

Investigating Employability: the Perspective of the Business School Graduate.

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Abstract

Graduate employability is a current and high profile concept, which has received much attention over recent decades. This attention however, has mostly centred on employer perspectives and their views regarding skill demands or shortfalls. Where the graduate viewpoint has been sought, this has largely involved the mass collection of career destination and employment outcome information (Woodley & Brennan, 2000; Tomlinson, 2007; Holmes, 2013). This career destination approach however, has been criticised for its simplicity, with arguments that it is not an accurate measure of employability (Harvey, 2001; Tymon, 2011). As a consequence, the graduate perspective of their employability enhancement is an under-researched and largely neglected area, resulting in a lack of understanding of this particular viewpoint (Nabi & Bagley, 1999; Harvey, 1999; Nabi, 2003; Shah et al. 2004; Sleep & Reed, 2006; Rothwell et al. 2009). To address this situation, the overall aim of this research is to investigate employability from the graduate perspective, and to research this within the context of the current economic climate.

The critical realist philosophy was adopted for this research, which supports the implementation of a multiple case study methodology, utilising mixed data collection methods. Employing this approach, three key employability stakeholder perspectives were collected and analysed: graduates, curriculum developers and employers. A fourth stakeholder view, the policy makers, was obtained from secondary sources comprising of recent policy documents. Addressing the four stakeholder perspectives assists in the acquisition of a holistic understanding of the graduate employability concept. This facilitates the connection of the graduate perspective to those of the other stakeholders, which is currently lacking in the employability literature (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

A range of interesting employability perspectives were produced, which most notably highlighted the importance of the type of institution attended, employer focuses upon behaviours over skills, and the significance of the prevailing economic climate. These fresh insights were incorporated into a revised model of graduate employability. The original contribution to knowledge is threefold. Firstly, a deeper understanding of the graduate perspective has been obtained. Secondly, clarity over employer requirements has been produced, and thirdly, the economic climate and labour market conditions have increased awareness of the effect these have upon stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a result of two key developments, graduate employability has become critical to all UK higher education institutions (HEIs). Firstly, since the year 2000, a range of employability performance indicators, and associated measurements, have been introduced which all HEIs are required to report on and publish (Harvey, 2001; Gedye et al. 2004; HEFCE, 2011). Secondly, universities no longer have limits on the fees they can charge for their programmes and Browne (2010:4) argues that “*HEIs must persuade students that they should ‘pay more’ in order to ‘get more’*”. The combination of these developments, have resulted in the positioning of employability and the student experience as central within university strategies.

The turn of the century has seen the profile of graduate employability increase (Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004/2005), however, the concept is not a recent development. References to employability have appeared in the policy documentation for decades: The Robbins Report 1963; The Dearing report 1997; The Leitch Review of Skills 2006 and The Wilson Review 2012. Dearing, Leitch and Wilson, all make specific recommendations for enhancing graduate employability and share a common concern for developing graduate skills, which are directly relevant for the workplace. Governmental pressure for enhancing graduate employability was believed to be the driving force behind the introduction of employability measurements, which focuses the attention of HEIs upon the concept (Weinert, 2001; Brennan, 2004).

Fulfilment of these policy endorsements to enhance graduate employability is ultimately believed to benefit the economy as a whole. For example, a skilful and knowledgeable workforce would result in increased productivity and prosperity at both micro and macro levels (Wilson, 2012). The reasoning given by policy makers for their increased focus on graduate employability derives from Human Capital Theory. Human Capital Theory (HCT) advocates that investment in education is a form of capital, which is correlated positively with economic prosperity (Schultz, 1960). Those who attend university and obtain graduate-level status will, according to the theory, reap benefits for themselves and for the wider society, due to the skills and knowledge they can offer.

As will be discussed later in this thesis, policy makers clearly state in their documentation that enhancing graduate skills has the potential to boost the prosperity of the UK and increase international competitiveness. The recent events in the economic climate have therefore, not deflated policy makers' sponsorship of HCT and their belief in this appears stronger than ever. Given that this is the policy view and regarded as the impetus for increasing graduate employability (Tomlinson, 2007), the theory of human capital is adopted for this research. More detail will be provided on this in Chapter Three: The Literature Review.

The policy makers are not the only employability stakeholder; employers, graduates and HEIs also have a vested interest in this concept, so their view of graduate employability also need to be considered. As employers recruit graduates, their opinions have been sought the most. There is now a plethora of research which has been conducted into the employer perspective of the skills and abilities they want graduates to possess. More detail will be provided on the different employability stakeholders in both Chapter Two: The Context Chapter and Chapter Three: The Literature Review, but in essence, whilst the employer perspective has been extensively researched, there is very little available in the literature which fully addresses the graduate perspective. Existing research into graduate perceptions of employability tend to focus mostly on destinations i.e. career outcomes, leaving researchers to note that:

“To date, few studies have considered the perspectives of the graduates themselves on such aspects as transition to the workplace, skill requirements, or their reaction to the teaching of skills”

(Shah et al. 2004:9)

This echoes sentiments expressed by Sleaf & Reed (2006), who also support that not enough is understood about graduate experiences of employability enhancement. These views are supported further by Rothwell et al. (2009; 153) who also include the element of current labour market conditions:

“In spite of all this interest, employability remains a relatively under-researched concept in the sense of any empirical investigation of what it actually means to individuals in the context of their experiences, their aspirations, and their perceptions of their ability to compete in the external labour market”

This issue will be discussed further in Chapter Three: The Literature Review, and it is this gap identified in the literature which forms the central focus of this thesis; the graduate perspective.

Following on from this brief introduction into the topic of this research project, this chapter next moves on to detail the research aims, objectives and questions. The chapter then reports on the original contribution to knowledge, the methodology employed and a summary of the key findings that resulted from the data analysis. The final purpose of this introductory chapter is to provide a blueprint of how the thesis is structured and offers a synopsis of the chapters which follow.

1.1 Research Aim

The current literature highlights the lack of attention paid to the graduate viewpoint and therefore the overall aim of this research is to investigate employability from the graduate perspective. In particular, the graduate perspective of employability as developed by their business higher education is sought. This is contextualised within the current economic climate and therefore, graduate perspectives of their own employability development will be investigated within the scenario of an economically turbulent period.

1.2 Research Objectives

To meet the research aim identified above, the following three objectives have been set:

1. To ascertain how complete the current literature is, given that the graduate perspective is often left out of the debates.
2. To collect primary data from graduates and to compare their views against those of the other main employability stakeholders: employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in the policy documents.
3. Drawing on the findings from the data collected, to develop a revised model of employability that addresses the previously neglected graduate perspective.

1.3 Research Questions

The following three research questions were devised to fulfil the research aim and objectives detailed above. These research questions are listed below before each is then expanded upon in the discussions that follow:

1. What is the graduate perspective on the employability provision they received during their business programme and student experience, and does this differ according to institution?
 2. Do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in the policy documents?
 3. How are stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability influenced by the current economic climate?
-
1. What is the graduate perspective on the employability provision they received during their business programme and student experience, and does this differ according to institution?

One of the main questions arising from the business school literature concerns a mismatch between what is taught on business programmes and what is required by industry (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Starkey et al. 2004; Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007). Despite there being insufficient research into the core issues, it is believed that much of what is taught in business education is not practised in the workplace; consequently graduates feel somewhat ill-prepared for the world of work. This has huge implications for HEIs, employers and graduates alike, yet it is difficult to fully appreciate these due to the severe lack of data surrounding the impact of business schools on their graduates (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002, Sleaf & Reed, 2006).

The first research question therefore, attempts to further the current understandings of graduate perceptions of their business education and how this has (or has not) enhanced their employability. Graduate views were sought on specific aspects of their business curriculum which included the development of certain skills, the awareness and uptake of employability initiatives and participation rates in work experiences. Views from graduates were also sought on securing work in the current economic climate and how concerned they feel as a result of the economic downturn. Finally, the graduate viewpoints from different

institutions are compared to determine whether graduates from different types of institutions express differences in employability views and experiences.

By addressing this research question, it is anticipated that a unique contribution of the graduate perspective can be added to the existing knowledge base.

2. Do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in policy documents?

The second research question involves comparing the graduate perspective with those of the other three stakeholders. This would establish the extent to which graduate views agree with the other perspectives. As the graduate perspective is often neglected, there is insufficient knowledge of how each stakeholder view, compares to that of the graduate. This is highlighted by Andrews & Higson (2008; 411) who state that *“there is a notable gap in the current knowledge linking graduate and employer perspectives of the context and content of business school education to graduate employability”*. Researching all four stakeholder perspectives therefore, will provide information on agreements and disagreements, which will assist in the further understanding of the graduate employability concept.

3. How are stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability influenced by the current economic climate?

The final research question places the employability stakeholder viewpoints within the context of the current economic climate. From 1992 until mid-2008, the UK's economy had been enjoying a lengthy period of economic growth (The UK GDP Growth Rate, 2011). Much of the relatively recent research into graduate employability had therefore been undertaken within the scenario of economic growth and prosperity.

The economic growth phase however, came to an end and the UK officially entered into a recession in October 2008. A double-dip recession occurred in early 2012 (ONS GDP Q1, 2012) and fears of a triple-dip recession continue into 2013 (BBC News, 2013). This turbulent economic climate needs to be acknowledged when researching graduate employability.

Most notably the economic climate has led to a dramatic increase in competition for graduate jobs, which has been further exacerbated by the recent mass participation in higher education. The data shows that just over 100,000 students were accepted into university during the academic year 1991-92, and this had dramatically increased to around 400,000 students for the academic year 2007-08 (Dearden et al. 2010). For those employability researchers writing in previous recessions, the situation was much different as significantly lower numbers of graduates were entering the employment market. The current situation offers a rare set of circumstances when a substantial economic downturn, coincides with a time of mass participation in higher education. This presents a timely and unique opportunity to research graduate employability viewpoints under such conditions.

As briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, the theory of human capital will be adopted for this thesis. This theory states that investment in education has a positive and measurable effect on both individuals and the wider society, which ultimately contributes towards the growth of the economy. However, one of the issues which is addressed under research question three, concerns whether the principle held by Human Capital Theory still persists during periods of economic uncertainty. This theory will therefore be appraised, within the context of the current economic climate, to determine its current applicability to graduate employability.

It is expected that by addressing these three research questions, and the overall research aim, a significant contribution to the current knowledge in this field will be provided. This will be discussed further in the next section.

1.4 Original Contribution to Knowledge

The concept of graduate employability has received much attention over recent decades, but this has mostly focused on employer perspectives of what makes a graduate employable. Consequently, very little attention has been given to the graduate viewpoint in these debates. As a result, the graduate viewpoint has been under-researched and largely neglected, leading to a severe lack of understanding of this important stakeholder perspective (Nabi & Bagley, 1999; Harvey, 1999; Nabi, 2003; Shah et al. 2004; Sleep & Reed, 2006; Tomlinson, 2007; Rothwell et al. 2009).

This under-researched graduate perspective leaves a significant deficiency in the literature which this thesis aims to remedy. The graduate's viewpoint of their employability will be directly addressed and these findings will offer a unique contribution to knowledge in this area.

Furthermore, Tomlinson (2007) and Rothwell et al. (2009) both highlight the lack of research into graduate employability within the context of economic climate and current labour market conditions. Each recession is different (Philips, 2009), and therefore experiences of previous recessions cannot be relied upon to provide accurate indications for current or future circumstances. By researching graduate employability during these economically turbulent times, this thesis contributes a deeper understanding on how views of employability are affected by the current economic climate. Furthermore, Rae (2008) highlights that whilst previous recessions had an impact upon graduate employment; this had been somewhat limited due to lower graduate numbers. Given the current mass participation in higher education, the effect of the recession upon graduates is still unclear (Rae, 2008). The findings from this research will therefore make an original contribution to knowledge in the field of employability within the context of the uncertain economic climate and tough labour market conditions; the findings will thus have implications for employability and recession debates.

Another contribution to knowledge is made via the employer viewpoints on the importance of certain employability elements over others. Whilst early work was carried out during the 1980s and 1990s into which skills and attributes employers value the most (Homes, 2012), the current literature remains unclear on this. This becomes further exacerbated by the current economic climate and the impact this has on employers' current and future requirements.

In summary therefore, the original contribution to knowledge provided by this thesis is threefold. Firstly, a deeper understanding of the previously neglected graduate perspective can be added to the literature in an attempt to plug this present knowledge gap. Secondly, this research will address the most important employer requirements to assist in the clarification of the extended skills lists that are currently in use. This information can be added to the current literature regarding what employers regard as the most salient features of an employable graduate. The third and final contribution to the knowledge in this field is made via researching employability stakeholder viewpoints, within a contemporary context of the economic climate and current labour market conditions.

The contribution this research will make has the potential to be extremely significant, given the current high profile of graduate employability and the unique opportunity to research such a concept in the current economic climate. The research will be applicable to a range of individuals and groups, largely involving the main employability stakeholders: students, graduates, employers, policy makers, curriculum developers and academic staff both within

the business school and wider employability arenas. Furthermore, this is also a timely piece of research for HEI management, given the recent tuition fee increases and the resulting renewed focus upon the student experience and graduate employability outcomes.

Ultimately, the final thesis will make both an empirical and theoretical contribution. The empirical contribution will be made from the data collected, to provide a deeper insight into stakeholder perspectives of graduate employability. The empirical data will then underpin a revised model of employability which incorporates the findings from the empirical data, thus making a theoretical contribution.

1.5 Overview of the Research Design

The nature of the research questions and the desire to further understand the unobservable concept of graduate employability supported a critical realist orientation. Critical realism was therefore adopted by this thesis to form the underlying research philosophy. Critical realism derives from positivism but acknowledges that there is a subjective element to individual realities of the social world (Danermark et al. 2002). Furthermore, the critical realist philosophy also supports that views change over time and within different contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), which is of particular relevance to this research as it addresses the impact of the current economic climate on viewpoints.

With regards to the primary data collection, three samples were employed: recent business graduates, business school curriculum developers and various sized employers. The business school at three different North-West higher education institutions (two post-1992 and one pre-1992), were used as case studies from which to obtain the graduate and curriculum developer samples. Obtaining the samples this way also allowed for some comparative analysis to take place between cohorts from different institutions. The employer sample, whilst predominantly focused within the North-West of England, also included employers from other parts of the UK.

Following the critical realist and case study approaches, a mixed methods design was employed. A total of 186 recent business graduates responded to an online questionnaire that was designed to gather their views on employability enhancement and experiences during their higher education. An online questionnaire was also used to gather broad information from employers before conducting nine employer interviews. Three curriculum developers, one from each business school, were also interviewed to ascertain how employability initiatives are delivered on their business curriculum. With regards to the policy

perspective, secondary data in the form of recent policy documentation was collected and this is discussed further and analysed in Chapter Three: The Literature Review.

This research design allowed for the implementation of a triangulation approach which involves researching different perspectives using different methods (Cohen et al. 2007). This can facilitate a deeper understanding of the issues being researched, alongside increasing the accuracy of the data collected (Lee & Lings, 20008; Olsen, 2010).

1.6 Summary of the Key Findings

The key findings are summarised below, which are then discussed further in Chapter Six: Discussion and Chapter Seven: Conclusion:

- Various similarities and disparities were found amongst the four stakeholder perspectives on graduate employability, supporting the complexity of this concept.
- The university from which the student graduated was a significant indicator of how graduates rated aspects of their employability enhancement. This view was also shared with a number of employers, however employers and graduates did not always agree upon the same details within this relationship.
- Employers did show a preference for certain attributes over others when recruiting graduates; leading to the conclusion that not all employability skills and abilities are of equal importance.
- Employer recruitment practices raised the important issue that these are not always conducive to recruiting the most appropriate graduates with the right skills.
- The current economic climate and the labour market conditions did feature heavily throughout the data collection with all stakeholders making reference to this. Employers also reported that the current climate had either affected their expectations of graduates or had influenced the qualities they now seek in graduates. It was concluded that the current economic climate was another factor in graduate employability.
- Human Capital Theory and its application to graduate employability was rejected.

1.7 Thesis Outline

This section provides a brief overview of the chapters contained in this thesis.

Chapter Two: Context Chapter

This chapter provides a detailed look at the concept of employability including definitions and models. The context of the current economic climate is also discussed to inform of the situation in which the data was collected. Finally, the four employability stakeholders are introduced with a brief overview of each group.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

The literature review further develops the points raised in the context chapter and delves deeper into the four employability stakeholders, detailing and appraising the literature with regards to each of these groups. The literature review also evaluates the theory of human capital which has been adopted by this research.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology and Design

The research philosophy, approach, samples and methods for each of the research cohorts are detailed in this chapter. Additionally, consideration is also given to aspects of validity, reliability and ethical conduct.

Chapter Five: Results and Data Analysis

This chapter details all of the results and analysis conducted with the data collected. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis is provided in this chapter for each of the employability stakeholder viewpoints researched.

Chapter Six: Interpretation of the Results and Discussion

The discussion chapter interprets the results outlined in the previous chapter and relates these to both the literature and research questions. Furthermore, the findings support the proposal of a revised model of graduate employability which is explained and discussed in this chapter. Lastly, the research is appraised and limitations acknowledged.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

The final chapter revisits the aims and objectives the research set out to address and makes firm conclusions. The key findings are summarised and areas for future research identified.

1.8 Concluding the Introduction Chapter

This introductory chapter has introduced the topic of this research and provided the structure for the chapters contained within this thesis. A rationale for undertaking this research project has also been given, together with outlining the potential areas for knowledge contribution. The next chapter will develop further the points raised in this chapter and provide the context within which this research is set.

Chapter 2: Employability Context Chapter

This context chapter further develops the points raised in the previous introductory chapter, which provided a setting for this thesis. This chapter details the wider background of the concept of graduate employability and also provides the basis for the next chapter; The Literature Review.

The context chapter comprises of two main parts; firstly, a comprehensive overview will be provided on the concept of employability, which will then be contextualised within the current economic climate. Secondly, an introduction to the four employability stakeholders is presented after which the chapter is then concluded.

2.1 Introduction to the Concept of Employability

Employability is not a new development, the concept and the links this has with higher education have been known for decades (Robbins, 1963; Dearing, 1997; Weinert, 2001; Brennan, 2004; Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004/2005; Leitch, 2006; Wilson Review, 2011). Whilst employability themes appeared in the policy documents as far back as the Robbins Report in 1963, it was only in the year 2000 when the notion of employability became more widespread and society “*witnessed an accelerating pace of engagement with employability within the higher education sector*” (Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004/2005).

The surge of interest around employability at the turn of the new millennium is attributed to government policy (Weinert, 2001; Brennan, 2004). From the year 2000 all higher education institutions (HEIs) had to adhere to a new requirement involving the measurement of employability (Gedye et al. 2004). Employability was added to the list of Key Performance Indicators which Universities are measured on. This involved HEIs contacting graduates six months after graduation to collect data on a variety of employment related outcomes. Each institution must publish this data which is used in rankings and league tables. Although heavily critiqued (Harvey, 2001), this system and the results produced by it, still remains the employability measurement of today. Furthermore, HEIs have been required to document more employability measurements, with the introduction of University Employability Statements in 2010, and Key Information Sets in 2012 (HEFCE, 2011). Employability therefore continues to remain prominent and at the forefront of HEI discussions.

However, employability is not only of significance to HEIs; employers, policy makers and graduates alike, all have a vested interest in this concept and comprise the four main employability stakeholders. Before embarking on further discussions of these employability stakeholders however, the next section will first appraise the definitions of this concept and reveal the models and frameworks to ascertain what employability is.

2.2 Defining Employability

“Employment and employability are not the same thing”, Lees (2002:3) explains; employability is more than just obtaining work. However, this is where the simplicity ends, as what employability is, has been very difficult to universally agree upon. Although employability has received increasing attention over the last decade, with mounting importance being placed upon the concept, one single universal definition of the term is still missing (Bollerot, 2001; Harvey, 2001; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Meager, 2001; Mcquaid & Lindsay, 2005; Yorke, 2006). The complexity of the concept, and the various stakeholders involved, mean that a single commonly shared definition is not in existence.

The absence of a universally accepted definition of employability has resulted in numerous individual interpretations, with researchers approaching employability in a variety of ways (Meager, 2001; Hillage & Pollard, 1998). These different approaches have produced different published meanings and there are now many definitions of employability on offer. A selection of the definitions available is presented in the following table:

2.2.1 A Selection of Six Employability Definitions

Yorke & Knight (2003)	<i>“A set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes — that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”</i>
Hillage & Pollard (1998)	<p><i>“Employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required.</i></p> <p><i>Employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work”</i></p>
Harvey (1999: 4)	<i>“Employability of a graduate is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organisation”</i>
Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007:280)	<i>“Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful”</i>
Lees (2002:3)	<i>“Employment and employability are not the same thing. Being employed means having a job, being employable means having the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace. Employability from the perspective of HEIs is therefore about producing graduates who are capable and able, and this impacts upon all areas of university life, in terms of the delivery of academic programmes and extra curricula activities”</i>
Rothwell & Arnold (2007:5)	<i>“The ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one wants”</i>

As the six definitions presented in the table demonstrate, there are both similar and divergent elements, illustrating that employability does not have one single universal definition. The definitions are largely multi-faceted, in that they have many prescriptive elements dictating what an employable graduate will possess.

Using these definitions alone, graduate employability can therefore be summed up as comprising of the following: possessing a variety of skills, knowledge and personal attributes, a pre-chosen career trajectory, an understanding of the job market and how to manoeuvre about in this job market. In addition, employable graduates must not only possess the skills they have personally chosen to develop, but also hold the skills needed by employers in the workplace. Employable graduates need to have a full awareness of these skills and abilities, with the aptitude to convey all of their skills to potential employers, in the correct context of the workplace. Finally, the most important aspect needed for graduates to be employable, involves having the capacity to obtain, remain and sustain employment.

As the above exercise highlights, expectations of graduates are high, maybe excessively so. To explain this point further, research illustrates that students struggle to self-assess and therefore find difficulty in acquiring a full awareness of their skills (Petrova & Ujma, 2006), let alone explain these coherently and comprehensively to employers. In addition, relating their skills to a workplace context is another problematic element for graduates, as they must have prior work experience to enable this. However, employers have commented repeatedly that graduates are deficient in business acumen, commercial awareness (AGR, 2006; Jackson, 2009) and valuable work experience (Harvey et al. 1997; Blackwell et al. 2001). This makes it harder for graduates to translate their skills into a workplace context.

Furthermore, the employability definitions offered in table 2.2.1 often contain many elements which are open to interpretation and ambiguities. Yorke & Knight (2003) highlight the need for “a set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes.” These terms need closer attention and definitions provided in their own right for example: the term ‘skills’ encompasses a range of skills which include both academic and soft skills. Harvey (2001:97) supports this point and echoes that “*employability is infrequently explicitly and clearly defined.*”

Possibly the most succinct definition available for employability is that offered by Rothwell & Arnold (2007:5) given in the table above. These authors simply state that employability is *“the ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one wants.”* However, authors such as Lees (2002), state that employability is more than just obtaining a job and therefore the incoherency around defining employability continues.

Some authors have tried to provide structure and order to the employability concept. De Grip, Loo & Sanders (2003/4: 216) detail a framework of employability, which was offered by Thijssen (1997), and involves 3 levels: core, broader and all-embracing. Core employability refers simply to an individual’s capability to find and maintain work in a given labour market. Broader employability builds on from the core definition to include a willingness to develop oneself and the ability to learn for the benefit of the workplace. Finally, the all-embracing view of employability encompasses contextualised aspects, such as the labour market trends and employer training provisions, which also affect an individual’s current and future levels of employability. Although attempts such as these have been made to stratify employability into differing levels of meaning, these just add to the plethora of ranging definitions available and *“has led to the concept of employability remaining rather abstract and vague”* (Van Der Heijden, 2005:25).

A further consideration acknowledges the need for vague terminology. Employability is a fluid, non-fixed concept and therefore a vague definition could apply to a wide range of both graduates and employers and remain applicable over time. This premise however, is based on the assumption that graduates and employers have the same perspective and will therefore use the same employability definition. However, Mcquaid & Lindsay (2005) raise this issue of perspective and explain this is one of the problems with trying to arrive at a universal definition of employability. The perspective of the individual will determine whether they opt for a definition focusing upon developing graduate characteristics, or one which focuses more on the factors influencing a person getting into a job i.e. what industry needs.

Mcquaid & Lindsay (2005) are not the only authors to make reference to the different perspectives of employability; Van Dam (2004), Sanders & De Grip (2004), Rothwell & Arnold (2004), Gore (2005) and Holmes (2013), have all highlighted this issue. In particular, Holmes (2013) outlines three approaches available with regards to viewing graduate employability: possessive, positional and processual. The possessive approach, Holmes (2013) argues, involves lists of skills and capabilities which graduates possess and utilise. The positional viewpoint concerns the links between higher education and the social position of the graduates; this links into cultural and social capital which will be discussed further in the literature review chapter. The final view offered by Holmes (2013) involves a processual approach to how the graduate moves through the process from education through to work. Whilst all three perspectives explain how employability can be viewed, Holmes (2013) highlights that the possessive approach is currently the dominant one in the UK, yet Sanders & De Grip (2004) argue that aspects such as the economy's performance, and labour market circumstances, dictates which perspective is most commonly used at that period in time.

From the definitions given in table 2.2.1 it is evident that different perspectives are held, some focus on developing the graduate, whilst others focus more on the needs of industry. Whilst currently encompassing two distinct perspectives, many researchers feel that a holistic definition of employability should be implemented. This would include both the development of graduates and addressing industry needs (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Mcquaid & Lindsay, 2005; Sanders & De Grip, 2004; Gore, 2005). A holistic definition of employability would therefore result in both graduates developing the skills required by industry and employers acknowledging that graduate employability is more than just filling skills shortages in the workplace.

This holistic view however presents significant issues for higher education institutions. The aim for HEIs is simple: to produce employable graduates, but achieving this aim is not straightforward. HEIs have to address the many different facets involved in graduate employability which has been discussed above.

Overall, a single definition of employability which is used by all remains elusive, due to the multi-dimensional nature of the concept. Possibly because defining the term is particularly challenging, a variety of employability models are now available in the literature. Models help clarify what individual authors consider employability to be and draw together the complex multi-facets in either a framework or graphical way.

2.3 Employability Models

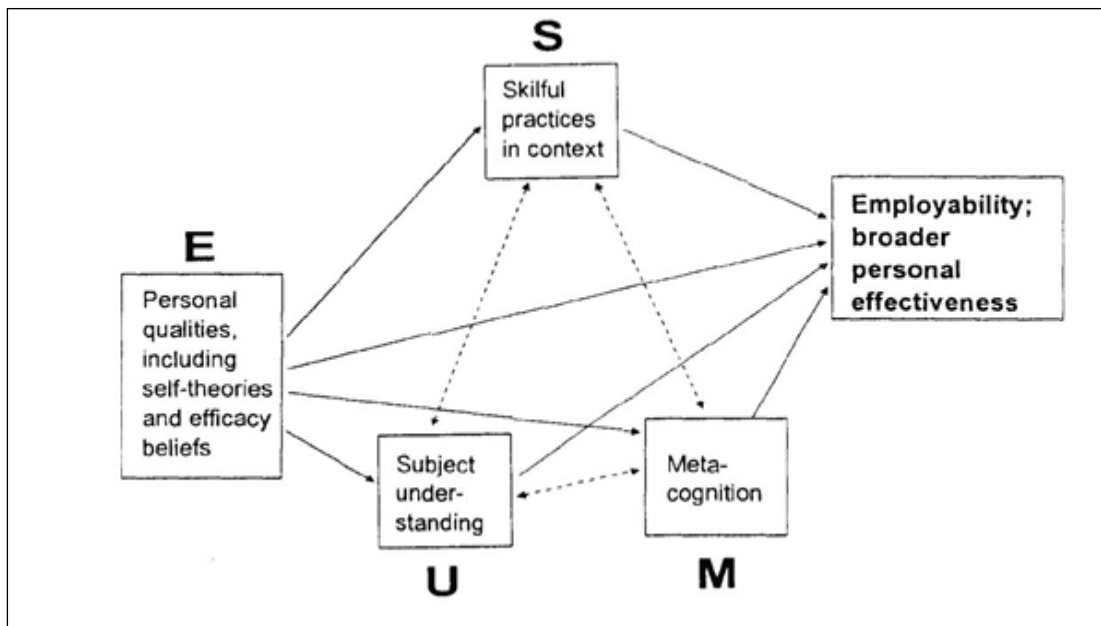
This section looks at three of the currently available employability models: the USEM model, the CareerEdge model and a heuristic model. The first two models are particularly relevant to the business higher education context. These two models are accepted by the Business, Management, Accounting and Finance subject centre for the Higher Education Academy, as examples of good practice when developing and enhancing student and graduate employability (Pond & Harrington, 2011). The third model derives from a human resources orientation, which may be more aligned with the employer viewpoint. This human resources model is used as a comparison, to show the differences between elements contained within each of the employability models aimed at different audiences.

As a response to the Dearing Report, and highlighted as one of the most famous models of employability (Sewell, 2009; Pond & Harrington, 2011), the USEM model was offered by Yorke & Knight (2004:5). USEM is an acronym for the following four components which comprise the model:

- **U**nderstanding (knowledge of the subject)
- **S**kills (or skilful practices)
- **E**fficacy beliefs (students' self-theories and personal qualities)
- **M**etacognition (learning how to learn and self-awareness and reflection capabilities)

Together these four general, but inter-related, elements combine to influence the employability of a student and therefore graduate (Yorke & Knight, 2004). This inter-relationship is detailed further in the figure below:

2.3.1 The USEM Model



(Yorke & Knight, 2004:5)

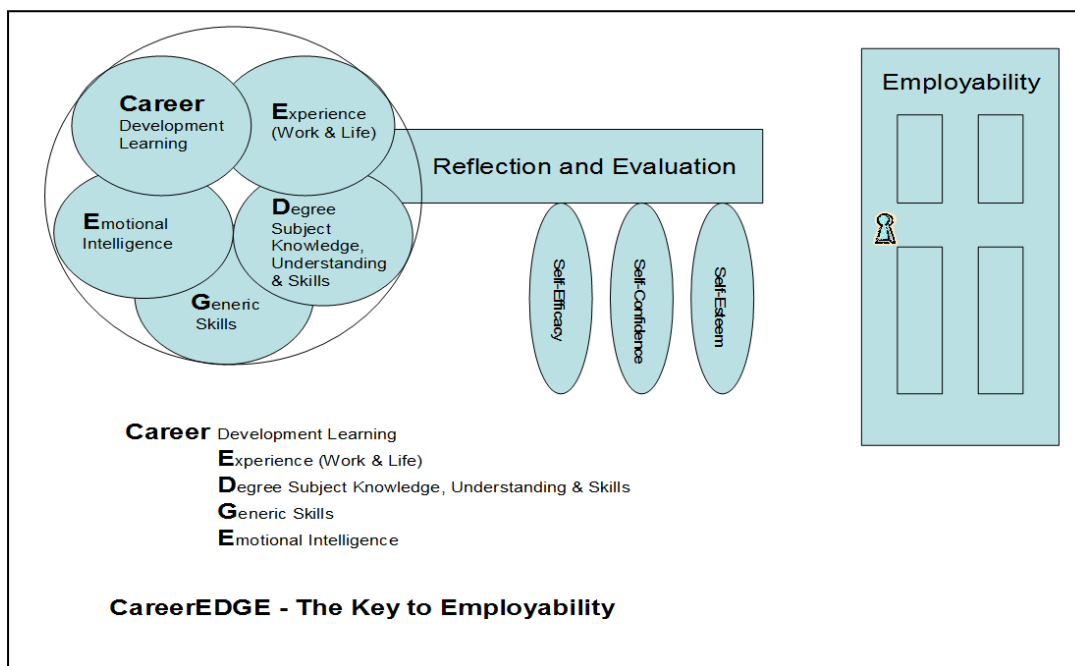
As shown by the USEM model, aspects of all four areas are needed to contribute towards employability. Employability therefore is not just about having subject understanding and skills; it is also about putting this knowledge and skills into practice within a variety of contexts. An element of self-belief and desire to improve is also required alongside meta-cognitive elements, to enable self-awareness and reflection to facilitate on-going developments.

The purpose of this model was to provide a guide for academics to assist in the embedding of employability provisions into the curriculum, and therefore enhance graduate employability. As this model is aimed at academic audiences, non-academic audiences (i.e. students and parents), may have difficulty relating to this model and fully understand what the USEM model of employability means (Sewell, 2009). For this reason, Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) put forward their CareerEDGE model, which builds on from Yorke & Knight's USEM model. "CareerEDGE" is a mnemonic for five of the model's components:

- **C**areer development and learning
- **E**xperience (work and life)
- **D**egree subject knowledge, understanding and skills
- **G**eneric skills
- **E**motional intelligence

Once students have developed these five components, these authors argue that “*reflecting on and evaluating these experiences will result in development of higher levels of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem – the crucial links to employability*” (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007:281). The figure below depicts the CareerEdge components along with reflection and evaluation to achieve self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem in order to achieve employability. These elements combine to produce a metaphorical model of a key to the employability door.

2.3.2 The CareerEDGE Model

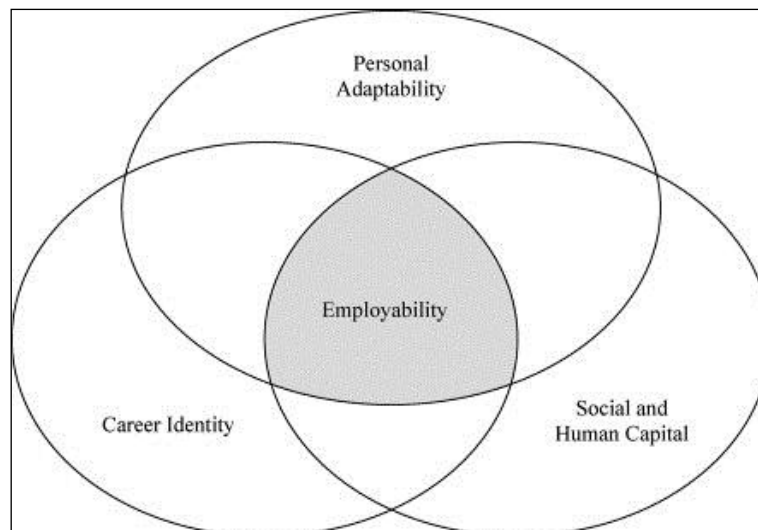


(Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007:281)

The authors argue that this is a more user friendly model, which makes it easier for non-academic audiences to comprehend as it “*provides a clear and visual answer to the simple question of what employability is*” (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007:281).

In addition to the higher education orientated models aimed at academics and students, there are employability models available in other arenas too. For example, psychology and human resources are amongst other fields which detail models of employability in their literature, which may be more akin to employer audiences (Rothwell, Jewel & Hardie, 2009). Figure 2.3.3 below illustrates the employability model put forward by Fugate et al. (2004), writing in the field of human resources. Rather than break down employability into smaller parts and focusing on multiple narrower elements, which the other models discussed have done, Fugate et al. (2004) adopt a broader approach to enable a wide ranging view of the concept of employability.

