

Mickey Mouse Learning: Discourses of the Vocational/Technical in Higher Education

Harriet Richmond

Work Placements Tutor
Newman University
Genners Lane
Bartley Green
Birmingham B32 3NT
United Kingdom

Tel: 0121 476 1181 x2454

Email: h.richmond@newman.ac.uk

Richard Sanders

Lecturer in Media and Education Studies
Newman University
Genners Lane
Bartley Green
Birmingham B32 3NT
United Kingdom

Tel: 0121 476 1181 x2422

Email: r.sanders@newman.ac.uk

Abstract

Within the frame of UK HE policy making, discursive distinctions between ‘academic’ learning and ‘vocational/technical’ skills for ‘employability’ are being used to justify contemporary reform of Higher Education. This economy driven reform context can be characterised by top down ideological interpretations of subject area value and workforce ‘skills’ needs (Ball, 2008), bottom up student choice (Willetts and Cable, 2011), perceived employer requirements (Moreland, 2005) and ‘supply-side strategies’ (Mills, 2002). This reform climate can be seen to be engendering a climate of autocratic control (McGettigan, 2013), where the voice of academic practitioners is becoming increasingly marginalised.

This paper seeks to investigate this reform agenda from a practitioner perspective using two case studies from Newman University: the first explores an attempt to move beyond deficit models of graduate skills gaps, drawing upon current practices in work-related learning within undergraduate programmes at Newman University; and the second investigates the discursive marginalisation of Media Studies, its subsequent excision from the portfolio of courses offered at Newman and associated wider implications of reform in terms of preparing students’ for their career aspirations.

Through the linking of these case studies, the authors are seeking to enter into a constructive debate around what graduates need in order to further their careers. The *Confederation of British Industry* (CBI) and *Association of Graduate Employers* (AGR) have been highlighting increasingly complex career requirements and the need to smooth the transition into the workplace (CBI, 2009). Our experiences, as well as the experience of others within HE (Sarson, 2013), suggest that the current reform agenda will not successfully address this perceived employer need. Both case studies highlight the importance of formative learning for career development - in terms of its reflective, metacognitive and critical functions (Mills, 2002) that cannot be easily quantified and valued economically (Collini, 2012). Here we would argue the distinction between ‘academic’ learning and ‘vocational/technical’ skills is not useful for students or employers, and a more nuanced understanding is required.

Keywords

vocational, employability, Higher Education, discourse, subjects, work-based, work-related, placement

Introduction

In this paper we suggest that two terms ('vocational' and 'Mickey Mouse') are used within and about higher education to refer to subjects and learning experiences that have a particular 'employability' value associated with them. Typically, the term 'vocational' is used to describe skills training designed to prepare the learner to enter directly into skilled or semi-skilled employment. It is concerned with the development of procedural knowledge (the knowledge of how and how best to perform a particular task) rather than declarative knowledge. However, we suggest that 'vocational' is developing an elected value in higher education, effectively standing in for subjects and learning activities that are defined as 'not academic'. In a similar way, the term 'Mickey Mouse' has recently been used in relation to humanities subject areas such as Media Studies that are perceived as 'soft' subjects holding no academic value and lacking a 'vocational' procedural orientation. We suggest that these two terms are being deployed in a derisory way, with the effect of marginalising and limiting the ways in which some modes of learning (work-related learning) or subjects (Media Studies) might be positioned, conceptualised and realised in higher education policy and practice. The positioning of these terms within contemporary educational reform provides an initial important site of analysis within this paper, before considering how this fits with the requirements of concerned stakeholders. Discourse within the analysis undertaken in this paper suggests that reform is globally legitimised by *Knowledge Economy* requirements, including the need to produce workers with particular 'vocational' skills who can compete within a changing environment (Boden & Nedeva, 2010, p.37-38).

According to Ball (2008, p.19), the *Knowledge Economy* is a widely used concept in relation to education policy and neoliberal reform, but evades definition. Essentially, it is derived from the idea that knowledge (including education) can be treated as a product that can be exported in a globalised marketplace. From a historical perspective, the *Knowledge Economy* was initially introduced by Drucker in 1966 to describe the difference between manual workers in contrast to knowledge workers who are defined as using their minds to produce knowledge and information (ibid). Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the need to focus on *Knowledge Economy* skills has been a key theme within UK educational policy making up until the present day (Mulderigg, 2008, p.150). Despite the global nature of

reform instigated by the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OCED) (Ball, 2008, p.40), and efforts by the *European Union* (EU) to harmonise educational provision for private sector needs, these reform agendas are underpinned by 'soft' law mechanisms (Ball, 2008, p.38). These mechanisms allow EU nations to retain control of their own policy when implementing educational reform, leading to interpretations on the prioritisation of meanings associated to the *Knowledge Economy* at a national level.

Within the UK, these *Knowledge Economy* interpretations and associated contemporary reform represent a significant shift to 'managerial professionalism' within teaching. This takes the ideological view that efficient management can solve any problem and that private sector practices can be applied to the public sector (Sachs, 2000, p.79). We argue that there is an absence of collaborative and reflective spaces for learners, employers and managerial stakeholders to productively engage with reform agendas. This is aptly illustrated by a recent article within the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) (Morgan, 2013). This article provides an important frame for the problematic nature of 'vocational' and 'Mickey Mouse' discourses within the analysis.

