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Marketing graduate employability: Understanding the tensions between institutional practice and external messaging

Do the narratives of employability constructed by higher education institutions for marketing purposes differ from the conceptualisation and/or the realisation of employability within those institutions? The study reported here drew on interviews with 16 senior academic and student support staff who were tasked with developing student employability at one of nine institutions in Australia, Canada and the UK. We then compared the interview data with content analysis of the employability narratives on those institutions' websites. We employed Holmes' conceptions of employability as possessional, positional or processual to analyse how the interviewees conceptualised employability and the presentation of employability on the institutional websites. We found that most institutions' employability marketing narratives were inconsistent with the institutional practice reported by staff. We explain this tension in the context of two competing characterisations of higher education: a university-student transaction view; and a learning view. We emphasise the need for internal and external narratives to align and advocate the need for engagement in a constructive and critical dialogue involving all stakeholders.

Keywords: graduate outcomes, graduate employment, marketing, higher education, student experience

Background and context

Across the world, higher education systems are evolving in a way that aligns the economic prosperity of a country to the skills and knowledge its graduates attain from their university experience. This agenda, driven by government policy, is well-established in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), North America and Australia, but it is also a topic of significant interest in many other parts of the world including Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe (Mok & Wu, 2016; Sin & Neave, 2016; Walker & Fongwa, 2017).

Policy makers make the logical assumption that the economic and societal value of higher education is amplified as more educated graduates transition into the workforce. Thus, policies have focussed on expanding higher education from an elite system that prepares a relatively small group of individuals to drive economic growth, towards a

massified system that promotes access to a larger number of individuals. These political and economic changes have had a considerable impact on how higher education institutions (described here as universities) define themselves and how they operate. On the one hand, universities are sources of intellectual enquiry, deep and critical thinking and production of new knowledge. On the other hand, they are under pressure to work in an increasingly marketised educational system in which they must compete for prospective students and prepare graduates with more economically relevant skills.

Against this backdrop, discussions of graduate employability have been dominated by a focus on human capital development, with both employers and governments emphasising the acquisition of skills that will enhance graduate-level employment and meet current and future challenges of industry (see Cole & Hallett, 2019). Universities have tended to respond by incorporating career development learning experiences designed to better prepare graduates for the workplace and so enhance graduate employment outcomes. These experiences take the form of both curricular and co-curricular opportunities, with a particular emphasis on work-integrated learning experiences (Clarke, 2018). However, the efficacy and impact of university initiatives on graduate outcomes are notoriously difficult to measure.

Measurement of graduate employment outcomes data is now common in many countries and it is variously linked with base funding. In the UK, for example, the Graduate Outcomes Survey records graduate employment 15 months after graduation (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2017). Similar measures of employment outcomes are used in other countries, including in Australia, which employs a Graduate Outcomes Survey four months after graduation (Social Research Centre, 2018).

Although *employment* outcomes data can be relatively easily measured and can be easily communicated to external stakeholders (Spence, 2018), these data are unable to provide a sophisticated understanding of *employability* in terms of the “on-going processes of performance and activity and future processes of development and sustainability” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 14). For this reason, they have been heavily criticised in the literature (see Bennett et al., 2015; Christie, 2017; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018). We contend that a realistic measurement of employability should take into account individual characteristics, labour market demand and the ability of the graduate to navigate the labour market in the longer term. This broader conceptualisation of employability is supported by Holmes (2013, p. 259), who argues that graduates must

possess a set of skills and also “act in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of a person worthy of being employed”.

Holmes (2013) emphasises the process by which graduate identity develops through industry interactions and through work that influences students’ sense of self and their ability to position themselves in the labour market; Holmes uses the term ‘processual’ to describe this iterative, process-oriented approach. The processual approach is in contrast with what Holmes describes as a ‘possessional’ approach to employability development, which focusses on the possession of skills, abilities or characteristics required for work. This fits with human capital theory that views higher education as imparting a set of marketable skills that increases graduates’ productivity and subsequently, their earnings in the employment market (Maringe, 2015). Holmes’ third orientation is a ‘positional’ approach, which highlights the role of social and cultural capital and how these advantage graduates transitioning into the labour market (Norton & Carroll, 2015). Universities which promote a positional approach to employability development tend to emphasise institutional reputation and the generation of employability capital through access to social and work-based networks (see hidden et al., 2017). The three approaches of Holmes are summarised below.

- Possessional: an emphasis on the acquisition of employability skills, attributes and capabilities;
- Positional: a focus on cultural and social capital as a means by which employment outcomes are enhanced; and
- Processual: employability development is described as a long-term process, with an emphasis on graduate identity that builds up through repeated exposure and interactions with learning and work-related activities.

However employability is defined and developed, future employment prospects are a key consideration when students decide where and what to study. United States-based research has identified the most important variables affecting higher education student choice as academic reputation, location, programme of study and employment opportunities or career enhancements (Kinzie et al., 2004; Moogan & Baron, 2003). Factors influencing student choice are similar in the UK (Diamond et al., 2012). As such, it is unsurprising that institutional marketing pays particular attention to graduate employment and the processes through which successful graduate outcomes are achieved.

Marketing, employability and student choice

When making enrolment decisions, university prospectuses and websites are widely consulted by prospective applicants. Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University's (2010) survey of 1,942 UK university students, for example, found that 88.4 per cent of that university's students had used university prospectuses and websites when deciding what and where to study. Despite the importance of websites in conveying information to prospective applicants, however, little is known about the extent to which employability development is foregrounded in the marketing materials of institutions. Absent from the discourse is a comparison of internal constructions of employability, how these are enacted and realised by students, and how employability is represented to external audiences.

The research reported here extended two earlier studies. The first of these was conducted by Smith, Bell, Bennett and McAlpine (2018), who interviewed university staff engaged in employability development and highlighted the importance of using consistent employability language when communicating with stakeholders. In the second study, hidden et al. (2017) conducted a content analysis on the websites of 107 research-intensive universities and identified a prevalence of positional and possessional approaches.

The study combined and further interrogated the interview data and collected additional website data to ascertain the alignment of how employability is communicated to external audiences with how it is understood and enacted internally. Early quantitative exploration of the combined dataset (hidden et al., in press) revealed a dissonance between the internal and external constructions of employability. Using new insights from the qualitative data, for this article we explored how and why these inconsistencies might arise and we sought to highlight the consequences of misalignment in terms of curricular development and pedagogical approaches to employability. We end the article with recommendations to align internal and external employability narratives.

Methodological Approach

The study reported here combined earlier interview data with an expanded dataset of institutional website data to explore the alignment of internal and external employability narratives. To assure the participants' identity, institutions are referred to by country and

differentiated by a numbered code: for example, the three Australian institutions are identified as Australia 1, 2 or 3.