Figure 2.3.3 A Heuristic Model



(Fugate et al. 2004:19)

As Fugate et al. (2004) illustrate in their model, an individual's employability encompasses elements of career identity, personal adaptability, as well as social and human capital. Although these terms were not explicitly used in the employability definitions in section 2.2.1, connections between these can still be made. For example, personal skills and attributes highlighted in the definitions table in section 2.2.1 relates to Fugate et al's 'personal adaptability'. Occupation choices, career goals and career direction, again all mentioned in section 2.2.1, can be linked to 'career identity'. Certain features of the employability definitions and this model are therefore in alignment.

However, the final elements contained within Fugate et al's (2004) employability model, are social and human capital. In this context, social capital involves an interpersonal element to employability and includes the importance of social networks for enhancing employability. It is argued that social capital enables individuals to use connections and people they know, to ascertain career-related information, materials and access formal and informal career-related networks (McArdle et al. 2007). The employability definitions provided in table 2.2.1 do not explicitly identify social capital as an element of employability and therefore this element is missing.

The other form of capital raised by Fugate et al. (2004) is human capital. The theory of human capital will be discussed in more detail in the literature review chapter, but briefly, the theory advocates that micro and macro benefits arise out of the investment in people:

“Education and schooling are seen as deliberate investments that prepare the labour force and increase productivity of individuals and organizations, as well as encouraging growth and development at the international level”

(Nafukho et al. 2004:545)

This investment in oneself can arise out of continuous learning, work experience, skills and knowledge (McArdle et al. 2007). It is this investment which becomes a form of capital (human capital), which then enhances one's level of employability. Investment and continuous investment is missing from the employability definitions, however the benefits of having this capital (i.e. benefits to the individual, employers and to the economy) are clearly emphasised.

Whilst some elements of the Fugate et al. (2004) model are reflected in the employability definitions (and the other models of employability), other elements are omitted. This becomes a concern if employers are to use this type of model and HEIs are to use another.

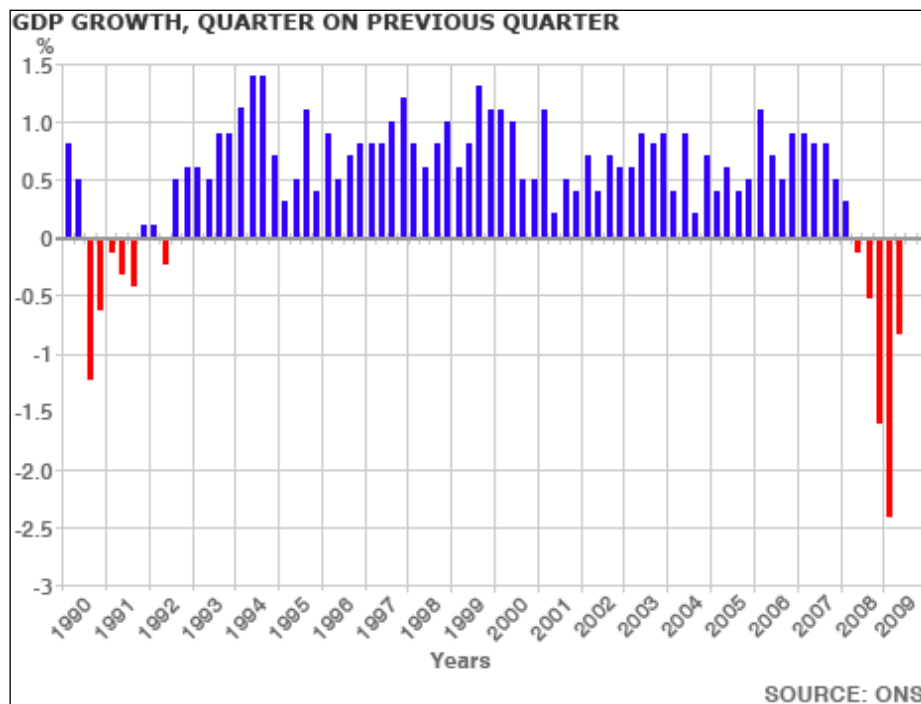
The preceding sections have above all else illustrated that employability is a very complex concept. The definitions vary, as do the employability models in terms of the perspective, approach and elements for inclusion. Each employability definition and model also varies on the level of detail, with either explicit or vague descriptions provided. Overall therefore, dependent upon the perspective taken (graduate development v employer needs), the audience being addressed (academic v employer), or the research field (education or human resources), your view of employability, the definition used, and the model to support it, would vary.

Despite such variance and the lack of clarity, employability still maintains a high position on the political and higher education agendas. Employability remains a very contemporary concept (reasons for this will be discussed in later sections of this chapter), and therefore must be analysed in a contemporary context. Everything that has been discussed in this chapter thus far, has involved analysing employability in an abstract manner. However, the recent economic conditions cannot be ignored. The current economic climate, which can be defined as uncertain at best, provides a context in which to discuss ultra-contemporary employability issues.

2.4 Employability in the Context of an Economic Downturn

The majority of the earlier literature surrounding graduate employability had been written during a period of economic growth. From 1992 until mid-2008, the UK's economy had been enjoying a long period of varying rates of economic growth. The economy was stable and The UK Economy - Analyses at a Glance report (2006:15) stated that: "*since the mid-1990s, the UK has experienced low inflation, low interest rates and falling unemployment*". The UK was therefore experiencing an upswing in the economic trade cycle and the chart below illustrates this growth period:

2.4.1 UK GDP between 1990 and 2009



(Source: ONS cited in BBC News, 2009)

During such an upswing period employment opportunities had been readily available meaning competition for jobs was relatively low. Writing in June 2005, the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) reported record levels in both graduate starting salaries and graduate employment since the year 2000.

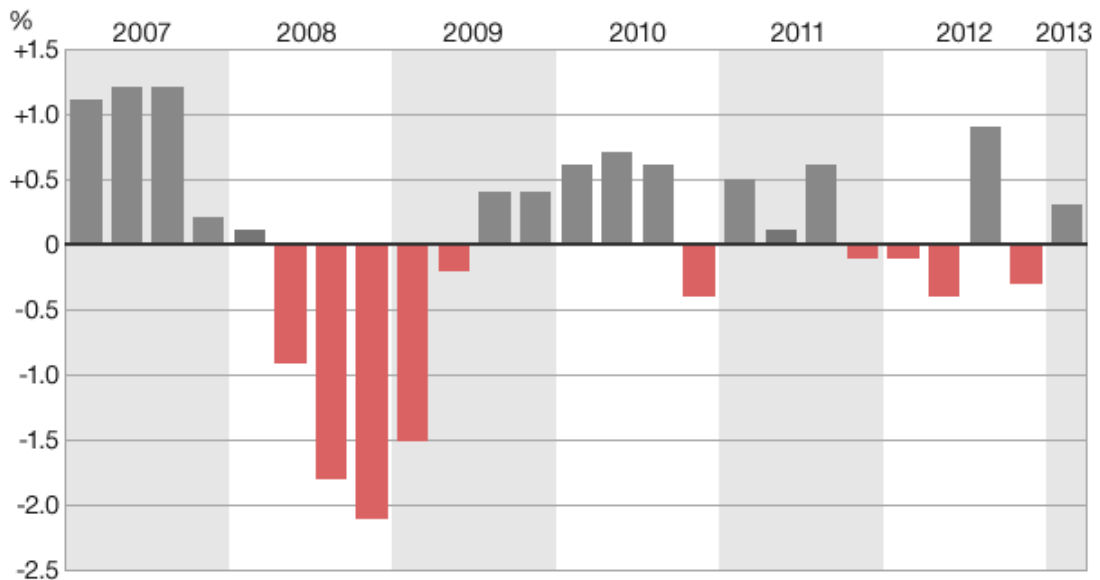
Looking back to the employability definitions outlined in table 2.2.1 earlier in this chapter, the dates of the definitions range from 1998 until 2007, which coincides with the economy's upswing period. Authors writing in the field of graduate employability during that time period were therefore writing within an era of economic growth.

However, towards the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008 an economic turn of events ensued, resulting in the UK's economic growth phase coming to an end. The collapse of the financial services sector led to a financial crisis and credit lending suspension. This resulted in the first economic down turn since the 1990-1993 recession (Rae, 2008). Greenspan (2007) describes how almost overnight, most of the world's financial markets froze as a result of the sectors "*seemingly insatiable desire for financial risk*".

The repercussions of the banking crisis were exacerbated by a societal trend of habitually spending more and saving less, thus increasing their amount of debt and reliance on credit spending (Treeck, 2012). With the onset of the banking crisis, the banks reduced lending to both each other and consumers, resulting in a 'credit crunch'. This in particular affected the ability for individuals to acquire credit in the forms of mortgages (Rae, 2008). These turn of events resulted in the now named 'great recession of 2008' (Treeck, 2012).

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) reported that growth had drastically slowed to zero in the second quarter of 2008 (ONS, 2008). UK GDP figures from the ONS revealed that the UK economy first contracted in the second quarter of 2008 (ONS, 2011). After two consecutive quarters of contraction, the economy is formally classed as in a recession. Officially therefore, the UK entered into a recession in October 2008 and the chart overleaf illustrates the UK GDP figures over this turbulent economic time period:

2.4.2 UK GDP between 2007 and 2013



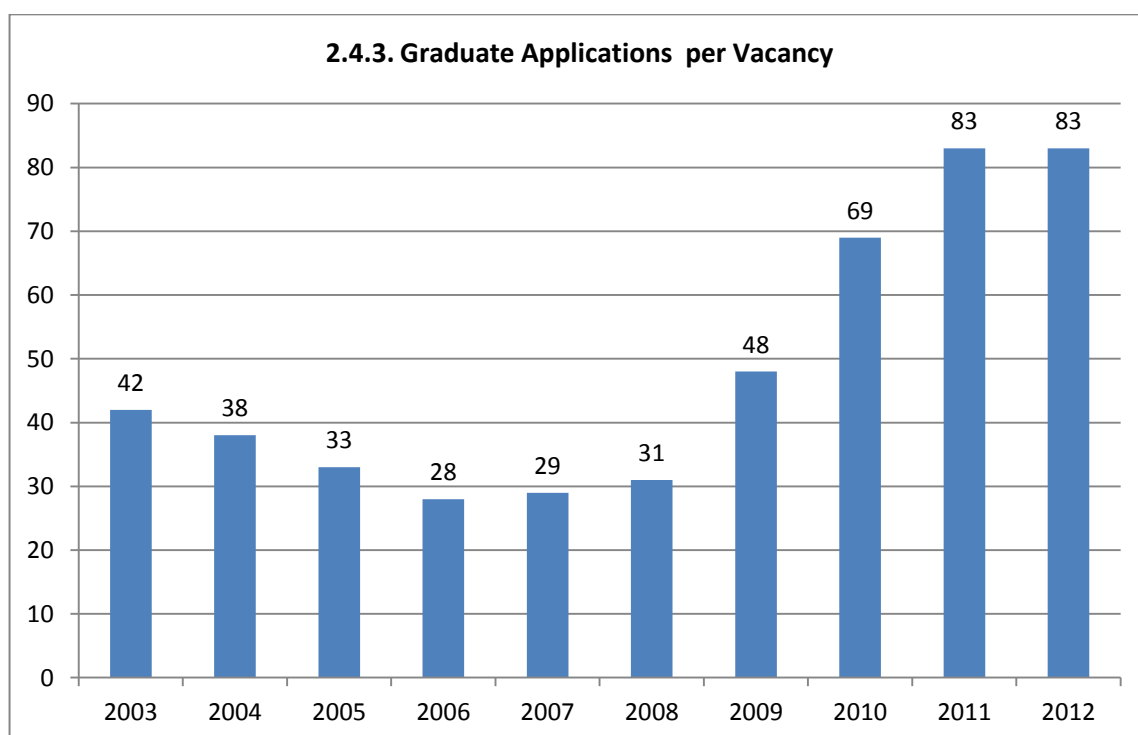
(Source: ONS 2013, cited in BBC News, 2013)

As the chart clearly depicts, the UK suffered five consecutive quarters of economic contraction from 2008 to 2009. The ONS (2011) has since reported that the UK economy shrank by 7.1% during that period. The recession ended (temporarily) in 2009, however, growth remained modest and in early 2012 the UK experienced a double-dip recession (ONS Q1, 2012). For 2013, the UK economic climate continues to look uncertain amid fears of a triple-dip recession, which thus far has been avoided.

The repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis are still being felt and effects to the UK economy are prolonged with slow recovery (Bean, 2011, King, 2011, Aldrick, 2011). The UK's economy therefore continues to look uncertain for the foreseeable future. The austerity cuts which the UK government has imposed, the continual debt concerns rife in the Eurozone, together with pay freezes and job losses for millions of workers in the UK, are all damaging factors jeopardising the UK's opportunities for growth (Oxlade, 2011). Given these compounding issues, pre-recession levels of GDP are not expected to be seen until 2018 (Kirkby, 2013).

In the context of graduate employability, this is a very different situation to previous economic downturns. Rae (2008) suggests that we are in the unknown as a recession has never occurred before during a ‘massification’ phase of higher education. The UK is experiencing dramatically increased participation rates in HE due to the Labour party’s widening participation agenda which aimed to encourage 50% of all 18-30 year olds into higher education by 2010 (Labour Party Manifesto, 2005). Although the 50% target by the year 2010 was never reached, participation rates did come exceptionally close reaching 47% in 2009/10 (Statistical First Release, 2011).

Whilst previous recessions had an impact upon graduate employment to some extent, this had been limited due to the smaller numbers of graduates in the labour market. With increasing numbers of graduates entering the labour market each year, the impact of this recession has significantly affected recent graduates; most notably in terms of job availability. With more graduating from higher education than ever before and unemployment rates hitting levels comparable to the last recession in both the UK and Eurozone (BBC News, 2012³; BBC News, 2012⁴), competition for jobs is fierce. The chart below details the number of graduate applications received for each vacancy in the UK over the last ten years:



(Data sourced from: High Fliers, 2013; Peacock 2011; Swain 2011; Vasagar 2010; AGR 2006; Prospects, 2006; AGR 2004)

As depicted in the chart overleaf, the number of graduate applications per vacancy had been steadily dropping from 2003 until 2007. The low competition for jobs was attributed to the buoyant economy, with employers providing more graduate opportunities (Prospects, 2006; High Fliers, 2013). However from 2008 onwards, the chart then shows a sharp increase in graduate applications per vacancy, which illustrates the impact of the recession. The number of applications per vacancy increased considerably from 31 in 2008 to 83 in 2012. The numbers of graduates applying for each job have therefore almost trebled since the initial 2008 recession period. The recession and its after-effects, coupled with the massification of higher education, have led to an exceptionally competitive job market.

Whilst geographical and industry variations do exist (Peacock, 2011), competition amongst graduates for jobs has never been so unforgiving, resulting in many graduates facing a tough time ahead of them in acquiring work they desire. For example, Woods (2012) reported that 16% of graduates have applied for more than 100 jobs, however a quarter of those have not obtained a single interview. Interestingly, the advice given for job seekers is not perseverance. Instead enhancing one's employability is advocated. Woods (2012) recommends exploiting social networks (social capital) and obtaining relevant and valuable work experience, in order to "stand out from the crowd".

The development of social capital however, was missing from the academic employability models discussed earlier and is not included in the HEI approaches to graduate employability enhancement. However, the USEM and CareerEDGE employability models were devised prior to the 2008 recession and a harsh economic climate can change factors concerning employability. This is important to know, as graduates need to be more acutely aware of how to develop their employability during recession periods (Sanders & De Grip, 2004).

Whilst graduates have an understandably vested interest in the employability concept, other employability stakeholders also need to be considered. Further analysis is needed into these specific employability stakeholder viewpoints and each employability stakeholder will be addressed in turn: the political agenda, higher education institutions, graduates and employers.

2.5 Employability Stakeholders

This section will provide an introduction to the four main employability stakeholders. Each of these parties has their own agendas which impact upon their specific perspective of graduate employability. The next chapter (the literature review) will delve into the stakeholder perspectives in more detail, but this section will provide a background to the issues upon which the literature review will build. The first stakeholder to be discussed is the government and political perspective.

2.5.1 The Government and Political Perspective

As outlined in one of the opening paragraphs of this context chapter, many argue that it is the political agenda which has been the most instrumental factor in raising the profile of employability over the past decade (Brennan, 2004; Gazier, 2001; Lees, 2003; Mcquaid & Lindsay, 2005; Weinert, 2001).

Employability in the context of higher education has been written about in the policy documents for years (The Robbins Report, 1963; The Dearing Report, 1997, The Leitch Review, 2006, The Wilson Review, 2012). The notion of higher education preparing graduates with skills necessary for the world of work was first detailed in the Robbins report in 1963. This report stated that by fulfilling industry skill requirements, this would facilitate economic prosperity.

Furthermore, Dearing in 1997 made more specific reference to enhancing skills and stressed employability as an area of importance:

“Experience suggests that the long-term demand from industry and commerce will be for higher levels of education and training for their present and future workforce. The UK cannot afford to lag behind its competitors in investing in the intellect and skills of its people”

(Dearing 1997: section 1.14)

In the same year the Dearing report was published, the UK National Skills Task Force (2000) was established, consisting of a range of representatives from industry and education. This task force was to determine the priority skill areas for development, which are necessary for the UK to sustain a competitive position and high employment levels.

The constant theme running through these policy agendas thus far, is the need for a skilful workforce which matches the requirements of industry to facilitate economic growth and international competitiveness. This viewpoint summarises the theory of human capital, which supports the idea that investment in people via education and training is directly correlated to economic prosperity (Schultz, 1961; Weisbrod, 1962; Useem & Karabel, 1986; Harvey, 1999; Teixeira, 2000; Little, 2003; Nafukho et al. 2004; Yorke & Knight, 2007; Sunderland, 2008). The increase in focus upon employability over the years is directly attributable to the belief in human capital theory, as Mcquaid & Lindsay (2005:203) explain:

“The objective of the employability agenda as formulated here is the creation of a higher-skilled labour force and a more inclusive and competitive active labour market, leading to the combined benefits of social inclusion on the one hand, and downward pressures on wage inflation and improved productivity on the other.”

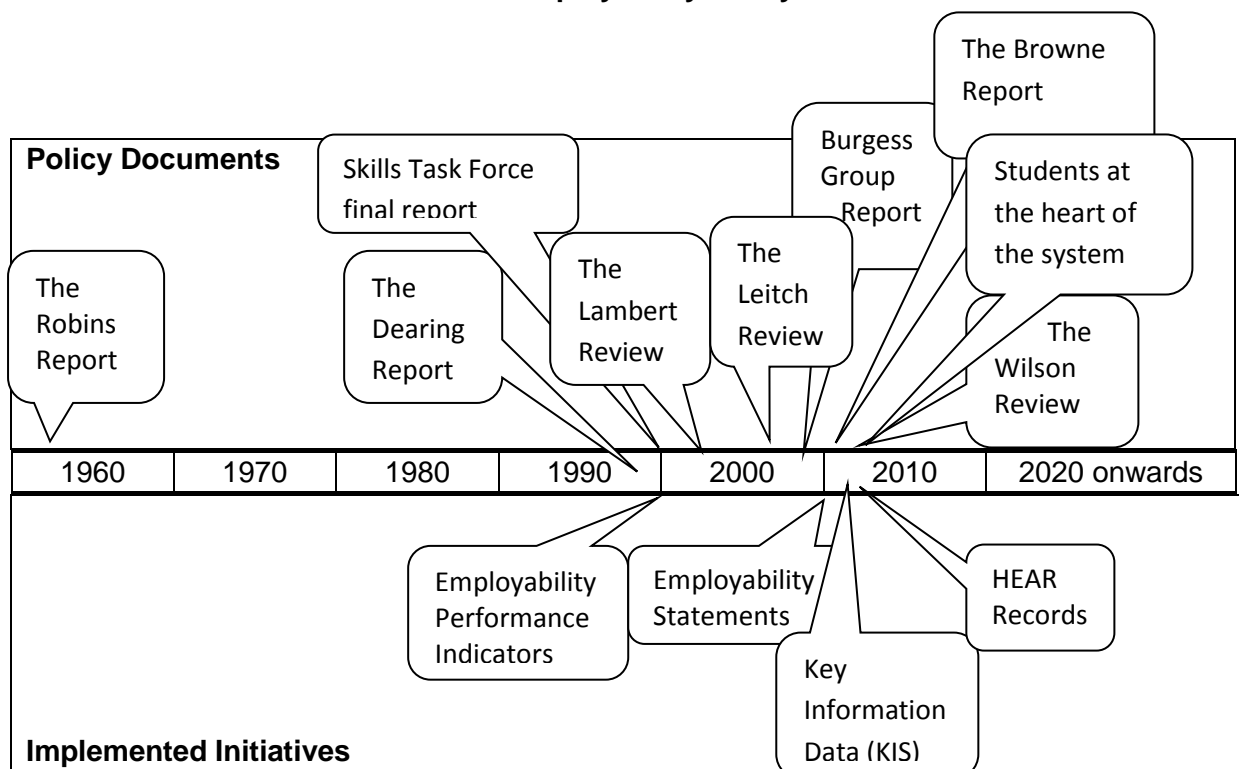
Furthermore, Gazier (2001:5) stresses that *“from the outset, employability was enmeshed in a set of economic and social, as well as moral, policy concerns”*. The links between employability and benefits to the economy will be discussed in greater detail in the literature review chapter, as human capital theory forms the underlying theory for this thesis.

As the employability concept gained a higher profile and became more prevalent in the policy documents, a method for measuring graduate employability was inevitably established. From the year 2000, a national employability performance indicator was launched, to monitor and measure graduate labour market outcomes (Mason et al. 2006). Since the year 2000, all higher education institutions have had to collect and supply data on their graduate’s employment status six months after graduation, known as the DLHE survey (Harvey 2001; Gedye et al. 2004). Interestingly, the employability definitions discussed in section 2.2 of this chapter, make a clear distinction that employment and employability are not the same, yet the current measurement of employability is employment. For this reason, the DLHE survey method for measuring employability has received much criticism, as it does not measure the employability of the graduate, but the employment outcome (Harvey, 2001; Brown, 2007).

More recently, 2010 saw the introduction of ‘employability statements’ in England (Pegg et al. 2012). The intended audience for these statements is prospective students and the aim is to use the employability statements to inform these students on the university’s employability provisions. Then, the Key Information Sets (KIS data) were introduced, which necessitated universities publishing pertinent data annually from September 2012 (HEFCE, 2011). The KIS contains information relating to courses, student satisfaction, student completion and outcomes. In particular, universities will have to include graduate employment and salary data as part of these sets. Again, the intended audience is prospective students, who can compare institutions on “like-for-like” criteria, on which they can base their university decisions.

This increase in employability reporting required by HEIs demonstrates that the focus upon employability is not diminishing. The figure below details a time line of the policy documents which have all made reference to employability and the initiatives which have been implemented:

2.5.1.a Timeline of the Main Employability Policy Documents and Initiatives



As this figure shows, there is a concentration of activity from the late 1990s to the present date. This activity involves both the occurrence of employability in policy documents and also the implementation of new employability initiatives (usually the actions following recommendations laid out in policy reports). A possible explanation for this is offered by Hodgkinson, Daley and Payne (1995). These authors highlight that a changing business environment, resulting from the European single market, advances in technology and a knowledge economy, began emerging in the documentation from the mid-1980s onwards. This change in business environment has been labelled the post-industrial era, the information age and the third wave (Wichramasinghe, 2003). Essentially, this refers to an economy where success in the current climate relies largely on knowledge.

The changing business environment consequently needs a workforce with a new set of skills: flexible and adaptable to continual changes, keep abreast of new technology and work effectively in the knowledge economy. Skills, knowledge and competencies which had not been necessary before, quickly became essential. Other authors concur stating that knowledge, a wider skills base and an enterprising workforce are of particular importance for industry, critical for sustaining and maintaining growth and succeeding in a globalised society (Harvey, 1999; Gazier, 2001; Brown et al. 2003; Yorke, 2004; EBK, 2006).

The new business environment requires workers with a new set of skills and this explains why even with the change of the UK's ruling party in 2010, the political interest in graduate employability has not dampened. Furthermore, the focus lies with graduates specifically, as they are the knowledge workers of the future (Brown et al. 2003). Graduates therefore need to develop skills to enable them to be life-long learners, to ensure they *"remain employable throughout their working life"* (Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004/2005). This was demonstrated by the release of the coalition's white paper 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System' in 2011. This paper outlined the new government's proposal for Professor Sir Tim Wilson to undertake a review into how the UK can become the best place in the world for university-industry collaboration, so to optimise graduate abilities. The eagerly awaited Wilson review was published in February 2012, where Wilson revealed his intention *"to propose an agenda for change; an agenda that will help make the UK the best place in the world for university-business collaboration"* (The Wilson Review, 2012:2).

The repeated focus from policy makers on employability and the links with HEIs, have brought increased pressures to HEIs, which will be the next stakeholder to be introduced.

2.5.2 Higher Education Institutions

As a result of recent policy documents, combined with the introduction of university tuition fees, a cultural shift began to take place in higher education, whereby increasing engagement ensued with the employability agenda (Harvey et al. 2001). The employability agenda is an on-going part of the government's wider higher education strategic policy to obtain a stable, maintainable and growing economy (BIS, 2012).

The repeated calls for action from the policy documents place exceptional emphasis on the need for higher education to be acutely aware of and increasingly responsive to, the needs of both students and employers. Higher education is seen as the key factor in providing competent graduates, able to contribute towards the economy (Gedye et al. 2004). Given the economy's current climate, pressure is higher than ever for universities to produce high calibre graduates who can form a skilful, knowledgeable, productive and enterprising future workforce who are needed to help the economy prosper (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

Harvey (1999) specifically states that there has been growing pressure since the late 1980s for the higher education system to play a more direct role in contributing towards economic growth. Yorke & Knight (2007:158) concur with Harvey's argument and also point out the strength of the perceived relationship between higher education and a nation's growth:

"Governments around the world are concerned that higher education makes the greatest possible contribution to human capital, the quality of which is believed to be critical to national well-being"

However, whilst pressure is mounting from the policy makers to meet the needs of employers, HEIs also need to meet the needs of their other stakeholders: the students and graduates. The student and graduate stakeholder cohort has changed in recent years with the introduction of tuition fees. The Dearing (1997) report recommendations outlined the introduction of university tuition fees from September 1998. Students initially paid a contribution of £1,000 per year towards their higher education tuition, then in 2004 the decision was made to increase annual tuition fees to £3,000 (BBC News, 2009). Finally in September 2012, the fees cap was lifted altogether, allowing UK universities for the first time to charge the full £9,000 per year in tuition fees (Coughlan, 2010).

The Government originally stated that it would only be a minority of universities which would charge the full £9,000 fees. However, rather than being the exception, the £9,000 fees have proved to be the rule (Gill, 2012). With estimates that *“today’s students could leave education more than £50,000 in debt”* (Murray, 2012: 37), it is believed that the student response to the increasing fees structure is to become more vigilant in their degree decision making. Primarily, students are interested in the possible returns from their investment i.e. well paid employment and good prospects after graduation (Diamond et al. 2012; Murray, 2012).

Furthermore, Browne (2010:4) advocated that *“HEIs must persuade students that they should ‘pay more’ in order to ‘get more’”*. If, as Browne (2010) postulates, that students will be paying more because they will be getting more, higher education institutions need to exceptionally address the needs of students over the course of their programmes, to ensure that these individuals go on to become exceedingly employable graduates.

However, the main contention within higher education lies in what their purpose is. Traditionally, university was concerned with cognitive development and intellectually progressing individuals. This original remit was not led by future workforce demands, but instead held a more student development focus. As Lees (2002:1) identifies: *“the notion of employability challenges traditional concepts of HE and raises the question of what the point of HE is”*.

Certain personnel within the academic sphere still oppose the mounting pressures to deliver a suitably trained and prepared workforce being in favour of the original purely cognitive development model. Slep & Reed (2006) acknowledge that some academics feel that a university education is primarily about obtaining a deep knowledge and understanding of a particular subject. Thus, introducing employability into the curriculum results in splitting valued time and resources across more activities which detract from the actual subject area. Silver (2003) however, explains that contention amongst academic staff is commonplace, as within academia there are conflicting pressures, limited resources and differing values, which is part of the culture of higher education. The cynical view is that employability disputes are another debate to be added to the list. Farwell (2002) supports this and discusses a polarisation within higher education; at one end staff are defending the more ‘traditional’ academic purpose and at the other, staff are in support of the employability agenda and for teaching of these skills.

Whilst inconsistencies may remain amongst the perspectives of individual staff within HEIs, collectively they have embraced employability and are engaged with this agenda. HEIs are committed to developing students' skills, knowledge and capabilities across *"all areas of university life, in terms of the delivery of academic programmes and extra curricula activities"* (Lees, 2002:3). The purpose of HEIs is therefore to develop able graduates, not just specifically for the workplace, but for a range of aspects the graduates will encounter through life. However, how effective employers feel institutions are in delivering this purpose will be appraised in the literature review.

It is clear that HEIs have significant pressures from the various employability stakeholders and whilst aspects of these will be in alignment, other pressures will conflict. The literature review will detail further the perspectives of HEIs and business schools, with regard to the employability agenda and this chapter now moves on to introduce the graduate perspective.

2.5.3 The Graduate Perspective

As discussed in the previous sections, the employability directive is being driven by policy makers, who endorse the investment in human capital theory (i.e. the connection between employability and economic prosperity). Policy makers are eager to ascertain the skills which employers reportedly need to contribute towards a productive workforce and encourage higher education to liaise with employers in the development of these skills. However, the graduate voice is not often considered and frequently left out of these debates (Pfeffer & Fong 2002; Farewell, 2002; Sleep & Reed 2006).

The research into graduate employability tends to focus either on graduate career destinations, or employer views of graduate skills which Shah et al. (2004:9) supports:

"To date, few studies have considered the perspectives of the graduates themselves on such aspects as transition to the workplace, skill requirements, or their reaction to the teaching of skills"

Other authors agree that not enough is understood about graduate experiences of employment. In particular, little is known about the effectiveness of university education in providing the necessary skills and knowledge required for working life (Rolfe, 2001; Sleep & Reed, 2006).

Given the economic climate and competition for jobs, coupled with the recent increases of tuition fees, students and graduates are changing their expectations about higher education (Gedye et al. 2004). Students are becoming more pragmatic in the degree choices they make and have anticipations about the return on their investment. However, despite such changes the graduate perspective is still underrepresented in the employability debates.

There is some research which does exist to address the graduate perspective, which will be discussed in more detail in the literature review, but the following piece is given as an example. Barraclough et al. (2009) researched alumni from Sheffield Hallam University. A survey was distributed to ascertain where graduates felt skills were best acquired; in an academic context, in a work context or equally well in either. The authors found that on the whole, graduates reported that the majority of skills could be developed in either context, with the exception of 'adaptability/flexibility' and 'managing others'; they were largely reported as being learnt in a work context only. Barraclough et al. (2009:40) found that student experiences of skill development differed between academic and work environments. The authors conclude that students first encounter these skills at university and then develop them further once in the workplace: *"the findings suggest that graduates are not exposed to these skills sufficiently whilst at university"*.

This is an interesting look at the graduate perspective of employability. Graduates therefore felt that they could have acquired the majority of skills in either environment; it was just that they did not have enough exposure in university to develop them fully in that context. This differs slightly to the political perspective which states that work placements and liaisons with employers will provide the necessary skills. The graduate perspective is that skills can be developed in either context given the correct provision.

This supports the point that not enough is understood about graduate experiences of employment and how effective their university education was in providing the necessary skills and knowledge required for working life. More attention needs to be paid to this stakeholder perspective, as their view is paramount in enhancing understandings of graduate employability. Without fully appreciating the graduate perspective specific details will be missed and strategies to improve employability will be weaker.

Conversely, the perspective which is never left out and often dominates debates, alongside the political perspective, is the employer viewpoint. Employers will be the fourth and final stakeholder addressed in this thesis.

2.5.4 The Employer Perspective

Due to the close links with the political perspective, employers are pivotal in the employability debates. Employers and their skill demands appear in official policy documents and are therefore significant to the employability agenda driven by policy makers. The employer perspective focuses on the skills, competencies, attributes and experiences graduates can demonstrate, which are needed for the future productivity and performance of their organisation (Harvey, 1997; Lees, 2002).

Employers are seen as a directly relevant and useful resource which HEIs can tap into and work in partnership with, to enhance the employability of their graduates. Employers are not only able to offer work placements, internships and graduate positions, but can also contribute towards curriculum design and development by advising on the skills, knowledge and characteristics necessary for the current and future workplace (Bollerot, 2001; Lees, 2003). However the repeated appeals for closer university and business collaboration in the policy documents mean that this still needs significant development.

The high status given to employers within the employability agenda is reflected in the large amount of research conducted with this stakeholder. A plethora of research now exists (which will be discussed in the literature review) which concerns employer skill demands, satisfaction with graduate capabilities and their preparedness for the workplace (Harvey, 1999; Farwell, 2002; Lees, 2002; Harvey, 2003; Thomas & Busby, 2003; Yorke, 2004; Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004/2005; Sleaf & Reed, 2006; Stringfellow et al. 2006).

One issue with the employer perspective research concerns the exact skills, behaviours and competencies required. As revealed at the beginning of this chapter, there is no universally agreed definition of employability skills. Instead, employability skills can, and do, encompass a wide variety of hard and soft skills, which employers demand with differing priorities and at differing levels (Taylor, 2005). Much can be incorporated under the term 'skills' and therefore the literature now include many skills employers want graduates to be proficient in. Problems inevitably occur when employers want to recruit graduates with capabilities in an excessively long inventory of skills. These demands for copious skills could partly explain the trend whereby graduates recurrently fall short of the demands employers expect of them:

“There has been a persistent undercurrent of opinion amongst employers and politicians to the effect that graduates lacked a number of the skills that businesses need”

(Yorke, 2004:409)

It is now well documented that employer demands are not being realised by higher education graduates, resulting in on-going employer complaints of skill shortages (Lees, 2002; Farwell, 2002; Harvey, 2003; Little, 2003; Yorke, 2004). In particular to business disciplines, Walker & Black (2000:194) highlight complaints that *“demands by business leaders [are] for increased capabilities in business school graduates”*.

Employers argue that graduates are not exhibiting the specific skills required for businesses. In particular, research shows that graduates tend only to possess the theoretical knowledge and severely lack any practical or industry experience (The Guardian and Park HR, 2002; Crebert et al, 2004; Stringfellow et al. 2006). Work experience is rated as extremely valuable by employers as this provides students with the opportunity to gain valuable insights and skills directly related to the workplace. More will be discussed in relation to this in the literature review.