The article - *Manchester Met v-c hits back on graduate employment* (ibid) - describes a disagreement between the Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University, Professor John Brooks, John Longworth, director general of the British Chambers of Commerce and Toni Pearce, the National Union of Students (NUS) president. They were all present at a fringe event of the Conservative Party conference in Manchester, organised by University Alliance, an umbrella organisation of 22 Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) that describe themselves as having 'a big focus on combining science and technology with design and creative industries' (University Alliance, 2013). The disagreement arose during a discussion about whether or not graduates were 'work ready'. The responses of Prof. Brooks, John Longworth and Toni Pearce to this question represent the positions of different stakeholders engaged with the higher education 'employability agenda'. The focus of the disagreement highlights important tensions within contemporary education reform for 'employability'. This case study suggests that these - sometimes problematically restricted - positions are framed by discourses about what 'employability' means, who it is for and what it is for. The aim of this paper is to illustrate some of the reasons for Mr. Longworth's

observation that 'he was surprised by how defensive everyone's being about employability' (Longworth in Morgan, 2013), in terms of the problematic discourse within the article and the methodological analysis outlined below.

Methodology and Case Studies

The THES article discussed within the introduction highlights the problematic nature of current HE reform agendas for key stakeholders, and *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) as a methodology is particularly useful for a problem orientated approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p.2). The main aim of the critical aspect of CDA is to reveal structures of power and prevalent ideologies (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.8), and the neoliberal consensus surrounding educational reform can be considered as an important research agenda for CDA (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.11). Specifically, Fairclough's *Dialectical-Relational Approach* (DRA) will be used because it allows for the examination of complex semiotic networks of educational reform - realised over a period of time and across a number of domains (Fairclough, 2009, p.176). For this analysis, the domains to be included from the semiotic networks of reform will include: the UK macro political domain; an intermediary domain of political action (including organisations such as HEFCE and JISC); the micro domain of HE institutions; and the domain of concerned stakeholders.

Starting within the macro domain via the coalition's white paper (Willetts and Cable, 2011), this paper draws upon a selection of non-conventional intermediary domain publications that are referred to as 'grey literature' (Alberani et al, 1990, p.358). The grey literature within this paper will be considered in terms of how meaning configurations (Fairclough, 1995, p.113) are transformed down to a micro institutional level via educational reform.

The micro domain of HE institutions is informed by our experiences within Newman University, and these experiences can be specifically related to the institution reconfiguring its portfolio of courses for the upcoming 2014-2015 academic year in response to macro reform agendas. This portfolio reconfiguration has prompted discussion in terms of what role an excised Media Studies has to play within the institution in preparing students for career aspirations, and the philosophical reconfiguration of work-related learning within undergraduate programmes. We anticipate that the changes to curriculum design within the

institution and the related critical issues raised within this paper will prompt discussion amongst stakeholders. We would welcome views on these and consideration of wider implications for all parties. Here, we would agree with Mr. Longworth's assessment that everyone is getting too defensive over 'employability' and we hope that this article encourages productive debate around learners needs by honest views, where stakeholder positions are made explicit.

Analysis of Educational *Knowledge Economy* Reform for 'Employability'

There are two sections in the analysis. The first section represents findings from the CDA in terms of the framing of 'employability' needs in coalition reform (with specific consideration of 'vocational' and 'Mickey Mouse') and how this is then transformed through semiotic domains to a micro institutional level. This is then followed by a consideration of how this is seen as meeting the requirements of key stakeholders, represented through the lens of the THES article. The analysis chapter will then provide the basis for recommendations at the end of the article and how these relate to the reconfiguration of Media Studies and work-related learning at Newman University.

Framing of 'Employability' Needs in Coalition Reform

With the perceived need for knowledge workers within the *Knowledge Economy*, educating the workforce is seen as key for economic prosperity (Ball, 2013, p.23) in terms of workers' skills needs. The political domain has previously defined features of the knowledge worker in terms of creativity, entrepreneurship and digital literacy. In this context, education is seen as needing to give emphasis to skills-based learning of this type and 'priority' subject areas (Ball, 2013, p.23-24; Blair, 2000; Mulderrig, 2008, p.149; Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p.2; Castells, 1998; Rodriguez, Warmerdam & Triomphe, 2010, p.20-33). Despite the perceived need to prioritise certain skills and subject areas, the previous Labour Government's interpretation of neoliberal *Knowledge Economy* requirements has not significantly denigrated other learning aims or areas. Political discourse has previously emphasised the role of education as not solely operating towards commercial imperatives (Mandelson, 2009, p.13) and the important 'employability' role of subjects outside of prioritised areas, including Media Studies (ibid, p.43). The Coalition's HE white paper continues much of Labour's priorities - but situates reform differently in terms of less worthwhile 'soft' subjects (Willetts & Cable, 2011, p.40); an emphasis on the removal of public good due to financial imperatives (ibid, p.14); and differentiating between 'vocational' and 'academic' learning (ibid, p.4). Here, these changes are discursively interpreted as the introduction of restorative neoconservative educational reform (Ball, 2013, p.14-15) - rather

than neoliberal *Knowledge Economy* reform - and the accelerated introduction of free market, supply-side strategies (Mills, 2002).

