most important skills sets for employers. However, given that some differences exists between employer expectations of full-time postgraduate students and part-time students, not only is programme specificity important to employability skills (Dacko, 2006; Evans, 2008), but also mode of programme delivery in the context of the study reported here.

When directly relevant core skills are specified, their component hard and soft skills can in turn be identified. The findings on these in this study point to employers being concerned with both hard and soft component skills, but mainly with hard, outcome orientated skills. For example, the soft component skill of “effectiveness in influencing and negotiating” is generally most important to employers within the core skill of communication, whereas the hard component skills of “analysis of business problems” together with “proposing solutions” are the most important within decision making.

Although the response rates impinge on the interpretation of the findings, a couple of wider points can be tentatively aired from the evidence of high levels of employer expectations of postgraduates’ skill development. Firstly, it appears that employability skills need to be bespoke for HRM programmes of study, modes of delivery, and component skills alike, possibly even for levels of ability in component skills for postgraduates as distinct from under-graduates. This can only be achieved with employer input in order to build understanding on the complex nature of employability skills (Lees, 2002) and in order to ensure that there is demonstrable realism in programme curricula as well as in the workplace (Scott, 2007). Secondly, the high level of expectation reflects a general presumption among employers that it is for educational institutions to develop employability skills (Cassidy, 2006) and, implicitly, not employers. This is somewhat ironic in the context of the HRM profession where continuous professional development is essential. Indeed this study finds more acknowledgement of their responsibility for development after the students complete their programme of study rather than during it (Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). Furthermore, the differential between part-time and full-time modes of study, with regards to theory versus practice, means that full-time students could potentially be disadvantaged in terms of their ability to achieve certain employability skills due to relative inexperience in work situations and to programme time constraints. This implies a need for greater recognition among employers of their role in skills development (Leitch, 2006; Johnson, 2007) during, not after, the programme of study. This would entail more than contributing to identifying relevant employability skills in, for example, providing students opportunities to develop actively in at least the priority skills and their components during placement. In addition, employers could provide real life/live case studies to help bridge the perceived theory and practice divide. In such ways, employers could potentially become more active partners in employability skills, expanding Milner and Hill’s (2008) tripartite model of interested parties.

Consequent to the findings and discussion in this article, in conclusion, it is suggested that employers of MSc in HRM postgraduates themselves may generally increase their stake in employability skills development, as advocated by Leitch (2006), in two principal ways. One, employers can work in partnership with universities on the bespoke core and component skills they seek from the main postgraduate programmes from which they directly recruit; and, two, they can assume their share of responsibility for the development of these

skills. In balancing employer expectations and responsibilities in such a way, it is contended that the general standard of postgraduates' employability skills may be enhanced. Further research along the line of inquiry covered in this article is called for to support this contention to solidify and extend understanding of employers' expectations of post-graduates' employability skills development. In particular, it may be instructive to investigate not only what skills employers seek but also the levels of skills they expect, including a comparison of undergraduate and postgraduate expectations. In addition, more research is needed on employers' views on, and reactions to, challenges inherent in increasing their involvement in postgraduates' skill development. The topic of employers as stakeholders in postgraduates' employability skills development therefore has much potential.

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