2.6 Concluding the Chapter

The information covered in this chapter provides a vital contextual element to the thesis. This context chapter has provided the wider background to the graduate employability concept giving a review of the definitions and models currently available. Furthermore, the employability concept was situated in the context of the current economic climate, detailing a brief background to the recent developments of the UK economy. Finally, the four employability stakeholders were introduced to provide a basis which the next chapter will build upon. This chapter therefore has underpinned the essential elements required to fully appreciate the work which now follows.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This literature review chapter further develops the information given in the previous context chapter. The context chapter provided a background overview to some of the major topics covered in this thesis, focusing on an appraisal of the concept of graduate employability following the effects of the UK economic downturn upon graduate employability. The context chapter also introduced the various employability stakeholders: policy makers, HEIs, employers and graduates.

Building on from the previous chapter, this literature review will appraise the specific literatures which have discussed graduate employability in relation to each of the four employability stakeholders. This chapter aims to bring together these four viewpoints as *“there is a notable gap in the current knowledge linking graduate and employer perspectives of the context and content of business school education to graduate employability”* (Andrews & Higson, 2008; 411). Whilst a look at what the literature involves is included, identification will be made of what the current literature excludes, thus forming a basis for the work of this thesis. Overall, this chapter establishes a framework upon which the remainder of the thesis will be constructed.

This chapter contains a comprehensive and critical review of the available literature and is comprised of three sections: firstly, the academic literature is covered; secondly, the policy literature is examined; and thirdly, the literature surrounding the underlying theory of human capital is assessed. Within these sections, an evaluation of the work others have conducted around employability will be developed and the key issues highlighted. This evaluation will also determine what is not known about employability and will therefore clarify the current knowledge gap in the literature.

As will be discussed further in this chapter, the graduate viewpoint is often neglected in the employability debates, instead preference is given to employer and political stakeholder views. It is important to identify this gap in the literature as this poses a significant limitation in the understanding of the concept of graduate employability. A detailed analysis is required to identify the information that is missing in the literature and this knowledge gap will contribute to a fuller understanding of the graduate employability concept. The next section will review the academic literature in order to identify this gap.

3.2 Academic Literature

As outlined in the introduction chapter, the overall aim of the research is to investigate employability from the graduate perspective and therefore this section will assess the literature currently available regarding graduate viewpoints. To fully evaluate the graduate perspective other employability stakeholder views are sought to enable comparisons between viewpoints on graduate employability. This section will appraise the literature currently available for three stakeholders: higher education institutions (HEIs), employers and graduates.

The evaluation of the literature pertaining to each of the three perspectives will enable a deeper understanding of the main issues relating to graduate employability to unfold. Furthermore, the evaluation will clarify the knowledge gaps currently residing in the presently available literature, which will enable the credibility of this literature to be fully examined.

The literature and research used in this review is largely drawn from UK publications. However, some data and comparisons are made on an international level, as graduate employability is an important factor globally.

The academic literature review will commence with the employer perspective to provide an examination of the skills employers require. Following this perspective will be the viewpoint of universities and business schools, to ascertain how these institutions are managing and implementing the employability agenda. Finally the graduate perspective will provide an important insight into how graduates feel university enhances their employability and how this translates into the work place.

3.2.1 The Employer Perspective

In the current changeable work environment, employers continue to face increasing competition from a globalised economy. For many businesses, the current economic climate presents a very challenging environment where they are increasingly reliant upon a knowledgeable, skilful and enterprising workforce. Employers therefore demand a skilful population from which to recruit new employees. With increases in technological developments, greater access to knowledge and a globalised economy, employers are seeking graduate recruits with the right skills, competencies and abilities to flourish in an ever demanding business environment (Hodgkinson et al. 1995; Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004/2005).

Given this ever-changing and demanding business environment, employers are well placed to identify the skills necessary for success in industry (Bollerot, 2001; Lees, 2003). The skills employers require for future business success, form the criteria against which potential recruits are assessed and therefore go some way to determining what makes a graduate employable (Harvey, 1997). As employers undertake the recruitment of graduates, they play an essential role and as such, their opinions on what constitutes an employable graduate have been researched extensively over the decades. Consequently, the employer perspective of graduate employability is one of the main voices depicted in the employability literature.

Much research into the topic of graduate skills was conducted with employers during the 1990s (Nabi & Bagley, 1999; Farwell, 2002). This research revealed that many employers were dissatisfied with the skills graduates demonstrated and as a result employers were experiencing difficulties in recruiting graduates with the desired skills (Nabi & Bagley, 1999). Employer dissatisfactions with graduate skills has led to further research undertakings as each researcher aims to ascertain what it is employers are looking for and the extent of the skills gap. As a result of this continued attention on employer views, an expanse of literature is now available on the employer perspective of graduate employability.

However, most studies in the field of employer perspectives have focussed on the viewpoints of large national or multinational employers (Brown et al. 2003). This is largely because it has previously been the larger employers who recruited graduates and include for example the companies listed in The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers (High Fliers, 2012). With such dominance of the large employer viewpoints, perspectives of the small to medium sized employers have often been overlooked. This oversight is a significant weakness given that there were an estimated 4.4 million small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the UK at the start of 2009 and SMEs are the main UK employers accounting for around 60% of private sector employment (Davidson, 2011; Shaw, 2011). Neglecting SMEs therefore means that the research is omitting a huge voice within the employer perspective literature.

Further limitations of the employer literature concern the lack of generalisations that can be made from one size employer to another. Lees (2003:2) illustrates this point by highlighting that smaller localised employers “*can sometimes be more strongly focused on the short-term needs of a particular firm or industry than the longer-term factors which will make a graduate employable*”. Small local firms and large national employers will therefore hold different perspectives, emphasising that employers are not one homogenous group. Instead, employers are diverse in sectors and sizes, each with different needs of graduates. This factor therefore makes it difficult for authors to universally agree on what employer’s require, hence the plethora of findings now available.

Much of the employer research over the decades has uncovered negative feedback highlighting skills shortages resulting in employer skill demands not entirely being met by graduates (Walker & Black, 2000; Lees, 2002; Farwell, 2002; Harvey, 2003; Little, 2003; Yorke, 2004; Lowden et al. 2011; CBI & Pearson, 2012). This host of literature includes many researchers who have aimed to ascertain what it is that employers need from graduates and in particular the specific skills, competencies and behaviours sought. Given that employers are a diverse group, a diverse range of opinions has now ensued.

The post-industrial era of the information age with reliance upon a knowledge-driven economy (Wichramasinghe, 2003; Tomlinson, 2007), a constantly changing business environment (Weinert, 2001), advances in technology (Hodgkinson et al. 1995), a more competitive global market (Yorke, 2004) and more recently, an intermittent global recession, mean that employer demands of skilled graduates are likely to intensify. This is due to the belief that “*the UK’s growth will depend on developing a wider and deeper pool of skills so that our economy can prosper in the face of fierce international competition for business*” (CBI & Pearson, 2012). This link between education and economic prosperity (which is known as human capital theory) will be discussed in length later in this chapter.

Despite insufficient research, however, it is believed that much of what is taught in education (theory) is not practiced in the workplace and therefore subject specific skills and job related knowledge have become less significant; instead the focus has shifted to personal attributes, behaviours and skills i.e. soft skills (Harvey, 1999; Harvey, 2003). Soft skills are also known as generic, transferable or key skills, but more recently termed as employability skills. Although a lack of clarity exists around the term ‘skills’ (Taylor, 2005), soft skills are generally deemed as transferable skills and personal attributes, whereas hard skills refer to subject specific skills (Harvey, 1999; Harvey, 2003).

A closer look at the employer literature will now take place with particular emphasis upon the specific skills employers report they necessitate graduates exhibit.

The Skills Employers Need

As briefly mentioned above, a lack of clarity exists around the word 'skills', which remains an ambiguous term holding different meanings to different stakeholders (Taylor, 2005; Tomlinson, 2012; Holmes, 2013). Similarly, terms such as competencies and capabilities, which are also used to rate graduate employability, are used interchangeably (Hodges & Burchell, 2003) which employers and graduates do not take to mean as the same thing (Tomlinson, 2012). With a variety of terms being used, many authors have attempted to group the employability skills into categories for simplification and clarity. For example, Coopers and Lybrand (1998) cited in Lees (2002), identified four main skill areas concerned with graduate employability: traditional intellectual skills, key skills, knowledge of organisations and personal attributes. Using these categories as a foundation, a thorough review of the literature was undertaken to ascertain the particular skills, knowledge, experience and behaviours employers reportedly value.

Reworking the categories initially outlined by Coopers and Lybrand (1998), the table below provides a succinct overview of the demands made of graduates in the employer literature:

3.2.1.a Employer Demands

Traditional Academic Skills & Knowledge	Soft Transferable Key Skills	Personal Behaviours & Characteristics	Knowledge of Organisations & Extra-Curricular Activities
Cognitive skills – e.g. critical evaluation, logical argument	Team working and co-operation	Interpersonal Skills	Relevant placements/ Internships
Literacy & numeracy	Analytical & Problem solving	Communication skills	Joining clubs & societies
ICT knowledge & Skills	Self-management	Motivation & drive	Involvement in volunteering
Technical knowledge	Leadership skills	Adaptability, flexibility and responsiveness to change	Being a student representative
Subject Understanding	Research skills	Confidence	Cultural awareness
Knowledge of principle theories and frameworks	Time management & Organisational skills	Positive attitude	Commercial awareness
Intellectual ability & ability to learn	IT skills	A willingness to learn	Knowledge of the business
	Written and oral communication skills	Entrepreneurial spirit	
		Self-reliance	

(Source: Targetjobs, 2012; Lowden et al. 2011; Dickerson & Green, 2004; Harvey, 2003; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Lees, 2002; Allison et al. 2002; Nabi & Bagley, 1999)

The table above summarises the skills which have appeared in the wide ranging employer literature to classify a graduate as being employable. To be employable to a wide range of employers therefore, graduates must hold a variety of soft skills (including generic skills such as team working) and particular attributes (such as interpersonal skills) in addition to the more traditional academic skills (including critical thinking and problem solving) alongside holding work experience and a commercial awareness.

This is an extensive repertoire of skills for a single graduate to develop during their time at university and problems inevitably occur when employers want to recruit graduates with capabilities in an endless inventory of skills. Especially, many employers recruit graduates from a range of disciplines as graduates can go into careers which are not related to their degree subject (Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). Graduates therefore need a range of skills that are relevant for a variety of potential employers.

Another issue concerning the skills listed in table 3.2.1.a, is that very little is offered in the literature about the weightings of such skills. Holmes (2012) highlights some of the research carried out with employers in the 1980s and 1990s concerning the importance of some graduate employability skills and attributes over others (See Smith et al. 1989; Harvey & Green, 1994; Yorke, 1999). Some more recent literature, such as The CBI/NUS (2011) also attempts to highlight the importance of some skills and abilities over others. However, much of this work provides incompatible findings and supports the argument made by Hodges & Burchell (2003) that there is no consistent agreement by employers on the importance and balance between all of these skills. Employers therefore have their own preference of the configuration of the weightings of these skills. This then differs from employer to employer, unbeknown to the graduates themselves (Holmes, 2013).

It is not just weightings which convolute the discussions over skills, but there is also no clear distinction over what level each graduate skill, competency or behaviour should be developed to (Hodges and Burchell, 2003). With regard to what employers seek therefore, there is little in the way of a focused collection of skills, competencies and behaviours required of graduates to be considered employable; instead the combined literature into this area provides a whole host of skills necessary by a wide variety of employers across many sectors and industries. This can lead to graduates having to “second guess” what is expected from employers. What can be determined from this literature, however, is that the higher the level and capacity in which graduates possess all of the skills, competencies and behaviours, the higher their employability will be regarded.

Whilst table 3.2.1.a identified employer requirements, the following sections will address each of the category headings in turn, in relation to the literature available in each area: Traditional Academic Skills, Soft Transferable Key Skills, Personal Behaviours & Characteristics and Knowledge of Organisations & Extra-Curricular Activities. In particular, the skills within each of these four categories will be related to how well employers feel graduates demonstrate these skills and where, if any, skills shortfalls exist.

Traditional Academic Skills and Knowledge

Traditional academic skills and knowledge include those such as critical analysis, subject understanding and a developed intellectual ability. These skills form a large part of the degree programme to enable students to be proficient in their subject area. Academic skills are a given within the context of the degree discipline: *“graduates should be able to demonstrate a range of cognitive and intellectual skills together with techniques specific to business and management”* (QAA, 2007;3).

In the main, the literature reveals that employers rarely express dissatisfaction over the traditional academic skills and knowledge which graduates possess (Lowden et al. 2011; Yorke, 2006). Employers tend to use the degree classification obtained to determine how well the graduate has acquired traditional academic skills and knowledge (AGR, 2007).

Degree classification is a contemporary area of importance for employers given the record demand for graduate positions and as such, employers are adapting their recruitment and selection practices to more efficiently manage the volume of applications. Writing in 2003, Nabi (2003; 372) explains how *“graduate entry jobs have not grown in line with graduate supply*. Tomlinson also echoed this comment in 2008, and the situation has intensified in recent years given the continued ‘massification’ of higher education and the on-going repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis. As a consequence, competition for graduate jobs has increased, leading employers to implement minimum thresholds of degree classifications. For example, prior to the recession, AGR (2007) reported that many employers were open to 2.2 classifications, more recently however, Vasgar (2012¹) notes how thresholds on degree classifications have risen. Vasgar (2012¹) reports on a survey undertaken with more than 200 organisations in May 2012. The results showed a trend of employers increasing their degree classification thresholds from a 2.2 to a 2.1 or higher. Of the 200 employers researched, 76% stated that a 2:1 degree classification was their minimum requirement, an increase from the 52% of employers who made the same statement in 2004. The same survey also revealed that 2.5% of graduate employers state their minimum threshold is now a first class degree. Whilst previously a degree was required as standard (Nabi & Bagley, 1999; AGR, 2002; Shah et al. 2004; Stringfellow et al. 2006; CBI & Pearson, 2012), now more specifically the degree classification has become a significant determining factor.

Whilst in general, the literature shows employers are satisfied with the academic skills and knowledge, there are however two exceptions which employers repeatedly express concern over: literacy and numeracy skills.

Employers are largely dissatisfied with graduates' basic literacy skills, i.e. spelling, grammar and punctuation (Jackson, 2009; Ben & Roger, 2011; Middleton, 2011). Whilst poor written communication and literacy skills are not exclusive to business graduates, Ben & Roger (2011) stress that this is a concern for employers. Written communication and literacy skills are regarded highly in industry, appearing within the top skills sought by employers (Jackson, 2009). Jackson (2009) conducted a review of the literature over a ten year period into skill deficiencies employers reported in Australia, the USA and the UK. Communication skills were highlighted as a skill employers internationally sought from graduates and dissatisfaction was prevalent amongst employers over graduate competency levels. In particular, Jackson (2009) detailed a UK study, which found that over a quarter of employers experienced a mismatch between the literacy and written communication standards expected and the level at which graduates demonstrated.

Additionally, numeracy skills have also been raised as a concern in the literature. Durrani & Tariq (2012) highlight that numeracy skills are also of importance to employability. Employers expect graduates to be numerate and as such are increasingly using numeracy tests in their recruitment and selection processes. Graduates therefore, need to demonstrate a good level of numeracy to ensure they succeed to the final recruitment stages.

However, the adoption of numeracy tests in the recruitment process is inclined to reflect the viewpoint of the larger organisations. Although relatively little is known about the recruitment processes of smaller organisations (Davidson, 2011), research by Bartram et al. (1995) found there to be significant differences between large and small employer recruitment practices. Smaller employers were more likely to employ informal and unstructured recruitment processes when compared to the large employers and would therefore be less likely to implement numeracy tests during recruitment stages. A graduate undergoing the recruitment processes of a large employer may therefore, need to demonstrate a different range of skills to a graduate undergoing the recruitment processes of a small employer. This again reiterates the differences between smaller and larger employers in the way they perceive employability skills. Some employers are more likely to test skills early in the recruitment phase, whereas others are not.

However, research undertaken by the CBI (2009) which included a survey of 581 employers of different sizes and within different industries, found that only a small minority of employers were very satisfied with the level of graduates numeracy skills. Only 30% of these employers reported that they were very satisfied with graduate numeracy levels. This highlights that more needs to be done to improve graduates' numeracy skills.

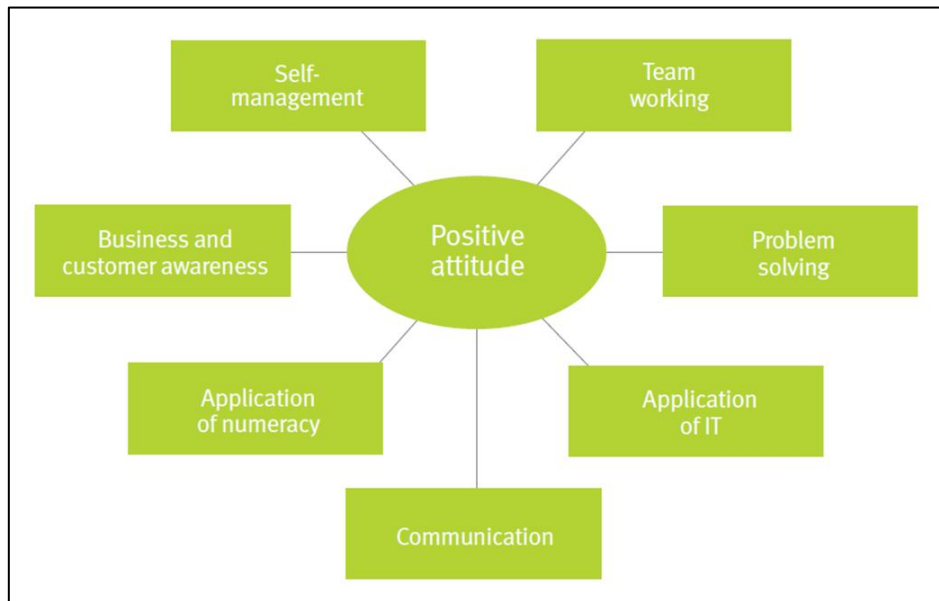
Overall, traditional academic skills and the degree itself are perceived by employers as a standard requirement, which should have been developed on the degree programme undertaken at university. With these in place, selection is then based on an alternative set of criteria which include: soft skills, behaviour, personality and prior work experience (AGR, 2002; Shah et al. 2004; CBI & Pearson, 2012). Stringfellow et al. (2006) also found a similar trend with marketing practitioners. Interviews with these marketing practitioners revealed the view that a marketing degree was a 'good starting point' and it was the personality of the candidate (in particular how well they would get on with existing personnel) which was the deciding factor upon who was selected and hired for the job vacancies. The literature pertaining to graduates soft skills and behaviours will be reviewed next.

Soft Transferable Skills and Personal Characteristics

As highlighted in the previous section, a degree and academic skills are a standard requirement in considering a graduate as employable. To build on these pre-required skills, a business graduate must also demonstrate soft skills, behaviours and personal characteristics. The QAA (2007) degree benchmark statements outline the soft skills which business students should acquire during the course of their degree: teamwork, communication, presentation, problem solving, organisational, interpersonal, analytical and decision making skills. The QAA (2007) does not outline the behaviours and personal characteristics to be developed during a degree programme, largely because these can be difficult for HEIs to implement and assess. However, despite the inclusion of soft skill development in business degree programmes, the literature supports that graduates are still not demonstrating the right skills, or the right level of skills, desired by employers for success in the workplace.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is a lobbying organisation which provides a voice for more than 240,000 companies of every size, in a range of industry sectors. In a 2011 report, the CBI together with the NUS analysed the soft transferable skills necessary for a graduate to be employable:

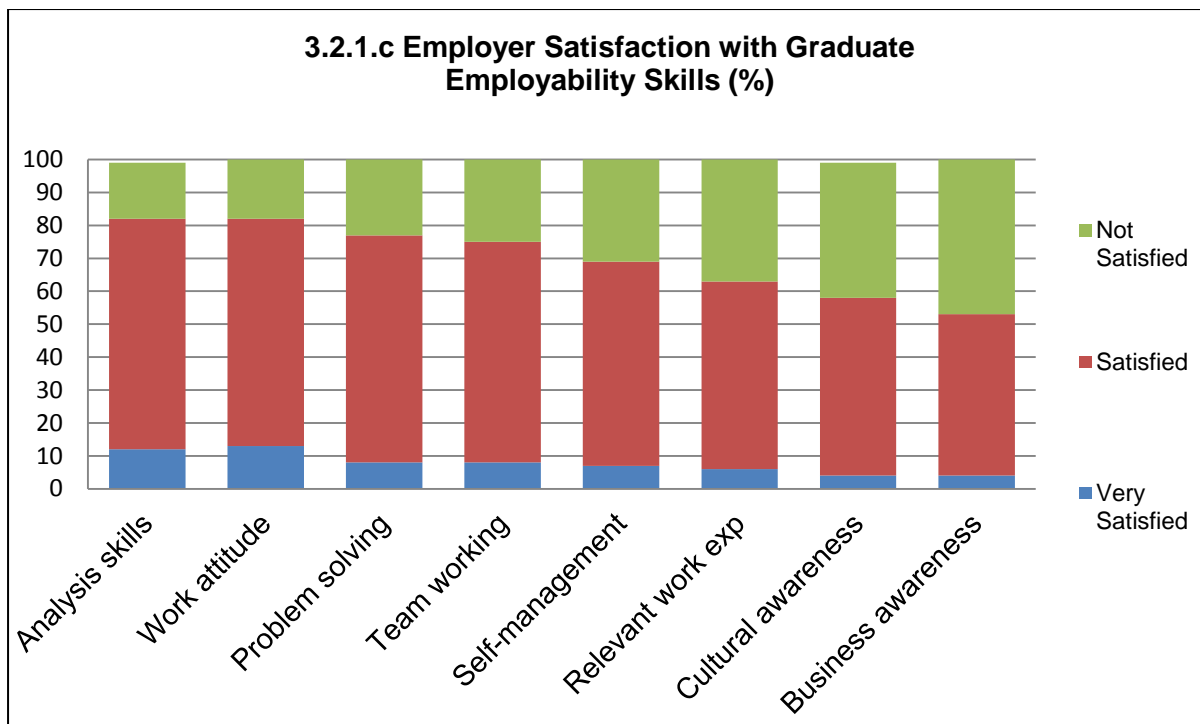
3.2.1.b CBI & NUS Employability Skills



(Source: CBI & NUS, 2011: 14)

The figure above does not detail the level of skill employers require; all that the report states is that graduates should possess these skills to a high level, without mention of what constitutes a high level. Nonetheless, what the CBI & NUS (2011) diagram above does show, is that a positive attitude is placed at the centre of the model. The positive attitude is given core status upon which the other skills can be built, highlighting that there is an underpinning skill or competency which is given as the foundation before other competencies and skills can be demonstrated. This therefore supports the view that employers rank skills and behaviours in some form of hierarchy.

In their survey of 581 employers, the CBI (2009) found that 80% of the employers were satisfied with the employability skills and positive work attitude of their new recruits. More recently, the CBI & Pearson (2012) carried out an education and skills survey to assess graduate skills against the employer viewpoints. A total of 542 UK employers responded to the survey which included a range of both industry sectors and business sizes. With reference to graduate-level skills, employers identified several shortfalls in particular areas. In particular, employers felt that the following skills continued to be a weakness; team working (25%), problem solving (23%) and inadequate work experience (37%). In addition to the literacy concern already mentioned previously, CBI & Pearson (2012) also highlighted concerns over numeracy and IT skills which also remained high on employer dissatisfaction lists.



(Source: Adapted from CBI & Pearson, 2012:33)

As the chart 3.2.1.c shows, employers in this sample are dissatisfied the most with graduates' business and customer awareness (47%), international cultural awareness (41%) and prior relevant work experience (37%). On average, 30% of the employers in this sample were not satisfied with graduate levels of employability skills, this suggests that more work is needed in these areas.

In addition to the skills listed in the chart above, the CBI & NUS (2011) reported on basic literacy and numeracy skills. From the research findings, 17% of employers were dissatisfied with graduates' basic use of English and 9% of employers were not satisfied with graduate levels of numeracy. Whilst basic literacy and numeracy skills elicited smaller dissatisfaction rates when compared to business awareness or prior work experience, it still suggests that employers are expressing dissatisfaction with these basic skills.

Similarly, Stringfellow et al. (2006) also found employer dissatisfaction amongst graduate skills. From interviews with marketing practitioners across 15 companies, they found that employers reported a shortage of soft skills in new graduates, including team working, problem solving, communication and organisational skills. Furthermore, findings from Lowden et al. (2011) concur, not all employers are satisfied with the calibre of graduates and in particular point out that wider skills and personal attributes can vary significantly between individual graduates.

One personal characteristic which has already been accentuated above by the CBI & NUS (2011) research is a positive attitude. This behaviour has also been singled out in other employer literature too. Joseph & Joseph (1997) highlighted that employers want graduates who are committed to the company, with a positive attitude and motivation to succeed. Unfortunately however, Davison et al. (1993) argue that many graduates have unrealistic expectations about the work place and this can blight their positive work attitude. This could explain why 18% of employers in chart 3.2.1.c are not satisfied with the level of positive attitude shown by graduates.

The research from employers highlights that, skills issues continue to be a reoccurring problem. The literature discussed so far, reveals that employers have expressed dissatisfaction to some extent with literacy, numeracy, business acumen, customer awareness, cultural understandings, team working, problem solving and organisational skills. However, there are still concerns over the exact details in this debate: *“There is not necessarily agreement over whether there is a ‘skills gap’ or how big it is if it exists”* (Lees, 2002) as some employers are happy with the calibre of graduates, whilst others argue there are skills shortages.

One significant argument made by Holmes (2001) concerns the learning context which can explain such skill shortages. Students learning skills in an educational context are not always applicable to a work environment, for example, undertaking ‘teamwork’ as part of a degree programme is not the same as undertaking teamwork in the work place. Holmes (2001) argues that the skills shortages are therefore due to contextual issues, which is not something higher education provision can change. Furthermore, Lees (2002) reports that many of the criticisms made by employers around the lack of graduate skills are in fact related to transition. The skills are developed on degree programmes but it is the transition from higher education to the work place which is the problem, again given that the two contexts are dissimilar. The differences between education and work environments can sometimes be too stark and the skills learnt do not therefore directly relate or transfer to a work environment. One way to address this is for graduates to undertake work experience during their degree, to practice applying the skills and knowledge they have learnt in an educational environment into a work context.

Knowledge of Organisations and Extra-Curricular Activities

For many employers to qualify a graduate as employable, a degree alongside a set of developed soft skills is still not enough, work experience is also required. Again, although the employer stakeholder cohort is not one homogeneous group, one resounding comment from the literature, is the importance of work experience for enhancing employability (Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Flash Eurobarometer, 2010; Lowden et al. 2011; CBI & Pearson, 2012).

A study by Lowden et al. (2011) set out to research both employer and HEI perceptions of graduate employability. Whilst they neglected the graduate and political viewpoints in their primary data collection, Lowden et al. (2011) did undertake qualitative interviews with 14 HEIs and 9 employers, in addition to a review of the literature in this area. Amongst their conclusions, Lowden et al. (2011: VI) found that:

“Perhaps above all, the literature and our own findings have overwhelmingly highlighted that employers, students, graduates and HEI representatives value work-based learning (such as placements and internships) as particularly effective approaches to promote the employability of graduates”

Research by CBI & Pearson (2012) also concur that employers rate work experience as highly important. Similar to Lowden et al. (2011), the employer cohort used by CBI & Pearson (2012) was a selection of small, medium and large organisations from a range of sectors. However unlike Lowden et al. (2011), the sample size was much larger and involved responses from over 500 employers. Of this larger employer sample, CBI & Pearson (2012) found that 68% deemed relevant work experience as important. Furthermore, Hodges & Burchell (2003) found that 79% of their sample of 85 New Zealand employers felt that work experience was important. In addition, Flash Eurobarometer (2010) reports on a large scale research project involving survey and interview findings with employers across 27 European Union member states. This research examined employer perceptions of graduate employability and found even higher proportions of employers valuing work experience; 9 out of every 10 graduate employers in their sample were in agreement that work experience was a vital factor in selecting new recruits.

Although these pieces of research show differing levels of employer agreement over the importance of work experience (a range from 68% to 90%), the message is clear that the majority of employers do highly value work experience. This literature indicates that work experience is one of the most important elements for enhancing graduate employability.

In December 2011, High Fliers Research Limited conducted their annual review of graduate vacancies and starting salaries with the UK organisations named in The Times top 100 graduate employers. Whilst these findings are skewed towards the larger employer perspective, they support the trends prevalent in other employer research; the high significance employers place upon work experience. The employers in this research revealed that a third of their graduate vacancies are likely to be given to graduates who have already worked for the company, in a placement or internship capacity. The research also highlighted that more than half of graduate employers would not be interested in those who had no previous work experience. Graduates without any work experience therefore, are highly likely to be unsuccessful in the selection process (High Fliers, 2012).

Although employers resoundingly deem work experience as a crucial element in an employable graduate, work experience is a vague term which comprises of a wide range of forms: work placement, student internship, work-based project, vacation work, part-time casual work, work shadowing and volunteering (Prospects, 2011; The OU, 2012). Given the many forms of work experience which a student can undertake, graduate's prior work experiences can vary greatly. For example, work experience opportunities can range in length starting at 10 weeks going up to 12 months (Lowden et al. 2011). In addition to length, work experience can also differ on other aspects such as levels of responsibility, pay, structure and relevance. Not all work experience is therefore of equal duration, responsibility or relevance.

The Wilson Review (2012), which was introduced in Chapter Two, examined university and business collaboration and provided many recommendations for students undertaking work experience during their degree programme. Firstly, the report advocates that all full time undergraduate students should benefit from a 10-12 week summer internship during their studies. In addition, Wilson also encourages an increase in the up-take of sandwich degrees (whereby students spend a year in industry part way through their studies). However, Wilson recommended that instead of 12 consecutive months with the same organisation, this was divided into three or four collections of shorter, separate work experience placements. These would be undertaken with different companies, which would equate to 12 months experience overall. This is to increase the variety of work experience students can obtain during their degree programme.

Additionally, employers have made their own stipulations regarding what work experience they deem valuable. Firstly, the duration of the work experience is important. Atfield, Purcell & Hogarth (2009) found that a placement of two weeks or less was not considered by employers to be of sufficient length. However, these authors also found that a universal ideal length of work experience was problematic as employer views differed. Furthermore, Harvey (2001) explained that whilst shorter work placements of up to a few months could be of value, the preference seemed to be for those graduates who had undertaken sandwich degrees involving a 12 month work placement. Ideally therefore, the longer the work experience, the more valuable this is regarded by employers. This differs to policy makers current endeavours to have all undergraduate students undertake 10-12 week vacation internships. If more students opt for the shorter work internships, which employers may not consider as valuable, this could negatively affect their employability.

Secondly, employers show a preference for work experience to be relevant to the career or industry the graduate wishes to enter (Atfield, Purcell & Hogarth, 2009). Given the economic climate, with increased job competition and employer uncertainties, employer demands for graduates to possess the appropriate skills for success in the work place has grown. This therefore emphasises the need for graduates to have undertaken directly relevant work experience (Caballero & Walker, 2010). The more relevant the work experience, the more valuable employers perceive this to be. With policy recommendations to break down the 12 month placement with one company into several smaller placements, this could potentially increase the likelihood that some of that experience would be relevant and therefore could enhance graduate employability.

Another factor in determining the value of work experience is whether that experience is voluntary or paid. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2012) undertook a survey of U.S.A college students regarding work experience undertaken during their studies. The survey revealed some interesting findings, namely that unpaid work experience fared only marginally better than no work experience at all. Of the sample, those who had undertaken paid work experience during their studies were offered a job. Of those who undertook unpaid work experience, 37% were offered a job, only 1% higher than those who did not undertake any work experience at all. These findings suggest that graduates who have obtained paid work experience during their degree are in a better position to acquire work, over those who opt for unpaid or no experience.

The reason offered for this difference, is believed to be attributed to the different duties carried out in the paid and unpaid placements. NACE (2012) suggests that those who are engaged in paid work are given more responsibility and hands-on experience, which are more highly valued by employers. Those in unpaid experiences tend to spend more time undertaking clerical activities, which have a lower value. The differences in time spent on particular tasks were therefore what gave paid work experience students the advantage over the unpaid.

The reason why previous work experience is so important to employers is because they want new graduate recruits to make immediate beneficial inputs to the organisation (Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Brook 2012). Employers have frequently reported that once recruited, graduates can take between 18-24 months to become a sufficiently competent employee of the organisation (AGR, The Guardian & Park HR, 2002; Crebert et al. 2004; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Shah et al. 2004; Stringfellow et al. 2006). Graduate's prior experiences of work can therefore enhance their work-readiness and reduce the time taken for graduate recruits to become productive and effective within the organisation.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that work experience is extremely valuable and a determining factor in how employable a graduate is perceived by employers, take up of work experience by students is still low. Vasagar (2012) reports that university work placements have reduced in popularity. In 2003, 9.5% of all full-time undergraduates took a placement as part of their degree, in 2010 this figure had dropped to just 7%. More specifically, the greatest decline in student placement numbers has been seen in post-1992 institutions (Hogarth et al. 2006; Little & Harvey, 2006). Reasons for the decline in numbers undertaking work placements are believed to include overall increased student numbers, increased student choice and the economic environment (Hogarth et al. 2006; Brooks, 2012).

One solution to the low numbers of students undertaking placements, and subsequently not fully developing the skills required in industry, is increased university and employer collaboration. It is argued that the development of a reciprocal relationship between employers and universities, would jointly help enhance graduate employability. The next section highlights further the benefits to be gained from such partnerships, but also raises many barriers to an effective working relationship.

University and Employer Collaboration

“Learning is no longer a separate activity that occurs either before one enters the workplace or in remote classroom settings ... learning is not something that requires time out from being employed in productive activity; learning is at the heart of productive activity”.

(Zuboff, 1988: 395, cited in Hodges & Burchell, 2003: 20)

The point that Zuboff made decades ago is still being echoed today within the employability context; graduates need both education and work experience to enable them to apply classroom learning to the work environment and vice versa. As discussed earlier in the employers section, expectations placed upon graduates are extremely high, if not excessively so. Universities alone cannot develop all of the desired skills in their graduates nor to the desired level required in the workplace. An increase in university and business collaboration is therefore seen as the solution. An effective working partnership would enable employer input into curriculum design and assessments whilst also encouraging employers to offer more work experience opportunities to students (Crebert et al. 2004). There is much in the literature, as well as in policy documents, encouraging this type of collaboration however, this collaborative relationship is still in an infancy stage with arguments for further development highlighted.

Whilst there is a clear argument for developing university and business collaboration, Lowden et al. (2011:16) points out that there is a lack of *“systematic approaches from universities to engage with employers”*, leading employers to feel that universities could be doing more to respond to employer needs.

Similarly, Lord Baker of Dorking, who is chair of the Edge Foundation (an independent education charity), commented that:

“Employers feel ignored by HEIs. In many cases, they have few (if any) links with an HEI; and those employers – relatively few in number – who serve on university committees say their views on course design are disregarded”.