‘Vocational’ and ‘academic’

The white paper distinguishes between ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ pathways through education but these terms are not defined. The paper refers to vocational education in the context of removing ‘the regulatory barriers that are preventing a level playing field’ for alternative providers (Willets and Cable, 2011, p.5). Vocational education is defined as something that should be ‘locally-relevant’ and concerned with ‘higher-level skills’ provided through ‘HNCs, HNDs, Foundation Degrees and Apprenticeships’ (ibid, p.46). This perhaps represents a view of the role of state higher education in contrast to ‘alternative providers’, with the distinguishing feature being the distinction between ‘vocational’ learning and ‘academic’ learning. This separation perhaps represents a reimagining of HE as a tripartite system with the increasing diversification of types of provider and type of setting. There are parallels in policy here with the diversification of the state school system, which Ball (2013, p.97) calls the ‘disarticulation of the state system’. Within the white paper, both of these suggested ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ pathways are disassociated from education providing public benefit, due to financial imperatives brought about by austerity. This very much signals the recognition within the political domain that ‘public good’ ideals do not sit neatly with economic imperatives (Collini, 2012, p.92).

Within this context, the white paper is seeking to ‘provide the skills and knowledge that employers want’ (ibid, p.40) and proposes a kite marking scheme for programmes that provide industry relevant content with ‘good’ graduate employment rates. The measure being used by the white paper is the successful progression of graduates into sectors related to the programme they graduate from - with the white paper focusing on a case study example from the video games industry. This example situates graduate ‘vocational’ learning around the ‘skills deficit’ concept, and this may indeed be useful for some courses and some employers. However, the transfer of this conceptualisation to all contexts may be overly reductive, reinforcing the distinction between ‘academic’ skills and ‘vocational’ skills:

Your university course matters and so does the degree result you emerge with at the end...These are qualities you'll need to be able to talk about, explain and demonstrate. This is all important, but employers are also interested in how effective you can be in the workplace. That's where employability skills come in. (CBI and NUS, 2011, p.11)

Employability skills then are defined here as being separate from academic knowledge and being concerned primarily with work effectiveness, described as 'non-academic or softer skills' (CBI, 2011). Distinctions are also made between 'subject specific skills' and 'generic skills' (Cole and Tibby, 2013, p.12). With these skills described as 'generic, transferable skills' (Lowden et. al, 2011, p.12) or 'key skills' (NCIHE, 1997, paragraph 38). The nature and type of these specific generic skill types is the subject of much debate which will be considered later in this paper through the frame of the positions represented in the THES article.

'Soft' and 'Mickey Mouse'

As previously mentioned, the coalition's white paper refers to 'soft' subject areas as holding less value than preferred 'hard' subjects. This lack of value is associated to humanities subject areas via statistics showing low contact time (Willetts & Cable, 2011, p.26) and the linking of contact time to quality (ibid, p.27). The Russell Group describes 'soft' subjects as usually having a more 'vocational' or practical focus (2011), and therefore being intrinsically different from 'hard' 'academic' subject areas that have preferred status within the white paper. This 'soft' white paper labelling has been preceded by discourse within the political domain and popular press that has consistently targeted Media Studies and other humanities subject areas by association with this label (Fazackerley & Chant, 2008; Conservatives, 2009; Conservatives, 2008; Henry, 2009; Merrik, 2009; Curtis, 2009; BBC, 2009). Here, Media Studies is mentioned in every article - effectively making the subject 'short-hand' for describing perceived problems with other 'soft' humanities subject areas (Berger & McDougall, 2013, p.6). With these preceding communications, it is also important to note that some discourses associate the term 'Mickey Mouse' to qualifications that are considered to be the equivalent of 'pub chat' (Curran, 2013), which aims to denigrate subjects such as Media Studies even further.

The term 'Mickey Mouse' was first coined in relation to undergraduate study during the late 1990s by the popular press, in terms of the content of courses such as Media Studies holding little value in society. In 2003, the Higher Education Minister Margaret Hodge accused universities of trying to increase student numbers and associated revenue via 'Mickey Mouse' courses (BBC, 2003). Within this article, Ms. Hodge clearly illustrates the further denigration of this labelling, as it not only suggests that the subjects are not at the same level of other 'academic' subjects, but also do not have any 'vocational' relevance to the labour market. The labelling of subjects in this way has been present over the past 15 years (Curran, 2013), but there has been a clear intensification of this rhetoric during contemporary coalition reform in terms of grey literature and associated policy technologies.

This intensification has manifested in a number of ways since the publication of the white paper: HEFCE have enacted university reform devaluing arts and humanities subjects within bands C and D (HEFCE, 2011) in terms of funding. When this is considered in conjunction with a cap on student numbers (McGettigan, 2013, p.4), it has left institutions to consider whether they need to fight for market share within more profitable 'hard' subjects; Willetts (Paton, 2011) and the Conservative Fair Access Group (Curran, 2013), calling for UCAS to abolish the current system which rates 'Mickey Mouse' qualifications such as Media at the same level as English. The Qualifications Information Review is now recommending the phasing out of the current system (UCAS, 2012), starting in the 2015 academic year; and on-going targeting of Media Studies within political rhetoric, that is increasingly associating a wider range of subjects with the 'soft' and 'Mickey Mouse' labelling. At a micro level, this labelling has had an effect on individuals applying for Media Studies undergraduate courses, with a decrease of 40.6% in applicants cited in October 2011 (compared with an overall drop of only 9%) (Ward, 2011). This 'common sense' view of subjects such as Media Studies is aptly illustrated by the answer to the following question posed on Yahoo: 'Is Media Studies at A Level considered a 'Mickey Mouse' subject by universities?' (Yahoo Answers, 2011). Here, the top rated answer is 'yes' with a link to a Daily Mail article to substantiate the response. Here it is important to recognise that the consistent targeting of subject value provides the political and commercial space for reconfiguring subject areas that are perceived as needing a greater vocational focus (Berger and McDougall, 2013, p.7).