Analysis of interview data

Interview data were gathered by Smith, Bell, Bennett and McAlpine (2018), who conducted interviews with 16 academic and career development professionals from nine institutions in Australia, Canada and the UK. Smith et al. (2018) employed purposeful convenience sampling to identify potential participants, with invitations based on the participants’ ability to provide a representative institutional view of employability in addition to broader social and theoretical issues relating to employability in the context of higher education.

To reduce bias inherent within convenience sampling methods, in most cases the participants in Smith et al.’s study were interviewed by, and interviews were conducted with, one or more participants from a different university located in another country. Interviews included senior learning and teaching academics and careers services leaders from each institution. All interview participants held leadership roles relating to institution-wide employability development and delivery (see Table 1). Permissions were obtained to re-mine the interview data for the study reported here.

Table 1 *Institutions and interview participants*

Institution	Academic leader (title)	Career Service leader (title)
Australia 1	Professor	Associate Director
Australia 2	N/A (no academic leader)	Head
Australia 3	Professor	Deputy Vice Chancellor
Canada 1	Vice President (Academic)	Head
Canada 2	Vice Provost (Teaching & Learning)	Director
Canada 3	Faculty Dean	Director
UK 1	N/A (no academic leader)	Director
UK 2	N/A (no academic leader)	Head
UK 3	Professor	Practitioner

For the current study, we probed the interview data resulting from three questions:

1. What is your institution's working definition of employability?
2. How does your institution promote an 'employability culture'?
3. What employability message do you give on the institution's website?

We first coded the interview data using Holmes' (2013) framework of approaches to employability development: possessional, positional and processual and researchers agreed on a coding frame which supported the differentiation of these approaches. The data were then coded independently by two members of the research team and the results compared. Where there were differences, consensus was reached through discussion.

Analysis of institutional websites

In order to understand how employability is messaged externally, we researched the website employability narratives at each interviewee's institution. We triangulated the interview responses by conducting a content analysis of the interviewees' institutional websites. For this, we utilised hidden et al.'s (2017) protocol for website analysis relating to employability and career development, adapted from Hite and Railsback (2010).

The following pages were searched for employability-related content.

- a. Home page;
- b. 'About' page on which the university was described;
- c. Pages for future students: for example, admissions, new/potential students, courses;
- d. Pages describing careers services/career development/student employment/workshops relating to employability;
- e. Pages describing the university mission and its vision statement; and
- f. Pages for current students: for example, student life, activities and/or organisations (hidden et al., 2017, p. 55).

As per Hite and Railsback (2010), pages two clicks away from the main page were also reviewed. The pages specified above were systematically viewed using the protocol and entered into a spreadsheet. The findings were then coded according to Holmes' (2013) framework of possessional, positional and processual approaches to employability using the same coding frame and protocol as for the interview data.

Finally, the two datasets were brought together and the alignment of Holmes' approaches was noted.

Results

Institutional narratives of employability: internal constructions

Here, we describe how the employability discourse is constructed in the three locations: Australia, Canada and the UK.

Australia

In our interview data, two institutions described their approach to employability in a manner that aligned with Holmes' (2013) processual approach:

... [a] strong focus on a student being aware of self and their professional and personal identity. (Australia 1 participant)

... pitched around preparation for lifelong and life-wide context. (Australia 3 participant)\

However, the websites of these institutions revealed that neither institution communicated a processual construction of employability. Instead, their focus was on institutional prestige, referring in particular to positional characteristics such as employer perceptions, graduate outcomes and university rankings: for example, 'top 1%' claims from the Australia 1 website and a 'top 100 in Law' headline from the Australia 3 website. Interviewees from the third Australian institution described an institutional approach to employability that aligned with Holmes' processual approach, emphasising skills development amongst students. This view was supported by information located on the institution's website:

... equip[ping] our students and graduates with the skills they'll need in an increasingly disrupted and challenged world. (Australia 2 website)

In addition to skills development, employment outcome statistics featured heavily on the Australia 2's website. From the interview comments, it appeared that there was a strategic

clarity in terms of the internal construction of employability and how they are presented externally:

...our University brand is for the real world, so there's quite a clear mandate in our marketing. (Australia 2 participant)

Interview participants across all three Australian institutions consistently highlighted the importance of differentiating between employability and graduate employment outcomes:

...I've been pushing hard that we need to stop mixing up the two terms. It's two different things: employment is an outcome and employability is a set of abilities, capabilities, skills that help an individual become both employed now: i.e., post-university, and ongoing, not just at one time. (Australia 3 participant)

The interviewees were aware that institutional website messaging tended to focus on graduate outcomes as opposed to employability development. One interview participant noted that even when a university mission was presented as 'preparing students for the real world', this often linked back to employment outcomes rather than employability development (Australia 1 participant). The interviewee from that institution bemoaned the inconsistency of internal and external employability messaging across the sector:

...I would say across Australia, maybe 20 per cent of the universities do that well: how we manage engagement and how we message that. (Australia 1 participant)

Australian participants emphasised that to manage engagement and present a coherent message about employability, a cross-institutional approach was required (Australia 3 participant) and that all stakeholders should be involved including students, staff involved in delivering and supporting employability, institutional leadership and marketing staff.

Canada

The interview data and website analysis from two of the Canadian institutions suggests that the employability agenda may be enacted differently in Canada than in Australia or the UK. Interview participants specifically highlighted that employability was 'a new concept' (Canada 1 participant) for higher education institutions, with one interviewee

noting that:

... employability is not a word that resonates I'd say, probably in most, if not possibly all, Canadian universities. (Canada 2 participant)

This finding was supported by our analysis of the websites in that there was no use of the term 'employability' on the pages searched using our methodology. Instead, the prominent discourse on all three Canadian websites related to students' career readiness. In two of the three institutions, there were indications on the websites of a sophisticated engagement with career development theory. For example, the Canada 1 website emphasised the importance of networking in graduate transitions and the Canada 3 website explicitly discussed the 'chaos theory of careers' (Pryor & Bright, 2003) on a webpage of the institution's career service. Although external messaging on websites related to career readiness, interviewees from Canada 1 and 2 described a possessional approach to employability development, focusing mainly on skills acquisition and career education. Institutional reputation and how reputation might support their graduates' transition into work was also highlighted on both websites, aligning with a positional approach (Holmes 2013). In contrast, a Canada 3 interview participant described a processual approach to employability development:

... for example, really emphasising this notion of using your time in university to explore, engage, participate. (Canada 3 participant)

This approach was supported through our analysis of Canada 3's website. Despite the consistency in internal and external constructions of employability for this institution, the interview participants viewed the marketing of any idea of employability to prospective students as a separate concern to that of the work of the institution in supporting its students to develop their employability.

UK

Interview participants from the UK universities were aware that graduate outcomes were presented on their institutional websites and that employability was an important part of marketing the university and its courses to prospective students:

...a lot of the marketing to our prospective students is framed around that employability agenda. (UK 1 participant)

The participants emphasised that it is a mandatory requirement in the UK to present Key Information Sets on university websites and that graduate outcomes data must be included in these Sets. Although all three UK institutions discussed graduate employment in a way that emphasised employability as a progressive concept, they employed marketing strategies which leveraged graduate employment as a key selling point. This can be seen in the following example.