(Lowden et al. 2011:iii)

Other literature also supports that university and business collaboration needs considerable improvement, in order to provide a mix of academic and workplace knowledge, skills and competencies in the curricula (Crebert et al. 2004; Stringfellow et al. 2006). Yet there are barriers to consider, hindrances to university-business collaboration referred to in the literature include: the lack of a common language (Lees, 2002), different expectations and priorities (Lowden et al. 2011) and getting the right balance between work in a specific role versus broader work preparation (Crebert et al. 2004).

These issues explain the repeated calls for increased university-business collaboration in the policy documents (i.e. the Lambert review, 2003; The Leitch review, 2006; the Wilson review, 2012). This suggests that more could be done to foster partnerships between employers and universities in a bid to improve employability skills directly required by businesses.

Hogarth et al. (2006) undertook a review of the literature and conducted case studies with 74 employers across England to investigate employer and HEI collaboration. Hogarth et al. (2006) found that employer engagement was largely initiated by employers who were looking for graduates to employ and therefore recruitment was the driving force behind the initial liaisons. As this relationship developed however, other areas of collaboration evolved: guest lecturing, research and informing on the skills needed in industry. Of the 74 case studies, Hogarth et al. (2006) discovered that liaisons between employers and HEIs were diverse, took different approaches and depended upon the employer resources as to whether engagement with HEIs took place at all. Differences were found between the approaches to collaboration adopted between small and large employers, with the large employers tending to target what they considered to be the best HEIs (i.e. the older, more esteemed red brick institutions) and smaller organisations targeting local HEIs, if indeed any targeting was undertaken at all (Hogarth et al. 2006). This piece of literature therefore, provides further support in the differences between the employer groups. Furthermore, this also highlights employer preferences towards liaisons with red brick universities from which to recruit graduates.

In contrast to the previous literatures, CBI & Pearson (2012) found some rather favourable results from their research into employer and HEI collaborations. Results from the CBI & Pearson (2012) education and skills survey, highlighted, that 63% of their employer sample already had links with universities to some extent. These linkages included providing work placements, internships and contributing towards the degree programme itself in terms of co-curriculum design. Unfortunately, the CBI is a networking and lobbying organisation, which provides a voice for all of their employer members. These members are businesses who have a keen interest in representing the business voice and therefore are possibly more engaged with universities as they are more proactive in getting their voice across. The findings from the CBI research may not therefore be representative of the total population of employers.

Concluding the Employer Perspective

It is well documented in the literature that employers overall are, to varying extents, still not completely satisfied with the calibre of graduates entering the employment market. As a multifaceted group, the employer grievances are a complex issue. As a result, there is no universal distinction of what is satisfactory (or not) about the graduates being produced, given that the skill requirements and standards are specific to each employer.

However, one area of agreement across employers of all sizes and industries, concerns the importance of prior work experience. Individual employers differ on their views over the relevance and duration of such experience, but do agree that an element of work experience is required to enhance graduate employability.

Finally, when reviewing all of the employer literature, a possible argument arises that too much is now expected of graduates. These expectations were not present decades ago (Yorke, 2012) and if higher education provision does not change to address the new skill demands, the graduates being produced will not change either. The higher education perspective will be addressed next.

3.2.2 The HEI and Business School Perspective

There has been much in the literature detailing the employer perspective on what makes an employable graduate, especially regarding employer criticisms over graduate employability and preparedness for the workplace. Such criticisms have been aimed at HEIs, which include questions over the provision and delivery of industry required skills and the lack of uptake of HEIs to work in collaboration with employers.

Building on from the initial introduction of the HEI stakeholders in Chapter Two, this section will look at the perspective of the universities and business schools, on graduate employability enhancement and employability provision. An overview of the development of the HEI sector will first be provided, before moving on to specifically address employability provision within business higher education.

The Higher Education Sector

Higher education has grown both in popularity and size since the 1950s (Sunderland, 2008; Bolton, 2012; Morgan, 2012; HESA, 2012²; Tomlinson, 2012). Student participation rates in higher education have increased significantly over this time, increasing from 3.4% in 1950 to 47% in 2010, resulting in almost 2 million students now studying an undergraduate course at a higher education institution (Bolton, 2012; Morgan, 2012; HESA (2012²). Demand from students for higher education, has therefore led to the growth in numbers of institutions offering this level of education. According to the Times Higher Education (2009), there were 47 universities in the UK in 1980, yet by the academic year 2010/11, there were 165 publicly-funded UK HEIs (HESA, 2012²).

The increased growth in HEIs over the past 60 years has been attributed to increased affluence in the middle classes, secondary education reforms (i.e. increasing school leaving age from 12 to 16 in 1972) and local authority maintenance grants. The belief in human capital theory also significantly contributes to higher educations' increased demand and growth (Sunderland, 2008; Bolton, 2012; Tomlinson, 2012). Human capital will be discussed fully in section 3.4 of this chapter, but the theory positively correlates the amount of investment in people (via education and training) to benefits for overall health, society, organisations, productivity and ultimately a nation's economic performance (Schultz, 1961; Weisbrod, 1962; Nafukho et al. 2004).

As a consequence, there has been growing pressure since the late 1980's for higher education systems around the globe to play a more direct role in contributing towards economic growth (Harvey, 1999). This pressure has increased over the decades with policy documents explicitly making the link between education and economic prosperity: "*achieving world class skills is the key to achieving economic success and social justice in the new global economy*" (Leitch Review, 2006; 9).

In order to contribute towards economic growth, HEIs are therefore expected to produce graduates that will extend the skill base of the population (Harvey, 1999) and match industry skill requirements; both of which contribute towards a more prosperous economy. However as Knight & Yorke (2003) point out, these expectations of higher education were not present in the 1950s and therefore expectations of HEIs have grown. HEIs are now expected, by stakeholders such as government and employers, to increase the quantity of available human capital, which will have a beneficial effect on the economy. With such intensifying expectations, HEIs have been evolving their employability strategies to keep up with demand:

"In the 1990's, HE addressed the issue of graduate employability by focusing on the development of transferable skills in undergraduates. Now, the employability agenda is moving beyond transferable skills to include personal development planning (PDP), opportunities for work experience and improved careers guidance and planning"

(Gedye et al. 2004: 382).

The growth of expectations have become more prevalent since the turn of the century, when HEIs internationally have all received increasing attention over their role in developing increasingly employable graduates, that can contribute towards the economy (Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004/2005). The year 2000 also saw the introduction of employability performance indicators and in subsequent years, universities have had to make available more transparent, information pertaining to the employability of their graduates. This employability performance information was discussed in Chapter Two and included the DLHE survey, employability statements and key information sets (Harvey, 1999; Gedye et al. 2004; HEFCE 2011).

The transparency of such information is now of significant importance, given that students are becoming more meticulous in their university and course selections. Since the introduction of the higher fee structure in September 2012, most universities are charging the higher £9,000 rate and students are expecting that their investment in higher education will increase their employability. Given such a climate, Purcell et al. (2011) argue that HEIs must improve their operations and obtain a better understanding of employability stakeholder viewpoints. Purcell et al. (2011) also state, that HEIs need to better develop graduate employability skills for two reasons: firstly, to better meet the needs of employers and secondly, to enable graduates to reap a life-long return on their investment in higher education. Universities have already been attempting this and since the introduction of employability performance indicators in 2000, most institutions have developed and implemented an employability strategy (Rae, 2007). However, as employers continue to report concerns over the employability and skill development of graduates, universities are being questioned on the effectiveness of their employability strategies.

The next section will look specifically what employability provisions and initiatives, under the employability strategies, have been implemented in business schools.

The Business School

The growth of the business school is documented as one of the biggest success stories of higher education since the 1950s (Starkey et al. 2004; Williams 2010). Since the opening of the first university based Business School, the Wharton School at The University of Pennsylvania, in 1881 (Khurana, 2007), the twentieth century saw an exponential growth in the number and prominence of university based business schools. Williams (2010) reported that in 2010, there were more than 250,000 full-time business and management students in UK universities. This means that 15% of all HE students in the UK were studying a business and management programme.

The literature in this area demonstrates how the measure of business school success has been based on the growth in demand for business school services, rather than what business schools produce (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Wilson & Thomson, 2006; Starkey et al. 2004; Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007). If success was to be measured by their output, i.e. the business graduates, then the current success rate may come under scrutiny, as was raised in section 3.2.1. Employers' dissatisfaction with the standard of business graduates produced has huge implications, yet there is a severe lack of data surrounding the impact of business schools on their graduates (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Sleaf & Reed, 2006).

In addition, Starkey et al. (2004) provide a long list of specific concerns with business schools and education, which includes questions over the values, ethics and models used in business schools to deliver business and management education. As a result, these issues have led to doubts over business higher education and these have continued for decades (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007). What makes this situation so intriguing, is that given the growth and popularity of business schools over past decades, business schools have attracted little academic investigation. Pfeffer & Fong (2002), along with Starkey & Tiratsoo (2007), stress that despite the number of doubts which have arisen over the decades, so far, none have been adequately addressed. Such questions remain over the skills, knowledge and preparedness of business graduates to enter the labour market. The next section will therefore address the skills and initiatives used in business schools to enhance student and graduate employability.

Employability Provision in Business Schools

Since the introduction of the first employability performance indicators in the year 2000, institutions have, to a differing extent, created employability strategies to implement the delivery of employability skills on degree programmes. In addition, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published in early 2000, benchmark statements as part of a periodic review of all subjects studied at higher education institutions. These benchmark statements list the skills (transferable and subject specific), that all students should develop during their undergraduate studies. Employability skills, therefore, have been formally incorporated into the undergraduate curriculum since the year 2000. This attention to employability skills provision, Tomlinson (2012) argues, is something which will not be dampened by the increased tuition fees implemented in 2012.

Whilst it has been accepted that employability skills should be built into the curriculum, considerations have been made regarding the best ways this should be achieved. Debates have continued to ensue over whether the delivery of employability skills should be via bolt-on sessions or formally embedded into the curriculum. Bolt-on employability skills development involves running separate modules which just cover the skills element. Embedding skills means that they are integrated in the curriculum on a range of modules and delivered alongside academic skills. Lees (2002) argues that embedding skills is the preferred way to develop employability. However, others feel that embedding skills means that students are not fully aware of the skills they are developing (Dacre Pool & Sewell, n/d). Others argue that the decision to embed or bolt-on employability skills should be undertaken within the specific context of each curriculum, given the complexities involved (Yorke & Knight, 2006). As a result, business schools adopt their own approaches, meaning that skill provision on degree programmes often includes both the embedding of skills into the curriculum and the offering of bolt-on skills modules (Maher & Graves, 2005; Dacre Pool & Sewell, n/d).

However business schools chose to deliver skill development (embed or bolt-on), the QAA benchmark statements, which were revised in 2007, provide a list of transferable employability skills which should be developed during a business undergraduate degree programme. The table below details the specific employability skills which the QAA (2007) outline for general business and management undergraduate degrees:

3.2.2.a The QAA Skills for Business and Management Degrees

Business and management graduates should be able to demonstrate a range of cognitive and intellectual skills together with techniques specific to business and management including:	
Cognitive skills of critical thinking, analysis and synthesis	Effective problem solving and decision making
Effective communication, oral and in writing	Numeracy and quantitative skills including data analysis
Information technology for business	Effective self-management in terms of time, planning and motivation,
Effective performance, within a team environment including leadership	Project management skills
Self-reflection and self-awareness	Ability to conduct research into business and management issues
Interpersonal skills of effective listening, negotiating, persuasion and presentation	Sensitivity to diversity in terms of people, cultures, business and management issues

(Source: QAA, 2007; 3)

However, these skills given in table 3.2.2.a above, are not ranked in any order of priority or preference and similarly, no mention is made as to whether these skills should be embedded in the curriculum or delivered through bolt-on sessions. Furthermore, specific details regarding the exact level at which graduates should be proficient in these skills, are also omitted. However, what these QAA (2007) skills do confer, is what every business student should be covering as part of their degree course and should therefore be able to demonstrate all of the capabilities listed in the table to some extent.

The QAA (2007: 1) subject benchmark statements, however, are not prescriptive, i.e. individual business schools need only use these as a guide and *“decide which of their particular programme specifications are appropriate to this subject benchmark statement”*. How business schools use and adopt these QAA benchmark statements, will determine how and to what extent, students develop these skills on their business programme. This point is supported by Jameson et al. (2012) who highlights that incorporating basic key skills into the curriculum is not the most effective way to develop graduate employability; employer involvement in curriculum design and providing work placements is a more successful strategy. Those business schools who engage with employers will therefore enhance the employability of their graduates more than those who do not. However, the issue raised in the employers section earlier in this literature review, revealed that larger employers showed a preference for liaising with elite universities (Hogarth et al. 2006). The older red brick institutions, therefore, do not need to incorporate the same level of skills development into their curriculums, as they are more likely to secure employer involvement in curriculum design and the offering of work placements. This could explain why *“new universities have tended to address the ‘employability agenda’ with greater zeal”* (Yorke, 2004; 412).

Another issue linked to employer engagement, concerns business schools and their staff, which are too detached from the business professions they prepare the students for (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). This raises questions over the competency of staff in business schools to prepare business graduates for the world of work:

“We cannot imagine a professor of surgery who has never seen a patient, or a piano teacher who doesn't play the instrument, and yet today's business schools are packed with intelligent, highly skilled faculty with little or no managerial experience. As a result, they can't identify the most important problems facing executives and don't know how to analyze the indirect and long-term implications of complex business decisions. In this way, they short change their students and, ultimately society”

(Bennis & O'Toole, 2005:103).

The argument made here, is that academic staff in business schools lack the detailed knowledge and expertise of the logistics and practicalities of working in business professions. Instead, staff focus more on teaching the theory elements alongside undertaking their own academic research, both of which are not perceived as highly relevant by employers. As this knowledge cannot be taught by the academic staff, the only way for graduates to obtain this, is to undertake work experience as part of their degree.

Work experience is rated as extremely valuable by employers, as it provides students with the opportunity to develop skills directly related to the workplace, such as increased business and commercial awareness and the application of skills developed in education to a work environment. However, Gedye et al. (2004) point out that work placements and internships are quite rare in the UK, compared to places like America where they are very common. This is because not all universities in the UK offer 'sandwich' degrees (i.e. a degree sandwiched between a 12 month industrial placement) and the reason given for this is a lack of resources. Placements require time and money for both the initial start-up and continuity, via supervision of students on placements and maintaining employer relationships (Syer, 2012; Wilson, 2012). As a result, only a *“small number of universities in the UK provide the majority of sandwich placements”* (Wilson, 2012: 38) with 70% of placements being offered by just twenty of the HEIs (BIS, 2012).

Whilst sandwich courses are more widely available in subjects such as Business, compared to subjects such as Art and Design and Law (Bowes & Harvey, 1999; Syer, 2012), uptake of sandwich placements by students is still very low (Hogarth et al. 2006; Wilson, 2012). As a result, HEIs are experiencing pressures from policy makers to provide more sandwich degree placements and to provide students with more industry experience (Wilson, 2012; Matthews, 2012). To meet these demands however, HEIs must first establish links with employers, to obtain placements and work experience opportunities, which can then be offered to students as part of their programme. The next section will look at the current issues for university-business collaboration from the university perspective.

University-Business Collaboration

The issue of university and business collaboration was raised in the employers section of this literature review, which detailed the employer perspective on this matter. Here, the perspective of the HEI is assessed.

As explained in the employers section, the policy documents have long encouraged HEIs and businesses to foster a collaborative relationship, which will ultimately benefit the graduate. The idea being, that graduates would have more access to work experience and employers would be more involved in curriculum design. As a result of the policy demands, initiatives have been launched to help develop university and business collaborations.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England, between 2008 and 2011, ran a dedicated '*workforce development programme*' aimed specifically at developing new relationships between HEIs and employers (HEFCE, 2011). Another initiative, the '*Unite With Business*' project, commenced in 2010 and was partly funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This scheme involved funding work placements for students at six North-West HEIs at local SMEs (AGCAS, 2012). Furthermore, in 2012, The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) revealed plans for a National Centre for Universities and Business, which continues work in this area (HEFCE, 2012). Lastly, in May of 2012, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2012²) released a £100 million fund, specifically for encouraging collaborations between universities and business.

The work of such initiatives, projects and schemes, is proving worthwhile, as Wilson (2012) acknowledged that since the turn of the century, HEI and business collaboration has progressed significantly. Davis (2008) reports, that the majority of universities (9 out of 10), offer degree courses which have been specifically adapted for the needs of business and over 75% of HEIs actively work with employers on aspects such as curriculum design and skill provision. Wilson (2012) also highlights, that a large number of universities now engage employers in departmental advisory groups, which enables employers to contribute to future curriculum developments, departmental activities and research.

However, whilst progress has been made in the creation of partnerships and collaborations between HEIs and industry, Wilson (2012) states that the full potential of UK business–university collaboration is yet to be fulfilled. Literature by Stepping Higher (2008) revealed specific areas where improvements are needed. The Stepping Higher project was a collaborative piece of research, undertaken by Universities UK and CBI, into workforce development through employer-higher education partnerships. Whilst a significant majority of universities in this research stated that they, to some extent, had links with employers, some of the employers had negative points to make. The most common complaint was the time taken for HEIs to respond to their requests and the quality of these responses. Some employers received no response from universities and others, who did receive a response, found that the person of contact changed, resulting in inconsistencies. In contrast however, other employers stated that their relationship with HEIs was very positive. This research therefore highlights that engagement differs according to institution and individual university staff. Furthermore, a mismatch is evident as some employer expectations are not being met.

These findings are supported by research from Howells et al. (2012), which established that experiences varied significantly between employers. These authors carried out a large scale survey obtaining views from 400 firms in different regions of the UK, about collaboration with HEIs. With regard to employer size, the smaller employers reported more difficulties when liaising with HEIs, namely the resources taken to obtain contact or other information, which is not easily accessible. This research also found regional variations existed amongst employer experiences when engaging with HEIs. The employers in the North-West of England and in Wales, reported less engagement with HEIs than East of England employers. However, the employers in the East of England reported fewer benefits arising from such liaisons compared to employers in other regions.

Similarly, literature from McKinsey (2012) again found, that employers reported different levels of engagement with HEIs. Around a third of employers claim that they do not have any links with HEIs and for the two thirds who do, just under half of these employers find liaisons effective. The ineffective working relationships between HEIs and employers, means that HEIs have difficulty estimating the number of placements they can provide to students, which often leads to a deficit in the number of placements being offered. McKinsey (2012; 18) argues that: *“employers, education providers, and youth live in parallel universes. To put it another way, they have fundamentally different understandings of the same situation”*. The differing perspectives and possible differing levels of priority assigned to such aspects, means that Wilson (2012) has a founded point, in that more needs to be done to reach the full potential of university-business collaboration. Ultimately, the instances where university-business collaboration is ineffective, will have negative impacts upon all stakeholders involved.

Concluding the HEI Perspective

This section has addressed the employability viewpoint of the HEIs and addressed the skills and work experience opportunities that business curricula need to offer. There is resounding pressure upon HEIs to contribute towards economic success, which therefore means closer and more effective liaisons with employers are necessary. A collaborative partnership with employers will ultimately benefit the graduates, but, as this section has shown, barriers to university and business collaboration persist.

So far, this chapter has discussed the literature relating to both the employer and HEI perspectives of graduate employability. The next section will now move on to discuss the most neglected viewpoint in the graduate employability debates, the graduate perspective.

3.2.4 The Graduate Perspective

The employer and HEI sections above, have shown differences in approaches to the employability agenda, such as preparing graduates for the workplace, work experience during degree programmes and the transfer of skills from one context to another. Ascertaining the graduate perspective is therefore necessary to clarify some of the inconsistencies held between employers and HEIs. The graduate perspective however, is the viewpoint most often neglected in the employability debates (Nabi & Bagley, 1999; Harvey, 1999; Nabi, 2003; Shah et al. 2004; Sleep & Reed, 2006). Instead, priority is usually given to the perspectives of employers or policy makers. Furthermore, on the few occasions that graduate perspectives are researched, these are either in a single case study scenario (either one institution or from one discipline), or focus purely on the career destination after graduation (Nabi & Bagley, 1999; Woodley & Brennan, 2000; Tomlinson, 2007; Holmes, 2013). As Tomlinson (2007; 286) explains:

“There has been very little recent empirical work exploring the way in which students and graduates are beginning to understand and manage their employability in the context of recent higher education and labour market change”.

Previous empirical research into employability from the graduate perspective, has tended to focus on graduate destinations i.e. the jobs and types of employments which graduates enter. For example, The DLHE (Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education) survey is published annually on UK and EU graduate destinations six months after graduating. This is *“the central source for the collection and dissemination of statistics about publicly funded higher education in the UK”* (HESA, 2012). For the DLHE, data is collected from graduates by way of questionnaire, six months after graduation. Typically, the DLHE survey aims to collect quantitative data on how many new graduates have, at that point in time, entered employment and what that employment is (i.e. the type of work, the nature of the contract, graduate level and starting salaries etc.). If the graduate has not entered into employment, the survey aims to establish what other activity the graduate is currently undertaking e.g. further study, gap year or unemployed (HESA, 2004).

The DLHE is essentially a “snap shot” taken six months after the individual has graduated, to obtain mass scale statistics for each year’s graduates. HESA and individual universities publish this data and it is therefore readily and widely available. Third party organisations can then use this information to draw their own conclusions. For example, the UK’s graduate careers website ‘Prospects’, uses the DLHE raw data to produce the ‘*what do graduates do*’ resource, which is published annually on their website (What do graduates do, 2012).

Whilst the DHLE large scale research survey does, to some extent, investigate the activities which are undertaken once graduates leave university, it is still very limited in terms of obtaining the graduate perspective of employability. For example, literature from Shah et al. (2004:9) points out that “*to date, few studies have considered the perspectives of the graduates themselves on such aspects as transition to the workplace, skill requirements, or their reaction to the teaching of skills*”. This echoes sentiments expressed by Slep & Reed (2006), who feel that not enough is understood about graduate’s experiences of employment and how effective their university education was in providing the necessary skills and knowledge required for working life. More recently and more specific to the discipline of Business, Azevedo et al. (2012: 22) support that:

“In spite of growing concern from employers around the world regarding business graduates’ ability to meet current and future workplace demands, there has been little research addressing competency development within the context of undergraduate business education”

The graduate viewpoint of the skills they developed on their business degree programme and how their degree has enhanced employability, is a currently under researched area and is therefore of limited supply in the literature. Reasons for the lack of such literature are linked to the complexities of the concept of employability, which Chapter Two looked at in-depth. Woodley & Brennan (2000) point out that as a consequence of the rapid expansion of higher education, with increasing student and graduate numbers, the researching of graduate experiences, skill development and career trajectories, becomes more complex and multidimensional. Woodley & Brennan (2000) argue therefore that as the task of measuring graduate employability is multifaceted, research tends to concentrate on simplified samples (i.e. with small remits) or measure employability based on outcomes (i.e. career destinations).

Despite the complexities, some research does exist which has attempted to extract the graduate viewpoint, providing a useful insight into the graduate perspective. This literature will be examined in this graduate perspective section. Firstly however, a brief overview of student attitudes and trends in higher education will be discussed, before moving on to literature which details how graduates feel their employability is, or is not, enhanced by their student experience.

Student Attitudes and Trends

Figures show, that from the early 2000s onwards, numbers studying at university have increased significantly. The number of students graduating from higher education is now 17% higher than in 2002 (Universities UK, 2012). In addition, Business and Administrative studies were amongst the more popular courses, where numbers of graduates in this discipline have increased the most over the past 5 years (HESA, 2012).

In fact, business subjects in general, have been popular for some time and since the mid-nineties, Business degree disciplines have held (albeit varying) places in the top 10 lists of degree subjects of choice:

3.2.3.a Most Popular Degree Subjects in 1996 and 2006

	Top 10 in 2006	Top 10 in 1996
1	Law	Business Management
2	Design Studies	Law
3	Psychology	Computer Science
4	Management Studies	English
5	Business Studies	Psychology
6	Computer Science	Subjects related to Medicine
7	English	History
8	Medicine	Sociology
9	Sports Science	Biology
10	Social Work	(In joint place) PE / Medicine

(Source: Baker, 2006)

As table 3.2.3.a shows, Business subjects have remained within the top five most popular subjects since the mid-1990s. This is due to the change in attitude towards choosing a particular degree subject based upon the potential career prospects upon graduation. For example, the trend is to now make choices pragmatically, which will help graduates get a good job, rather than hedonistically, which is for the pure enjoyment of studying that subject (Rolfe, 2001; Gedye et al. 2004; Shah et al. 2004). The rationale for this shift in student orientation to now adopt a more pragmatic approach, is linked to three recent developments; the massification of Higher Education resulting from the Labour Party's Widening Participation agenda, the dramatic increase in university tuition fees and the current uncertain economic climate. Due to the massification of higher education, graduates already faced significant competition in the graduate jobs market; however, the current economic climate has exacerbated this situation further. Students are therefore choosing degree subjects which they believe will help them to fare better in a depressed economy with fewer jobs, which for many students, supports the selection of a Business degree.

Research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) involving a survey of 876 graduates, found that with the benefit of hindsight, one-third of the graduates surveyed would choose a different course to the one they studied. Graduates identified scientific, business-based and professional qualifications as their preferred replacement:

“A combination of the tight labour market, competition for graduate jobs and graduates taking longer to find work suggests that more recent graduates want something that relates directly to business and that will equip them with skills that are directly transferable into the workplace”

(CIPD, 2006: 6).

Graduates have become increasingly conscious of their higher education decisions and now make choices based on what they feel will give them an advantage when competing with others for jobs, thus giving them a return on their investment. These are turbulent times for higher education, as students seek the best option for themselves, given both the financial outlay and job circumstances they are faced with. For students and graduates, employability is now more important than ever and decisions about their future are taken very seriously. It is therefore imperative, that graduate perceptions of employability and how higher education has enhanced this, is fully understood and documented. Whilst literature on this is not widespread, the next section will look at graduate employment rates as there is much data available in the literature on graduate destinations.

Employability and Employment

At present, graduate employability in the UK is measured using employment information obtained by the DLHE survey (HESA, 2012). The concept of employability concerns more than just obtaining work, hence this simplistic way to measure employability has been extensively criticised as it lacks details over what helped the graduate to acquire the work in the first place (Harvey & Knight, 2003). Despite such criticisms however, the use of employment outcome as a measure of employability remains.

An example of the data produced by the DLHE survey is given in the table below. This shows the five degree subjects with the highest unemployment rates, reported by the 2011 graduates, six months after graduation:

3.2.3.b 2011 DLHE Unemployment Data

	2011 Graduate from the discipline:	Percentage Unemployed 6 months After graduation
1	Computer science	14.3%
2	Mass communications and documentation	12.4%
3	Creative arts & design	11.9%
4	Engineering & technology	10.6%
5	Business & administration studies	10.4%
	Average of all disciplines	9.2%

(Source: HEUK Introduction, 2010/11, 2012)

Whilst business disciplines are amongst the most popular subjects to study, they are also in the top five disciplines to experience the highest unemployment rates six months after graduation. The average unemployment of all disciplines which DLHE reported on in 2011 is 9.2%. At 10.4% therefore, Business and Administration subjects resulted in higher than average unemployment rates six months post-graduation, for that cohort. The high popularity of this discipline, could explain the higher than average unemployment rate, given that the more Business graduates there are, the more competition there will be amongst them.

Additionally, the 9.2% unemployment rate is a slight increase on the previous year's figure. For the 2010 graduates, the unemployment rate six months post-graduation was just under 9% (Vasagar, 2011). The situation has therefore deteriorated since the previous year. Due to the recession, job cuts and previous graduates struggling to find work, new graduates have ended up competing with past cohorts for jobs; thus compounding the problem.

For many graduates however, it is not just about getting a job; the type and level of that employment is also important. Given that there are not enough graduate level jobs to meet demand (Nabi, 2003), the phenomenon of 'under-employment' or 'over-education' have become more widespread (Futuretrack, 2012). Green & Zhu (2010: 24) define over-qualification as *"a state of disequilibrium, whereby workers possess excess educational qualifications relative to those their jobs require."* This situation is a result of graduates being unable to secure graduate level employment and they therefore arrive in non-graduate level jobs; they become GRINGO's (Graduates In Non-Graduate Occupations). The emergence of underemployment, or GRINGO's, was cited by both Nabi in 2003 and Blenkinsopp & Scurry in 2007. Since the time of their writing, a sequence of subsequent events (the 2008 global recession, the crisis in the Eurozone and the general increase in university graduates), has exacerbated the situation for recent graduates:

"It emerged that the number of ex-students in "non-graduate" jobs such as office juniors or shelf stackers has soared by almost 3,500 – six per cent – this year compared with 2011".

(Paton, 2012)

Paton (2012) reported that 61,395 of the 2012 graduates were employed in non-graduate level jobs, which included: sales, customer service, call centre and administrative positions.

Consideration is also given to the duration of the GRINGO phenomenon. Literature from Futuretrack (2012) provides key features which are typical of either increased or decreased likelihoods of working in non-graduate occupations for more than nine months. The research found that those who graduated from more elite universities, achieved a first-class grade and whose parents also held a degree, were *less* likely to be in a GRINGO role for nine months or longer. Interestingly, those who graduated from low tariff entry point universities, obtained a 2.2 classification and studied subjects such as Business and Administration, were *more* likely to be in a GRINGO role for longer than nine months. Whilst this criterion is not fixed, it does give an indication of those graduates who are more likely to end up in non-graduate employment for more than nine months.

Of particular interest is the type of higher education institution attended, as those who graduated from low tariff entry point universities, were more likely to remain in non-graduate employment after nine months, in contrast to those who graduated from the more elite establishments.

To support this point, High Fliers (2013) researched the UK's top 100 employers and found that these particular employers were most likely to recruit graduates from elite universities. Employers showed a preference for just twenty UK HEIs; this included all but two of the Russell Group Universities and all were higher entry tariff pre-1992 institutions. Graduates from the likes of Warwick, Manchester, Cambridge and Oxford universities, to name just a few, were targeted by the top UK employers and they were therefore less likely to end up in non-graduate level employment.

Whilst GRINGO roles are not ideal for any graduate, Futuretrack (2012) research showed that over 70% of graduates reported that they were satisfied with their future career options, even if they were not satisfied with their current employment. Longer term career prospects with a degree were therefore seen more positively. Furthermore, Walker (2012) highlighted that 96% of graduates were contented by acquiring their degree and institutions also agree with this outlook. For example, ACGAS (The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services) support that despite current labour market conditions, it is *"still more beneficial to be a graduate than not as they move up the ladder relatively quickly"* (Paton, 2012).

However, the long term effects of GRINGOs are still uncertain (Green & Zhu, 2010) as not all of the graduates will move up the career ladder. Elias and Purcell writing in 2004, reported that five years after graduation around 15% of UK graduates remained in non-graduate level jobs. The economic conditions are currently worse than those experienced in 2004. A more timely analysis of this issue, reveals that of recent graduates *"40% [are] failing to get graduate-calibre posts more than two years after leaving education, around twice the proportion of their peers a decade earlier"* (Walker, 2012).

Furthermore, there is concern that once a graduate becomes under-employed, i.e. is in a non-graduate level job, their skills are underutilised, which they may never recover from. For example, Nabi (2003) found that under-employed graduates were paid less, developed fewer skills and were then less able to apply for promotion when compared with their graduate-level employed counterparts.

Given the increasing phenomenon of graduates in non-graduate employments, the next section addresses whether or not a degree enhances employability.

Does a Degree Enhance Employability?

As previously discussed, measures of employability focus upon the graduate destination, i.e. whether they are employed or not after graduation and what level of employment they have secured (graduate level or not). However, as defined in Chapter Two, employability is not just about acquiring work, other aspects in addition to acquiring work which are necessary to classify an individual as employable. These include: a range of skills, personal attributes, knowledge, experience and the ability to not just gain, but to maintain employments (Hillage & Pollard 1998; Yorke & Knight 2003). To be employable therefore, graduates must have more than just the ability to get a job, they must also display a range of employability skills. To obtain the graduate perspective of their employability and employability development, the relevant literature will now be reviewed.

Nabi & Bagley (1999) obtained 143 survey responses from graduates across six degree disciplines (which included Business) at one higher education institution. The survey contained a list of 25 transferable skills and graduates had to rate each in terms of their importance and ability. Although this was only a single case study research design, which means generalisations are not possible, a trend was found whereby graduates rated the importance of skills higher than their ability in them. This led the authors to conclude, that graduates reported a deficiency in their employability skills and the lowest rated skill in terms of ability was IT proficiency.

In contrast to Nabi & Bagley (1999), Mason et al. (2003) adopted an interview approach to graduates from five subject areas: Biological Sciences, Business Studies, Computer Science/Studies, Design Studies and History. These authors found that graduates across all of the five subject areas, reported an emphasis on employability skills during their degree programme, which overall were in harmony with the requirements of their current employment. There were two exceptions to this: presentation skills and networking and liaising with clients. Graduates reported that presentation skills were carried out extensively at university, yet this was not a commonly needed skill in the workplace. Secondly, graduates highlighted a need for networking and liaising skills, which was largely neglected during their degree programmes (Mason et al. 2003).

In agreement with the findings from Mason et al. (2003), Futuretrack (2012) found that the majority of the graduates (75%), reported that they possessed the right knowledge and skills that employers required. Futuretrack (2012) sought graduate views on the extent to which different skills had been developed on their courses and their current employer demands for these skills. Of the graduates questioned, 62% were using the skills developed on their course in their current employment. For the majority of these graduates, their degree and university experiences had developed the relevant skills and had therefore contributed towards the enhancement of their employability. There was a minority of graduates (38%) however, who expressed some concerns over skill development mismatches which are detailed in the table below.

3.2.3.c Skill Development at University versus Employers Demands

	Level of demand from their employers	Feel they developed on their course
Spoken communication	High	Not explicitly
Team-working	High	Not explicitly
Time management	High	Not explicitly
Numeracy	High	No
Entrepreneurial skills	High	No
Research skills	Low	No

(Source: Futuretrack, 2012)

A minority of graduates reported that spoken communication, team-working and time management skills, whilst included in their studies, were not explicitly developed at university, but were in high demand by their employers. Graduates also felt that numeracy and entrepreneurial skills, whilst in high demand from their employers, were not covered sufficiently during their degree programme with few opportunities provided for developing these skills adequately. Furthermore, graduates felt that research skills were neither demanded by employers nor sufficiently covered by their degree programme.

Other recent research into graduate skills and employability includes the work undertaken by Azevedo et al. (2012). These authors addressed business graduates' competencies and with the assistance of employers, compiled a list of eight competencies which were deemed highly valuable in the work environment;

1. Influencing and persuading
2. Teamwork and relationship building
3. Critical and analytical thinking
4. Self and time management
5. Leadership
6. Ability to see the bigger picture
7. Presentation skills
8. Communication skills

Employers and graduates alike agreed that these eight skills were necessary for graduates' current and future performance in their careers. Graduates were then asked whether they felt they possessed these skills. Of the graduates, 63.4% either strongly agreed or agreed that they were competent and capable in these eight areas. The remaining graduates (just over a third of the sample), considered themselves to be deficient in these skills and therefore, felt that they had not developed the skills deemed necessary for the workplace. Given that the employers in this sample regard these eight skill areas as highly valuable, for around a third of these graduates, their degree has not enhanced their employability.