Willetts would like to see alternative providers in the provision of liberal arts education (McGettigan, 2013, p.97), and this consistent subject targeting in HE aligns with this aim. This provides a space for a reconfiguration of the 'myopic distinction' between 'pre-92' and 'post-92' institutions (Berger and McDougall, 2013, p.6) – with the opportunity for alternative providers to take on subjects such as media. This leaves the existing universities with a choice, either configure their portfolios to align themselves to compete with new vocationally orientated providers, or align to notions of what subjects 'academic' elite institutions should provide. The response of universities on the whole, is to align with the latter by reconfiguring their subject areas and demanding high tuition fee payments (£8,100 on average in 2012 - McGettigan, 2013, p.25). This may help to explain the excision of perceived 'soft' subjects, like Media Studies from some HEI's, including Newman.

The Stakeholders - Issues Raised within the THES Article

After inspecting the framing of reform associated to 'employability' above, the analysis now turns to the problematic nature of the contemporary reform agenda for stakeholders, which is framed by the THES article. From this article, we have drawn out four key problematic positions within reform that we feel should be a concern of key stakeholders within education.

Position 1: Students don't have the skills employers want

The THES reported that the discussion opened with John Longworth, director general of the British Chambers of Commerce expressing concerns about the 'work readiness' of graduates:

There were problems around graduates "being ready for work and having the softer skills needed: a range of communication skills, punctuality, motivation – which businesses often complain about. And actually complain about with good reason as well. (Morgan, 2013)

Longworth's view is representative of what will be referred to here as a *discourse of deficit*. This is indicative of the on-going difficulties employers and successive governments have encountered with this 'work-ready' preoccupation around the need for 'softer skills'. The emphasis on a gap in skills, has led to the proliferation of taxonomies of generic vocationally

transferable employability skills, in an attempt to clearly identify (and provide the basis for development of) the skills that are 'needed' by employers (CBI, 2011; CBI & NUS, 2011; Prospects, 2013). Discussions of employability within higher education 'grey literature' suggest that there are perhaps some areas of complexity for practitioners about the rationale for, and conceptualisation of, employability interventions but that these are not always fully explored. Pegg et. al (2012, p. 6) suggest that some 'policy' documents (Browne, 2010; CBI, 2009; UKCES, 2008,) adopt 'a common sense and, at times rather uncritical understanding of the *Knowledge Economy*'. Furthermore, they explain that 'defining and embedding employability remains challenging'. Despite the many definitions, there is limited agreement about what skills are needed and how the gap is to be bridged. Ball highlights that the need for particular skills is not necessarily as evenly in place as the *Knowledge Economy* would suggest (2013, p.27-28), and this simplification in terms of requirements labelling does not reflect and respond to the complexity of the employment sector operating at international, regional and local levels. Tymon (2011) suggests that:

[A]ny agreement [about employability skills] is just between 'labels', with little evidence to suggest that any of the interested stakeholders...share a common understanding of these terms. (Tymon, 2011, p.13).

Tymon's view is supported by earlier research by Hawke (2004 in Cornford, 2005, p.35). Hawke (2004) concludes that employers do not agree about which skills are important and that their preferences are framed by specific work contexts and job roles. Cornford (2005, p.26) describes 'generic skills' acquisition as a policy ideal, which is both unattainable and unrealistic because practical exploration of the necessary conditions to attain and transfer these skills has not concerned policy makers. Hager and Hodkinson (2009, p.635) question the very notion of transferability of skills, arguing that it oversimplifies learning, grounded in 'simplistic, 'common-sense' assumptions...that are directly contradicted by much of the research' (ibid, p.620). The idea of the mind as a repository for knowledge - a type of substance to be deposited, to be transferred as required, places emphasis on the products of learning but neglects processes of and conditions for learning. Furthermore, this view separates learning from context just as the discursive emphasis on generic skills acquisition for employability decontextualizes 'skills' from particular job roles or work settings. They

suggest that the learning transfer metaphor fails to recognise individual experience and interaction with, and understanding of, their learning in context and the interconnectedness of this with personal situation, experience of work practices and own cultural capital. Instead, they propose a set of alternative metaphors, which aim to capture a more complex view of learning:

We should cease thinking and writing about “learning transfer” and think instead of learning as becoming, within a transitional process of boundary-crossing.’ (Hager and Hodgkinson, 2009, p.635)

The metaphor of ‘learning as becoming’ is a useful one because it does not entail an end-point in quite the same way as ‘learning transfer’. Instead it implies a process that takes place over time, explicitly recognises prior experience, involves different stages (transitional) with the transfer from study to graduate employment being one of many boundaries to be navigated over a lifetime. Boden and Nedeva (2010, p.44) suggest that the discursive definition of employability in imprecise terms has a different purpose, which is to restrict the voices of those (academics, learners and employers perhaps) who have an interest in more expansive and complex notions of employability. This imprecise definition and lack of complex employability notions, is very much embodied by the perceived need of digital literacies and competencies within graduates. In a number of forms, digital literacies and competencies are seen as required by employers (CBI, 2009, p.8; CBI & NUS, 2011, p.11-12; Prospects, 2013), and a recent report by McDougall, Livingstone and Sefton-Green for the European Commission (2013) sets out to investigate the UK’s ability to engender these competencies and literacies within education. Here, Media Studies is situated as providing the most tangible evidence of addressing these ‘employability’ needs and this same position is taken within this article. However, when inspecting discourse within UK grey literature, this view is not clearly recognised within educational policy and practice.

