

CROSSING THE DIVIDE FROM EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT - do business students see group work as a useful bridge?

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Context and Aims

The aim of this small scale, exploratory study was to analyse the perceptions of a group of current and recent business students as to the importance and impact of the various group projects (group work), regularly carried out as part of their studies, on their future employability. It considers whether group work can be used as a supportive object to enable students to bridge the boundary between university and the workplace (see, for example, Ackerman and Baker, 2012). Universities now need to ensure that students develop strong, core disciplinary knowledge and a broad range of other skills and competencies (Furnell and Scott, 2015).

Most HE providers use group work as part of their pedagogic approach, often to reduce marking for staff and the assessment burden on students, to assist with transition to HE by allowing social interaction (Hughes and Smail, 2014), to engage learners as it allows students to take control of their learning (Sambell, 2013), to develop key academic skills such as planning, negotiation, compromise and listening (Carless, Joughin and Liu, 2006), but also to prepare students for the workplace. Do our students, though, see it as important and do they value it as a tool which enables them to transition to another context?

The research methodology

Intended as a pilot to provide direction for further research, the study was carried out by first conducting a literature review looking at the key concepts of graduate employment, employability, group work, boundary crossing and bridging tools. The resultant research question developed was;

Do business students consider their experience of group work as impacting positively on their future employment?

The following sub-questions were then developed to allow this to be answered:

- What attitudes do students and recent graduates hold about group work at university?
- What does the term 'employability' mean to students and recent graduates?
- What effect does group work have on students' and graduates' employability?

A qualitative study was carried out using interviews and a survey in order to capture the views of both students and recent graduates. These views were then analysed and the implications of these for those teaching students in group work situations were considered.

Our findings

Students see group work as both a positive *and* a negative aspect of university.

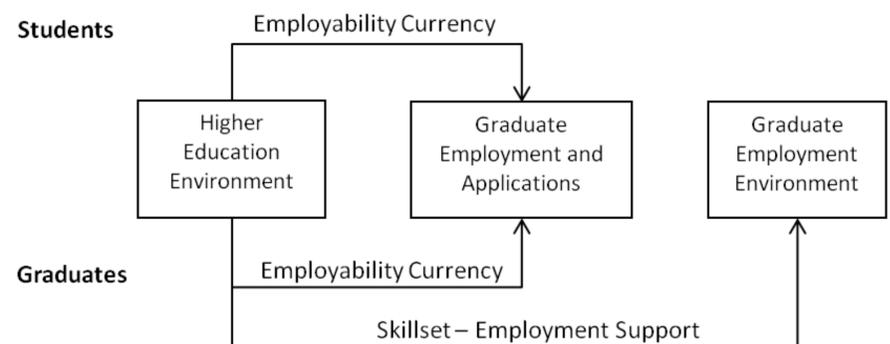


Negotiation, time management, planning, communication and interacting with others, reduced workload, greater interaction amongst peers, and more interesting work. They could see some link between these skills and gaining employment.



Grades were affected by groups not working equably and well, conflict, and feelings of loss of control over submitted work and the subsequent results.

Recent graduates already in employment were most able to see the positive aspect of *all* group work whether it had been seen as positive or negative when it was undertaken. It had provided them with a set of skills and experiences that had helped them cross the boundary from the world of education to the world of work.



Implications for Practice

1. Initiatives that support the development of students' awareness of how the skills developed via group work can be carried through to employment and their long-term transferability to the workplace should be considered. This supports the conclusion made by Furnell and Scott (2015) that **appropriate, timely and repeated signposting of the significance of key skills to students is vital**.
2. The skillset developed by the students and graduates in this study predominantly comprised skills developed from positive group work experiences; few could associate the beneficial experiences that arose from the more negative aspects of group work such as conflict. It may be difficult for students to disassociate the personally negative aspects of such group work to see any positive benefit. Interventions that **enable students to reflect fully on both positive and negative aspects of group work**, as well as being more explicit about how each aspect can be used in a workplace situation, need to be developed and utilised **as early as the first year of HE study** as these would be beneficial both for the learning experience itself and for the development of the skillset that may provide some stability and act as a supportive bridging tool when crossing the dividing boundary from education to employment.