...we want to support you in preparing for the world of work and make sure that you have the greatest possible chance of getting a job you want after graduating. (UK 3 participant)

Two divergent accounts about institutional understandings of employability were identified from the UK participants. UK 1 interviewees expressed fatigue with the idea of employability and focussed instead on immediate graduate outcomes and the associated (positional) importance of institutional reputation. The UK 1 website did not align with that view, presenting in contrast a possessional approach to employability with an emphasis on skills development:

...we encourage our students to be enterprising and innovative — key skills for all types of graduate employment. (UK 1 participant)

We noted a tension between the UK 1 interviewees' comments and those of their institution's website, reflected through comments such as:

... it's great for marketing but ... I have a different approach to employability because, you know, going to university is not just about getting you a job. (UK 1 participant)

In contrast, the website of the UK 2 institution presented Holmes' (2013) processual approach to employability, with skills being referenced in terms of cognition and the development of identity. UK 2's internal account was consistent with this and emphasised that the institution viewed employability as a collective responsibility:

... everybody plays their part in it ... from the VC (Vice Chancellor) and the Executive Board to the individual student. I think we view it as a continuous process. (UK 2 participant)

UK 2 staff went on to say that they perceived employability to be a continuous process and that this view was shared by the marketing department:

...it isn't a series of random interventions that needs to be part of the total student experience, and that's the test to really old model. (UK 2 participant)

In sum, the data from the UK interviews and website analysis indicate that the concept of employability has evolved and changed in response to different institutional contexts and their local needs.

Discussion

In this study, we first explored how employability is understood and enacted within institutions. We did this through interviews involving sixteen participants, all of them tasked with developing student employability. We compared these views with constructions of employability as they were presented to external stakeholders, including prospective students, through institutional websites.

Three key themes emerged from our analysis. First, there appear to be rich and diverse understandings and practises in relation to employability. These are evident within and across institutions and between geographical locations. Second, how employability is understood and enacted internally appears to vary considerably from its representation to external audiences. Although a developmental approach to employability is commonly practiced internally, external representations are often dominated by metrics relating to graduate outcomes and by rankings which highlight institutional prestige.

Our third point of note stems from participants' emphasis that consistent messaging is a crucial part of supporting employability. The most commonly cited reason for misalignment between external and internal representations was lack of communication between different operations of the university. We next discuss each of these points in turn, exploring the consequences of misalignment in terms of curriculum development and pedagogy for employability.

Internal narratives of employability development

Half the institutions involved in our study focussed on the acquisition of human capital (a possessional approach) when describing employability. However, broader definitions of employability also emerged. Three institutions emphasised the ability of graduates to transition successfully into the workforce together with the need for lifelong learning and the ability to sustain employability over the longer term (a processual approach).

The processual approach is more aligned with recent employability concepts expressed in the scholarly literature: for example, Bennett's (2019, p. 1) emphasis on a metacognitive, strengths-based view of employability: students' "cognitive and social development as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens". Tomlinson (2017a) agrees, describing the process of developing five forms of crucial capital—human, social, cultural, identity and psychological capitals—and their impact on graduates' ability to transition into and through the labour market. The capitals view is certainly more in line with the traditional mission of higher education. However, the more pragmatic, *skills-based* view of employability is also gaining ground (see Clarke, 2018) and we return to the reasons for this later in the discussion.

We note the differences in how the employability agenda is expressed in Canadian institutions compared with UK and Australian institutions. Career development theory, for example, was an active discourse on the websites of the three Canadian institutions but it was absent from all UK and Australian institutional websites. This may be a consequence of how government policy interacts with higher education, including in its funding and reporting models. It might also be a matter of longevity: employability discourse in the UK and Australia has been ongoing since the early 1960s (see Robbins in the UK and Pullman in Australia, both 1963). The term 'employability' was also absent from the websites of Canadian institutions, with one participant highlighting that employability is 'not a word that resonates' (Canada 2 participant) in that context.

Although some interviewees described an institutional culture of employability development involving partnerships between academic and professional staff, students and senior management teams, this was rare. More commonly, institutional representatives described a fragmented relationship. Smith et al.'s study (2018) highlights the value of an institution-wide approach to employability in which all stakeholders work together. The ability of an institution-wide approach to promote meaningful engagement in employability development, however, is realised only when all university operations emphasise a 'learning view' of employability rather than a 'productivity and skills view'.

Whilst the learning view was prominent among interviewees' conceptualisations of employability, in no case was a learning view seen across an institution. Given the desire for such an approach, its absence serves to emphasise the challenges of working across operations to ensure that careers practitioners and academic staff work together, influencing not only how employability development is defined and practised—as “part of the student experience agenda” (AGCAS, 2018, p. 31)—but how it is communicated to internal and external audiences.

Do different internal and external constructions of employability matter?

We assert that the misalignment of internal and external constructions of employability matters considerably. There exist two competing constructions of employability within higher education: a university-student transaction view; and a learning view. In terms of providing students with realistic expectations of study and an understanding of their role and responsibility within this, the two views carry conflicting messages which at best misinform and at worst mislead potential and current students.

In the vast majority of cases, our study data revealed that employability constructions were inconsistent between the institutional practice reported by senior university staff and the skills-based employability narratives presented on institutional websites. Some participants attributed these differences to lack of communication between different operations of the university: for example, between marketing, learning and teaching and the careers service.

Interviewees pointed out the importance of aligning internal and external constructions of employability. They also emphasised that if employability is to be understood and effectively operationalised, its definition and the communication of that definition must involve all institutional stakeholders:

... marketing need[s] to be at [the] table, future students need to be at the table, so our message gets out to the community—future students, current students and employers. (Australia 1 participant)

Our previous analysis of institutional websites (hidden et al., in press) found that 50% of institutions utilised a positional approach to employability on their websites, emphasising both employment outcomes and institutional prestige through university rankings and

achievements. Given that potential students are influenced by the strength of an institution's employment and career enhancement opportunities (see Diamond et al., 2012), it is not surprising that these feature heavily on institutional websites. Our interview participants agreed that institutional websites are a crucial point of information for potential students, with one interviewee describing potential students as the 'number one audience' (Australia 3 participant) for which the website had been designed. Indeed, a visit to the homepage of a university or faculty is for many students their first 'campus visit' (Opoku et al., 2006).

The inclusion on institutional websites of employment and related data, however, also reflects the marketisation of higher education (Tomlinson, 2018). As marketisation continues, the "teaching and research activities of academics are increasingly measured and scrutinised, the contemporary academy appears to be suffused with anxiety" (Loveday, 2016, p. 154), and the fate of teaching-focussed academics within a research-based funding model is increasingly uncertain (Bennett, Roberts, Ananthram, & Broughton, 2018). Declines in public funding and increased competition for fee-paying students have placed institutions under increasing pressure to demonstrate their value to students. As such, websites increasingly market to potential students both the likely (or the ideal) outcomes of their studies and the quality of the education they can expect to receive.