When inspecting grey literature on initiatives undertaken by the *Joint Information Systems Committee* (JISC), the organisation responsible for championing the use of digital technology within education, it is apparent that contemporary reform has had limited impact on how higher education responds to the perceived need for digital skills. Here, we see a

continuation of the previous governments initiatives (JISC, 2011a to JISC, 2011c; JISC, 2012a to JISC, 2012d; White 2012), signalling a neoliberal consensus in terms of the approach to addressing this perceived need. With these publications the JISC oscillates between characterising learners in differing ways, sometimes as skilled participants with the ability to contribute to learning design (JISC, 2011a) and sometimes as uncritical users that need close attention from the academic community (White, 2012). The involvement of private sector is discussed as having a contribution to skills development (JISC, 2012c) and technology use is positioned as meeting top down needs and bottom up free market reform (JISC 2012b; JISC, 2011b) – sometimes in a deterministic manner and meeting the need of abstract solutions (JISC, 2011c). The learning environment is occasionally seen as needing to be broadened out to include informal spaces, and in other instances these spaces are seen as disruptive with protectionist discourse foregrounded (White, 2012). These examples give a brief perspective on problems that the JISC has when trying to deliver messages to satisfy many stakeholders, and it is difficult for all of these sometimes competing and complex views to engender coherent change. McDougall, Livingstone and Sefton-Green highlight within their conclusions that the imprecise and complex definition of stakeholder digital literacy and competencies requirements does not match the delivery capabilities of mainstream education (2013, p.44). Here, we feel that this is very much illustrated within a discursive analysis of the JISC in terms of digital literacies and competencies.

Newman has begun work on the JISCs digital literacies programme (JISC, 2011d), which is targeted at improving the nature of technology use. The consultancy report provided to Newman by JISC for embedding digital literacies highlights an important critical dimension to students' work, and the project documentation also highlights an important role for critical media literacy (2011e). This *Knowledge Economy* need immediately seems at odds with the neoconservative devaluing of Media Studies, and provides a focus for the following position.

Position 2: Students are not studying the right degree subjects

Further on within the THES article, Mr Longworth makes the following statement regarding the employment of graduates:

Mr Longworth countered that “if students come out of universities with the wrong degrees and/or are not ready for work, like it or not, they won’t be employed. It’s as simple as that.” (Morgan, 2013)

Here, Mr. Longworth makes specific reference to students’ studying the ‘wrong degrees’, indicating a discursive alignment to reform that devalues subject areas. As previously highlighted, Media Studies is a particular target within a neoconservative reform agenda, despite the subject area’s potential for cultural, critical and creative learning within the context of digital literacies and skills (McDougall et al, 2013, p.12). A defence of the subject area is beyond the remit of this analysis, but readers are recommended to review the Manifesto for Media Education, which provides a more nuanced view on the value of the subject area that can be provided here (Manifesto for Media Education, 2011).

This perceived lack of value can be seen as stemming from a relatively new subject area not neatly fitting within a vertical ‘academic’ subject categorisation and not entirely focused on perceived ‘vocational’ needs (generic or specific vocational skills). Due to the lack of a neat fit within this labelling, the subject is perceived as having little value and refocusing around employer needs is required. This lack of fit with labelling can be considered as one of Media Studies strengths, and is embodied in the subject areas own validating ‘Powerful Media’ and ‘Media Literacy’ discourses (Berger and McDougall, 2013, p.9-10). Within these discourses, the subject area recognises the need for digital ‘vocational’ skills, literacies and competencies for employment but also situates the acquisition of these around the same critical ‘academic’ enquiry that is found within established subject areas. Media Studies is at its best when critiquing practice and policy (Berger and McDougall, 2013, p.17), providing the space for media students’ to make meaning on their own terms and within the context of their own career aspirations. This type of critique does not sit comfortably with macro discourses around the perceived need for Media Studies to become more vocationally orientated (Berger and McDougall, 2013, p.10), and lends credence to the view that resistance to the subject is from those organisations that it critically engages with (Notaro, 2011). Interestingly, this has resonance with the JISCs digital literacies project, where criticality around the use of digital technologies is primarily situated in terms of the unquestioning acceptance of *Knowledge Economy* needs (2011e). If the *Knowledge Economy*

does not give us the entire picture for preparing students for the workplace, then the question of who instigates the critical inspection of vocational knowledge is important. Our views here broadly align with McDougall, Livingstone & Sefton-Green, where Media Studies is well placed to 'deliver' literacies and competencies, but is being undermined by the current neoconservative agenda that refuses to legitimise the subject area as an academic pursuit or civic entitlement (2013, p.4).

The above is indicative of the tensions associated with the state leading an agenda that defines what skills and subject content are required for employment. According to Boden and Nedeva, this is 'signalled by the state defining broadly the content of employability, developing the employability agenda, identifying employability skills and attempting to measure university performance by measuring employability' (2010, p.44). Here Boden and Nedeva touch upon the mechanisms (or policy technologies) for measuring performance in 'employability', which do not capture whether or not students have acquired the skills identified as lacking but instead measure whether or not a graduate can get a job. The focus of the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey is to measure employment rather than employability. The DLHE perhaps measures what is measurable rather than that which is valued, which might include graduates making a successful transition to a graduate workplace, their ability to make informed decisions about the kind of workplace they enter or how they reflect on or manage their own professional development. These things are not captured perhaps because they are complex, messy and take place over time and are not the main priority of a *Knowledge Economy* driven reform agenda. The policy technology of the DLHE represents an incongruent measure and this incongruence is perhaps reflected in students' and graduates' expectations of what HEI's are 'selling'.

