

# **'Competitive job markets' and 'employable graduates'. A corpus-based critical discourse analysis of UK universities' Careers and Employability web pages.**

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## **Introduction**

This paper aims to explore the issue of competitiveness in the 'graduate job market' and the notion of 'employability', as presented by Universities in the UK through their career services webpages. It is part of a wider project that seeks to understand the role of careers services inside academia. With a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis methods and Corpus Linguistics tools, the analysis focuses on identifying, interpreting, explaining and evaluating (Baker and McEnery, 2015, pp. 2-3) the 'reality' presented by these services as students are expected to 'invest' their time at university in getting prepared for the transition from HE to the workplace.

## **HE in the UK and the concept of 'employability'**

Since the early 1980s, UK governments have introduced numerous reforms to the educational system. By the mid-1990s, 'universities were considered by the policy makers to be more about conferring private benefit upon individuals than public benefit upon society as a whole' (Williams, 2013, p. 41). Emphasis on 'the individual' is also clearly expressed in the Browne review:

The primary beneficiary of higher education is the individual student. The student chooses where to study and what to study; and the student chooses where to use the new skills they have acquired. Businesses benefit from employing highly skilled graduates and they pay for that benefit through higher wages (2010, p. 54).

Besides the fact that the individual is considered the primary beneficiary of higher education and the one who has the 'power' to choose (the power of the consumer), this statement creates a direct link between higher education, students, and employers which all have one thing in common: the interest in teaching, acquiring and using (respectively) 'skills'.

The concept of 'employability' promoted by powerful groups, such as governments, business organisations, employers, HE institutions, and the media, emphasises the development of employability skills as necessary for those who wish to enter the 'global graduate job market'. The discourse of employability promotes a reality where economic insecurity and labour competitiveness are presented as natural, as 'common sense' (Fairclough, 2015). Individuals are considered responsible for their own success in the labour market and governments become the 'enablers' that can provide the possibility to 'make necessary choices to become employable' (Fejes, 2010, p. 99). As Boden and Nedeva (2010, pp. 43-44) note, the UK government has 'appropriated' itself from any blame about the 'market dysfunction' while universities were given the responsibility of preparing the 'workers' employers need. In other words, universities have taken up the task of preparing students to enter the 'job market'.



Similarly, the adjective 'competitive' is used to characterise the availability of employment positions. Students and graduates are informed of the 'competitive employment market', 'competitive global economy', 'competitive graduate job/labour market'. It could be argued that the rhetoric of 'fierce' competitiveness addressed to students or graduates who are searching for employment, can act as stimulus to take 'appropriate' action. Thus, students are urged to gain a 'competitive advantage' or a 'competitive edge' in the 'graduate job market'. They are also encouraged to 'stand out from the competition' or 'the crowd'. The close examination of the pattern 'stand out from' - found 143 times in the corpus - shows that students are expected to 'improve', 'enhance', and 'boost' their CVs and skills, 'take action early', get 'work experience' and 'invest' in their 'employability' if they want to 'secure' a place in the 'competitive job market'.

### The discourse of employability

The analysis then moves on to examine the concept of 'employability'. AntConc shows that within a span of -3 +3 words, the most frequent lexical collocates of the search term 'employability' are: 'careers', 'skills', 'service', and 'team' (Table 1):

	Freq	Freq(L)	Freq(R)	MI	Collocate
1	1593	863	730	3.48395	and
2	1504	1146	358	3.27564	the
3	984	916	68	5.53015	<b>careers</b>
4	683	473	210	2.31987	to
5	585	41	544	5.25245	<b>skills</b>
6	578	467	111	3.56048	<b>your</b>
7	426	290	136	2.25812	of
8	391	37	354	5.60622	<b>service</b>
9	349	34	315	6.19010	<b>team</b>
10	313	133	180	2.21464	in

Table 1: 'employability' collocates

In recent years, careers services in UK universities have integrated the term 'employability' in their services' titles ('Careers and Employability Service'), professional titles ('Careers and Employability Adviser', 'Careers and Employability team', 'the Global Employability Team'), events ('Careers & Employability Fair'), and resources used (Careers & Employability booklet'). In addition, students are instructed to 'develop', 'enhance', 'identify' or even 'sell' to employers a plethora of 'employability skills' while studying at university.

As shown in Table 1, one of the most frequent collocates of 'employability' that can provide information about the ideological stances that follow this term, is the possessive determiner 'your'. A close analysis of the concordance lines ('your employability') shows that students are directed to 'boost', 'build', 'demonstrate', 'enhance', 'improve', 'increase', 'shape' and 'support' their employability.

Similarly, the examination of the adjective 'employable', found 157 times in the corpus, shows that the services highlight their own helping role in making students become 'more/highly/globally employable graduates'. Most importantly, however, the services suggest that the students should take action and make themselves employable (Figure 2):

orking abroad	<b>Make yourself</b>	employable	and for employment opportuni
Employability?	<b>Make Yourself</b>	employable	Being employable is about bei
for First Years	<b>Make Yourself</b>	employable	Finding jobs and Work experie
(Intimate) Years	<b>Make Yourself</b>	Employable	Guide for First Years Make You
Work experience.	<b>Make yourself</b>	Employable	Guide for Final Student Emplo
Volunteering	<b>Make yourself</b>	Employable	Guide for First Years If you're
Topics relating to	<b>Make yourself</b>	employable	Link to Employability skills. Get
your future. Our	<b>make yourself</b>	employable	Making yourself employable is
Employability	<b>Make yourself</b>	employable	Where to start Quick Guide:
Networking	<b>Making Yourself</b>	employable	whilst at university guide The
Work experience in the UK.	<b>Making yourself</b>	employable	Work experience Working abrc

Figure 2: Concordance Lines - 'employable' in CEW15

## Discussion and conclusions

The discourse of careers services in UK universities is in line with the neoliberal thought and rhetoric that chooses to focus on an insecure and competitive way of living without really explaining the reasons that have led society and its economy in this problematic state. The concept of 'employability' is promoted as a solution to this challenging reality that students/graduates are asked to follow blindly should they wish to get employed. Students are urged to 'stand out from the crowd' and make themselves employable. Is this, however, the solution that will actually help young people in the long term? Who benefits from the concept of 'employability'? Is becoming 'employable' in order to compete in this 'tough' and 'fierce' 'graduate job market', a fruitful solution or a pseudo-therapy to the problematic neoliberal reality that students are asked to deal with? And finally, do careers services 'teach' students how to 'stand out from the crowd' or become a part of the 'job-hunting' crowd? These are the 'evaluating' questions that the final part of the analysis wishes to raise which is the element that makes the discourse analysis critical (Baker and McEnery, 2015: p. 3).

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