Metrics which claim to demonstrate teaching quality are perhaps best evidenced in the UK example, where the Teaching Excellence Framework (DBIS, 2016) was designed in part to inform student choice. The UK is among many countries to employ multiple graduate data instruments as proxy indicators of quality. Authors such as Jackson and Bridgstock (2018), Muller (2018) and Spence (2018) have argued strongly against the excessive use of metrics in making judgments about the quality of higher education, maintaining that such metrics can lead to narrower student experiences rather than the higher standards, quality and choice that such data is intended to foster. In the context of employability, institutions conscious of metrics may, for example, funnel students towards employment and direct them away from potentially life-enhancing activities such as a post-graduate gap year.

In line with arguments such as these, our interviewees were consistent in their view that institutions must not conflate employability with employment outcomes data. A persistent challenge in this regard is that students' understanding of employability tends to be limited to a narrow view which emphasises short-term graduate employability goals

together with credentials such as degree and grade point average (see Gedye & Beaumont, 2017). Students are also displaying increasingly consumer-orientated attitudes to higher education in that they are more concerned about getting financial value from their higher education studies (Tomlinson, 2017b).

Ironically, a positional approach to employability, characterised by rankings, achievements and graduate outcomes, may speak to the expectations and behaviours of prospective applicants and so be effective in enhancing student recruitment. However, these approaches are at odds with the equity agenda of higher education. As Holmes (2013) asserts, people from privileged backgrounds are advantaged in the labour market because they can use their social and cultural capital to secure work (see also Norton & Carroll, 2015). The most advantaged groups continue to dominate attendance at the most prestigious institutions and this selective advantage can be further reinforced by employers who recruit from prestigious universities, often due to alumni connections (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012). These factors suggest that the positional approach exacerbates inequality in the graduate labour market, as evidenced by Pitman et al. (2019) and Tholen (2015).

Our contention that it is important to have consistency between internal and external narratives is substantiated through the interview data. Interviewees, who were all senior university staff involved in the design and delivery of employability, emphasised the need for consistent employability narratives and the need for all stakeholders, including marketing, to engage in constructive and critical dialogue about how employability might be constructed and developed.

We end our discussion with an example from Thornton and Shannon's (2014, p. 158) study of employability narratives in the discipline of law. Thornton and Shannon highlight that a student who undertakes a law degree is promised employability, prestige and wealth. Consequently, the serious and difficult aspects of studying law are overlooked. As Nixon et al. (2011) assert, good marketing should work hard to eliminate content that induces 'dissonance and angst'. If the higher education sector is to avoid dissatisfied students whilst developing "more complex and sophisticated expectations of university and of their [students'] own roles and responsibilities" (James, 2002, p. 81), the alignment of marketing narratives and institutional practice should lie at the core of the sector's activities.

Conclusion

We begin by acknowledging the limitations of the study. First, although the interview study involved participants who were selected for their ability to give a representative view of employability within both their institutions and their geographic regions, the study was limited to a small sample of institutions and geographical locations. Differences across regional and institutional statuses might emerge with a larger and more geographically diverse sample. Second, we analysed external institutional positioning using only the institutional website. A more comprehensive analysis that includes other modes of communication might yield a more nuanced picture of institutional employability narratives. Finally, we note the absence of the student voice in this study. Research that incorporates the student voice in discussions about employment metrics, consumer-led marketing and employability development is lacking and should be explored.

In this article, we investigated how institutional employability discourse and practice compares with the employability discourse communicated to prospective students via institutional websites. Internal constructions of employability included conceptualisation at a sophisticated level in terms of developing social, personal and academic capitals, and at a functional level in terms of the skills and capabilities required to navigate the graduate labour market. External representations of employability were dominated by a focus on graduate employment metrics and data as opposed to descriptions of employability practice experienced and realised by students internally.

The misalignment between internal and external representations could be attributed to two competing characterisations of higher education. As government interventions increasingly direct the higher education sector along market lines, universities recruit students in an environment of intense competition. To do this, they take a transactional view to “sell their courses” (Askehave, 2007, p. 725) by marketing to students economic gains in terms of high employment prospects following completion of their studies. In contrast, internal constructions of employability are based on a learning view in which each student is more a “young person ‘in formation’, or the ‘citizen-specialist’ in training, than the burgeoning *homo economicus*” (Lyndsay, 2014, p. 147).

We assert that this tension can be productive if it provides an impetus for active and critical dialogue involving all stakeholders (for example, policy-makers, institutions, industry, students, and alumni) about the economic and social purposes of higher education learning, and the means of achieving these. In the current environment,

however, students are caught up in discourses of skill, employability, employment, attributes and performance, directed by market mechanisms used by governments to reshape higher education and to encourage and inform student choice.

Since institutional strategies are influenced by such interventions, a constructive dialogue is required at the level of policy-making to ensure that the inherent social values of higher education are protected and that the excesses of marketisation are resisted. This could, in turn, reduce the incongruence between external and internal representations of employability and lead to more coherent, institution-wide employability strategies that include accurate and realistic marketing of courses to prospective applicants.

Institution-wide strategic development is of critical importance in the development of practices which support individual employability development because discursive positioning helps to resource individuals with context-specific modes of self-identification and behaviour (Tomlinson, 2017b). As noted by one UK interview participant, employability development “isn’t a series of random interventions... [it] needs to be part of the total student experience” (UK 2). By providing accurate representations of student experience, and what they will get from attending university, the expectations and responsibilities of each partner will be better understood. Not only would this lead to prospective applicants becoming better informed in their selection of a university, it would enhance student engagement and satisfaction.

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Marketing graduate employability: Understanding the tensions between institutional practice and external messaging

Do the narratives of employability constructed by higher education institutions for marketing purposes differ from the conceptualisation and/or the realisation of employability within those institutions? The study reported here drew on interviews with 16 senior academic and student support staff who were tasked with developing student employability at one of nine institutions in Australia, Canada and the UK. We then compared the interview data with content analysis of the employability narratives on those institutions' websites. We employed Holmes' conceptions of employability as possessional, positional or processual to analyse how the interviewees conceptualised employability and the presentation of employability on the institutional websites. We found that most institutions' employability marketing narratives were inconsistent with the institutional practice reported by staff. We explain this tension in the context of two competing characterisations of higher education: a university-student transaction view; and a learning view. We emphasise the need for internal and external narratives to align and advocate the need for engagement in a constructive and critical dialogue involving all stakeholders.