Position 3: Students have been 'sold' employability as a solution to tuition fees

Toni Pearce, President of the NUS:

Ms Pearce said the real problem was that students expecting to graduate into a secure job if they studied hard had been "sold a bit of a lie".

Toni Pearce's view is representative of two related dimensions of the learner experience of the 'employability' agenda. First, the main factor that contributes towards successful graduate employment is 'working hard' to get a good degree. There is evidence to suggest that learners increasingly associate HE with improved employment opportunities.

Futuretrack, a five-year longitudinal study following the higher education entrants of 2005/2006 from application into employment, suggests that the top two reasons why students apply for a higher education course is related to their 'longer-term career plans' and the association of higher-level study with 'getting a good job' (Purcell et.al, 2008, p.35). Students' understanding of the meaning of 'employability' is 'a short-term means to an end, being about finding a job, any job, or employment.' (Tymon, 2011, p.13). This view reflects a very different understanding of employability from that expressed by Longworth, which is more concerned with the capability of the graduate once they are in the workplace. The second related dimension is the way in which employability (as employment) is a measure included in the Key Information Set (KIS). Information provided through the KIS populates information in the UNISTATS website; a 'price comparison' website, which details employment statistics and average salaries of graduates by course. The selling of employability (as employment with an expected 'average' salary) in this way limits the extent to which applicants have access to realistic expectations associated with improved earnings over time of graduates compared to non-graduates (ONS, 2013, p.15). The neoliberal 'individual project of the self' (Boden and Nedeva, 2010, p.42) promoted through the *discourse of deficit* has the effect of 're-framing...education as something that the individual should self-invest in.' (Boden and Nedeva, 2010, p.44) as the CBI exhorts future graduates: 'Remember, you're investing in yourself' (CBI and NUS, 2011, p.8.) Furthermore, the discourse restricts explicit consideration of current graduate labour market conditions, with 'unemployment... more likely to be seen as an individual's problem' (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006, p. 309). Within this discursive frame, employability becomes the reason and rationale for engaging in (and consuming) higher education rather than one of a range of potential outcomes of gaining a degree. Although in 2013 graduates are more likely to be employed, less likely to be searching for work and less likely to be out of the labour force than those with lower qualifications or no qualifications (ONS, 2013, p.5), the percentage of graduates working in non-graduate jobs has risen by 10% since 2001 (ONS, 2013, p.13). Whether this reflects a decrease in the demand for graduates in the labour market or an

oversupply of graduates is not clear but it does perhaps place into perspective Ms Pearce's comments about feeling as if students have been 'sold a lie'.

If employers' understand 'employability' to be concerned with acquiring the right skills and right subject competencies to operate effectively in the workplace and some students' perceive 'employability' (as employment) to be about the expected reward for studying hard and making a financial investment in a course, the final position within this article will consider the impact that these twin conceptualizations have on the ways in which academic staff respond to meanings of 'employability'.

Position 4: Who owns it? Where does it belong?

Professor John Brooks:

"I'm fed up with employers telling us our students are not employment-ready. I think increasingly there's evidence that employers are not graduate-ready." He argued that modern graduates, with an "independent, autonomous approach to learning and their understanding of technology, frankly scare employers". (Morgan, 2013)

Within Prof. Brooks's response to John Longworth, there is an intimation of two tensions that the *discourse of deficit* creates the conditions for within higher education. The first is the question of who should bear the responsibility for ensuring that 'our students' are 'work-ready'. Reference has already been made in this paper to the suggestion by Boden and Nedeva (2010), that employability is framed in such a way as to measure the performance of universities, despite the incongruence of this position with the emphasis on the individual's responsibility for his or her own employability. Prof. Brooks' 'fed up' response to John Longworth is perhaps both representative of frustrations with the incongruent task HEI's have been presented with (employability/employment) and also a response to government-created expectations that universities should always respond to employers' demands (Cornford, 2005, p.42). The second part of Prof. Brooks response perhaps represents the second effect of the *discourse of deficit*, which is the repositioning of the 'academic' in contrast to 'vocational' in higher education. Prof. Brooks seems to be suggesting that the qualities that he argues that higher education develops in people, i.e

‘independent, autonomous’ are not those favoured by employers. The deliberate separation of subject from skill, and academia from vocation could be seen to be a resistant response to an imposed and sometimes incongruent agenda:

Some academics may object to what they perceive as the substitution of enhancing personal intellect, traditionally associated with higher education, with skill development, traditionally addressed by vocational education institutions and workplace training. (Jackson, 2009, p. 85)

Some of the recent headlines in the THES (the ‘trade paper’ for higher education) reflect this view, with headlines such as ‘Employment Skills Don’t Fit with Academic Degrees’ (Matthews, 2013b) and ‘Beware the Student Employability Agenda’ (Matthews, 2013a).

Responding to these Positions as Stakeholders

With the analysis presented here, we feel that a number of issues are raised that concerned stakeholders should be responding to, and the following section represents key points and recommendations. Here, it is important to recognise that although the introduction of neoconservatism within contemporary reform has introduced new issues - particularly within the area of devaluing subjects such as Media Studies - many of these problems have existed within the historical pursuit of a neoliberal *Knowledge Economy* reform agenda.