Contrary to Azevedo et al. (2012), Mason et al. (2003) found that many graduates believed themselves to be over-skilled for the work they were doing. In their current employment, the majority of graduates felt that they were not fully utilising the skills and knowledge developed at university. The graduates reported that their skills were at a higher level than that required for the job they were currently doing. Whilst for some, this may mean that their university experience had overly developed such skills, some of these responses may have come from graduates employed in non-graduate level employments.

Moreover, from their research of graduates in 2011, the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU, 2012: 1) found that the vast majority of graduates (80%), felt they possessed the right skills sought by employers. As such, they felt that their overall university experience had made them more employable. However, 10% of the graduates felt that whilst their degree had helped them to develop skills, this had not made them more employable. Another 6% said that they did not have the necessary skills required by employers. In line with the prevailing economic conditions, 84% reported that it was *“more difficult than ever to find work.”*

The literature shows that graduates have expressed differing opinions over whether their degree has enhanced their employability. The graduate literature also identifies discrepancies between the skills developed at university and those skills required by employers in the workplace. However, studying for a degree and the university experience do not solely contribute towards enhancing graduate employability; work experience is also a vital element, which will be discussed next.

Work Experience

As discussed in the employer section, the term 'work experience' encompasses a range of forms, including, but not exclusive to: placements, internships, part-time, casual work and volunteering (Prospects, 2011; The OU, 2012). Differences also occur in the duration of work experiences, which can range from 10 weeks to 12 months (Lowden et al. 2011). There are also other variations on aspects such as levels of responsibility, pay and relevance (NACE, 2012).

Mason et al. (2003) point out that for Business disciplines, formal course-related work experience is more commonplace compared to other subjects and a wide selection of research exists which highlights the many benefits to be gained by graduates who undertake work experience:

- demonstrate a better understanding of the work environment
- hold more accurate expectations about the work place
- have experience of applying theory to a 'real-life' context
- see improved academic performance on return from their placement
- develop directly relevant skills
- fare much better in the job market post-graduation

(Greenbank, 2002; Mason et al. 2003; Little & Harvey, 2006; Andrews & Higson, 2008).

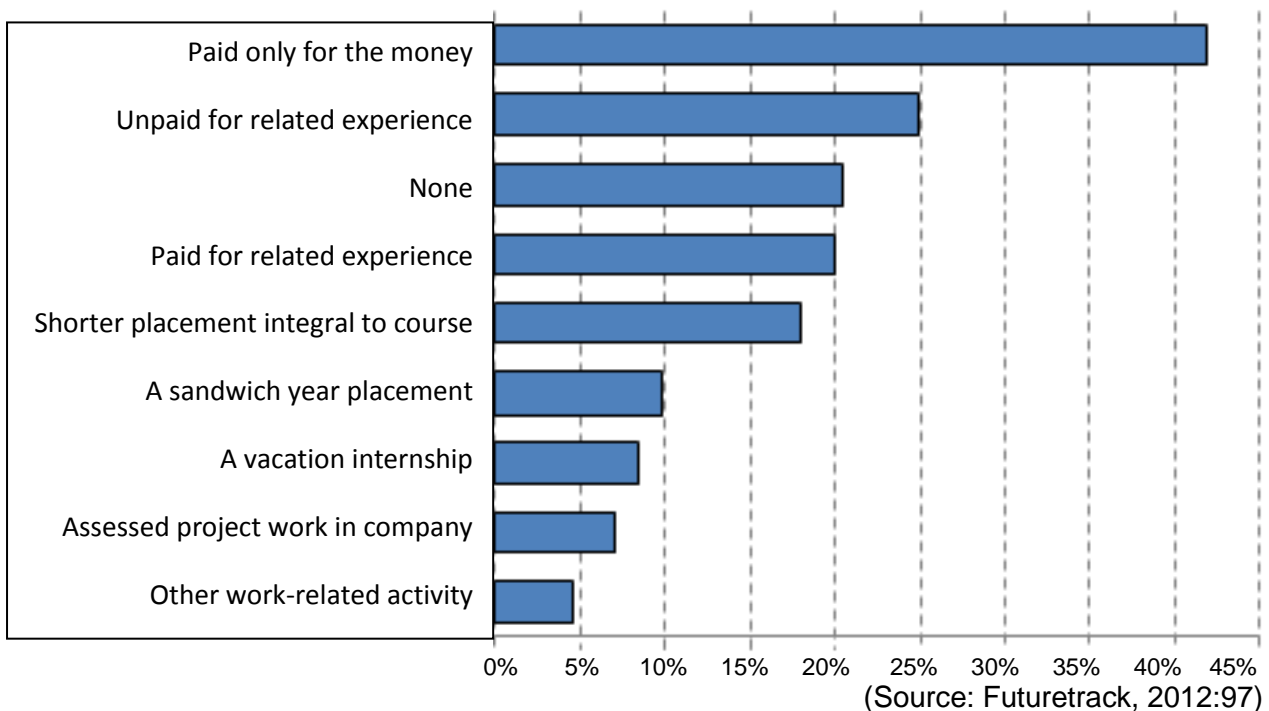
Yet despite the numerous benefits which result, many students do not engage with work experience during their studies. Across all degree subjects, the average number of students who undertake a placement at university is very low, as illustrated by HEFCE (2009: 2):

"Of the 203,275 students who started a full-time first degree course in 2002-03 and went on to gain a first degree within five years, 4 per cent did a period of study abroad, whereas 8 per cent did a placement"

To compound this issue further, the number of students who take a placement in the UK has declined (Mason, et al. 2003; Little & Harvey, 2006; Blake & Brooks, 2012; Syer, 2012). Whilst this phenomenon is seen more widely in post-92 institutions, pre-92 institutions have also witnessed this declining trend (Walker & Ferguson, 2010).

Although student uptake of a 12 month work placement during a degree is low, research from Futuretrack (2012), displayed in the chart below, shows that students do undertake a variety of other forms of work experience during their studies:

3.2.3.d Student Work Experience Uptake



As the chart shows, the most common type of experience undertaken is work purely for the money, i.e. it is not undertaken because it offers experience related to a future career. Futuretrack (2012) found that apart from those who engaged in no experience at all, several students undertook more than one type of work experience during their studies. The chart also shows that a 12 month sandwich placement, as a formal part of the degree, is not a popular choice amongst students.

Walker & Ferguson (2010) undertook some research to establish why students opted out of undertaking a 12 month placement during their degree. Students commonly stated that they either could not find the right type of placement, that they thought their degree was long enough without adding a placement year or that they already had some form of other work experience. Interestingly, around half of the students stated that if the placement duration had been shorter, or over the summer months, they may have considered undertaking this experience. This student viewpoint unfortunately contrasts with the employer perspective. For employers, the longer the duration of work experience, the more valuable it is regarded.

Other research from Blackwell, Bowes & Harvey (2001) found slightly different results. In their study, less than half of the graduates undertook work experience, however, many did state that they were interested in work experience, but could not acquire any. Unfortunately, some graduates had tried unsuccessfully to secure some work experience, as they could see its value and importance, but they felt few opportunities were available to them. This is something which universities are keen to address with current and new students. With the increased university tuition fees in 2012-13, many universities are further developing their employability strategies as a way to add value to the degree and attract more students (Dalziel, 2012). The ability to offer more work experience opportunities to students, is one way to do this, although it does rely upon greater employer and HEI collaboration.

There are however, arguments over whether there are enough placements available to offer students. For example, High Fliers (2013), in their annual review of the graduate market, found that during 2013 only 57% of the employers in their research provided a sandwich degree placement of 6-12 months. Of the same sample, half of the employers claimed to offer internships longer than 3 weeks in duration, which could be undertaken by students over the holiday periods. However, 16% of employers offered no formal paid work experience to students. Reasons for not offering work experience included employer hesitations over the work and resources involved in supervising a placement student in their workplace (Syer, 2012).

Whilst the number of employers offering formal placements have been growing over the years (Briggs & Daly, 2012; High Fliers, 2013), supply is still not meeting demand, given the mass participation in higher education.

The literature has demonstrated that graduates have differing views towards, and differing levels of engagement with, work experience. The literature also shows that work experience is rated very highly amongst employers and those graduates without any, will suffer as a consequence. However, this is not the case for all graduates from all universities. As highlighted in previous section, larger employers tend to engage more with the elite establishments, as they are keen to recruit graduates from more prestigious institutions. This increased employer contact, may result in a larger number of work experience opportunities being offered to those studying at elite institutions. Tomlinson (2012:417) reported that those who graduated from prestigious universities, such as those which are pre-1992 institutions and belong to the esteemed Russell Group association, were more likely to achieve higher earnings post-graduation and be in "*high reward occupations*".

Reasons why graduating from elite universities was advantageous to employability are twofold; the social and cultural capital gained and employer biases towards graduates from such institutions (Tomlinson, 2012). Tomlinson's (2012) argument is supported by the research of High Fliers (2013), which found that the top UK graduate recruiters targeted just a small selection of HEIs. Employers therefore, prefer graduates from elite institutions and thus direct their marketing communications exclusively towards these audiences. This focus on the esteemed institutions, is believed to be based on their reputations and has been labelled "*reputational capital*" (Tomlinson, 2012: 417). There is an argument therefore, that employability is also enhanced by the institution from which a student graduates.

Summary of the Graduate Perspective

The literature supports the argument that the economic climate, coupled with the massification of HE, has had a detrimental effect upon graduate employability. This means that graduates now need to demonstrate a wide range of skills and experience, in order to be employable. Enhancing employability is now of greater importance to ensure success in the current climate. However, the literature has supported a caveat; those graduating from elite institutions fare better in the employability stakes, than those do not.

Thus far the graduate, employer and HEI literature has been reviewed and now the fourth and final stakeholder, the policy makers, will be addressed.

3.3 A Review of the Government Policy Literature

This section will analyse the employability agenda as driven by policy makers. In their documents, policy makers have explicitly linked higher education skills development, employability and economic growth. Whilst reference to the concept of employability was first made in the Robbins report in 1963, it was not until the turn of the century that the notion of graduate employability gained momentum. Due to its perceived links with human capital, policy makers argue that enhancing graduate employability increases the supply of knowledge workers required in the current knowledge economy:

"Policy continues to depict graduates as being an elite social and occupational group who will access a wage premium and fulfil their potential through careers as 'knowledge workers'."

(Tomlinson, 2007; 286)

The onset of the global recession in 2008 did little to dampen the employability agenda, which remains one of the top priorities for policy makers today. For example, in 2012, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned a project with AGCAS and AGR, to research the graduate labour market. This research, due to complete in the summer of 2013, is to provide a deeper understanding of the issues involved and interestingly, this work includes researching the much neglected graduate perspective (AGCAS, 2012²).

The turbulent economic climate of recent years and the need for the UK to compete more effectively in international markets, has only added to policy makers growing emphasis on the employability agenda. Chapter Two earlier in this thesis, provided a background to the perspective of policy makers and the relevant policy documents. This section will now build on from that initial background and will perform a content review of more recent policy literature.

3.3.1 Four Policy Documents

To review the political literature of graduate employability, policy documents from the year 2010 will be analysed. This analysis aims to identify the salient employability-related elements outlined in the documents to decipher the perspective of policy makers. Policy documents from the year 2010 have been targeted specifically, as this coincides with the change of government from the previous Labour party to the new coalition government. This analysis therefore, focuses upon the more recent developments in the graduate employability area.

The coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats succeeded over the Labour party and assumed political control in May 2010 (Wintour, 2010). The policy documents analysed in this section will be from the year 2010 to date, therefore covering the agenda of the current ruling coalition government. A total of four documents which pertain to the issue of employability, are included for analysis, which includes both independent reports commissioned by the government, policy papers and research reports (listed in table 3.3.1.a).

3.3.1.a The Four Policy Documents Included for Analysis

Policy Doc.	Title of policy document	Publication Date	Policy document type
1.	The Browne report: Securing a Sustainable future for higher education (Browne, 2010)	October 2010	Independent report commissioned by the government
2.	Supporting Graduate Employability: HEI Practice in Other Countries (BIS, 2011 ²)	June 2011	Research paper
3.	Higher education: students at the heart of the system (BIS, 2011)	June 2011	White policy paper
4.	A Review of Business–University Collaboration (Wilson, 2012)	February 2012	Independent report commissioned by the government

A description of each document will be provided below before moving on to analyse the content of each piece of literature, with interpretations from this analysis made at the end of this section.

The Browne Report: Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education

Although the Browne report was commissioned by the Labour party in 2009 prior to the ascent of the coalition government as the ruling party, this policy document was published in October 2010, five months after the coalition government came to power. The coalition government later acted on the recommendations of this document and therefore this policy paper will be included in the analysis.

The Browne report was commissioned to make recommendations regarding how HEIs should proceed given their growth, with particular emphasis being attached to finance and world class teaching quality. Recommendations involved the removal of government funding, thus passing responsibility for full university costs onto students and HEIs. This new approach, Browne suggested, would elicit increases in competition amongst HEIs, which would encourage improvements in HEIs quality.

The government agreed with the Browne report recommendations and a radical change in higher education funding structures followed.

Supporting Graduate Employability: HEI Practice in Other Countries

The second paper, links to the issue of global competitiveness. This government-commissioned research paper reported on the data collected from HEIs in 25 countries, regarding their approaches to enhancing graduate employability. These findings were then compared to UK developments.

The research found that the UK had demonstrated many areas of best practice with regards to the development of graduate employability, but it also identified areas for improvement. To address these concerns, a set of recommendations were made, which interestingly began with the need to establish a universal definition of 'the term employability'. Further recommendations included the need for all universities, not just most, to create and implement an employability strategy. The recommendations outlined in this document, were mostly directed at HEIs, which involved best practice methods for improving graduate employability.

Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System

The third paper included for analysis, is the first white paper produced by the Coalition Government relating to higher education. This policy document sets out the reforms that the new government were to implement, which includes two main elements: a funding reform and a renewed focus upon the enhancement of the student experience.

Firstly, the document outlined funding reforms involving a new fees structure, whereby universities could charge students between £6,000 and £9,000 per year. Secondly, an appeal for universities to enhance the student experience was called for, which highlighted the need for greater business-university collaborations. A specific review on this final element was to follow; which became The Wilson Review.

The Wilson Review: A Review of Business–University Collaboration

The Wilson review of business and university collaboration is an update of the work from the Lambert Review (2003). The Wilson Review however, was concerned with business and university collaboration under the current economic climate. Overall, the objective is for the UK to become an international leader for business–university collaboration, thus be at the forefront of producing graduates with the necessary skills for business.

To achieve this aim, The Wilson Review outlines the actions and improvements which need to take place following an agenda for change.

3.3.2 Policy Document Analysis

The purpose of analysing the policy documents is to gain an understanding of the political perspective on graduate employability. This analysis will attempt to uncover the reasons behind the drive from policy makers on the graduate employability agenda.

The analysis of the policy documents will be performed by undertaking a content analysis. Content analysis is a data reduction technique *“that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text”* Weber (1990:9). Furthermore, Stemler (2001) highlights that the principal feature of content analysis involves the undertaking of a word-frequency count. The policy documents will therefore, be searched for a common set of criteria to determine the occurrence of certain words or phrases in each. However, Stemler (2001) also states that this is not the only aspect of a content analysis; the contexts in which the words or phrases appear also need to be taken into consideration. The context of the words/phrases in the policy documents will thus be acknowledged, in order to compliment the word frequency analysis.

The content analysis of the policy documents allows for trends, reasoning and prevalence of issues to be identified, which will establish the policy maker’s perspective. Eight key words and phrases were identified and these were searched for within each of the four policy documents to determine their frequency. Before reporting upon the frequency however, the context within which the words and phrases appeared was checked to ensure the meaning was correct. Table 3.3.2.a overleaf, shows the eight key words and phrases sought within each of the policy documents and the frequency of occurrences reported.

3.3.2.a Content Analysis of the Policy Documents

Policy Doc.	key Word/Phrase							
	Graduate Employability/skills	Skills Gap/shortages	Placement/Work Experience	HEI Role/performance/evaluation	Business-University collaboration	Matching/Employer needs	Human Capital/Link to economic growth	International reputation/competition pressures
1.	6	15	7	18	7	37	47	19
2.	28	4	46	152	37	33	24	38
3.	10	7	21	24	33	23	15	17
4.	30	14	71	30	138	42	81	41
Total	74	40	145	224	215	135	167	115

Policy Document Key	
1.	The Browne report: Securing a sustainable future for higher education (Browne, 2010)
2.	Supporting Graduate Employability: HEI Practice in Other Countries (BIS, 2011)
3.	Higher education: students at the heart of the system (BIS, 2011 ²)
4.	A Review of Business–University Collaboration (Wilson, 2012)

3.3.3 Interpretation of the Content Analysis

Whilst the content analysis makes it difficult to comment upon the meanings and weightings allocated to certain elements contained within these policy documents, it can reveal how frequently key words and phrases appear and in what context. The analysis of the four policy documents published under the coalition government, revealed two salient elements which occurred more frequently than the other graduate employability aspects; the role of the HEIs (224 counts) and business-university collaboration (215 counts).

The Role of HEIs

The role of HEIs, together with their performance and evaluation, were prevalent in all four of policy documents. However, the 'Supporting Graduate Employability: HEI Practice in Other Countries' (BIS, 2011²) document, made the most reference to the role of HEIs in the graduate employability agenda and the importance of this. This document in particular, questioned HEI endeavours to develop graduates' high level skills and felt that more could be done to improve this:

"Whilst 91% of UK careers staff felt that academic staff shared responsibility for employability skills, involvement is often limited. It is important to ensure that the involvement of academic staff is widened so there is strong engagement in the development and delivery of employability skills within the curriculum" (BIS, 2011; 8)

The role of HEIs was particularly highlighted, due to the emphasis place upon human capital theory. HEIs were viewed by all the documents to be a key driver of economic prosperity:

"A university provides economic, environmental and cultural benefits to its community and, critically, should play a central role in rebalancing the economy of a community under stress and promoting growth in one that is prosperous" (Wilson, 2012; 73)

Linking to the great expectations of HEIs to provide a high level of employability skill provision, was the need for improved liaisons these establishments had with industry. This was seen as another important development when striving for economic growth.

Business-University collaboration

The policy documents only reported briefly on the divergence between graduate skills and employer requirements. However, the frequency level does not always equate to the associated importance level and references about skills shortages did still occur:

“A ‘gap’ still exists between the level of skills sought by employers and the extent to which graduates meet those expectations” (BIS, 2011; 10)

Given such skills shortages and the perceived link between high level relevant skills and economic growth, the policy documents all favoured enhanced collaborations between HEIs and employers:

“Although around 80 per cent of universities say they are engaged in collaborative arrangements with employers, this can still be improved” (BIS, 2011²; 39)

Increased collaboration between universities and businesses is believed to accelerate the development of graduate’s skills, as employers are more directly involved and can therefore impart their preferred skills. It is these high level employability skills, which the documents argue will contribute towards improved productivity and overall economic growth, which is critical during turbulent economic times.

Overall, economic growth will enable the UK to compete more effectively on an international scale and this was a recurring theme reiterated in these policy documents.

3.3.4 Concluding the Political Perspective

The policy document analysis supports much of what was iterated in the previous literature about links to HCT, desires to increase the UK’s international competitiveness, pressures upon HEIs to improve their performance and repeated calls for businesses and institutions to work together more closely. The government perspective, therefore, holds that HEIs should be more attune to the needs of employers and businesses in order to promote economic growth. Whilst HEIs are aware of this pressure, the previous HEI section revealed a number of barriers they must overcome to meet this government objective. Furthermore, the removal of government funding and grants has made the plight by HEIs even more difficult (DFE, 2010).

As Human Capital Theory is at the heart of the government perspective, the next section will detail this and discuss how it applies to the concept of graduate employability.

3.4 Human Capital Theory Literature

This section will review the theory of human capital which was the theory chosen for this thesis. In reviewing this, an alternative theory will be discussed, and its relevance appraised, before moving on to detail fully the Human Capital Theory (HCT) literature and its links to higher education and graduate employability.

3.4.1 A Rationale for Adopting HCT

The economic theory of human capital will be the underlying theory for this research, as the links between investment in graduate employability and economic prosperity have been explicitly cited by policy maker stakeholders, as well as being an implicit theme in the graduate employability research (Woodhall, 2001; Little, 2003; Brown et al. 2008; Sunderland, 2008; Brown et al. 2011; Tomlinson, 2012;). In summary, HCT correlates investment in individuals, via education and training, with increased economic prosperity (Schultz, 1961; Weisbrod, 1962; Becker, 2002; Nafukho et al. 2004). HCT is therefore strongly allied to the higher education system as HEIs have a greater responsibility for the development of knowledge, skills and understanding in the future workforce.

An alternative theory however, is presented by the sociological field; Bourdieu's Forms of Capital. Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher who, in 1986, argued that money was not the only form of capital and that other forms existed, such as: cultural, social, linguistic and symbolic forms (Jenkins, 1992; Biggart, 2002). Elements of Bourdieu's theory are applicable to this thesis, namely the particular discussions made around cultural and social capital.

Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, states that a cultural hierarchy is present in society which correlates to one's education and social class. For example, Bourdieu details three types of culture: legitimate, middle-brow and popular, which are thought to relate to the different social class levels (Jenkins, 1992). Exertions persist between the cultural levels, as individuals strive for social positions. Education is identified by Bourdieu as one of the ways to increase competitive advantage in this context (Jenkins, 1992).

To apply Bourdieu's theory to this thesis, the knowledge and skills acquired by graduates during their time in higher education, ultimately lead to a higher status in society, thus graduate employability is enhanced via a higher social standing.

Secondly, social capital refers to a form of capital being obtained through connections, memberships and relationships with institutions, organisations, networks and groups of people. Individuals "*are sought after for their social capital and, because they are well known, are worthy of being known*" (Richardson, 1986: 52). Specifically for this research, the social capital element would relate the enhancement of a graduate's employability to the network of individuals and groups they know, thus accessing certain resources they would not otherwise be able to obtain.

Whilst both of these forms of capital are applicable and relevant to this thesis, the adoption of Bourdieu's theory would take the study in a sociological and philosophical direction, which is not the intended aim of the research. Additionally, whilst cultural and social capital is of relevance to graduate employability, it does not encompass the context of a recession, which forms the basis of this research. In contrast, HCT explicitly states that deliberate investment in one's education translates to a form of capital used to increase productivity, economic growth and prosperity (Schultz, 1961; Weisbrod 1962; Nafukho et al, 2004). Utilising the HCT therefore, enables an analysis of graduate employability within the context of an economic downturn and subsequent recovery.

Finally, HCT forms the fundamental basis to the maker's viewpoint, which explicitly links graduate human capital to increased economic growth. In order to fully appraise the viewpoint of the policy makers therefore, HCT was used to maintain consistency.

In summary, whilst Bourdieu offered a relevant theory, the application to the research is limited. Bourdieu's Forms of Capital does not allow for the context of a recession and due to its grounding, the application of Bourdieu would result in the production of a more sociological thesis. Bourdieu's theory was therefore rejected in favour of the adoption of Human Capital Theory. Now that the implemented theory has been justified, a background to what this theory consists of will now be presented.

3.4.2 Introduction to HCT

Human Capital Theory is an economic principle devised by Schultz in 1961, yet he did not explicitly define this; instead he explains that HCT is a process of deliberate investment in developing skills and knowledge that becomes a form of capital. Nafukho et al. (2004) expands on this and details how the skills and knowledge an individual develops result in them becoming a more productive worker. This in turn has benefits for their employer and ultimately, the economy. Other authors writing in the field of human capital also agree and advocate that HCT supports a strong correlation between the amount of investment in people and the numerous consequential benefits for overall health, society, organisations, productivity and the economy. As Weisbrod (1962:107) explains:

“Schooling benefits many persons other than the student. It benefits the student’s future children, who will receive informal education in the home; and it benefits neighbours, who may be affected favourably by the social values developed in children by the schools and even by the quietness of the neighbourhood while the schools are in session. Schooling benefits employers seeking a trained labour force; and it benefits the society at large by developing the basis for an informed electorate”.

As advocated by Schultz, Weisbrod and Nafukho et al, schooling and education are paramount in the success of the individual first and foremost, followed by indirect benefits to the wider society. Possessing this education becomes a valuable asset to the individual, it is a form of capital; human capital.

Although the term ‘human capital’ was formulated in 1961, the inspiration for this theory had been present for some time; dating back to Adam Smith who put forward the notion that similar to investment in machinery and physical capital, investment in education and training would also lead to a form of capital (Smith, 1904). Schultz, and other authors such as Becker, then developed this theory at length over the latter half of the 20th century and gave rise to its popularity. As a result, a growth of research and publications in the field of human capital occurred throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Woodhall, 2001).

Speaking in 2002, Gary Becker maintains that this theory is still relevant in today's society:

"I like to call the last part of the 20th Century, and the beginning certainly of the 21st Century, the Age of Human Capital. Nowadays a primary determinant of a country's standard of living is how well it succeeds in utilizing the skills, knowledge and health of its people. These skills, knowledge and health are necessarily developed through investment in the people, and are used in an economic environment, in a sound structure, the market structure".

With the growing interest in this theory, the higher education system soon became an important figure with regards to its role and effectiveness in developing human capital (Woodhall, 2001; Sunderland, 2008). The issues relating to HCT and higher education will be examined in the next section.

3.4.3 HCT and Higher Education

The literature details the dawn of a new era during the 1980s called the "Knowledge Economy", which revolves around knowledge as the key to a business's success (Hodgkinson et al. 1995; Bowers-Brown & Harvey, 2004/2005; Brown et al. 2011). A new type of employee was therefore needed for this emerging type of work environment. So followed employer requests for "knowledge workers", who held a variety of high-level skills including being responsive to change and adaptable to new technologies.

In line with the emergence of the knowledge economy, the government responded in the 1980s and 1990s, by increasing pressures on higher education institutions to become more directly involved in contributing towards economic growth (Harvey, 1999; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Yorke & Knight, 2007; Sunderland, 2008). A Universities UK (2012: 2) publication has the following opening paragraph, which details the links between HEIs and economic growth:

"Universities are a core strategic asset to the UK and play a critical role in driving economic growth and social mobility. World-class education, research and innovation are to be found in universities right across the sector, making them vital to the future prosperity and wellbeing of society"

HEIs have therefore experienced growing expectations in recent decades, to develop individuals with the complex skills sets necessary for business success and overall economic prosperity.

One of the main methods in measuring the effectiveness of human capital, has been in the form of wages (Berntson et al. 2006; Hussey, 2011) as Sunderland (2008; 49) explains:

“Human capital theory posits that investment in education enhances productivity, and that this enhanced productivity generates an earnings premium in the labour market, relative that is to the equivalent individual who has not elected to make the investment”

The theory supports the claim that those who have invested in university education will see a return on this effort by way of enhanced salaries. This has been attributed to employers paying more for individuals with the desired skills, knowledge and education. Whilst the research was conducted prior to the onset of the global recession, which saw widespread salary freezes and high unemployment rates, Universities UK (2007) found that a graduate salary differential did indeed exist, and a large one at that. The Universities UK (2007) study aimed to quantify the economic benefits of undertaking a degree. Their research compared individuals with a degree, against those with two or more A-levels and found that the graduates earned substantially more over their working lives, reaping additional benefits equating to around £160,000. The graduate group therefore, saw an increase of roughly 25% over their lifetime compared to the A-level group.

However, Sunderland (2008) found that the graduate salary differential did vary according to certain characteristics of graduates; primarily the university that was attended and the subject studied. Graduates from the elite universities, within the Russell group association, benefited from an additional 6% premium on their earnings, compared to graduates from new institutions. Furthermore, graduates in Economics, Business, Law and Mathematics, saw higher wage premiums than those who graduated in subjects relating to the Arts and Education.

This monetary return on investment has been one form of evidence used to support the links between HCT and HEIs, and was one of the arguments used to justify the increase in tuition fees (Holmes, 2013). Table 3.4.3.a overleaf shows recent data on salary figures to determine whether this graduate salary premium is still in existence after the 2008 recession.

3.4.3.a Graduate and Non-Graduate Salary Comparisons

For the year 2009–10	Starting Salary per annum
Graduate job	£21,574
Non-graduate job	£14,734
Difference	£6,840

(The Complete University Guide, 2012)

Table 3.4.3.a displays the mean starting salaries for full-time work for both graduate and non-graduate jobs. The difference between the two, indicates that graduate jobs pay on average £6,840 more per annum than non-graduate jobs. This again supports the graduate salary differential.

Further support for the continued graduate salary premium comes from the university think-tank, Million+ (2013), who found that, on average, graduates experienced a 27% earnings premium over non-graduates. This increase is a surprise given that graduate starting salaries have remained stagnant for a four year period between 2010 and 2013 (HECSU, 2013). Evidence suggests therefore, that despite a global recession and the UK suffering long-term effects, the graduate earning premium is still in existence today; thus supporting the theory of human capital.

However, there are issues to consider such as the massification of higher education leading to increased numbers of graduates entering the workforce. There are now approximately 260,000 new graduates entering the labour market each year (Universities UK, 2012) and the graduate supply is now outstripping demand; i.e. there are not enough graduate jobs for all graduates. There are four options graduates face when they are unable to acquire graduate level employment and do not wish to continue in higher education. The first option is to set up their own business as figures show that 2,800 new businesses were set up by graduates in 2011 alone (BBC News, 2012). Secondly, graduates can undertake additional work experience, as human capital is not just a product of education, but also of training (Berntson et al. 2006). The third alternative is to enter into a non-graduate level occupation and accept the lower earnings associated with this option. Fourthly, not all graduates will find work, as figures support that 1 in every 12 individuals graduating in 2013 will remain out of work six months after graduation (HECSU, 2013); thus unemployment is the final option. This supports the argument that for some graduates, human capital investment does not deliver the expected benefits.

This is of concern for graduates, given the substantial costs involved in undertaking a degree qualification. The economic downturn, the increased number of graduates entering the workforce and a more globalised economy enabling a supply of cheaper labour from abroad, mean that the reward of a good job is not available to all graduates. For many therefore, their belief in the Human Capital Theory is not realised (Brown et al. 2011). Specifically, Brown et al. (2011) raise the issue of inequalities between graduates, stating that relatively few will experience the true benefits of undertaking a degree. Instead the vast majority of graduates will not benefit greatly and wage inequalities will result.

This suggests therefore, that human capital may only be a viable currency when the economic market allows it to be i.e. *“it is the labour market conditions that determines whether or not the individual has the opportunity to make progress and career advancement”* (Berntson et al. 2006; 228). This argument claims that if industry needs individuals with a particular set of knowledge or skills, the needs of the business will dictate an individual's human capital. Human capital therefore, is not generally gained from attending any university and obtaining any degree, instead it is those skills and knowledge required by employers at the time which determine who will reap the associated benefits from human capital.

A degree level education however, still remains important, but this is now considered a standard requirement by employers and any human capital advantage to be gained, is subject to the laws of diminishing returns (Brown et al. 2008; Brown et al. 2011). Tomlinson (2008) supports this view. He argues that labour market outcomes concern more than just skills and knowledge obtained via a degree. As a result, Tomlinson (2008, 2010) criticises the theory of human capital and concludes that the application of this to the concept of graduate employability is limited due to the simplicity of the principle.

The economic gains to be made from undertaking a degree are uncertain and this issue is compounded by a factor highlighted by Sunderland (2008) and Crook et al. (2011); that graduates are not fully productive at the very start of their career but instead develop over time. The literature supports the argument that it can take graduates between 18-24 months to become a sufficiently competent and productive employee of an organisation (AGR, The Guardian & Park HR, 2002; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Crebert et al. 2004; Shah et al. 2004; Stringfellow et al. 2006). Graduate productivity increases with time, the length of which can vary, making human capital difficult to quantify. There are, therefore, a range of variables to consider in the measurement of human capital which are not conducive to empirical testing, as they cannot easily be observed (Gemmel, 1996; Hussey, 2011).

The full impact of human capital is complex to measure, given the number of unobservable variables involved, this theory therefore remains unproven. Given that HCT is not certain, it is questionable as to why policy makers have explicitly used this as a method for driving HEI pressures forward. With the UK economy suffering prolonged after-effects from the 2008 recession, the belief in HCT seems to have been strengthened and is now used as viable process for improving the prosperity of the nation.

However, given the massification of higher education, with the highest numbers of graduates now being produced in the UK, one might expect this would have assisted the economy to recover more rapidly from the 2008 global recession. For example, if the simple case was that human capital, which is enhanced by higher education, contributes towards economic prosperity, the UK economic should be thriving. Furthermore, if the UK Government genuinely believed in the theory of human capital, the current economic climate might lend itself to the overwhelming support to invest more in higher education. Instead government public spending in this area has been cut by 7% (Rogers, 2012). Furthermore, the European University Association (EUA, 2013) reported that not only is UK public investment in higher education lower in 2013 than it was in 2008 (per share of GDP), but the UK is the fifth lowest investor in H.E when compared to other European countries. This will therefore hinder endeavours to increase the UK's international competitiveness.

3.4.4 Concluding the HCT Section

Whilst policy makers have made explicit links between HCT and HEIs, the literature demonstrates that the graduate labour market and the needs of industry are complex. Whilst there is some evidence to support that graduates do contribute towards economic prosperity, given the higher wage premiums they can potentially achieve, these are multifaceted, as human capital rate of returns depended upon a variety of graduate characteristics, involving: the subject studied, the type of university attended, prior work experience and the prevailing labour market conditions.

One of the main issues that the literature has highlighted, is that the measurement of human capital is difficult as it cannot be observed (Gemmel 1996; Hussey, 2011) and therefore the economic gains from partaking in higher education remain unclear.

3.5 Concluding the Literature Review Chapter

This literature review chapter has covered the perspectives of each of the four main graduate employability stakeholders: employers, HEIs, graduates and policy makers. The literature has shown that the perspectives demonstrate similar and differing viewpoints and agendas. For example, whilst graduates and employers agree on the priority of certain skills, HEIs do not always cover these to the desired level in the curriculum. Furthermore, employers and graduates differ in their views of work placements, with students often opting for shorter duration placements, whereas employers prefer longer work experiences. HEIs however, agree with employers that longer placements are preferable and offer sandwich degree placements as a solution, but student participation on these courses have been low. The policy perspective advocates the importance of university and business collaboration, yet the employer and HEI perspectives both revealed differing experiences on: levels of effectiveness, benefits and barriers. Whilst each of the employability stakeholders have clear wants, needs and demands, these often lead to conflicting viewpoints amongst these perspectives.