Keywords: graduate outcomes, graduate employment, marketing, higher education, student experience

Background and context

Across the world, higher education systems are evolving in a way that aligns the economic prosperity of a country to the skills and knowledge its graduates attain from their university experience. This agenda, driven by government policy, is well-established in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), North America and Australia, but it is also a topic of significant interest in many other parts of the world including Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe (Mok & Wu, 2016; Sin & Neave, 2016; Walker & Fongwa, 2017).

Policy makers make the logical assumption that the economic and societal value of higher education is amplified as more educated graduates transition into the workforce. Thus, policies have focussed on expanding higher education from an elite system that prepares a relatively small group of individuals to drive economic growth, towards a

1 massified system that promotes access to a larger number of individuals. These political
2 and economic changes have had a considerable impact on how higher education
3 institutions (described here as universities) define themselves and how they operate. On
4 the one hand, universities are sources of intellectual enquiry, deep and critical thinking
5 and production of new knowledge. On the other hand, they are under pressure to work in
6 an increasingly marketised educational system in which they must compete for
7 prospective students and prepare graduates with more economically relevant skills.
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12 Against this backdrop, discussions of graduate employability have been
13 dominated by a focus on human capital development, with both employers and
14 governments emphasising the acquisition of skills that will enhance graduate-level
15 employment and meet current and future challenges of industry (see Cole & Hallett,
16 2019). Universities have tended to respond by incorporating career development learning
17 experiences designed to better prepare graduates for the workplace and so enhance
18 graduate employment outcomes. These experiences take the form of both curricular and
19 co-curricular opportunities, with a particular emphasis on work-integrated learning
20 experiences (Clarke, 2018). However, the efficacy and impact of university initiatives on
21 graduate outcomes are notoriously difficult to measure.
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31 Measurement of graduate employment outcomes data is now common in many
32 countries and it is variously linked with base funding. In the UK, for example, the
33 Graduate Outcomes Survey records graduate employment 15 months after graduation
34 (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2017). Similar measures of employment
35 outcomes are used in other countries, including in Australia, which employs a Graduate
36 Outcomes Survey four months after graduation (Social Research Centre, 2018).
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42 Although *employment* outcomes data can be relatively easily measured and can
43 be easily communicated to external stakeholders (Spence, 2018), these data are unable to
44 provide a sophisticated understanding of *employability* in terms of the “on-going
45 processes of performance and activity and future processes of development and
46 sustainability” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 14). For this reason, they have been heavily criticised
47 in the literature (see Bennett et al., 2015; Christie, 2017; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018).
48 We contend that a realistic measurement of employability should take into account
49 individual characteristics, labour market demand and the ability of the graduate to
50 navigate the labour market in the longer term. This broader conceptualisation of
51 employability is supported by Holmes (2013, p. 259), who argues that graduates must
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1 possess a set of skills and also “act in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity
2 of a person worthy of being employed”.

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4 Holmes (2013) emphasises the process by which graduate identity develops
5 through industry interactions and through work that influences students’ sense of self and
6 their ability to position themselves in the labour market; Holmes uses the term
7 ‘processual’ to describe this iterative, process-oriented approach. The processual
8 approach is in contrast with what Holmes describes as a ‘possessional’ approach to
9 employability development, which focusses on the possession of skills, abilities or
10 characteristics required for work. This fits with human capital theory that views higher
11 education as imparting a set of marketable skills that increases graduates’ productivity
12 and subsequently, their earnings in the employment market (Maringe, 2015). Holmes’
13 third orientation is a ‘positional’ approach, which highlights the role of social and cultural
14 capital and how these advantage graduates transitioning into the labour market (Norton
15 & Carroll, 2015). Universities which promote a positional approach to employability
16 development tend to emphasise institutional reputation and the generation of
17 employability capital through access to social and work-based networks (see Bennett et
18 al., 2017). The three approaches of Holmes are summarised below.

- 19 • Possessional: an emphasis on the acquisition of employability skills, attributes
20 and capabilities;
- 21 • Positional: a focus on cultural and social capital as a means by which employment
22 outcomes are enhanced; and
- 23 • Processual: employability development is described as a long-term process, with
24 an emphasis on graduate identity that builds up through repeated exposure and
25 interactions with learning and work-related activities.

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However employability is defined and developed, future employment prospects are a key consideration when students decide where and what to study. United States-based research has identified the most important variables affecting higher education student choice as academic reputation, location, programme of study and employment opportunities or career enhancements (Kinzie et al., 2004; Moogan & Baron, 2003). Factors influencing student choice are similar in the UK (Diamond et al., 2012). As such, it is unsurprising that institutional marketing pays particular attention to graduate employment and the processes through which successful graduate outcomes are achieved.

Marketing, employability and student choice

1
2 When making enrolment decisions, university prospectuses and websites are widely
3 consulted by prospective applicants. Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University's
4 (2010) survey of 1,942 UK university students, for example, found that 88.4 per cent of
5 that university's students had used university prospectuses and websites when deciding
6 what and where to study. Despite the importance of websites in conveying information to
7 prospective applicants, however, little is known about the extent to which employability
8 development is foregrounded in the marketing materials of institutions. Absent from the
9 discourse is a comparison of internal constructions of employability, how these are
10 enacted and realised by students, and how employability is represented to external
11 audiences.

12
13 The research reported here extended two earlier studies. The first of these was
14 conducted by Smith, Bell, Bennett and McAlpine (2018), who interviewed university
15 staff engaged in employability development and highlighted the importance of using
16 consistent employability language when communicating with stakeholders. In the second
17 study, Bennett et al. (2017) conducted a content analysis on the websites of 107 research-
18 intensive universities and identified a prevalence of positional and possessional
19 approaches.

20
21 The study combined and further interrogated the interview data and collected
22 additional website data to ascertain the alignment of how employability is communicated
23 to external audiences with how it is understood and enacted internally. Early quantitative
24 exploration of the combined dataset (Bennett, Knight, Divan, & Bell, in press) revealed
25 a dissonance between the internal and external constructions of employability. Using new
26 insights from the qualitative data, for this article we explored how and why these
27 inconsistencies might arise and we sought to highlight the consequences of misalignment
28 in terms of curricular development and pedagogical approaches to employability. We end
29 the article with recommendations to align internal and external employability narratives.

Methodological Approach

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31 The study reported here combined earlier interview data with an expanded dataset of
32 institutional website data to explore the alignment of internal and external employability
33 narratives. To assure the participants' identity, institutions are referred to by country and
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differentiated by a numbered code: for example, the three Australian institutions are identified as Australia 1, 2 or 3.

Analysis of interview data

Interview data were gathered by Smith, Bell, Bennett and McAlpine (2018), who conducted interviews with 16 academic and career development professionals from nine institutions in Australia, Canada and the UK. Smith et al. (2018) employed purposeful convenience sampling to identify potential participants, with invitations based on the participants' ability to provide a representative institutional view of employability in addition to broader social and theoretical issues relating to employability in the context of higher education.