These problems are likely to continue within future political landscapes, especially when considering successive governments' focus on the state defining what is required (Boden and Nedeva, 2010, p.44) and the top down managerial view on professionalism within the UK. This ignores significant expertise held by individual stakeholders, dismantles their professional autonomy and does not provide conducive conditions for democratic and collaborative professionalism between stakeholders. Here, we take the position described by Sachs as 'professional activists' (2000, p.81), where the focus for reform agendas moves from an individual stakeholder to a collaborative group, providing the opportunity for each party to 'look inside each others castles' (Sachs, 2000, p.82) to find an agreed way forward. Here we feel that the lack of a collaborative and reflective space for professional activism between learner, employer and managerial stakeholders has been highlighted via the problematic discourse within the THES article (Morgan, 2013) and this underpins what is presented here.

The Consideration and Use of Subjects by Stakeholders for Skills Development

The perceived homogenous need for 'vocational' *Knowledge Economy* skills has been brought into question (Ball, 2013, p.27-28), and a lack of shared stakeholder vision in the labelling & understanding of these skills is also exposed (Tymon, 2011, p.13). Bearing 'professional activism' in mind, stakeholders would benefit from authentic collaborative spaces for discussion that do not engender the defensive reactions that Mr. Longworth refers to. As stakeholders, we have a direct responsibility to create these spaces for the benefit of everyone involved. Within the climate of autocratic 'managerial professionalism', the political domain is situating the requirements of these spaces as having narrow stakeholder involvement that is primarily focused on financial imperatives. This is very much

embodied within the coalitions HE white paper (Willets and Cable, 2011) and subsequent grey literature. Importantly, these spaces should not exclude the role that subjects may have to play within this agenda, due to the discursive devaluing that is permeating down from a neoconservative political domain. This is not an easy solution, as it will require stakeholders to go against 'common sense' political notions of what value subjects have and work towards a fuller understanding of what subjects can provide in terms of skills development. This is embodied within a key recommendation of McDougall, Livingstone & Sefton Green's report, in terms of the need for more detailed research into the relationship between Media Studies and digital competencies (2013, p.5). The creation of these spaces in a productive manner should provide compelling arguments that can then feed back into policy and practice.

This approach provides the focus for the approach being taken for work-related learning within Newman's new portfolio of courses. Here, we see an important role for Media Studies in terms of helping students acquire technical competencies for employment, but also in terms of critical interrogation of perceived *Knowledge Economy* needs in relation to learners' career aspirations and subject area.

Reflection for all Stakeholders

In terms of critical consideration within work-related learning, Moreland identifies the crucial role that reflection has provided in terms of associating work placement learning to degree subject areas (and will continue to within the context of Newman work-related learning):

Work-related learning has a formative function; to develop degree-level learning through emphasis on reflective learning processes and metacognitive capabilities, such as judgment, reflection and critical awareness. (Moreland, 2005, p. 3)

Here, reflection is considered in terms of moving beyond the discursive notion of 'preparation for work', into how subject knowledge can frame, prepare and critique what a particular individual's requirements are for fulfilling their career aspirations. Here, the interdisciplinary and 'academic' critical focus of Media Studies provides a particular strength,

in terms of providing a conceptual bridge between the discursive binaries associated to 'academic' and 'vocational' within policy. Moreland's definition is useful in the context of work-related learning because it reframes these contexts as contexts for degree-level learning, connected with subject knowledge and exploration as well as providing opportunities for learning about being effective in a *particular* work setting.

These binaries are discussed further below, but it is important to note here that all stakeholders should be entering into similar collaborative reflective practice. Reflective models have been developed within the context of professionally orientated life-long learning, and reflective practice is already seen as an essential skill within the employment sector (Moon, 2004, p.80-81). However, if we cannot find the collaborative space to enable honest professional reflection on the more nuanced needs of graduates between ourselves, then how can we expect learners to also engage with collaborative reflection?

Re-evaluation of the Boundaries Between Vocational and Academic

The discourse of simplification, categorisation and labelling provides a consistent theme throughout the analysis presented here, whether this is the simplified labelling of required skills for work, the value labelling of particular subject areas or policy technologies that categorise the value of institutions in particular ways. These all stem from the perceived separation of vocational requirements from academic, and the need for students to acquire skills for the workplace that are generally decontextualised from authentic critical engagement. Here we propose that this boundary needs to be re-conceptualised by concerned stakeholders for the benefit of economic growth and prosperity, with a particular focus on organisational structures within Higher Education. An embedded and transitional strand of work-related learning needs academic oversight, whilst maintaining integrated relationships with *Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Services* (CEIAG) and employer engagement functions. The recommendation is made with the awareness that this kind of configuration occupies a liminal space in higher education, which can be both dissonant because of the absence of a disciplinary home and reconciliatory because it challenges the discursive distinction between 'academic' and 'vocational'. Moreland (2005, p.3) has highlighted the role of academic study, as well as higher order critical and reflective capabilities for work related learning. In addition, the CBI (2009, p.8), the CBI & NUS (2011,