The literature therefore, demonstrates that the concept of graduate employability is a complex one which holds different meanings, expectations and levels of engagement from the various stakeholders. To illustrate the complexity further, not all members of each stakeholder group are homogeneous. For example, the employer group comprises of different sectors and sizes; each having their own perspective with regards to graduate employability. Furthermore, not all graduates are the same either. The literature revealed stark differences between graduates from elite universities and graduates from new institutions. The two types of graduates (elite or not), will have different experiences of employability, which will ultimately lead to different viewpoints. This chapter supports the assertion that a uniform view of graduate employability is not currently present amongst or within the stakeholder literatures.

The introduction to this literature review highlighted a quote from Andrews & Higson (2008; 411) which stated that *“there is a notable gap in the current knowledge linking graduate and employer perspectives of the context and content of business school education to graduate employability”*. Largely, this is due to the under-reporting of graduate perspectives of employability, which is a severely neglected voice in the employability debates. This literature review has therefore highlighted both what is known in this field, as well as identifying what information is missing, thus rendering the body of literature incomplete.

Finally, the theory of human capital was discussed and applied to the context of graduate employability. The theory is heavily embedded in the policy makers' perspective, which is the driving force behind the UK employability agenda. However, the literature questions the viability of HCT, given the context of the recession, the conditions of market forces, the 'massification' of H.E and other variables such as graduating characteristics.

The next chapter moves on from the literature, to reveal what this thesis has done to plug the gaps identified by this chapter. The next section therefore, details the methods, methodology and design adopted, to meet the aims and objectives of the research and answer the research questions.

4. Research Methodology, Methods and Design

4.1 Introduction

This purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the philosophy which underpins this research and to appraise the methods and design employed. This is a pinnacle chapter in the thesis as the chapters that follow this i.e. the results, discussions and conclusions, all hinge on the methodology and methods employed, which are examined in this chapter.

The theoretical framework for this thesis (Human Capital Theory) has already been explained in Chapter Three, where an appraisal of the use of this theory over alternative theories was addressed. This included the deliberation of a pedagogic theory such as that put forward by Bourdieu. To re-iterate the conclusion on this matter, Bourdieu was eschewed on the grounds that the Bourdieuan theoretical framework would take the thesis in a different direction i.e. a more sociological thesis would result. Instead HCT, which asserts that investment in humans translates to a form of capital which increases productivity, economic growth and prosperity (Schultz, 1961; Weisbrod, 1962; Nafukho et al. 2004), was selected as the theoretical framework for this thesis. As the research for this thesis was undertaken during an era of economic uncertainty involving periods of negative growth (i.e. within a recession), HCT presided as the theoretical framework of choice, as the theory of investing in humans to encourage economic growth is now more applicable as ever.

Applying the theoretical framework to graduate employability therefore, if human capital is increased (i.e. improved developments of skills, knowledge and competencies in graduates to enhance their employability) employers, businesses and the economy will also benefit in addition to the individual in question. This provides a basis upon which the findings of the study can be tested against, in order to ascertain answers to some of the 'why' questions and explain the relationships between some of the stakeholder viewpoints. For example, why some employers remain unhappy with the skills and competencies of graduates produced by higher education institutions.

With the theoretical framework in place, the next stage is to discuss the philosophical approach that will underpin the research; which is what this chapter moves on to discuss. The philosophy of the research governs all elements of the research process, including the research methods chosen and the overall research design adopted. The research philosophy therefore is the determining factor in how the data is collected before the data findings can be tested against the theoretical framework.

The following section will examine the philosophical underpinnings of this research before moving on to assess the research samples, the data collection tools and the design process adopted. The research philosophy provides the foundation upon which the research design and process are built upon and this is discussed next.

4.2 Research Philosophy

A research philosophy is the underpinning perspective which forms the basis of the research and determines the research outlook. Lee & Lings (2008: 24) explain that research philosophy is “*concerned with exactly how we can link theoretical ideas to the reality of our world, but also about the nature of that reality, and how much we can ever know about it*”. The philosophy therefore explains the relationship between the theory, the data collected and the real world (Blumberg et al 2008; Lee & Lings, 2008).

At the core of the research philosophy are certain assumptions relating to how the world and learning are viewed, for example how reality can be measured, how knowledge can be obtained, and as such, what methods should be employed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). These assumptions fall under the two headings of ‘ontology’ and ‘epistemology’. Ontology involves how the world is viewed and how the world can be measured (either objectively or not), whereas epistemology concerns knowledge and how knowledge is developed (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Blumberg et al, 2008). The ontological and epistemological assumptions provide the foundations upon which the research questions and research design are built. For example, a researcher who holds the perspective that the world can be measured objectively to produce facts and that it is independent and free from human interpretation, would develop research questions and a research design that would fall in line with that objective position. The research questions and research design would differ for another researcher whose perspective was that the world cannot be measured objectively and that the world comprises of subjective social constructs. These two researchers would hold opposing research positions which are known as ‘Positivism’ and ‘Interpretivism’ respectively (Blumberg et al, 2008).

Positivism and interpretivism appear at opposite ends of a research methodology continuum (Blumberg et al, 2008), and the table overleaf highlights the main characteristics of each opposing perspective:

4.2.1 Summary of Positivism and Interpretivism

Positivism	Interpretivism
Originates from the natural science perspective	Reject the natural science approach and argue social sciences should have a different approach
World is viewed objectively	World is a social construct and should be viewed subjectively
Research that which can be directly seen and tested empirically i.e. observable	Research human behaviour such as meanings, feelings, thought process i.e. not always observable/unobservable
Predominantly use quantitative data collection methods with large representative sample sizes for generalizability	Generalisation is of little importance instead the focus is on qualitative, in-depth rich data to obtain an understanding. Small sample sizes are more common in this approach.
Deductive research approach which involves starting with a hypothesis and theories which are used to explain data	Inductive research approach where observations and data collected first which then formulate theories and conclusions
Objective facts can be collected, produced and reduced to fundamental generalizable laws	Interpretations of that being researched is produced
The researcher is independent from the research and does not influence the research	Researcher is part of the research and therefore research is not value free

(Data sourced from: Blumberg et al 2008; 21; Lee & Lings, 2008; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008)

As table 4.2.1 above highlights, those with a positivist perspective see the world as an objectively measurable entity, which is tangible and free from human interpretation. Positivist researchers only research directly observable phenomena which can be tested empirically to produce facts.

In contrast, interpretivist researchers argue the world is not objective, as humans attach their own subjective meanings and interpretations to the world around them. An interpretivist researcher will research concepts and social constructs which cannot be directly seen, such as thought processes, feelings and meanings, to obtain an understanding of the social world.

The differences between the two methodologies illustrate just how different research philosophies can be. The research philosophy held determines every aspect of the research process from developing the research questions and opting for particular research methods to the data analysis, interpretations and conclusions.

Whilst both perspectives have their advocates, each is not without their critics. Positivism's limitations lie in their inability to acknowledge certain unobservable phenomena. Lee & Ling (2008:31) provide the example that under the positivist research methodology:

“One cannot directly observe a student’s motivation to attend class, only the result (actual attendance). However, motivation as an unobservable construct is a vital part of psychological theory, as are many other ‘unobservables’”

Similarly, arguments against the interpretivist methodology are present. Whilst a researcher adopting the interpretivist approach is interested in understanding unobservable concepts from the viewpoint of the participant, the findings are subjective and are not value free, which mean results cannot be generalised (Blumberg et al. 2008).

Blumberg et al. (2008) acknowledge that whilst not an easy option, ideal research would comprise of a combination of elements from both positivist and interpretivist perspectives. There are several other perspectives which also appear along the continuum within the polar ends of positivism and interpretivism; realism, critical realism, feminism, post-structuralism, post-modernism and grounded theory (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

One such approach in particular is the critical realist perspective, which is the foundation research philosophy for the thesis. An overview of this methodology alongside the justification of the adoption of this perspective for this thesis will be discussed at length in the following section.

4.2.2 The Critical Realist Perspective

Traditionally, business and management research had been associated with scientific methodology, as the research in this field implemented scientific principles (Whitley 1984; Lee & Ling, 2008). This meant that observable business and management problems were defined in a scientific manner, which involved the formulation of hypotheses based on existing theories, followed by a testing and verification of these. This demonstrates a deductive approach to research, based upon quantitative data (Whitley 1984; Bryman & Bell 2007). As already highlighted in the above section, the viewpoint that the social sciences can be researched in an objective and scientific manner describes a positivist methodology. Historically therefore, business and management research was set within a positivist philosophy.

However, a researcher who held the positivist perspective would not chose to research a concept such as graduate employability, as this is not an observable concept. A positivist researcher could however research graduate employability based upon observable measures such as employment outcome. However, as highlighted in Chapter Three, considerable data already exists on graduate employment outcomes as a measure of graduate employability. Furthermore, the concept of graduate employability concerns more than just obtaining employment, which has been examined in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. Employment outcome does not therefore measure graduate employability; it measures graduate employment. Employability involves an array of skills, behaviours, competencies and prior work experiences, which enable a graduate to not just obtain any work, but pertinent sustainable employment to realise their full potential (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Lees, 2002; Yorke & Knight, 2003; Harvey, 1999; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). The concept of employability therefore involves many unobservable elements which are more akin to an interpretivist approach.

Whist positivism historically dominated as the research philosophy of choice within social science disciplines, such as Business and Management (Whitley, 1984; Lee & Ling, 2008), Prasad and Prasad (2002) cited in Cassel et al (2006:163) talk of a “*coming of age of interpretivist research*” in the Business field. Whitley (1984) also explains that as different approaches within Business research have become more popular, researchers have moved away from the traditional quantitative approach consistent with a positivist methodology.

Whilst the trend in Business research is to move away from a positivist methodology, coupled with an incompatibility between positivism and the researching of graduate employability, another option for this research could be an interpretivist approach. However, a researcher from this approach would use only qualitative data collection techniques where the researcher is often an active participant in the research (Blumberg et al. 2008; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This approach did not fit with the nature of studying graduate employability from the researcher's perspective, given that a preference was for employing a mixed methods design.

Instead, the following research questions were set which aimed to acquire both broad information as well as obtaining in-depth data on observable and unobservable elements within the graduate employability concept:

1. What is the graduate perspective on the employability provision they received during their business programme and student experience, and does this differ according to institution?
2. Do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in policy documents?
3. How are stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability influenced by the current economic climate?

These research questions make the assumption that the world is independent to human's awareness of it and at the same time, the research aims to acquire individual stakeholder viewpoints of how each experiences the world around them, given that knowledge about the world is socially constructed and individually interpreted. These combined elements do not fit either a positivist or interpretivist philosophy; instead they concur with a critical realist approach (Johnson & Duberley, 2000; Easton, 2002; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Lee & Ling, 2008).

The critical realist perspective is one of several realist philosophies. The realist philosophy is argued to be a complex perspective due to a variety of different meanings on offer, therefore only the two main types of realism will be detailed; empirical realism and critical realism (Johnson & Duberley, 2000; Danermark et al. 2002; Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Empirical realism is very closely aligned to positivism, as the basis of this perspective lies in the natural sciences. Hence empirical realism rejects the notion of a subjective world instead favouring the objective viewpoint (Johnson & Duberley, 2000; Saunders et al. 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2007). A short definition is provided by Bryman & Bell (2007:18) which basically states that: *“empirical realism simply asserts that, through the use of appropriate methods, reality can be understood”*. Another definition offered by Saunders et al. (2009:114) explains that: *“the essence of realism is that what the senses show us as reality is the truth; that objects have an existence independent of the mind”*. This type of realism therefore assumes that what humans sense, feel and experience is an objective truth and an exact representation of the social world i.e. *“what you see is what you get”* (Saunders et al. 2009: 114).

However, not everyone agrees with this realist perspective; Roy Bhaskar being one of its main critics. Bhaskar created a new type of realism which was born out of the limitations of empirical realism; critical realism (Danermark et al. 2002). In contrast to empirical realism: *“critical realist argue that what we experience are sensations, the images of the things in the real world, not the things directly”* (Saunders et al. 2009; 115). What Saunders et al. (2009) are highlighting, is that critical realists believe that human senses are neither accurate nor exact portrayals of the events in question, but are open to individual interpretations i.e. subjectivity.

Critical realism therefore builds on from the empirical realist perspective in arguing the case for subjectivity in how people perceive the world around them. The critical realist perspective asserts that both a world independent of human consciousness exists alongside a socially determined knowledge about reality (Danermark et al. 2002; 8; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In acknowledging the subjective element, critical realism also accepts that you can only understand the social world being researched if you recognise the underlying social structures and mechanisms which have led to the social world we live in (Bryman & Bell, 2007), i.e. *“What we see is only part of the bigger picture and we can identify what we do not see through the practical and theoretical processes of the social sciences”* (Saunders et al. 2009; 115). Lawson (1997; 21) explains that the relationships and interplay between social structures cause actions and outcomes, otherwise known as ‘mechanisms’:

“A mechanism is basically the way of acting or working of a structured thing....Structured things [physical objects or social processes] possess causal [or emergent] powers which, when triggered or released, act as generative mechanisms to determine the actual phenomena of the world”.

Examples of social structures and mechanisms, which need to be acknowledged when researching the social world, can include demographic factors such as gender, age, socio-economic status and ethnicity as well as social structures such as marriage, values, culture, norms and where you live (Olsen, 2010). Social structures and the resulting mechanisms involve both observable and non-observable factors which help to explain the differences in perspectives held by different individuals surrounding the same experiences and events, i.e. different realities of the social world.

In the context of this research therefore, the specific underlying social structures and mechanisms include the institution (for both the graduate and the curriculum developer stakeholders), the culture, values and norms of all stakeholders (which may or may not be linked to institutional effects), power relationships (which has particular relevance to the employer stakeholders who do the recruiting of the graduate stakeholders), the employment market in which all three stakeholders are operating within, as well as the identifying group the stakeholder belongs to (graduate, employer or HEI). The individuals may not be aware themselves of their links to these social structures and resulting mechanisms, however critical realism asserts that the mechanisms produce the realities experienced by the individual and need to be identified and acknowledged in order to understand the realities they generate.

The critical realism philosophy therefore informed the design of this research as addressing viewpoints from different stakeholders, with different inherent social structures and mechanisms facilitate a deeper understanding to be obtained of the graduate employability concept. This is particularly salient for a complex social concept such as graduate employability, as an individual exists within several social structures and mechanisms. This therefore means that realities cannot be explained by one social structure alone, and several mechanisms as responsible for generating the realities of the different employability stakeholders. This further perpetuates the complexity of the graduate employability concept, as there is not just one underlying social structure, but many, which can explain how that individual (be it graduate, employer or curriculum developer), perceives graduate employability.

An additional consideration is that these structures and mechanisms can change over time. The critical realist philosophy accepts that viewpoints change according not only to individuals, but also change over time and within different context (Saunders et al. 2009; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This element is something which interests business and management researchers who are researching a constantly changing social world. This element is also of significance to this thesis as different perspectives of graduate employability are being researched within the context of a changing work environment during a period of changeable economic conditions. The interplay between social structures and resulting mechanisms are not static, and therefore cultures, norms, viewpoints, situations are dynamic and changing. For example, over time, new graduates leaving university will move into the employment market and may even go on to become employers themselves, therefore their realities of the graduate employability concept will evolve. Furthermore, the context of the economic climate is ever-changing which again means that beliefs, norms and cultures for example, may be challenged and thus realities change and progress accordingly. This dynamic capability is another aspect which differentiates the critical realism from the empirical realism philosophy.

The main differences between empirical realism and critical realism which have been highlighted above are summarised in the table below to succinctly detail the outlooks of each realist philosophy.

4.2.2.a. A Summary of Empirical and Critical Realism

Empirical Realism	Critical Realism
Originated from positivism as a response to positivism's limitations	Originated from realism as a response to realism's limitations
An objective reality can be gained i.e. exact representation of unobservable phenomena is possible	Subjectivity prevails i.e. humans interpret experiences differently and universal truths are not possible
Do not need to look at the social context as what you see is what you get.	Need to acknowledge underlying social structures to better understand the social world
Viewpoints are constant	Viewpoints change over time and within different environments and contexts

(Sources: Johnson & Duberley, 2000; Danermark et al. 2002; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Lee & Ling, 2008; Saunders et al. 2009)

Whilst critical realism has transcended from the positivist methodology (Johnson & Duberley, 2000), it has integrated the subjective element of the interpretivist philosophy (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), resulting in a multi-philosophical perspective. This means that a critical realist, whilst undertaking empirical studies, would be at the same time be trying to ascertain a better understanding of the social world (Olsen, 2010). Lee & Ling (2008; 32) argue that the critical realist approach has many benefits:

“The implications of accepting realism over positivism are manifold for the scientists. Essentially, we are now allowed to postulate abstract, unobservable entities in our theories. These entities can be related to empirically observable effects, and then if we do observe those effects, we can consider our abstract entities to actually ‘exist’”.

The quote above, demonstrates how well critical realism relates to the concept of graduate employability. Under the critical realist perspective the unobservable concept of graduate employability can be measured and linked to observable data obtained, which can result in graduate employability being classified as an observable concept. Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008) agree and state that critical realism is accepted in the field of business and management as a viable alternative to the traditional positivist approach.

Despite such a case for critical realism, there are opponents to this philosophy. Specifically, the pragmatist orientation is an adversary to critical realism, which is known as an anti-realist perspective (Lee & Lings, 2008). Similar to critical realism, pragmatism is also neither a form of positivism nor interpretivism, but instead pragmatism states that *“the most important determinant of the epistemology, ontology and axiology you adopt is the research question”* (Saunders et al. 2009; 109). Pragmatism has been criticised for being *“an anything goes philosophy”* (Lee & Lings, 2008; 33), but in reality it is set in philosophical groundings but simply supports the application of the appropriate methods for the research questions set (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Saunders et al. 2009). Due to this underlying principle, pragmatism is usually associated with a mixed research methods approach.

To clarify the differences between critical realism and the pragmatist approach, the following table summarises the main characteristics of each philosophy.

4.2.2.b. A Summary of Critical Realism and Pragmatism

Critical Realism	Pragmatism
Assume that there is a real world subject to individual interpretations based upon social structures and mechanisms	Do not assume a real world exists as <i>“truths are only defined in relation to how useful they are in action”</i> (Lee & Lings, 2008:33).
Focus is upon obtaining a truth and knowledge about reality	Truth is not the focus, problem solving is.
Data collected within a case study methodology, which can include mixed methods	Data collected by implementing the correct technique identified for the research question and supports a mixed methods approach

(Sources: Lee & Lings, 2008; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Easton, 2010)

As the table above demonstrates, the two perspectives hold differing beliefs with regards to how the world is viewed and maintain different research focuses. Although some agreement is present over the implementation of a mixed methods approach, the reasoning behind adopting this approach differs for each perspective.

This research did not set out to problem solver per se, but ultimately aimed to understand more about the concept of graduate employability. Hence the focus of this research is upon obtaining individual interpretations of the social phenomenon of employability so to uncover stakeholder truths about graduate employability. This focus aligns to the critical realist perspective and therefore this was deemed the most appropriate and suitable philosophy for this thesis.

As iterated earlier in this chapter, the research philosophy influences the method and design that follow in the research process and therefore these will be discussed next from the context of a critical realist perspective.

4.3 Research Methods and Design

As highlighted in table 4.2.2.b above, critical realism supports the application of mixed data collection methods within a case study approach. This research design was therefore implemented for this research. A definition of a research design is offered by Bryman & Bell (2007:39):

“A research design relates to the criteria that are employed when evaluating business research. It is, therefore, a framework for the generation of evidence that is suited both to a certain set of criteria and to the research question in which the investigator is interested”

Using the terms outlined in Bryman and Bell’s definition above, this research is working within a framework which will involve generating evidence from graduates, curriculum developers and employers in order to answer the research questions.

The specific particulars of the samples and methods employed will be discussed in the following sections. Firstly however, following the critical realist approach, the research design involved the adoption of a case study methodology, which will be explained first before moving on to detail the full participants in this research.

4.3.1 Multiple Case Study Design

The main focus of this research is graduate employability and obtaining the graduate perspective on employability was of paramount importance. The sample selection therefore started with the graduate cohorts. As a case study methodology was being implemented, a decision was made on the number of cases to include. A case study approach can involve the study of a single case or the study of multiple cases (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Blumberg et al. 2008; Lee and Lings, 2008). However, multiple cases are regarded as being more valuable, as the findings produced tend to be more robust (Blumberg et al. 2008).

As a more expansive set of data could be obtained by addressing graduates from different institutions, coupled with the associated benefits detailed by Blumberg et al. (2008) above, it was decided that more than one HEI would be invited to take part in the research. This research therefore employed a multiple case study design.

Bryman & Bell (2007) also offer another reason why multiple cases are chosen over a single case study design, which involves the ability to compare cases and ascertain differences. Employing more than one institution therefore, would allow for some comparative analysis to take place, which would provide further details about graduate views on employability.

Researching graduates from different institutions would also address the critical realist's acknowledgement of underlying structures and mechanisms. As previously highlighted, under a critical realist philosophy, importance is placed upon core structures and mechanisms, in order to better understand the social world (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Olsen (2010) identified a range of demographic, geological and social structures which are considered within a critical realist philosophy. For this thesis, the stakeholder group which an individual belongs to, i.e. employer, graduate or curriculum developer, would classify as an underlying structure. Furthermore, dissecting the graduate perspective further, the institution from which the individual graduated would also be classified as a social structure, as each institution holds their own beliefs, values and norms. Collectively, the interplay between these elements influences individual perceptions. Researching graduate viewpoints according to the institution they graduated from would therefore assist in a deeper understanding of the relationship this has to their perceptions of graduate employability. The critical realism approach of acknowledging the underlying social structures and mechanisms involved in determining stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability, has therefore shaped the design of this research to include more than one institution in the study.

However, discussions ensued over which institutions to include. Age, cultural differences, access and locality, were all factors when selecting the HEIs to take part in this research. Ultimately, the business schools at three institutions in the North-West of England were included in the research.

The three institution business schools in this research hold contrasting cultures, are different ages and are diverse in terms of both traditional focus and student cohorts. These differences allowed for data to be obtained from a varied graduate sample and also provided a basis for performing a comparative analysis. This will help to better understand the concept of graduate employability given the underlying structures emphasised by the critical realist perspective.

Table 4.3.1.a below, details the main characteristics of each business school, first however, the details over anonymity must be declared. Each business school has been anonymised to protect identities. Each case has been given a pseudonym which involved them being assigned a letter of the Greek alphabet. Each case will be known as this Greek letter instead of their real name, to preserve anonymity. The three cases will be known as Omega, Alpha and Pi. An overview of each establishment is provided in the table overleaf to provide a background and context of each institution:

4.3.1.a Characteristics of the Three Cases

1. HEI	2. Pre or Post 92 institution	3. 2013 League table ranking	4.Average Entry Tariff	5.Staff Student ratio	6.Career after 6 months
Omega	Post-92	3 rd	241	16	33
Alpha	Pre-92	1 st	379	26	53
Pi	Post-92	2 nd	299	22.9	54

(Source: The Guardian, 2012)

The table above enables comparisons to be made between the three cases employed within this research. In order to explain the table, column one provides the assigned pseudonym of the higher education institution in which the business school resides. The second column identifies whether the HEI is a pre or post 1992 institution, which indicates whether it is classed as an old or new institution. In column three, instead of revealing the actual ranking of the university according to the Guardian formula (which would be an identifier), this is presented ordinally. For example, the order in which the business school appears in the set of three is given. Column four offers the typical UCAS score, as the average entry tariff of the students currently studying in each business school. Column five reveals each business school staff-student ratio, i.e. the number of students per member of teaching staff. Finally, the career score in column six, shows the percentage of graduates who find graduate-level jobs, or are engaged in further study, six months of graduation.

As table 4.3.1.a shows, each case brings differing strengths and weaknesses. For example, the Pi business school has the highest percentage of graduates in either graduate level jobs or further study 6 months after graduation, but it has one of the lowest average entry tariffs out of the three cases.

The Omega business school has the lowest UCAS student entry tariff out of the three cases and the lowest percentage for career after 6 months. However, Omega also has the lowest staff to student ratio meaning that there is more staff to each student. Finally, the Alpha business school holds the highest rank in the league tables and it also has the highest UCAS entry tariff, but the staff student ratio is the poorest of all three cases.

These characteristics help to distinguish between each case and appreciate the differences each institution brings. Further to the information provided in table 4.3.1.a, each institution also has their own emphasis. For example, the Omega and the Pi universities are teaching focused, whilst the Alpha University is research focused. Such diversity is desired, as this means that comparisons can be made with regards to how each institution responds to the employability agenda and the impact this has on their graduates' employability.

Once the three business school cases had been identified, the samples could then be targeted. Bryman & Bell (2007: 182) define a sample as "*the segment of the population that is selected for investigation*", therefore the samples within this thesis involve graduates, curriculum developers and employers. The three business school cases were used to directly extract the samples for both the graduate cohort and the curriculum developer cohorts. The links each business school had with employers was also utilised to form the basis of the employer sample. The theme of institution therefore runs throughout each sample used within this study. Particular details of these samples will now follow.

4.3.2 The Graduate Sample

Once the three business school cases had been confirmed, the graduate target samples were identified. Which particular graduates to target however was an area of deliberation. The research aimed to establish what graduates thought about the employability provision during their business school degree and university experiences. It also sought to ascertain the graduate viewpoint on the skills, knowledge, competencies and experiences they had developed during their degree, along with how useful they were to the workplace and also in enhancing their own employability.

The conundrum present was that graduates needed to be recent in order to possess fresh memories of the curriculum which they had undertaken, but also graduates needed sufficient time to have passed for them to have acquired work. The fear was that if evidence was collected from graduates too long after graduation, their memories of their degree and employability provision would be poor, which would then confound the results.

The decision was taken therefore, that new graduates would form the sample given that they were best placed to judge their education as they enter into a competitive job market. This does present a drawback of this research, as less recent graduates (who could have been in work longer and therefore have been able to better answer some of the questions which related their degree to their work experiences) were excluded.

Contact was made with the graduate sample during June and July 2012, which involved all those who had completed an undergraduate degree that year in a business subject within each of the three institutions. As all of those who had completed an undergraduate degree that year were invited to take part in the research, a total population sample was employed, which is also known as a census approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Blumberg et al, 2008).

Whilst findings from a census sample can be generalisable, the findings from the graduate sample can only be generalised to the total population (Bryman & Bell, 2007), i.e. the business school in which the graduate completed their degree at. The graduate findings cannot be generalised to other institutions or to graduates from other disciplines. The same is also true for a case study design however; generalisations can only be made to the cases involved, not to other cases which were not included in the research. However, the critical realist perspective is not concerned with achieving generalisable findings; the focus instead is upon obtaining a deeper understanding of individual realities of the social world (Clark, 2008; Easton, 2010). The lack of generalisability from this data was therefore not considered a limiting factor, as the aim is to obtain a deeper insight into perspectives of graduate employability.

With regards to making contact, as the researcher had links at all three business schools, access to the graduate populations did not pose any major difficulties. As a total graduate population sample was employed, over 1,000 graduates were contacted to take part in this research:

4.3.2.a Graduate Total Population

Business School	Total population size
Omega	249
Alpha	234
Pi	563
Total	1046

As table 4.3.2.a overleaf reveals, the Omega, Alpha and Pi universities had 249, 234 and 563 business students respectively graduating in June/July 2012. All of these graduates were contacted and invited to take part in this research. The details relating to response rates are discussed later in section 4.4.

4.3.3 Curriculum Developers Sample

Whilst the graduate view point was the main focus of this research, in order to fully analyse this, viewpoints from other employability stakeholders were also explored; curriculum developers and employers.

With regards to the curriculum developer's point of view, one representative from each institution was obtained in keeping with the case study approach. This one representative within each business school held an academic position with responsibility over the undergraduate business curriculum design. Their remit included the provision of employability initiatives in modules and programmes. Again, as the researcher had links with each business school, identifying and accessing these curriculum developers posed no major problems.

As the three undergraduate curriculum developers were targeted based upon their job role, the non-probability sampling technique of judgement sampling was employed. Judgement sampling involves selecting the sample members because they fall under a particular condition (Blumberg et al. 2008). For example, participants were not randomly selected, but instead the sample was restricted by the job role sought; consistent with a judgement sampling design. The concern with a non-probability sampling technique however, is that bias plays a part in the sample selection because a researcher is making a judgement about who to include in the research and who not to include (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

4.3.4 Employer Sample

The final cohort to be identified in this research samples section is the employer group. Reaching employers to take part in this research was the hardest group to access. With the previous samples (graduates and curriculum developers), the researchers own links with the three business schools proved advantageous for accessing these samples. With the employers cohort however, access problems were encountered.

Initially, the links each business school held with employers was explored. Employees within the careers departments at each institution were approached to uncover any employer networks which could be utilised in this research. Once some employers had been found this way, additional methods were employed to access more employers. The table overleaf details the methods used for targeting employers and the potential number of employers accessed via each method:

4.3.4.a Targeting Employers

Method of targeting employers	Number of employers contacted
Exhibitors at university careers fairs	60
Placement providers across all three universities	49
University newsletter to employers	750-800
Posts on relevant groups on 'LinkedIn'	Unknown
Total	>859

As the table above shows, the exact total population size of the employer cohort is difficult to determine given the sampling methods employed. All that is known is that the total population accessed was more than 859 employers.

There were four main methods employed for accessing the employer cohort. Firstly, the careers service at each institution was contacted for details of employer exhibitors at the most recent careers fair. Secondly, each business school was asked for details of the employers currently providing placements for business school students. Thirdly, an advert publicising the research was included in one newsletter sent to one university's employer network. Finally, the professional networking site 'LinkedIn' was explored for accessing more employers. Each institution had employer networks on the professional networking site which was utilised to publicise the research alongside exploring other relevant business and employer groups to tap into.

These methods employed for accessing the employer group fall under the technique of snowball sampling. A snowball sampling design relies on referrals and participants suggesting other employers, networks or further avenues to explore (Blumberg et al. 2008). A snowball sample is not a random sample and there is no way to pinpoint the size of the sample frame, i.e. the total population from which the sample will be selected (Bryman &

Bell, 2007). As Blumberg et al. (2008; 255) explains: “*the ‘snowball’ gathers subjects as it rolls along*”, which is how the employer sample in this research was created. The limitations of this sampling technique largely concern generalisability, as you do not know that the sample is representative of the total population (Bryman & Bell, 2007). However, as was explained earlier, generalisability is not considered a vital element within the critical realist philosophy.

Summary of the Samples

As this section details, three different sampling techniques were employed in this research for contacting participants: total population sampling for graduates, judgement sampling for curriculum developers and snowball sampling for employers. Once the samples had been identified and contacted, a variety of research methods were used to extract data and gather information. These data collection methods will be discussed in detail next.

4.4 Data Collection Methods

As already explained at the beginning of this chapter, the research philosophy underpins the whole research process and provides the foundation upon which the research design is built. The research methods employed in this research are therefore consistent with the critical realist philosophy.

Within the critical realist paradigm, a mixed methods approach is favoured (Fleetwood, 1999; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Olsen, 2010). Olsen (2010:14) describes how “*realists are taking to mixed methods like ducks take to water. The converse is also true – many mixed-methods writers are implicitly or explicitly realist*”. Furthermore, the application of a case study approach also lends itself to a mixed methods approach (Blumberg et al. 2008; Lee & Lings, 2008; Saunders et al. 2009; Olsen, 2010), this therefore led to a mixed methods approach being implemented for this research.

A mixed methods approach is defined as research which collects and analyses both qualitative and quantitative data and as such needs to use qualitative and quantitative data collection tools to collect each type of data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Bryman & Bell (2007) highlight the benefits of adopting a mixed methods approach and state that researchers have come to identify the ways in which qualitative research can aid the conduct of quantitative research.

The benefits of employing a mixed methods approach largely involve the ability for limitations of one data collection tool being offset by the advantages of the other data collection tool (Bailey et al, 1996; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Blumberg et al, 2008). For example, qualitative data is the data that provides depth and meaning to the issues being investigated (Blumberg et al 2008). Qualitative data is usually derived from interview and focus group methods and answers the 'why' and 'how' questions in the research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). However, as the focus of qualitative data is to be in-depth, large scale qualitative methods are not possible. Instead, quantitative methods are more suitable for obtaining large scale data. Quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, provide broad data which can be carried out on a large scale but as a result loses richness of data (Blumberg et al, 2008). The use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods concurrently means that the shortcomings of one method can be bolstered by the other method which leads to a more comprehensive data set than if only one method of data collection was employed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Furthermore, Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008; 19) advocate that using mixed methods can "*enhance more detailed and accurate analysis when looking for causalities*".

By combining qualitative and quantitative techniques in this research, it is anticipated that a rich data set will ensue. Mostly quantitative data will be collected from graduates to ascertain a breadth of information on a range of employability aspects. Some qualitative data will also be collected from graduates, this will provide more in-depth reasoning's for their views. Purely qualitative data will be collected from the curriculum developers to enable them to explain their response to the employability agenda. A mix of quantitative and qualitative data is collected from employers to obtain both statistics on the issues and employer justifications for viewpoints. Together, the mixed methods approach will enable a more detailed analysis to occur regarding graduate employability which will lead to a deeper understanding of this concept. The data collection tools for each sample will now be discussed in turn and considered.

4.4.1 Graduate Data Collection Methods

As was highlighted in the literature review, the graduate perspective is often neglected in the employability debates and little research focuses exactly upon graduate perspectives of their own employability development. This research study therefore aimed to plug that gap by directly obtaining the graduate view point. In order to obtain the graduates viewpoint, a questionnaire method was adopted to distribute to the graduate samples from each of the three business schools. The purpose of the questionnaire was to wholly answer the first research question and to contribute towards answering the second and third research questions:

1. What is the graduate perspective on the employability provision they received during their business programme and student experience, and does this differ according to institution?
2. Do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in the policy documents?
3. How are stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability influenced by the current economic climate?

Questionnaires mostly tend to be self-administered, i.e. the participants read the questions contained within the questionnaire and answer these without any researcher involvement. If the researcher was present to ask participants the questions, this would be classified as a structured interview approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007). As a result, self-administered questionnaires need to be user friendly with low levels of complexity as the researcher is not present to answer participant queries. Questionnaires also need to be somewhat short in length to reduce 'respondent fatigue' (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Questionnaires mainly include closed questions i.e. such as multiple choice, dichotomy responses or likert scale ratings, which therefore means that quantitative data is generated (Cohen et al. 2007). This approach means that standardised questions can be posed to the graduates to ascertain wide information on the issue of graduate employability to obtain a deeper understanding of their viewpoint. The main limiting factor of employing questionnaires is that some richness of data is lost because the focus is upon breadth rather than depth (Blumberg et al. 2008).

Graduate Pilot Study

A questionnaire was devised and piloted in 2011 with a sample of graduates at one of the business schools employed in the main study. This pilot study involved the trialling of a self-administered questionnaire which was made available online through Bristol Online Survey. The benefits of employing an online method over other methods, such as a paper based or telephone questionnaires, lie in this being a low cost and low resource alternative (Blumberg et al. 2008; Sauermann & Roach, 2013). The Bristol Online Survey tool allows for questionnaires to be easily constructed and launched online, with the link to such a questionnaire easily emailed to a large number of participants. This is less labour intensive than printing out questionnaires and mailing these to participants, which also makes this paperless approach more environmentally friendly.