To reduce bias inherent within convenience sampling methods, in most cases the participants in Smith et al.'s study were interviewed by, and interviews were conducted with, one or more participants from a different university located in another country. Interviews included senior learning and teaching academics and careers services leaders from each institution. All interview participants held leadership roles relating to institution-wide employability development and delivery (see Table 1). Permissions were obtained to re-mine the interview data for the study reported here.

Table 1 *Institutions and interview participants*

Institution	Academic leader (title)	Career Service leader (title)
Australia 1	Professor	Associate Director
Australia 2	N/A (no academic leader)	Head
Australia 3	Professor	Deputy Vice Chancellor
Canada 1	Vice President (Academic)	Head
Canada 2	Vice Provost (Teaching & Learning)	Director
Canada 3	Faculty Dean	Director
UK 1	N/A (no academic leader)	Director
UK 2	N/A (no academic leader)	Head
UK 3	Professor	Practitioner

For the current study, we probed the interview data resulting from three questions:

1. What is your institution's working definition of employability?
2. How does your institution promote an 'employability culture'?
3. What employability message do you give on the institution's website?

We first coded the interview data using Holmes' (2013) framework of approaches to employability development: possessional, positional and processual and researchers agreed on a coding frame which supported the differentiation of these approaches. The data were then coded independently by two members of the research team and the results compared. Where there were differences, consensus was reached through discussion.

Analysis of institutional websites

In order to understand how employability is messaged externally, we researched the website employability narratives at each interviewee's institution. We triangulated the interview responses by conducting a content analysis of the interviewees' institutional websites. For this, we utilised Bennett et al.'s (2017) protocol for website analysis relating to employability and career development, adapted from Hite and Railsback (2010).

The following pages were searched for employability-related content.

- a. Home page;
- b. 'About' page on which the university was described;
- c. Pages for future students: for example, admissions, new/potential students, courses;
- d. Pages describing careers services/career development/student employment/workshops relating to employability;
- e. Pages describing the university mission and its vision statement; and
- f. Pages for current students: for example, student life, activities and/or organisations (Bennett et al., 2017, p. 55).

As per Hite and Railsback (2010), pages two clicks away from the main page were also reviewed. The pages specified above were systematically viewed using the protocol and entered into a spreadsheet. The findings were then coded according to Holmes' (2013) framework of possessional, positional and processual approaches to employability using the same coding frame and protocol as for the interview data.

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2 Finally, the two datasets were brought together and the alignment of Holmes'
3 approaches was noted.
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6 7 **Results**

8 9 10 *Institutional narratives of employability: internal constructions*

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12 Here, we describe how the employability discourse is constructed in the three locations:
13 Australia, Canada and the UK.
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16 17 *Australia*

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19 In our interview data, two institutions described their approach to employability in a
20 manner that aligned with Holmes' (2013) processual approach:
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24 ... [a] strong focus on a student being aware of self and their professional and
25 personal identity. (Australia 1 participant)
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29 ... pitched around preparation for lifelong and life-wide context. (Australia 3
30 participant)\
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34 However, the websites of these institutions revealed that neither institution communicated
35 a processual construction of employability. Instead, their focus was on institutional
36 prestige, referring in particular to positional characteristics such as employer perceptions,
37 graduate outcomes and university rankings: for example, 'top 1%' claims from the
38 Australia 1 website and a 'top 100 in Law' headline from the Australia 3 website.
39 Interviewees from the third Australian institution described an institutional approach to
40 employability that aligned with Holmes' processual approach, emphasising skills
41 development amongst students. This view was supported by information located on the
42 institution's website:
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52 ... equip[ping] our students and graduates with the skills they'll need in an
53 increasingly disrupted and challenged world. (Australia 2 website)
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57 In addition to skills development, employment outcome statistics featured heavily on the
58 Australia 2's website. From the interview comments, it appeared that there was a strategic
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1 clarity in terms of the internal construction of employability and how they are presented
2 externally:

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5 ...our University brand is for the real world, so there's quite a clear mandate in our
6 marketing. (Australia 2 participant)
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10 Interview participants across all three Australian institutions consistently highlighted the
11 importance of differentiating between employability and graduate employment
12 outcomes:
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16 ...I've been pushing hard that we need to stop mixing up the two terms. It's two
17 different things: employment is an outcome and employability is a set of abilities,
18 capabilities, skills that help an individual become both employed now: i.e., post-
19 university, and ongoing, not just at one time. (Australia 3 participant)
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25 The interviewees were aware that institutional website messaging tended to focus on
26 graduate outcomes as opposed to employability development. One interview participant
27 noted that even when a university mission was presented as 'preparing students for the
28 real world', this often linked back to employment outcomes rather than employability
29 development (Australia 1 participant). The interviewee from that institution bemoaned
30 the inconsistency of internal and external employability messaging across the sector:
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37 ...I would say across Australia, maybe 20 per cent of the universities do that well:
38 how we manage engagement and how we message that. (Australia 1 participant)
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42 Australian participants emphasised that to manage engagement and present a coherent
43 message about employability, a cross-institutional approach was required (Australia 3
44 participant) and that all stakeholders should be involved including students, staff involved
45 in delivering and supporting employability, institutional leadership and marketing staff.
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50 *Canada*

51 The interview data and website analysis from two of the Canadian institutions suggests
52 that the employability agenda may be enacted differently in Canada than in Australia or
53 the UK. Interview participants specifically highlighted that employability was 'a new
54 concept' (Canada 1 participant) for higher education institutions, with one interviewee
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noting that:

... employability is not a word that resonates I'd say, probably in most, if not possibly all, Canadian universities. (Canada 2 participant)

This finding was supported by our analysis of the websites in that there was no use of the term 'employability' on the pages searched using our methodology. Instead, the prominent discourse on all three Canadian websites related to students' career readiness. In two of the three institutions, there were indications on the websites of a sophisticated engagement with career development theory. For example, the Canada 1 website emphasised the importance of networking in graduate transitions and the Canada 3 website explicitly discussed the 'chaos theory of careers' (Pryor & Bright, 2003) on a webpage of the institution's career service. Although external messaging on websites related to career readiness, interviewees from Canada 1 and 2 described a possessional approach to employability development, focusing mainly on skills acquisition and career education. Institutional reputation and how reputation might support their graduates' transition into work was also highlighted on both websites, aligning with a positional approach (Holmes 2013). In contrast, a Canada 3 interview participant described a processual approach to employability development:

... for example, really emphasising this notion of using your time in university to explore, engage, participate. (Canada 3 participant)

This approach was supported through our analysis of Canada 3's website. Despite the consistency in internal and external constructions of employability for this institution, the interview participants viewed the marketing of any idea of employability to prospective students as a separate concern to that of the work of the institution in supporting its students to develop their employability.