p.13) and Prospects (2013) all highlight the importance of problem solving and the ability of graduates to take innovative approaches (entrepreneurialism). Meeting the perceived need for these 'generic skills' will not be engendered by a purely procedural 'vocational' skills acquisition approach. Here 'academic' criticality supports the acquisition of skills, in terms of: inspecting the transferability of existing competencies; the use of theoretical 'academic' frameworks within work practices; and the critical inspection of whether policy has all of the answers for an individual's work context. As previously highlighted, Media Studies is positioned across these 'vocational' and 'academic' labelled boundaries in an interdisciplinary manner that can see it have a wider bridging role than specific digital competencies, but perceived lack of value provides a discursive labelling barrier. Here, it is also important to recognise that this labelling also acts as a barrier to work-related learning within institutions, which needs to be resolved within academic stakeholder circles. Many lecturers themselves perceive work-related learning as a distraction for what good 'academic' study should be about, which is somehow disconnected from the commercial pressures of the real world. Here, we would agree with Collini that academics and other stakeholders should not be 'snobbish' regarding vocational and academic pursuits (2013, p.4). We live in an economically driven capitalist society and as such, we can work to the premise that 'HE plays a critical role in sustaining a competitive, productive economy' (Peach, 2010, p.456). As Peach describes, we have a social responsibility to empower those from poorer socio-economic circumstances in terms of jobs and careers within contemporary society.

Hager & Hodkinson highlight that learning for work contexts involves a transitional learning process of boundary crossing between what is perceived as 'vocational' and 'academic' (2009, p.635) and we are suggesting here that stakeholders should be focusing on these boundaries or label intersections. These boundaries or liminal spaces are exactly where work-related learning and Media Studies are best positioned and until these are recognised as important, we will not be satisfying the requirements of employers and policy makers, or properly enabling learners with skills within the workplace. Here, it is important to recognise that enablement should also include the role of aspirational ideals that are not necessarily connected to commercial imperatives, but more towards the traditional 'public good' role of 'academic' institutions (Collini, 2012, p.86-88). Collini highlights that this role for education

is not easily quantified economically and does not sit neatly with these imperatives (ibid, p.92), as the type of empowerment we are talking about here is in the interests of the learner and society, which do not align with commercial pressures. When getting together as collaborative stakeholders, we need to be honest with each other around what is driving the skills deficit agenda and that this does not provide all of the answers for students' work requirements.

Going Beyond the Deficit Model

Cole and Tibby (2013) provide a useful summary of definitions of employability but acknowledge the need for a more expansive view of employability:

[F]rom demand-led skills sets towards a more holistic view of 'graduate attributes' that include 'softer' transferable skills and person-centred qualities, developed in conjunction with subject- specific knowledge, skills and competencies. (Cole and Tibby, 2013, p.9).

There is the potential for a more nuanced and expansive understanding of the concept of 'employability' which moves beyond the *discourse of deficit*. Moreland (2005) warns policy makers in HE against being guided only by student choices and employer expectations towards what Mills (2002) calls a 'supply-side strategy'. Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011, p.581) propose an alternative definition of employability, which is grounded in an idea of 'graduate identity':

[A] complex capability set that encompasses values, identity, social engagement and intellect.

This conceptualisation of employability is a useful one because it situates graduates as both active and agentic subjects and provides a framework for critical engagement with the world of work. The development of the work-related learning strand recognises this by creating opportunities for learners to develop an informed view of 'employability' in relation to their own transition into work, study or self-employment, through critical engagement with dimensions of employability (social engagement) that include: consideration of the

concept of the *Knowledge Economy*; exploration of data concerned with graduate career trajectories and salaries; consideration of social, political and economic factors and their impact on work and the workplace; and factors influencing the job market. The aim here is to enable learners to develop a balanced and informed view of the relationships between higher education, employment and employability.

Hager and Hodkinson's (2009, p.635) metaphors of 'learning as becoming, within a transitional process of boundary crossing' provide a useful starting point for a more expansive notion of employability. These concepts suggest a process that takes place over time, explicitly recognises prior experience, involves different stages (transitional) with the transfer from study to graduate employment being one of many boundaries to be navigated over a lifetime. The model of work-related learning at Newman University includes elements at each of the three years of a full-time undergraduate programme, presenting opportunities for three staged transition points. In year one, students complete a placement preparation module, in the second-year they have a work-related experience (for 18 days) and in the final year, an opportunity to undertake a negotiated work-related project. One of the ways in which the module team aim to emphasise the ideas of transition and boundary crossing, is through the introduction of an electronic portfolio that aims to capture and connect each stage of the placement strand. The electronic portfolio provides opportunities for learners to develop: digital literacy skills; a rich electronic profile, which could be made available to employers; a digital artefact which considers the impact of a social, economic or political factors on work and the workplace in their chosen sector; digital artefacts concerned with reflection on the work placement experience; and the process of learning associated to research in a negotiated work-related project.

We propose that the explicit integration of concepts in work-related learning that address values, identity and social engagement; and the recognition of 'learning as becoming', and 'boundary crossing' aligns our approach with what Peach (2010, p.456) calls 'socially critical vocationalism'. SCV is an approach to the curriculum that is 'intellectually rigorous, vocationally oriented and socially responsive' with the potential to bridge discursive distinctions between 'academic' and 'vocational' and away from the *discourse of deficit* in conceptualisations of employability.

Conclusion

Within this paper we made reference to our aim to better understand Mr. Longworth's assessment that everyone is getting too defensive over employability by adopting the position of 'professional activists' (Sachs, 2000, p.81), where the focus for reform agendas moves from an individual stakeholder to a collaborative group, providing the opportunity for each party to 'look inside each others castles' (Sachs, 2000, p.82) to find an agreed way forward. In this spirit we would like to invite stakeholders to enter into dialogue with us about issues highlighted in this paper to inform our developing research and practice with these related areas.

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