The pilot questionnaire involved fifteen questions which comprised of both open and closed questions relating to a variety of issues pertaining to graduate employability which had been outlined in the literature (please see appendix one for a copy of the pilot questionnaire).

One of the fifteen questions included within this pilot questionnaire, which also remained in the main study questionnaire, asked graduates to tick skills from a list which they had developed during their degree. There were sixteen skills listed in this question and graduates were asked to select all of those which they could now demonstrate as a result of undertaking their degree. These sixteen skills were taken directly from the QAA (2007) benchmark statements for general business and management undergraduate honours programmes and included skills such as: oral and written communication, team work, presentation and critical thinking skills.

The QAA set of skills was selected over other options such as the CBI list of skills or university business schools own skills sets, as this enabled easier comparisons across all three business schools in this multiple case study approach. For example, one university could not be evaluated against another university's skill set, so instead the QAA benchmark statements were used as they provide a standardised set of employability skills. The QAA skills, which graduates in the field of business and management are expected to have developed during their degree, are irrespective of the institution studied at. Furthermore, the QAA subject benchmark statements are purposefully developed for HEI use, especially when evaluating a current course or developing a new course, which contrasts with the agenda of the CBI skills set.

The CBI skills are not developed with HEIs curriculums in mind and therefore it would be difficult to assess graduates on a criteria which HEIs may not have included in undergraduate curriculums. For example, the CBI list of skills given in the Future Fit (2009) report, detail one skill in particular which may pose a challenge for universities; a positive attitude. Whilst undergraduate curriculums can assess quite easily skills such as oral and written communication, team work, presentation and critical thinking skills, assessing a positive attitude may be more problematic. Whilst consideration was given these other options, the final decision was to utilise the skills outlined in the QAA (2007) benchmark statements, for both the pilot questionnaire and subsequently the main study questionnaire.

The pilot study involved all of those graduating in June 2011 from the business school within one North-West higher education institution. This sample was emailed after they had obtained their pass results for a business course in that year. The email was a standard email sent to the entire sample which provided background information about the research and asked graduates to visit the link to complete the online questionnaire. In total, 890 individuals were graduating from the pilot university in June 2011 and all of these were contacted to complete the pilot questionnaire. A total of 110 business graduates responded providing a 12.4% response rate.

The purpose of the pilot study was to explore some of the issues concerned with business graduates' own views of their employability, as well as to test out the data collection tool; the questionnaire. As a result of the pilot study, three improvements and amendments were made to the data collection tool.

Firstly, the pilot study responses showed that the impact of the current economic climate upon graduate worries for acquiring employment was identified as a significant issue. An amendment was therefore made to the economic climate question which included the addition of more responses for graduates to select to yield further detail. Secondly, the question which asked whether graduates had undertaken any personal development or study skills modules was broken down to instead ask about individual PDP modules separately rather than all in one question; again to extract more detail from the graduates. Thirdly, another key area identified by the pilot study responses was the need for graduates to have obtained work experience during their business degree. For the pilot study, these comments came indirectly through an open ended question, but for the main study, a question was added that explicitly asked if graduates had undertaken any work experience during the time of their degree and to comment on this.

Upon testing out the questionnaire on the pilot sample, the amendments were made to the data collection tool to produce the main study graduate questionnaire.

Graduate Main Study

Using the pilot study questionnaire and findings as a basis, the main study questionnaire was compiled. Given the benefits mentioned above of using online questionnaires, the Bristol Online Survey tool was again used to create the main study graduate questionnaire.

The main study data collection tool comprised of an online 19-item questionnaire. The 19 items consisted in the main of closed questions; however seven open questions were included to enable respondents to provide more detailed comments on the employability related themes (please see appendix two for a copy of the graduate main study data collection tool).

Upon launching the questionnaire online, the graduate samples were first emailed at the end of June 2012 with a standard email; this informed graduates about the research and requested their help by completing the online survey at the link attached. As was detailed in an earlier section of this chapter, the researcher had links at the three institutions and therefore accessing the graduate samples was not a problem. For two institutions (Omega and Pi), the researcher obtained an excel spread sheet containing the email addresses for all those completing an undergraduate degree in those business schools that year. For the Alpha university, an employee at the university contacted the relevant graduates on behalf of the researcher. A follow up email was sent out to all graduates a week later to thank those who had completed the survey and remind others who had not yet completed the questionnaire. A further reminder was sent out 2 weeks later.

To reiterate the details provided in the graduate samples section above, a total of 1,046 graduates were contacted from the three business school cases, to take part in the main study of the data collection. Out of these 1,046 graduates, 186 responded to the online questionnaire, which gives an overall response rate of 17.8%. This response rate is not equally split across the three institutions however. The table overleaf displays the response rates from each institution.

4.4.1.a Graduates Response Rate according to Institution

HEI	Total population size	Number of Responses	% Response Rate
Omega	249	47	19%
Alpha	234	21	9%
Pi	563	118	21%
Total	1046	186	17.8%

As the table above shows, similar response rates were achieved from Pi University and Omega University, however, Alpha University yielded a much lower 9% response rate. The research methods literature suggests many ways to increase response rates including follow up reminders, detailing a deadline for completion, a short questionnaire to be completed in no longer than 10 minutes and to originate from a linking organisation or institution (Blumberg et al. 2008; Saunders et al. 2009; Fan & Yan, 2010; Sauermann & Roach, 2013). All of these approaches were adopted by the researcher, therefore even after much endeavour, the response rate from the Alpha sample remained very small and much lower.

Other ways to maximise response rates include the use of incentives, either monetary or non-monetary such as gifts (Saunders et al. 2009; Fan & Yan, 2010). This research did not adopt an incentivised approach and is something which could have been explored in an attempt to yield a higher response rate in particular from the Alpha university sample.

Whilst online questionnaires do have a range of benefits including time and costs savings, which were given in more detail above, one of the main limitations of such a questionnaire is the level of response rate. Online questionnaires in general elicit a lower response rate than alternative approaches such as postal questionnaires or telephone surveys (Bech & Kristensen, 2009; Fan & Yan, 2010; Sauermann & Roach, 2013), and on average achieve a response rate of around 11% less than other questionnaire methods (Fan & Yan, 2010). However, the 11% lower response rate is an averaged figure and the range between different modes of questionnaire can be much greater than this mean. For example, Fricker & Schonlau (2002) cited in Cohen et al. (2009; 226) found that the same survey administered via different mediums elicited stark differences in response rate. When the questionnaire was distributed via post, a 71% response rate was achieved, whereas when the questionnaire was carried out online, there was a 28% reduction in response rate.

With regards to specific response rate percentages, Sauermann & Roach (2013) state that online questionnaires typically achieve a 10-25% response rate and postal or telephone questionnaires can achieve response rates as high as 40–70%. The average response rate for this research of 17.8% is therefore in keeping with average response rates for online questionnaires.

However, response rates for postal or telephone questionnaires can be very low. Whilst online questionnaire response rates are often poor compared to those achieved for postal or telephone questionnaires, the response rates for the latter modes still pose difficulties. Cohen et al. (2007:218) highlights that response rates for postal questionnaires can be problematic and some experience response rates as low as 20-30%. If online response rates are compared to the lower postal and telephone questionnaire rates, online response rates can be as low as 9-19%. The low response rate of 9% experienced from the Alpha graduates could therefore be explained by the mode of questionnaire delivery alone.

Whilst the issue over the differing response rates may warrant some questioning, the critical realist philosophy is not interested with achieving maximised response rates. This approach is much more concerned with understanding reality according to the individual subjects. The focus is upon obtaining deeper understanding and is therefore not preoccupied with methodological stipulations (Clark, 2008).

One area where the lower Alpha response rate may affect however is in the subsequent statistical analysis of the data (Cohen et al, 2007). A lower response rate equals a lower number of participant responses to analyse. The 9% response rate from the Alpha graduates translates to only 21 graduates completing the online questionnaire. Unfortunately, Cohen et al. (2007) state that if a researcher wishes to carry out any statistical analysis on a given set of data, that data should have a minimum sample size of 30. These authors state that this is a minimum and therefore advise that sample sizes are much larger than this 30 cases minimum.

One of the concerns with having such a small sample size is that smaller samples tend not to fit set criteria of the statistical tests. For example, the Chi-Square test stipulates that for the cells being analysed there should be a minimum number of five cases in each category (Cohen et al. 2007, Pallant, 2007; Field, 2009). If the sample size is very small, there is more chance that some categories may receive less than five cases. For example, in a yes/no/unsure category with only a sample of 21, you will not necessarily end up with equally weighted answers of seven responses under each of the three categories. This means therefore, that one of the yes/no/unsure categories may end up having less than five cases, which would affect the performance of the Chi-Square statistical test, thus mislead your data analysis findings.

Whilst reflecting upon the Alpha graduate response size of 21, which is below the minimum threshold set by Cohen et al. (2007), excluding the Alpha cohort from the overall graduate research was deliberated. However, the Alpha graduate responses would add a further dimension to the data and research findings (albeit based on a very small number). However, the Alpha graduate sample is a sub-group in a larger data set and therefore the overall sample size is sufficient to draw reasonable conclusions. Whilst comparisons across graduates from different institutions are made, this should be viewed in light of the small Alpha sample; however graduate comparisons are only one part of this study. Furthermore, the final support for retaining the Alpha cohort comes from the critical realist philosophy. This philosophy supports the priority for obtaining a deeper understanding of the issues being researched, not obtaining stratified samples from which to make generalisations (Clark, 2008). Given these arguments, rather than discard the Alpha graduate responses, it was decided that this data be retained.

Whilst obtaining the graduate viewpoint was the main focus of this research, other stakeholder views are also necessary in order to fully evaluate the graduate perspective. The stakeholder group of curriculum developers will be discussed next with regards to the data collection methods used to generate data from this sample.

4.4.2 Curriculum Developer Data Collection Methods

The sample used to obtain the curriculum developer's perspective included a member of academic staff responsible for undergraduate curriculum development at each business school. This resulted in three academic staff comprising the curriculum developer's sample. Interviews were undertaken with these three staff and the data collected from this sample was to contribute towards answering research question two:

2. Do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in the policy documents?

The three curriculum developers across the three institutions were contacted to take part in an interview. The details of these interviews are offered in the table below:

4.4.2.a Curriculum Developer Interviews

Institution	Job title of curriculum developer	Type of interview undertaken
Omega	Associate Director	Telephone
Alpha	Director of Studies	Face-to-face
Pi	Division leader	Face-to-face

As iterated earlier in this chapter, the critical realist philosophy is supportive of a mixed methods approach (Fleetwood, 1999; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Olsen, 2010). Whilst a largely quantitative approach was adopted with the graduate data collection, a qualitative interview approach was adopted with the curriculum developers.

Qualitative interviews are used to obtain rich data from participants about the research topic and the purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewee's perspective. Qualitative interviews can be undertaken in either a semi-structured or unstructured way. Unstructured interviews are just that, they have no structured line of questioning enabling the interviewee to talk freely about the topic, whereas semi-structured interviews do have a list of questions to work through, but these do not have to be talked through in order and there is flexibility to deviate from the questions to an area the interviewee feels is relevant.

(Bryman & Bell, 2007)

For the curriculum developers interviews, a semi-structured approach was adopted which ensured that certain topics were discussed i.e. how employability was included in the curriculum of each business school and what the institutions experiences were of employer engagement. As each interview covered these topics, answers could be compared across the three institutions. However as the interview was semi-structured, the interviewee could drift from these questions to other related topics they felt worth mentioning or issues that were particularly related to their business school (please see Appendix three for a copy of the interview schedule).

In addition to the type of interview undertaken, Silverman (2001), cited in Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008:79), highlights that there are three distinct purposes for interviews; positivist, emotionalist and constructionist. Whilst the positivist approach is mainly interested in acquiring facts and the constructionist style focuses on how interactions occur between the interviewee and interviewer, the interviews with the curriculum developers adopted an emotionalist function. The emotionalist interview approach is concerned with individual experiences and the focus is on obtaining their viewpoint to contribute towards a better understanding of their views on the employability concept, which again adheres to the critical realist approach. The curriculum developer interviews were to therefore generate rich data about how each business school views the employability agenda, implements employability initiatives into the curriculum and their experiences of engaging with employers.

The data collection methods have so far been discussed for both the graduates and the curriculum developers. The final stakeholder whose perspective was sought was the employer's viewpoints on graduate employability. The data collection methods for employers will now be reviewed.

4.4.3 Employer Data Collection Methods

As the literature review highlighted, there has been much research conducted into the employer views of graduate employability. This research therefore wanted to look at aspects of the employer viewpoints which were lacking in the literature. Most of the literature concerns the large employers and therefore the small and medium sized employer views are often neglected. Furthermore, the literature identified in the Chapter Three details a range of skills, knowledge, experience, behaviours and competencies which employers want graduates to exhibit. However, only a few studies address whether some of these elements are more important than others.

The data collection tools employed for the employers viewpoints were implemented so to firstly, attract a variety of sizes of employers (small to medium and large companies) and secondly, to obtain a deeper understanding of their views regarding an importance hierarchy of skills, knowledge, behaviours and competencies. Addressing these aspects would therefore contribute towards filling the gap in the pre-existing employer literature.

As one purpose of the employer interviews aimed to attract many employer views, to ensure all sized companies were included, firstly, a questionnaire approach was adopted. Secondly, once respondents had completed the questionnaire, several employers were selected to undertake a qualitative interview, to obtain a more in-depth viewpoint of their opinions and experiences of graduate employability.

The dual approach of questionnaire and follow up interview adopted with the employer sample was to obtain data which would contribute towards answering both the second and third research questions:

2. Do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in policy documents?
3. How are stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability influenced by the current economic climate?

The questionnaire and qualitative interview approaches have previously been evaluated in relation to the graduate and curriculum developer data collection. Rather than evaluate these again, the next section will move on to detail the specifics of the employer data collection.

Employer Pilot Study

This was not an extensive pilot study, but instead the intended purpose was to ‘test the water’ and highlight some of the key issues surrounding employer views of graduate employability, skills and preparedness for the workplace.

A total of 12 employers comprised the sample of the pilot study and these consisted mostly of small-medium employers based within the North-West of England. The employer voice was represented by Company Directors or Managers (HR, General, Administration or Store Managers). The employers were obtained via convenience sampling (i.e. members of these populations were chosen based on their relative ease of access) and a short survey was disseminated to these employers via email between April and July in 2008 (please see appendix four for a copy of the employer pilot survey).

The employer pilot study data revealed a significant value for graduates in obtaining practical work experience alongside their degree. Employers stressed the importance of both a degree and skills acquired through industry experience in the enhancement of a graduate's employability and their preparedness for the work place. This pilot study therefore provided several issues to be teased out which could be investigated further in the main employer data collection.

Employer Main Study

The employer main study comprised of two parts; a questionnaire and an interview, this mixed methods approach again aligns to the critical realist philosophy. The next two sections will detail both of these data collection methods and highlight the issues which arose with the employer sample.

Employer Questionnaire

Combining both the responses obtained from the employer pilot study and the literature review findings, the main study employer questionnaire was created (see appendix five). The employer questionnaire formed the first part of the employer data collection and was created online using the Bristol Online Survey tool. The questionnaire was launched online in September 2012 and stayed open for four months to collect data from the snowballing sample. The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide a base line of information from employers about their views on graduate employability, upon which follow up interviews would be built. The questionnaire contained mostly quantitative questions to provide a foundation upon which more in-depth detailed qualitative data would be obtained via interviews.

As was highlighted earlier in this chapter, the exact total population size of the employer cohort is difficult to determine given the sampling methods employed. Snowball sampling, involving employer contacts providing links to other employer contacts, involved a variety of techniques from online posts through LinkedIn to an electronic newsletter advertising this research for interested participants to engage in. Unfortunately however, whilst the snowball sampling method did result in 35 employers completing the survey, this is still a relatively small number compared to the upwards of 859 employer contacts made. However, a reason why the electronic newsletters and posts through the professional networking site LinkedIn proved unfruitful could be explained by Saunders et al. (2009:398), who state that “*response rates from web advertisements are likely to be very low*”. This is a reoccurring issue that has been prevalent throughout this research, which involves the use of online data collection methods and subsequent low response rates.

Nevertheless, a total of 35 employers completed the online survey and out of these 35, a total of 16 employers offered their contact details stating they were interested in taking part in a follow up interview. The details of the follow up interviews will be discussed next.

Employer Interviews

Of the 16 employers who agreed to be contacted for a follow up interview, all 16 were contacted and offered an interview at a convenient time and date for them. Not all employers were forthcoming about an interview which resulted in a total of nine employer interviews taking place; which was deemed a sufficient number for the purposes of this research.

The interviews took a semi-structured form with an aim to acquire more in-depth information about particular employer views and follow on from some of the points raised by the participants in the questionnaire (please see appendix six for a copy of the employer interview schedule). Each interview was to last around twenty minutes and the main employer viewpoints sought included: preference for certain skills, graduate work experience, experience of business-university collaboration and recruitment processes. Understanding employer viewpoints and experiences on these issues were more easily extracted via an interview method rather than via questionnaire.

A second purpose for undertaking employer interviews was to cross-examine findings from the graduate questionnaire against employer viewpoints, to determine the level of agreement between both stakeholders. This analysis is something which Andrews & Higson (2008) state is missing from the current literature. The interviews with employers therefore again followed the emotionalist approach which Silverman (2001), cited in Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008:79), outlined.

As the graduate data analysis had to occur before the employer interviews could take place (to allow graduate findings to be relayed to employers during the interview) telephone interviews were opted for. In comparison to face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews require less time and costs as no travelling or expenses are required (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Due to time constraints of this research therefore, telephone interviews provided a quicker alternative to face-to-face interviews without losing the in-depth level data which can be obtained through qualitative data collection methods.

One argument against telephone interviewing is that the interview only obtains auditory evidence, i.e. no physical observations by the researcher can take place nor can a social rapport be engendered between the researcher and participant resulting in a sometimes 'cold' discussion (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Blumberg et al. 2007). However, this could help improve the reliability of the interview data as it is more difficult for the researcher to inflict bias over the telephone.

The nine employers who took part in the telephone interviews displayed a range of backgrounds. The employers held a range of positions within their company, were from a mixture of different sized organisations which were within a range of industry sectors. The only stipulation, which all employers had in common, was they had recruited and/or managed graduates within their company. The table overleaf details the sample which comprised of the nine employer interviews.

4.4.3.a Employer Interview Sample

Employer No.	Gender of Employer	Position within Company	Industry Sector	Business Size	Location in which company based	Capacity in which dealt with graduates
1	Male	Chief Executive Officer	Construction	Small-Medium	North-West England	Recruited graduates
2	Male	Chairman	Marketing	Large	North-West England	Recruited & managed graduates
3	Female	Learning and Development Consultant	Training & Development	Small-Medium	North-West England	Recruited graduates
4	Male	Executive Search Consultant	Energy	Large	South-East England	Recruited & managed graduates
5	Female	Senior Recruitment Consultant	Human Resources	Large	North-West England	Recruited graduates
6	Male	Partner in a law firm	Legal	Small-Medium	North-West England	Recruited & managed graduates
7	Male	Contracts and Procurement Manager	Oil and Energy	Small-Medium	North-West England	Recruited & managed graduates
8	Male	Non-Executive director	HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC)	Large	South-East England	Recruited & managed graduates
9	Female	Commercial Marketing Specialist	Marketing	Small-Medium	South-East England	Recruited & managed graduates

A request was made to all nine of the employers to tape record the telephone interview. The majority of employers were happy to have their discussions recorded for the purposes of the research, however two participants felt more comfortable if the recording device was turned off. During these two interviews therefore, more notes were taken during and immediately after the interview in order to document the viewpoints of these employers to assist the researcher's memory in the analysis of this data. The data analysis will be discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

Summary of Data Collection Methods

This data collection methods section has in detail, evaluated the research methods used within this case study and mixed methods research design, to clarify what is being measured, who is providing the data for this measurement and how the data is being measured. Whilst issues have been identified with response rates when using online data collection methods, counter-arguments have been presented. One of the main concerns present in this study is that low responses rates through the online data collection methods, may have an impact upon the analysis of this data. The analysis of the collected data will be discussed next.

4.5 Data Analysis

As this research design adopted a mixed methods approach, the data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. These two distinct types of data need to be analysed in different ways and therefore the data obtained from each sample will be discussed in turn as to how the data was analysed.

4.5.1 Graduate Data Analysis

The main study graduate questionnaire mostly provided quantitative data, however qualitative data was also obtained through the open ended questions the questionnaire contained. The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately and the specific details of this analysis now follows.

Graduate Quantitative Data

The quantitative data from the main study graduate questionnaire was inputted and analysed using the statistical package SPSS. The quantitative data contained within the graduate questionnaire took the form of nominal data. Nominal data involves assigning options within a variable, a numeric value for purposes of analysis (Field, 2009). In this research for example, graduates were asked to rate how aware they are of their skills and knowledge. The likert scale was coded 1-5, where 1 was assigned to 'very unaware' up to 5 meaning 'very aware'. You cannot do any arithmetic on these numbers, but these numbers are used to symbolise which level of awareness to which the graduate relates.

Furthermore, much of the nominal data in the graduate questionnaire involved categorical variables. Categorical variables are variables which have categories rather than continuous variables, this involves scores on a type of measurement scale (Field, 2009). For example the variable 'institution graduated from' consisted of three categories: Omega, Alpha or Pi.

The type of data and variables employed are important as they determine the statistical tests which can be performed on that data. For example, continuous and categorical variables are required for tests such as ANOVA and correlations, whilst Chi-Square analysis requires categorical variables only (Pallant, 2007; Field, 2009).

As all of the variables being analysed in the graduate questionnaire were categorical variables, the statistical test suited to this data type is a Chi-Square analysis. A Chi-Square statistical test is a type of non-parametric test. There are two categories of statistical tests: parametric and non-parametric. Parametric tests tend to be more powerful in detecting relationships involving categorical alongside continuous variables and assume a normal distribution of the data. In contrast, non-parametric tests do not have the same 'parameters' as parametric tests and therefore have less stipulations about the distribution of the data.

(Pallant, 2007; Huizingh, 2007; Field, 2009)

A Chi-Square test therefore is suited for data which only contains categorical variables and unequal distribution of data (Pallant, 2007; Field, 2009). The graduate questionnaire consisted of categorical variables and data from unequally weighted sample sizes, therefore the Chi-Square test was the ideal test for statistically analysing the graduate quantitative data.

One of the stipulations of a Chi-Square test however, is that for the categories in the variables being analysed, there must be a minimum expected frequency of five or greater in 80% of cases (Pallant, 2007). This means that under each variable category, there must be at least five graduates who have given that response. Unfortunately, in some variables, this did happen. Due to the Chi-Square stipulation therefore, a decision was made to amalgamate responses where fewer than five cases occurred. For example, when analysed, the variables 'how prepared do you feel to enter the world of work' and 'which university did you graduate from', resulted in the 'no' and 'unsure' categories falling short of the five cases minimum. As the main interest was in those who had replied 'yes', the analysis was repeated with the 'no' and 'unsure' groups merged together to ensure the number of cases exceeded five.

Whilst this action does result in some detail being lost, the results from a statistical test with frequencies less than five, would have falsified the statistical outcome. If a minimum expected frequency of five or greater appears in 80% of the cases, the outcome of the Chi-Square test is presumed accurate (Field, 2009). The choice was made to sacrifice some of the level of detail to ensure an accurate result ensued.

However, as the Chi-Square test is a non-parametric test, some argue it can be less powerful than their parametric counterparts. As it is criticised to be less powerful, the Chi-Square test can sometimes have difficulty in detecting relationships, even when they do exist, due to the lack of sensitivity of the test (Pallant, 2007; Field, 2009). Acknowledgement therefore needs to be made that a Chi-square test may not detect a significant association when it genuinely exists (Field, 2009). However, an alternative statistical test could not be applied to this data as the data did not fit within the parameters of the parametric tests and therefore it would not be suitable to use a test other than the Chi-Square.

Whilst the use of the Chi-Square test has been justified above, appendix seven provides an index on how the test is calculated, the 0.05 significance level adopted and effect size implications of any associations found. This template set out in this index was applied to all Chi-Square analysis in order to arrive at the data analysis findings which are given in the next chapter.

The index given in the appendix details the template for the analysis of quantitative data, however the main study graduate questionnaire also produced a small amount of qualitative data. The details of the analysis of this qualitative data are provided next.

Graduate Qualitative Data

As the main focus of the graduate data collection was to acquire a wide range of employability viewpoints from graduates, mostly quantitative data was gathered. However, some qualitative data was also sought to provide a richness to the quantitative information. This qualitative data was obtained in the form of comments and quotes from graduates to add depth, meaning and interpretations to the statistical findings.

The analysis of this qualitative data involved a thematic approach. The thematic approach to qualitative data analysis was also undertaken with the curriculum developer and employer data analysis and this technique is discussed in further detail in section 4.5.4 below.

4.5.2 Curriculum Developer's Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained through the interviews with the three curriculum developers was analysed with the same approach adopted for analysing the graduate comments and employer interviews; using thematic analysis. This qualitative data analysis for all samples will be discussed together in section 4.5.3 below. Firstly however, the employer questionnaire data analysis will be discussed.

4.5.3 Employers Data Analysis

As was iterated in the earlier section, the employer's data collection comprised of two parts; a questionnaire and a telephone interview. These two types of data collection elicited both quantitative and qualitative data which needed to be analysed accordingly.

Employer Questionnaire Data Analysis

One purpose of the employer questionnaire was to ascertain a broad data set on the employer perspective of graduate employability. Another purpose was to use the questionnaire responses for obtaining follow-up interviews. The main focus of the employer data collection was the interviews as these would yield much more in-depth data about the employer viewpoint on certain aspects which are currently lacking in the literature; such as ranking skills in order of importance and the impact of the economic climate on the skills businesses now need.

As the emphasis was upon the interview data the quantitative data analysis only involved descriptive and cross-tabulation analysis rather than in-depth statistical analysis. The descriptive and cross-tabulation analysis provided enough basis upon which the interview data could be built.

4.5.4 Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data was obtained from graduates, curriculum developers and employers, all of which was analysed using a thematic approach. The interviews from both employers and curriculum developers specifically, provided a wealth of qualitative data ready for analysis. There are several ways to analyse qualitative data; discourse analysis, thematic analysis, content analysis, narrative analysis and grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman & Bell, 2007).

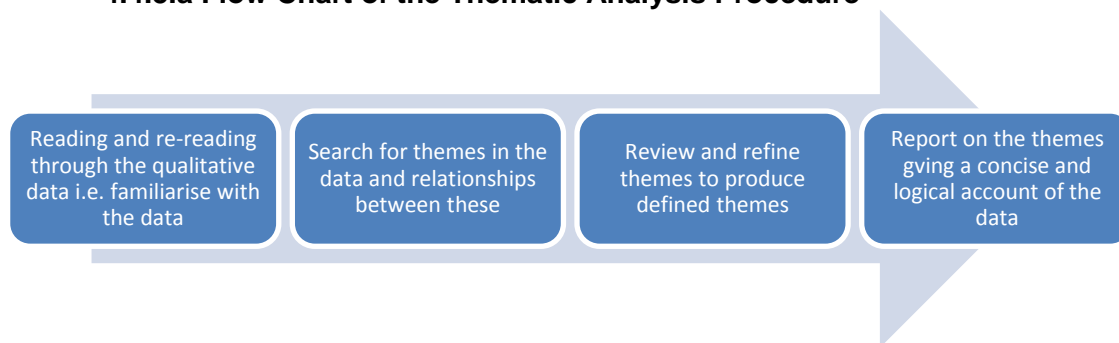
However, as this research is underpinned by the critical realist perspective, the data analysis would also follow the assumptions of this underlying philosophy. As Braun & Clarke (2006:6) identify, thematic analysis is a favourite within the realist perspectives as it allows a rich and detailed analysis to take place:

“Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic”

Under the critical realist perspective, thematic analysis is concerned with understanding the experiences, viewpoints and meanings held by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis of the qualitative data therefore focused on emergent themes coming from the data, which explained and reported the realities of graduate employability for each of the participants.

Bryman & Bell (2007) also point out that in the field of business, thematic analysis is the most commonly adopted method for analysing qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a repetitious process (Bryman & Bell, 2007), therefore to detail the stages of the qualitative data analyses, a flow chart is presented below:

4.4.5.a Flow Chart of the Thematic Analysis Procedure



(Adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006)

The graduate comments and interview transcripts were used to conduct the analysis. Whilst an attempt was made to use NVIVO for facilitating this analysis, the researcher found the programme too convoluted for the purposes of this research. Welsh (2002) highlights that time and resources are necessary for familiarising with the package, therefore it was decided that NVIVO did not warrant the time and investment for the amount of analysis required. Had hundreds of interviews been conducted, another decision would have perhaps been made.

Instead of using NVIVO, the transcripts were eyeballed and when an important element arose which related to answering a research question, that element was identified as a theme (shown as the first two stages in the flow chart above). Each theme contained sub-themes which were called codes. This method of searching for themes and codes was an iterative process which involved much reading and re-reading of the transcripts searching for information emerging from the data. Analysis was taken into how these themes related to each other and the themes become more defined. Finally, as shown in the flow chart above, the last stage of the thematic analysis was to report on these themes to answer the research questions set out by this thesis. The reporting of such themes were presented in cognitive maps to enable linkages and connections to be visualised.

However, arguments against this type of analysis involve the loss of data by summarising participant's views, therefore losing the original point made by the respondent. The argument is that detail is lost because the participant's words are replaced by the researchers codes (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Bryman & Bell (2007) make a similar point that in extracting themes and codes, the context in which those issues were highlighted by the participant is lost. Unfortunately however, qualitative research by its very nature is data rich and therefore a lot of data is generated. The researcher must select a way to reduce this data into analysis and for this research the thematic approach is the appropriate method for carrying out the data analysis. The limitations highlighted by Bryman & Bell (2007) and Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008) must be acknowledged in the data analysis and recognise that some data and context is lost during the analysis process.

However, one way to overcome such loss of data is the method of triangulation. The process of triangulation *"involves looking at issues from different angles"* (Lee & Lings, 2008:239). This research adopts a triangulation approach as it is looking at graduate employability from the different viewpoints of employers, graduates and curriculum developers, which have been collected using different methods. Triangulation enhances the accuracy of the data which means that if some detail is lost when analysing one type of data, another type of data (either via another method or via a different stakeholder) can buffer these effects. The following section will provide more detail on the triangulation design.

4.6 Triangulation

The data collected from the different stakeholders was analysed and correlated against each other, thus evaluating viewpoints holistically. The approach of analysing different perspectives gathered via different methods is known as 'triangulation' (Cohen et al. 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Lee & Lings, 2008). As Creswell and Plano Clark (2007:62) explain, triangulation is very common in research designs using mixed methods as it brings *"together the differing strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses of quantitative methods with those of qualitative methods."* The limitations of one research method are outweighed by the benefits of another research method and therefore a deeper understanding of the concept is achieved, compared to using a single research method alone (Cohen et al. 2007).

Through triangulation, a deeper and more holistic understanding is attained by researching the concept from different viewpoints and using a variety of different methods to collect those viewpoints (Cohen et al. 2007). Triangulation is therefore a way of allowing a deeper understanding of the concept of graduate employability to be obtained by cross-examining the various viewpoints obtained across different data collection methods (Olsen, 2010).

Using these samples therefore, a cross examination of employer, curriculum developers and graduate viewpoints can be obtained. To add further analysis, these views will then be correlated to the information outlined in the policy documents given in the literature review. The totality of this analysis results in a triangulation design.

The adoption of a triangulation approach means that the accuracy of the findings can be increased as you obtain different viewpoints on the same issues across different data collection techniques (Cohen et al. 2007; Lee & Lings, 2008). This increased confidence in the accuracy of the data can increase the validity of the research, results and findings.

4.7 Validity and Reliability

Bryman & Bell (2007) highlight that there are a variety of issues to consider when addressing the value of the data collection and research methods used for a piece of research; of these is validity and reliability.

Firstly, the term validity *“refers to the issue of whether or not an indicator (or set of indicators) that is devised to gauge a concept really measures that concept”* (Bryman & Bell, 2007; 165). What Bryman & Bell (2007) mean by validity therefore, is whether the research methods collect the data they are meant to collect. The pilot studies undertaken before the main studies go some way to test the validity of the research methods employed. If participants did not understand the questions contained within the research methods, or answered off topic, the question was changed so that the research methods did measure the topic it was meant to measure.

Another issue concerning validity is the small Alpha sample size. Whilst validity concerns the data collection tools, it also encompasses the accurate representation of the population being measured. The size of the Alpha sample does pose a threat to the validity of the research, as you cannot be certain that the responses of those 21 graduates accurately reflect the total population, but as explained in the sections above, a generalisable and representative viewpoint was not the focus of the research as supported by the critical realistic philosophy.

Secondly, reliability relates to how consistent the research methods are in measuring what they are meant to be measuring (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Reliability therefore refers to how replicative the research methods are for obtaining the same results. Whilst replicating a questionnaire might yield similar responses, Cohen et al. (2007) highlight that reliability can be difficult for qualitative data. Qualitative interview data used in this research can be very much biased towards the viewpoints of the individual participants and if you were to re-test the research again, it is therefore likely you may get a different result. However, the critical realist perspective highlights that viewpoints change over time and also change within different contexts and according to various structures. Individual viewpoints do not form universal truths nor are they static.

However, adopting a triangulation approach can help to improve both validity and reliability of this research data. Steps have therefore been taken to maximise both the validity and reliability of the research tools employed for this research.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations take place with all research and involve elements such as the treatment of participants, how the research is conducted and how the data obtained is to be used (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Cohen et al. 2007). For this research, before any data collection took place, ethical approval was sought and granted by the university research ethics committee. This process involved a declaration of the planned research to be undertaken and an ethics panel considered this application which was then approved. The following paragraphs detail how this research remained within good ethical practice guidelines.

With regards to the treatment of participants, informed consent was sought from all participants which means that before participants took part in the research they were made aware of what was being asked of them and why, so that they had the freedom to make an informed decision about taking part in the research (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Cohen et al. 2007). Specifically for interview participants, a series of informed consent statements were read out to each participant prior to the interview starting to ensure that interviewees were aware of the purpose of the research and how any response they gave would be treated (please see appendices three and six for the interview schedules containing the informed consent statements). It was made clear to interview participants that they were volunteering and at any time they could remove themselves and their responses from the research. Only once the participant agreed to the informed consent, did the interview commence.

For those participants who undertook questionnaires, an introduction page occurred before the start of the questions which detailed the purpose of the research and the treatment of the participant responses. If participants continued to complete the questionnaire, it was assumed that participants were happy with the conditions and therefore gave consent in their action of completing the questionnaire.

Furthermore, anonymity was guaranteed for all participants. Each case study institution included in this research was given a pseudonym to protect the identity of the business school. Furthermore, the employers and curriculum developers were stripped of their names and company particulars at the data analysis phase to anonymise their responses and the graduate identities were never sought, therefore their responses were always anonymous.