UK

Interview participants from the UK universities were aware that graduate outcomes were presented on their institutional websites and that employability was an important part of marketing the university and its courses to prospective students:

1 ...a lot of the marketing to our prospective students is framed around that
2 employability agenda. (UK 1 participant)
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5 The participants emphasised that it is a mandatory requirement in the UK to present Key
6 Information Sets on university websites and that graduate outcomes data must be included
7 in these Sets. Although all three UK institutions discussed graduate employment in a way
8 that emphasised employability as a progressive concept, they employed marketing
9 strategies which leveraged graduate employment as a key selling point. This can be seen
10 in the following example.
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17 ...we want to support you in preparing for the world of work and make sure that
18 you have the greatest possible chance of getting a job you want after graduating.
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20 (UK 3 participant)
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25 Two divergent accounts about institutional understandings of employability were
26 identified from the UK participants. UK 1 interviewees expressed fatigue with the idea
27 of employability and focussed instead on immediate graduate outcomes and the
28 associated (positional) importance of institutional reputation. The UK 1 website did not
29 align with that view, presenting in contrast a possessional approach to employability with
30 an emphasis on skills development:
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38 ...we encourage our students to be enterprising and innovative — key skills for
39 all types of graduate employment. (UK 1 participant)
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43 We noted a tension between the UK 1 interviewees' comments and those of their
44 institution's website, reflected through comments such as:
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49 ... it's great for marketing but ... I have a different approach to employability because,
50 you know, going to university is not just about getting you a job. (UK 1 participant)
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54 In contrast, the website of the UK 2 institution presented Holmes' (2013) processual
55 approach to employability, with skills being referenced in terms of cognition and the
56 development of identity. UK 2's internal account was consistent with this and emphasised
57 that the institution viewed employability as a collective responsibility:
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1 ... everybody plays their part in it ... from the VC (Vice Chancellor) and the
2 Executive Board to the individual student. I think we view it as a continuous process.
3 (UK 2 participant)
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6 UK 2 staff went on to say that they perceived employability to be a continuous
7 process and that this view was shared by the marketing department:
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10 ...it isn't a series of random interventions that needs to be part of the total student
11 experience, and that's the test to really old model. (UK 2 participant)
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16 In sum, the data from the UK interviews and website analysis indicate that the concept of
17 employability has evolved and changed in response to different institutional contexts and
18 their local needs.
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23 **Discussion**

24 In this study, we first explored how employability is understood and enacted within
25 institutions. We did this through interviews involving sixteen participants, all of them
26 tasked with developing student employability. We compared these views with
27 constructions of employability as they were presented to external stakeholders, including
28 prospective students, through institutional websites.
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34 Three key themes emerged from our analysis. First, there appear to be rich and
35 diverse understandings and practises in relation to employability. These are evident
36 within and across institutions and between geographical locations. Second, how
37 employability is understood and enacted internally appears to vary considerably from its
38 representation to external audiences. Although a developmental approach to
39 employability is commonly practiced internally, external representations are often
40 dominated by metrics relating to graduate outcomes and by rankings which highlight
41 institutional prestige.
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49 Our third point of note stems from participants' emphasis that consistent
50 messaging is a crucial part of supporting employability. The most commonly cited reason
51 for misalignment between external and internal representations was lack of
52 communication between different operations of the university. We next discuss each of
53 these points in turn, exploring the consequences of misalignment in terms of curriculum
54 development and pedagogy for employability.
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Internal narratives of employability development

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2 Half the institutions involved in our study focussed on the acquisition of human capital
3 (a possessional approach) when describing employability. However, broader definitions
4 of employability also emerged. Three institutions emphasised the ability of graduates to
5 transition successfully into the workforce together with the need for lifelong learning and
6 the ability to sustain employability over the longer term (a processual approach).
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10 The processual approach is more aligned with recent employability concepts
11 expressed in the scholarly literature: for example, Bennett's (2019, p. 1) emphasis on a
12 metacognitive, strengths-based view of employability: students' "cognitive and social
13 development as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens".
14 Tomlinson (2017a) agrees, describing the process of developing five forms of crucial
15 capital—human, social, cultural, identity and psychological capitals—and their impact
16 on graduates' ability to transition into and through the labour market. The capitals view
17 is certainly more in line with the traditional mission of higher education. However, the
18 more pragmatic, *skills-based* view of employability is also gaining ground (see Clarke,
19 2018) and we return to the reasons for this later in the discussion.
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29 We note the differences in how the employability agenda is expressed in Canadian
30 institutions compared with UK and Australian institutions. Career development theory,
31 for example, was an active discourse on the websites of the three Canadian institutions
32 but it was absent from all UK and Australian institutional websites. This may be a
33 consequence of how government policy interacts with higher education, including in its
34 funding and reporting models. It might also be a matter of longevity: employability
35 discourse in the UK and Australia has been ongoing since the early 1960s (see Robbins
36 in the UK and Pullman in Australia, both 1963). The term 'employability' was also absent
37 from the websites of Canadian institutions, with one participant highlighting that
38 employability is 'not a word that resonates' (Canada 2 participant) in that context.
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48 Although some interviewees described an institutional culture of employability
49 development involving partnerships between academic and professional staff, students
50 and senior management teams, this was rare. More commonly, institutional
51 representatives described a fragmented relationship. Smith et al.'s study (2018) highlights
52 the value of an institution-wide approach to employability in which all stakeholders work
53 together. The ability of an institution-wide approach to promote meaningful engagement
54 in employability development, however, is realised only when all university operations
55 emphasise a 'learning view' of employability rather than a 'productivity and skills view'.
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Whilst the learning view was prominent among interviewees' conceptualisations of employability, in no case was a learning view seen across an institution. Given the desire for such an approach, its absence serves to emphasise the challenges of working across operations to ensure that careers practitioners and academic staff work together, influencing not only how employability development is defined and practised—as “part of the student experience agenda” (AGCAS, 2018, p. 31)—but how it is communicated to internal and external audiences.

Do different internal and external constructions of employability matter?

We assert that the misalignment of internal and external constructions of employability matters considerably. There exist two competing constructions of employability within higher education: a university-student transaction view; and a learning view. In terms of providing students with realistic expectations of study and an understanding of their role and responsibility within this, the two views carry conflicting messages which at best misinform and at worst mislead potential and current students.

In the vast majority of cases, our study data revealed that employability constructions were inconsistent between the institutional practice reported by senior university staff and the skills-based employability narratives presented on institutional websites. Some participants attributed these differences to lack of communication between different operations of the university: for example, between marketing, learning and teaching and the careers service.

