

# Student Conceptions of Employability: A phenomenographic study

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## Context and Aims

The 2010 Browne report on student funding recommended that students and graduates have greater access to employability related information. The resultant public scrutiny forced HEIs to place an even greater emphasis on developing student employability and support for graduates<sup>1</sup>. Yet employers are still voicing long-term concerns that graduates are entering the workforce with inappropriate skills, aptitudes and behaviours<sup>2</sup>.

The concept of employability has been subject to much debate over its definition, which include skills, knowledge and attributes in varying degrees of importance<sup>3</sup>. More complex definitions include career identity, personal adaptability and social capital<sup>4</sup> to the benefit of multiple stakeholders<sup>5</sup>. However, there is little that considers the student perspective. This study aims to examine how students understand the concept of employability and how this affects their job seeking behaviour.

## The Phenomenographical Approach

Phenomenography was used as a methodological approach with the aim of identifying the qualitatively different ways a group of students understand the concept of employability, and then structure these into a hierarchical set of categories of description in which the conceptions become increasingly more inclusive and complex<sup>6</sup>.

A sample of 35 undergraduate students responded to an online student survey regarding university and work practices and employability. The sample included UG students from all levels across seven degree specialisms within the business school to maximise variation.

The survey's written responses were first analysed to extract quotes that exemplified particular conceptions of employability, and these formed the different categories of description. Each category was then examined to identify the structural dimensions that formed the conceptual hierarchy.

## Results

There were five distinctly different conceptions of employability held by business students:

<i>Employability as a 'noun'</i>	Category 1: Employability as a possession meaning 'I can do any job'
	Category 2: Employability as an acknowledgement meaning 'I can do this job'
	Category 3: Employability as a position that 'I can do this job better than others'
<i>Employability as a 'verb'</i>	Category 4: Employability as the behaviours required when 'I am doing this job'
	Category 5: Employability as a personal responsibility so that 'I can keep this job'

Structural dimensions of variation include personal competence (skills and knowledge), academia and work experiences, employers' perspectives, professional behaviours and sociality.

## Implications for practice

The results of this study suggest that there is a clear need to reorient students' perspectives on employability to encompass a conception which encourages self-reflection and self-development rather than simply viewing it as an object they possess upon graduation.

## References

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- 2 Confederation of British Industry (2013) *On the Up - Employment Trends Survey*
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- 4 Fugate, M., Kinicki, A. J., & Ashforth, B. E. (2004) Employability: A psycho-social construct, its dimensions, and applications. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 65(1), 14-38
- 5 Yorke, M. (2004) *Employability in higher education: what it is-what it is not*. LTSN Generic Centre
- 6 Marton, F. (1981) Phenomenography - describing conceptions of the world around us, 10, 177-200