Interviewees pointed out the importance of aligning internal and external constructions of employability. They also emphasised that if employability is to be understood and effectively operationalised, its definition and the communication of that definition must involve all institutional stakeholders:

... marketing need[s] to be at [the] table, future students need to be at the table, so our message gets out to the community—future students, current students and employers. (Australia 1 participant)

Our previous analysis of institutional websites (Bennett et al., in press) found that 50% of institutions utilised a positional approach to employability on their websites, emphasising both employment outcomes and institutional prestige through university

1 rankings and achievements. Given that potential students are influenced by the strength
2 of an institution's employment and career enhancement opportunities (see Diamond et
3 al., 2012), it is not surprising that these feature heavily on institutional websites. Our
4 interview participants agreed that institutional websites are a crucial point of information
5 for potential students, with one interviewee describing potential students as the 'number
6 one audience' (Australia 3 participant) for which the website had been designed. Indeed,
7 a visit to the homepage of a university or faculty is for many students their first 'campus
8 visit' (Opoku et al., 2006).
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14 The inclusion on institutional websites of employment and related data, however,
15 also reflects the marketisation of higher education (Tomlinson, 2018). As marketisation
16 continues, the "teaching and research activities of academics are increasingly measured
17 and scrutinised, the contemporary academy appears to be suffused with anxiety"
18 (Loveday, 2016, p. 154), and the fate of teaching-focussed academics within a research-
19 based funding model is increasingly uncertain (Bennett, Roberts, Ananthram, &
20 Broughton, 2018). Declines in public funding and increased competition for fee-paying
21 students have placed institutions under increasing pressure to demonstrate their value to
22 students. As such, websites increasingly market to potential students both the likely (or
23 the ideal) outcomes of their studies and the quality of the education they can expect to
24 receive.
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34 Metrics which claim to demonstrate teaching quality are perhaps best evidenced
35 in the UK example, where the Teaching Excellence Framework (DBIS, 2016) was
36 designed in part to inform student choice. The UK is among many countries to employ
37 multiple graduate data instruments as proxy indicators of quality. Authors such as Jackson
38 and Bridgstock (2018), Muller (2018) and Spence (2018) have argued strongly against
39 the excessive use of metrics in making judgments about the quality of higher education,
40 maintaining that such metrics can lead to narrower student experiences rather than the
41 higher standards, quality and choice that such data is intended to foster. In the context of
42 employability, institutions conscious of metrics may, for example, funnel students
43 towards employment and direct them away from potentially life-enhancing activities such
44 as a post-graduate gap year.
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54 In line with arguments such as these, our interviewees were consistent in their
55 view that institutions must not conflate employability with employment outcomes data.
56 A persistent challenge in this regard is that students' understanding of employability tends
57 to be limited to a narrow view which emphasises short-term graduate employability goals
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together with credentials such as degree and grade point average (see Gedye & Beaumont, 2017). Students are also displaying increasingly consumer-orientated attitudes to higher education in that they are more concerned about getting financial value from their higher education studies (Tomlinson, 2017b).

Ironically, a positional approach to employability, characterised by rankings, achievements and graduate outcomes, may speak to the expectations and behaviours of prospective applicants and so be effective in enhancing student recruitment. However, these approaches are at odds with the equity agenda of higher education. As Holmes (2013) asserts, people from privileged backgrounds are advantaged in the labour market because they can use their social and cultural capital to secure work (see also Norton & Carroll, 2015). The most advantaged groups continue to dominate attendance at the most prestigious institutions and this selective advantage can be further reinforced by employers who recruit from prestigious universities, often due to alumni connections (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012). These factors suggest that the positional approach exacerbates inequality in the graduate labour market, as evidenced by Pitman et al. (2019) and Tholen (2015).

Our contention that it is important to have consistency between internal and external narratives is substantiated through the interview data. Interviewees, who were all senior university staff involved in the design and delivery of employability, emphasised the need for consistent employability narratives and the need for all stakeholders, including marketing, to engage in constructive and critical dialogue about how employability might be constructed and developed.

We end our discussion with an example from Thornton and Shannon's (2014, p. 158) study of employability narratives in the discipline of law. Thornton and Shannon highlight that a student who undertakes a law degree is promised employability, prestige and wealth. Consequently, the serious and difficult aspects of studying law are overlooked. As Nixon et al. (2011) assert, good marketing should work hard to eliminate content that induces 'dissonance and angst'. If the higher education sector is to avoid dissatisfied students whilst developing "more complex and sophisticated expectations of university and of their [students'] own roles and responsibilities" (James, 2002, p. 81), the alignment of marketing narratives and institutional practice should lie at the core of the sector's activities.

Conclusion

We begin by acknowledging the limitations of the study. First, although the interview study involved participants who were selected for their ability to give a representative view of employability within both their institutions and their geographic regions, the study was limited to a small sample of institutions and geographical locations. Differences across regional and institutional statuses might emerge with a larger and more geographically diverse sample. Second, we analysed external institutional positioning using only the institutional website. A more comprehensive analysis that includes other modes of communication might yield a more nuanced picture of institutional employability narratives. Finally, we note the absence of the student voice in this study. Research that incorporates the student voice in discussions about employment metrics, consumer-led marketing and employability development is lacking and should be explored.

In this article, we investigated how institutional employability discourse and practice compares with the employability discourse communicated to prospective students via institutional websites. Internal constructions of employability included conceptualisation at a sophisticated level in terms of developing social, personal and academic capitals, and at a functional level in terms of the skills and capabilities required to navigate the graduate labour market. External representations of employability were dominated by a focus on graduate employment metrics and data as opposed to descriptions of employability practice experienced and realised by students internally.

The misalignment between internal and external representations could be attributed to two competing characterisations of higher education. As government interventions increasingly direct the higher education sector along market lines, universities recruit students in an environment of intense competition. To do this, they take a transactional view to “sell their courses” (Askehave, 2007, p. 725) by marketing to students economic gains in terms of high employment prospects following completion of their studies. In contrast, internal constructions of employability are based on a learning view in which each student is more a “young person ‘in formation’, or the ‘citizen-specialist’ in training, than the burgeoning *homo economicus*” (Lyndsay, 2014, p. 147).

We assert that this tension can be productive if it provides an impetus for active and critical dialogue involving all stakeholders (for example, policy-makers, institutions, industry, students, and alumni) about the economic and social purposes of higher education learning, and the means of achieving these. In the current environment,

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however, students are caught up in discourses of skill, employability, employment, attributes and performance, directed by market mechanisms used by governments to reshape higher education and to encourage and inform student choice.

Since institutional strategies are influenced by such interventions, a constructive dialogue is required at the level of policy-making to ensure that the inherent social values of higher education are protected and that the excesses of marketisation are resisted. This could, in turn, reduce the incongruence between external and internal representations of employability and lead to more coherent, institution-wide employability strategies that include accurate and realistic marketing of courses to prospective applicants.

Institution-wide strategic development is of critical importance in the development of practices which support individual employability development because discursive positioning helps to resource individuals with context-specific modes of self-identification and behaviour (Tomlinson, 2017b). As noted by one UK interview participant, employability development “isn’t a series of random interventions... [it] needs to be part of the total student experience” (UK 2). By providing accurate representations of student experience, and what they will get from attending university, the expectations and responsibilities of each partner will be better understood. Not only would this lead to prospective applicants becoming better informed in their selection of a university, it would enhance student engagement and satisfaction.

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