Data protection was also adhered to. Data protection concerns the storage of data to ensure information is kept confidential (Bryman & Bell, 2007) and the questionnaire responses, interview recordings and transcripts were all stored on a secure computer which was only accessible by the researcher. No other person was able to access this data, it was used by the researcher alone.

Overall, this research was undertaken according to the university ethical code of conduct to ensure an ethical piece of research ensued.

4.9 Chapter Summary

The purpose of this research is to evaluate graduate employability from the angles of different stakeholders to obtain a deeper understanding of this concept and add the graduate viewpoint to the employability debates. This chapter has detailed the underpinning philosophy of the research and evaluated the research methods and research design that was employed in the quest to fulfil the research purpose.

A case study design was adopted in which three business schools were used to obtain the graduate and curriculum developers samples and also formed the basis of the employer samples. A mixed methods approach, which is consistent with a critical realist philosophy, was employed and data was obtained from the three samples via questionnaires and interviews. Finally the triangulation method was utilised to cross-examine the viewpoints of the employability stakeholders.

This chapter has also highlighted the limitations within the research samples, methods and analysis and detailed either the attempts made to limit the impact of such limitations or acknowledge when limitations pose an on-going issue to the research. Best practice issues were also detailed in terms of how the research meets with validity and reliability assumptions and keeping within the research ethical code of conduct, in the strive to undertake and produce research of a good merit.

As the introduction stated, this chapter is key in the production of this thesis, as the research approaches adopted for the philosophy, methods and analysis pave the way for the findings, discussions and conclusions given in the subsequent chapters. Now that the research process in its entirety has been detailed, the next chapter now moves on to reveal the findings of the data collected.

Chapter 5: Results and Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter follows on from the Chapter Four, as it clearly outlines the data drawn from the methods employed, and outlines the results of the analysis.

Chapter Four detailed the sample, data collection methods and data analysis techniques for each of the employability stakeholders in turn. This chapter will follow a similar approach and details the results for each individual employability stakeholder. The following structure therefore, is adopted for this chapter:

- a. Reporting of the graduate findings first,
- b. Followed by the results of the curriculum developers,
- c. Finally, the employer data analysis results are presented.

This results chapter will only specify the data analysis findings; a detailed discussion and interpretation of these results will be given in the next chapter of this thesis (Chapter Five: The Discussion). The discussion chapter will discuss these results in relation to the research questions and thus draw together the findings of this research.

Firstly however, the graduate data findings will be presented before moving on to address the results of the other employability stakeholders.

5.2 The Graduate Results

As was detailed in Chapter Four, the graduate data was obtained via a questionnaire. This questionnaire elicited both quantitative and qualitative data which and provided answers to the first research question:

1. What is the graduate perspective on the employability provision they received during their business programme and student experience, and does this differ according to institution?

This graduate results section contains findings from a range of data analysis employed: descriptive statistics (involving means and percentages), cross-tabulations of quantitative variables and qualitative results from the thematic analysis. The aim is not only to summarise the quantitative data on the graduate perspective of employability, but also gain a deeper understanding of graduates' reasoning from the qualitative analyses.

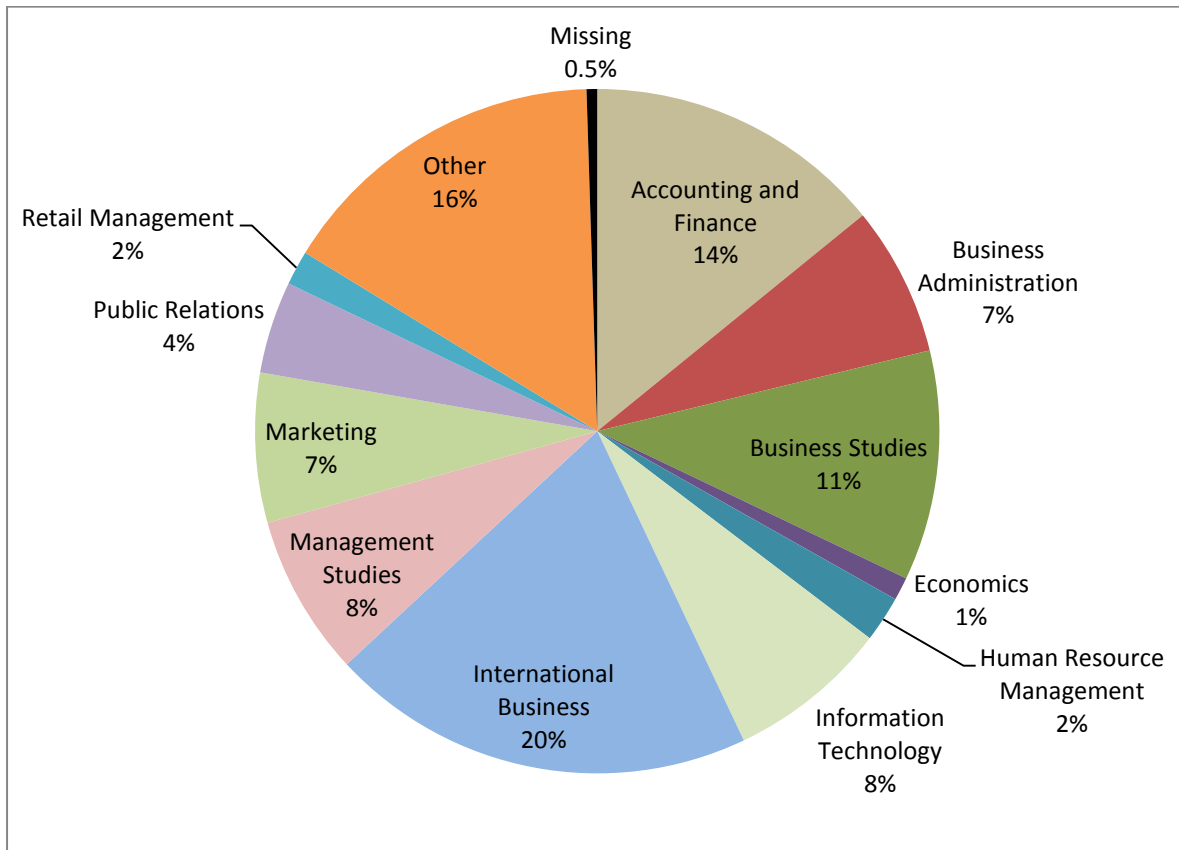
These results do reveal several trends in the data which require further and deeper analysis, therefore statistical analysis and tests of significance were undertaken, these are detailed in a later section of this chapter. Firstly however, a descriptive analysis of the graduate sample is provided, before moving on to discuss specific findings from this cohort, drawing on detailed thematic and statistical analysis.

Graduate Sample Demographics

Demographic information was obtained from the graduate sample, which included the Business subject studied and the degree classifications achieved. Additionally, graduate's initial plans post-graduation were also sought, so to obtain further details of this sample's characteristics.

The whole spectrum of business subjects were represented in this sample as displayed in the chart below:

5.2.1 Business Degree Undertaken



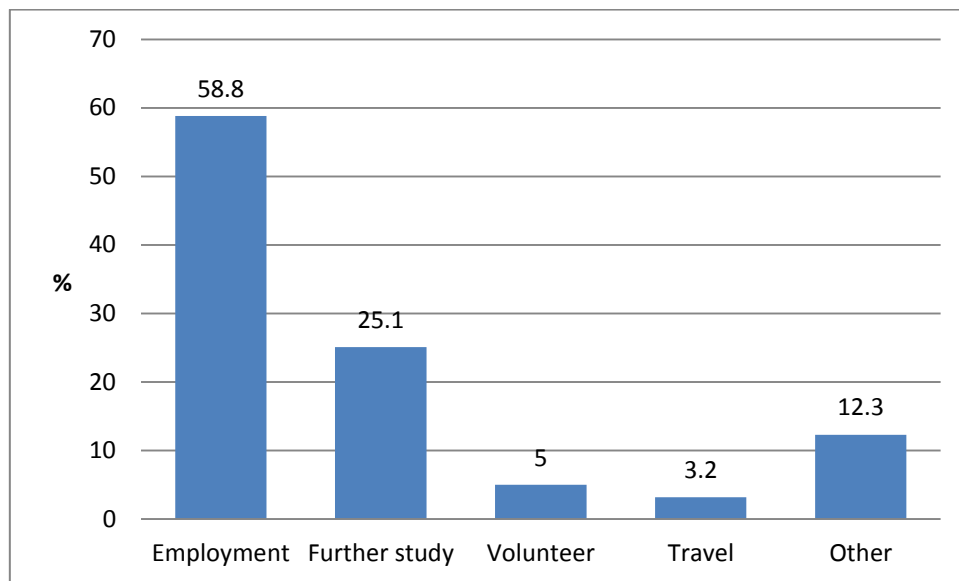
Graduates from subjects such as Accounting and Finance, International Business and Business Studies had the largest representation, whilst Economics, Retail Management and HRM graduates had the smallest representation.

The 'other' category includes Business joint degrees such as Accounting and Business, Business and Marketing and Business and Economics. The majority of the graduates who responded to this questionnaire (86%) had studied on a full-time basis, leaving only 14% of the sample who had studied for their degree part-time.

With regards to the degree classifications obtained, the most commonly achieved grade was a second-class upper degree (50.5%), distantly followed by a first-class degree (22.3%) which is was very closely followed by a second-class lower degree (20.7%). The minority classifications obtained were a third-class degree and an ordinary pass degree, in which 6% and 0.5% of the sample achieved respectively.

The questionnaire also sought information about graduate's immediate future plans. The majority of the graduates planned to go into employment after they had completed their degree, as is illustrated in the chart below:

5.2.2 Post-Graduation Plans



The next most popular option for graduates was to enter into further study. Volunteering and travel were amongst the lowest plans graduates held. The 'other' category included: part-time students who were already in full-time employment, graduates planning to undertake a combination of both employment and further study and those students who reported they were unsure about what they want to do after graduation.

For the 58.8% of graduates who planned to enter into employment, 41% of these had already been offered a job. This means therefore, that over half (69%) of the graduates who wanted to enter into work, had not yet been offered employment. For these job-seeking graduates in particular, enhanced employability is of significant importance.

These descriptive demographic results give an idea of the characteristics of the graduate sample. Although to differing amounts, graduates from the full range of business disciplines responded to the questionnaire, the large majority of the sample had obtained a 2.2 degree classification or higher, and just over half of the sample planned to enter into employment once graduated. With these characteristics in mind, the next sections go on to detail the graduate views of their Business degree education and how this did (or did not) enhance their employability.

Graduate Views on their Employability

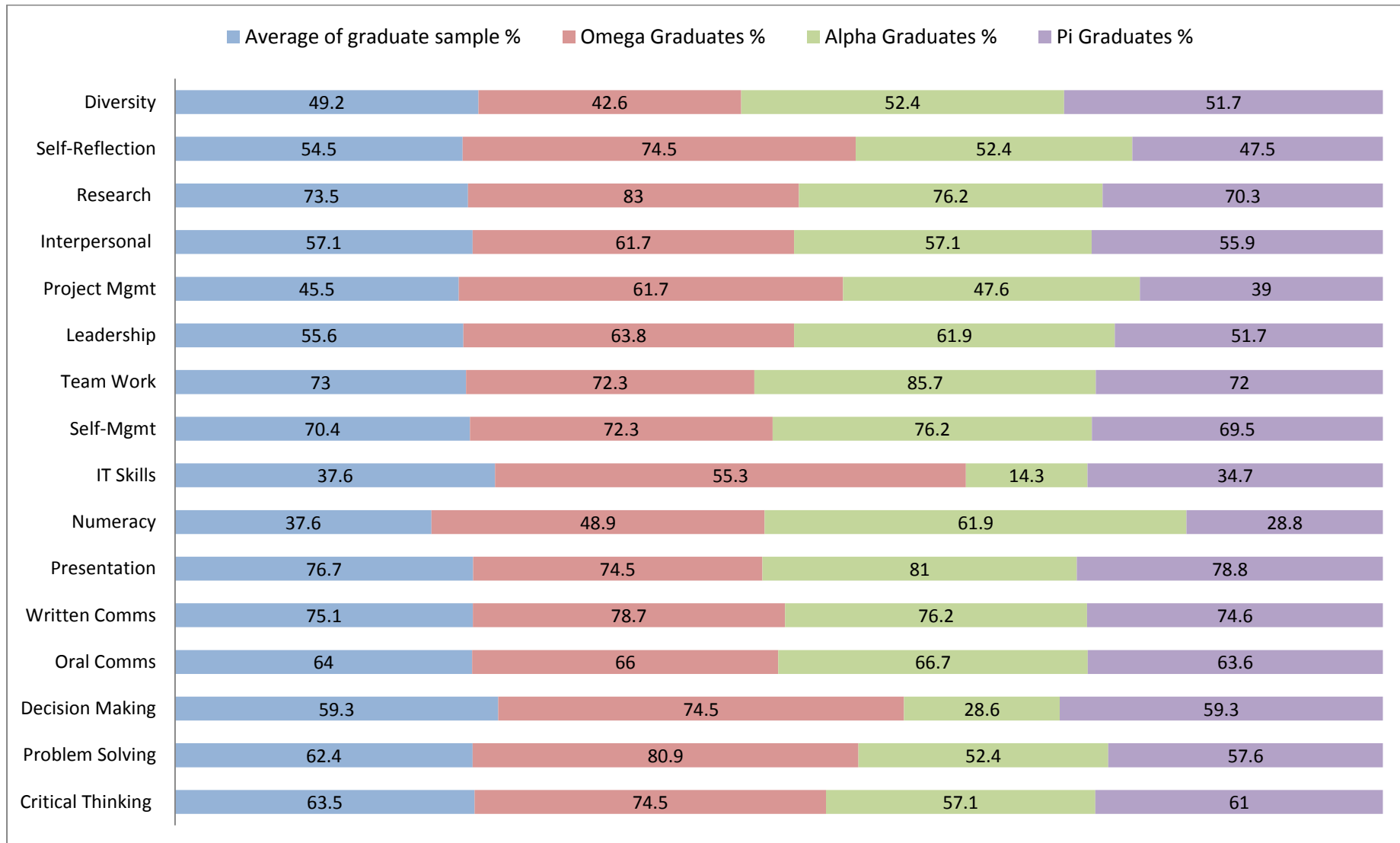
Building on the demographic information discussed above, this section looks at the main findings from the graduate questionnaire. There were five main areas of graduate views sought in the questionnaire: skill development, work experience, employability enhancement, employment in the economic climate and preparedness for the world of work.

Skill Demonstration

As Chapter Two and Chapter Three highlighted, graduate employability is dependent upon a range of elements, amongst which is the development of soft skills. Chapter Four discussed the skill lists available and justified the use of a skill set provided by the QAA (2007) benchmark statements.

The graduate questionnaire replicated the sixteen skills outlined by the QAA (2007) and graduates were asked to tick all of these skills which they felt they could now demonstrate as a result of their Business education. Chart 5.2.3 overleaf shows the graduates response to these sixteen skills.

5.2.3 Graduates Demonstrable Skills according to Institution



Firstly, looking at the average graduate response, presentation, written communication, researching, team work and time management skills all yielded the highest percentage from the graduates. On average, three-quarters of graduates reported that they can now demonstrate these five skills as a result of undertaking their Business degree. In contrast, information technology, numeracy, project management, sensitivity to diversity and self-reflection skills received the lowest percentages from the graduates. Half the sample or less, felt that they could now demonstrate these skills. This five skill areas, according to the graduates, were therefore insufficiently developed at university.

Secondly, chart 5.2.3 allows for comparisons to be made across graduates from the three different institutions: Omega University (post-1992 institution), Alpha University (pre-1992 institution) and Pi University (post-1992 institution). The chart reveals differences between graduates from different intuitions and the skills which they feel they can now demonstrate. For example, a trend is prevalent that Omega graduates tend to report higher percentages of demonstrable skills than the average figure (with the exception of three skills - diversity, teamwork and presentation skills, which produced lower than average percentages). Similarly, higher than average percentage figures were also prevalent amongst the Alpha graduates (with the exception of five skills; self-reflection, IT skills, decision making, problem solving and critical thinking which elicited lower than average percentages).

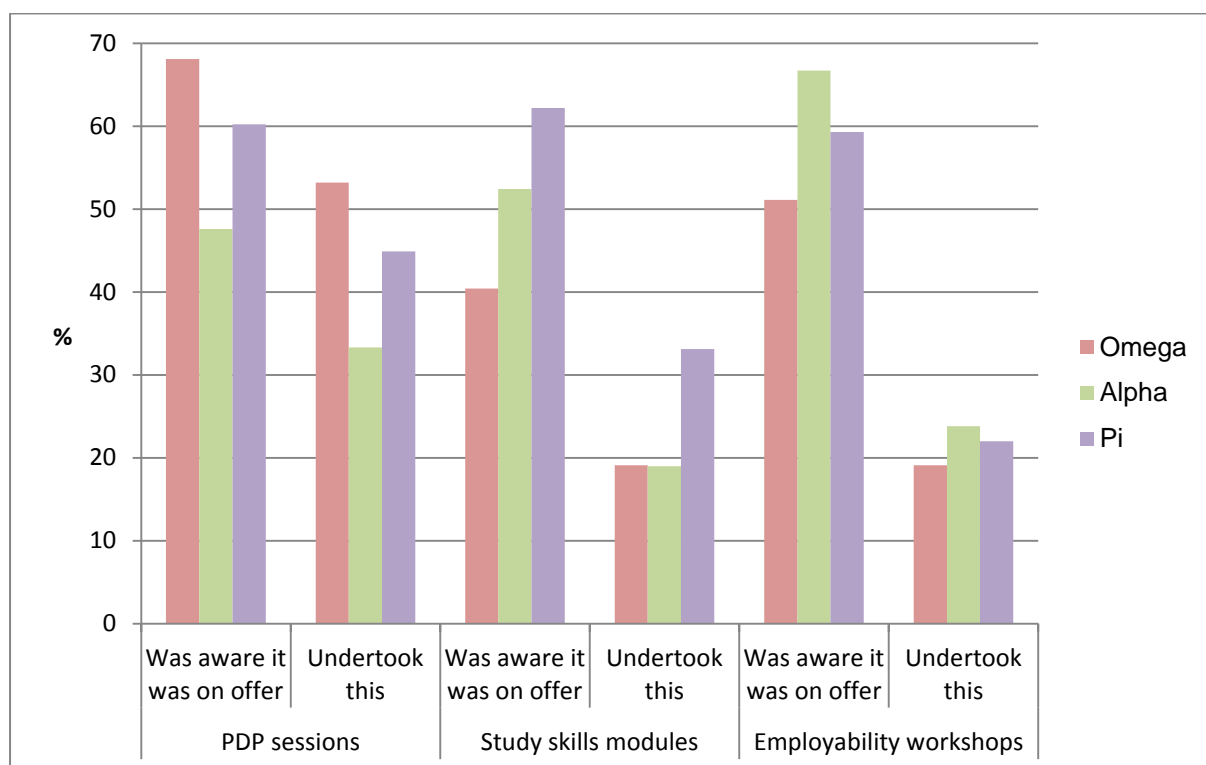
In contrast to the other two institutions, however, the Pi graduates fared the worst. Pi graduates on the whole, provided lower than average percentage figures when reporting on their demonstrable skills. For example, in fourteen of the sixteen skills, the Pi graduates' percentages were lower than the university combined average figure. The only two skills which Pi graduates held higher than average percentages for, were sensitivity to diversity and presentation skills.

Overall therefore, graduates from the Omega University gave the most favorable outcomes for demonstrable skills, when compared to the other two institutions. Alpha institution came second and Pi institution fared the worst for graduate reports on demonstrable skills resulting from their Business degree course. This analysis supports a trend that the institution from which graduated, could influence graduates feelings on their ability to demonstrate employability skills.

However, the limitations of this question must be acknowledged. The question asks specifically about the skills which graduates can now demonstrate as a result of their degree. Graduates may be able to demonstrate these skills as a result of extra-curricular activities, but the question sought the graduate viewpoint based upon skills developed by their Business degree. These results therefore, show that certain skills were not sufficiently developed by their Business degree and Business degrees at different institutions, resulted in differences reported by graduates on their demonstrable skills.

Following the skill development theme, graduates were also asked about the sessions they had engaged in during their studies, which were provided to develop their employability skills. Three response options were provided: PDP, study skills and employability workshops. Graduate had to select whether they were aware such sessions were available and also their attendance at these. The findings are presented in chart 5.2.4 below:

5.2.4 Graduates' Awareness and Uptake of Employability Enhancing Sessions



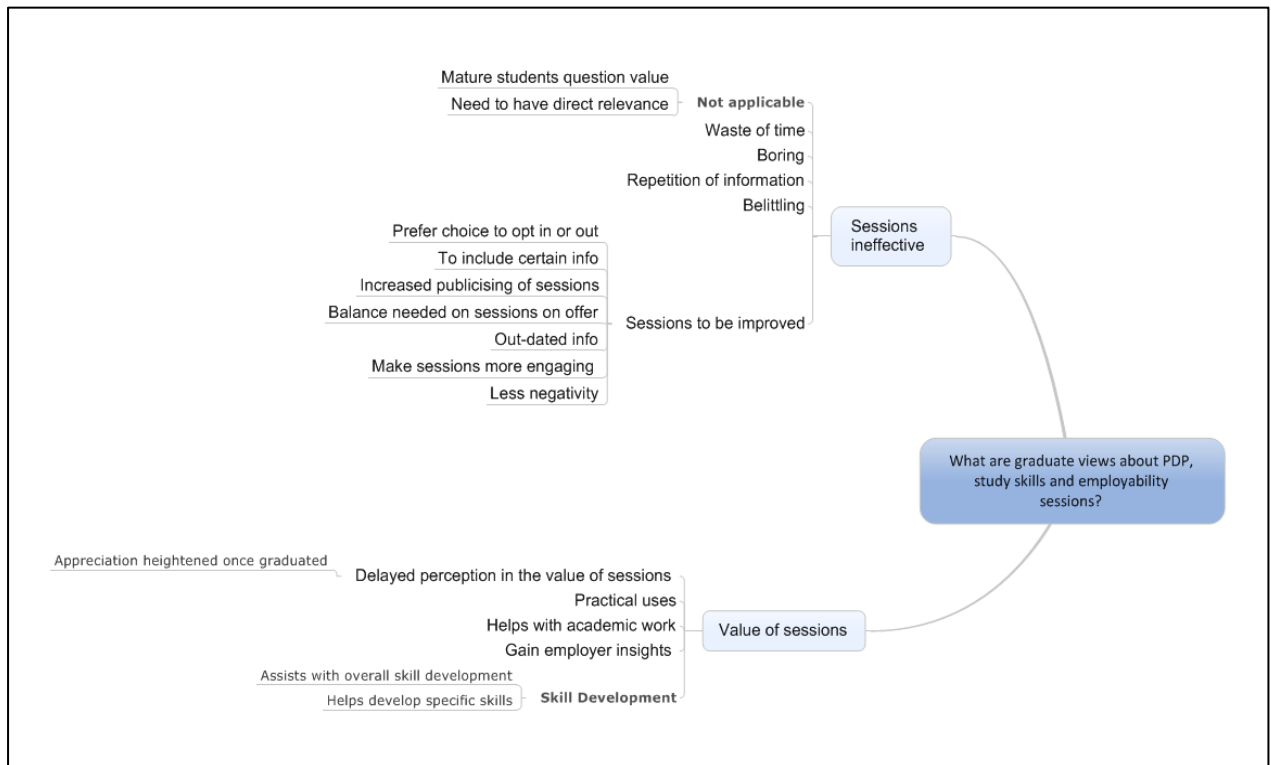
Graduate levels of awareness of PDP, study skills and employability sessions varied according to both the institution and the session. For example, 68.1% of Omega graduates were aware of PDP sessions on offer, whilst only 47.6% of Alpha graduates had an aware of these.

Alpha graduates were the most aware of employability sessions available, with 66.7% reporting awareness of these sessions, whilst Omega graduates had the lowest awareness of these. With regards to study skills sessions, Pi graduates were the most aware of these sessions, with 62.2% aware of these being provided. No institution, therefore, has the monopoly on graduate awareness of sessions with Omega institution receiving the most awareness of PDP, Pi University experienced the highest awareness of study skill sessions and Alpha University yielding the highest awareness for employability workshops.

Whilst awareness of such sessions varied, one common theme (irrespective of the specific session or the institution graduated from) was the low numbers of uptake. Graduates may have been aware that these sessions were on offer, yet not of all these graduates attended such events. For example, 68.1% of Omega graduates stated that they were aware of PDP session on offer, but only 52.3% attended the sessions. For study skill modules, 62.2% of Pi graduates were aware of these, yet only 33.1% took these up. Finally, 66.7% of alpha graduates were aware employability workshops were available, but only 23.8% undertook these. The disparities between these two aspects (awareness and uptake), need closer analysis.

To understand the graduate perspective of PDP, study skills and employability sessions, a qualitative question contained within the questionnaire requested more details. In particular, graduates were asked to comment on their experiences of these sessions and a thematic analysis was conducted on this questionnaire qualitative data. The mind map below reveals the findings of this thematic analysis:

5.2.5 Graduate Views on PDP, Study Skills and Employability Sessions



As figure 5.2.5 shows, there were two main opposing graduate views: firstly, some graduates felt the sessions were ineffective and secondly, other graduates valued the sessions.

For those who felt the sessions were ineffective, a range of issues were raised as to why the graduate felt this way. These largely concerned a lack of relevance or applicability, somewhat boring delivery and questionable content:

“Very basic in some areas and looked into some parts of employability that really don’t matter. One lesson for example was entirely based on how to shake someone’s hand”

Pi graduate in Business Administration, achieved 2.2 classification

“As a mature student I had a pretty clear idea of my development needs and had acquired most of my skills in my previous job role in a major bank”

Omega graduate in Computing, achieved 1st classification

In contrast however, several graduates did feel that PDP, study skills and employability sessions were valuable as these provided beneficial insights into both their skill development and employer expectations:

“I undertook an employability course which was really interesting and helpful. It helped me to gather not only my point of view as employee but also the employers’ point of view and what they’re actually looking for”

Pi graduate in International Business, achieved 1st classification

Furthermore, other graduates stated that they did not feel these sessions were valuable at the time, but in hindsight, they can now see the relevance:

“At the time I thought that they were useless, but since graduating I now understand the importance of PDP as it helps you fine tune your existing skills and also gives new and helpful information that you have previously overlooked or have been unaware of!”

Omega graduate in Management Studies, achieved 2.1 classification

The thematic analysis revealed that graduates were divided in how they perceived and experienced the PDP, study skills and employability sessions they undertook. Whilst for some they were useful and valuable, others found them to be a waste of time or not applicable. The negative elements raised by the graduates go some way to explain why the uptake of such sessions was low.

This section has highlighted the graduate questionnaire results surrounding skill development on a Business degree programme. Continuing through the graduate questionnaire themes, the next area of analysis involves graduate views and experiences of work experience.

Work Experience

As was raised in Chapter Three, work experience plays an integral part in enhancing a graduates’ employability. The questionnaire therefore sought information on graduate participation rates in work experiences, such as work placement, internship or volunteering opportunities, and their reasons for this.

The results showed that that less than half of the graduate sample (46.8%), took part in any form of work experience during their degree. This means that the majority of this sample did not undertake any work experience.

Disecting this information further, a crosstabulation analysis was performed to establish whether graduates from different areas within the business discipline, proved to have different levels of engagement with work experience. Chapter Three had already dscussed how work experience was more prevelant in Business subjects compared to other disciplines (Bowes & Harvey, 1999; Syer, 2012), so this exercise was to determine how work experience engagement differed within the Business field.

5.2.6 Work Experience Uptake according to Business Subject

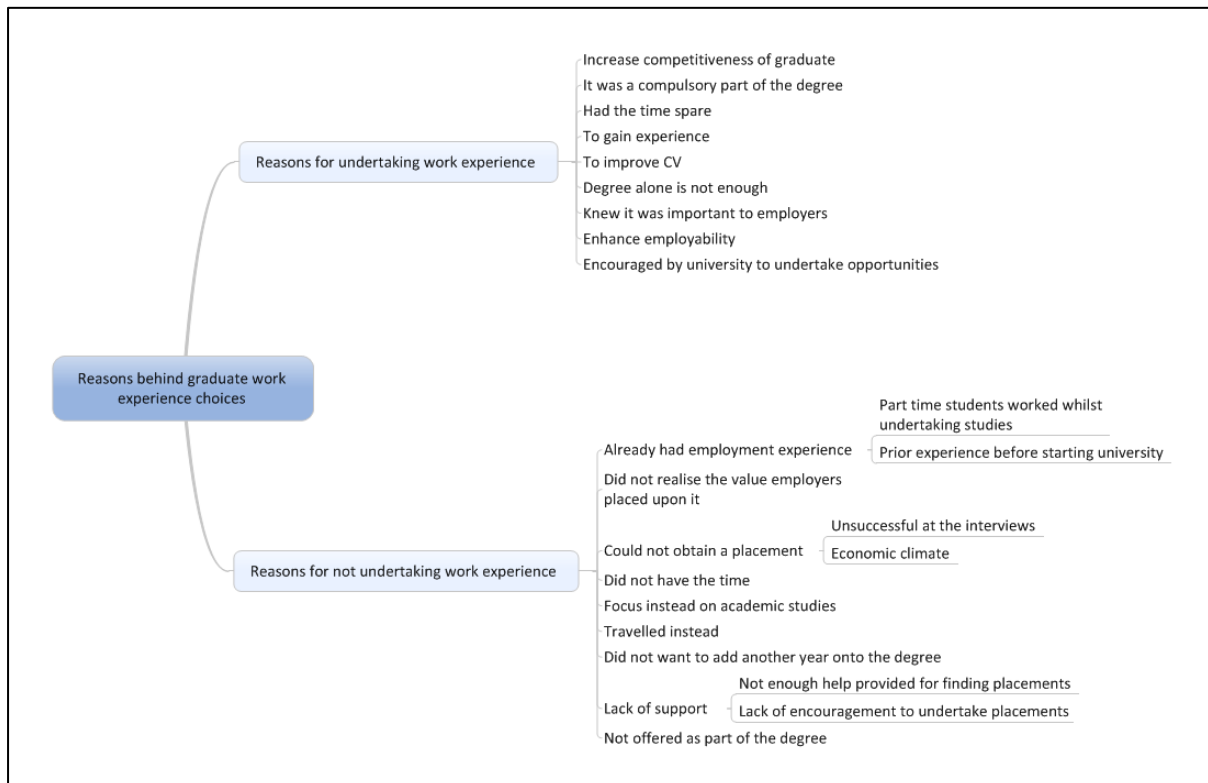
Business Degree Subject	% of graduates who undertook any form of experience during their degree
Accounting and Finance	60.9
Business Administration	35.7
Business Studies	52.6
Economics	33.3
Human Resource Management	25.0
Information Technology	61.5
International Business	30.3
Management Studies	38.5
Marketing	58.3
Public Relations	75.0
Retail Management	0.0

Table 5.2.6 above, shows that graduates in Public Relations had the most engagement with work experience, as 75% undertook some form of work experience during their degree. Information Technology graduates were the second highest subject to undertake work experience, followed by Accounting and Finance as the third highest, and Marketing as the fourth highest.

In contrast, none of the Retail Management graduates undertook work experience (although there were only 3 graduates from this discipline that completed the questionnaire). The second lowest uptake of work experience was seen with the Human Resource Management graduates, followed by International Business in third lowest place.

These findings support huge variation amongst the uptake of work experience across the range of business degree subjects. To obtain a deeper understanding of the issues relating to work experience engagement, the graduate qualitative comments were analysed via the thematic approach, the findings of which are presented in the mind map below:

5.2.7 Graduate Views on Work Experience



Graduates were asked why they did or did not choose to undertake work experience during their studies and a variety of reasons were offered, both in favour and against the undertaking of work experience.

For those who undertook work experience, several reasons were offered as to why the graduates chose to engage with such activities. For some, work experience was a compulsory element of the degree. For other graduates, they reported an awareness of the importance of work experience for enhancing employability:

“Throughout the degree we were always encouraged to ensure we were adding to our cv by doing extracurricular activities, again with the emphasis on being more employable”

Alpha graduate in Business and Management, achieved 1st classification

“I chose to undertake an internship because I realised early on that in this climate, a degree isn't always enough, and generally employers look for some work based experience too”

Pi graduate in Marketing, achieved 2.1 classification

However, the majority of the graduate sample (53.2%), did not undertake any work experience during their studies. The thematic analysis depicted in 5.2.7, provided a good insight into why so many of the graduates did not engage with this activity. For some of the graduates, especially those who were mature or studied part-time, sufficient work experience had previously been gained. These particular graduates therefore, decided to opt out of undertaking more experience. For other graduates however, there was a lack of awareness around the importance of work experience and therefore some graduates did not think undertaking work experience was that beneficial:

“I was unaware of how stringent employers have become towards experience over knowledge”

Pi graduate in Business Administration, achieved 2.2 classification

Other graduates decided against work experience as they chose instead to focus purely upon their academic studies and work load:

“I did not chose to seek employment when doing my degree because of the work load that was given out over the course of the year”

Omega graduate in International Business, achieve 2.1 classification

Additionally, there were a noteworthy number of graduates (14.4%), who stated that they did seek work experience, but were unable to secure any. Graduates largely attributed this to the economic climate and fierce competition:

“I applied, didn't get any of the placements I went to interviews for”

Omega graduate in Management Studies, achieved 2.1 classification

“Difficult to find work experience in such an economic climate”

Pi graduate in Business Administration, achieved 2.2 classification

Although only 46.8% of the sample undertook work experience, these graduates offered a range of gains made from engaging in this activity. Unfortunately, the direct question of 'what specifically did you gain from this experience' was not asked in the graduate questionnaire. However, graduates were asked an open question to comment on their work experience and their responses produced an insight into the skills and other benefits obtained from their work experiences.

As a result of undertaking work experience, the most frequent positive outcome graduates gave was improved employment prospects and outcomes. Having prior work experience put graduates in a more advantageous position when searching for and securing employment. Two graduates in particular, expressed their conviction that they would not be in their current employment had it not been for the work experiences they undertook whilst at university:

"I feel my placement has been invaluable in getting my employment so soon after graduating and has given me real live ability under live market conditions to see what 'real marketing work' is like".

Pi combined honors graduate in Marketing (Major) and Business (Minor), achieved 1st classification

"The university started their own web company whereby they took on live client work and allowed us to work on the projects. Very few people took them up on the offer but I jumped on it because I felt it offered a unique opportunity to gain "real world" experience. I was right too, employers that I interviewed with loved it and I ended up getting job at Shop Direct (one of the biggest online retailers in the UK) at a much higher salary than I should have got!"

Omega graduate in Information Technology, achieved 2.1 classification

This supports previous research findings discussed in Chapter Three, which highlights that work experience is a contributory factor for graduates securing graduate level employment more readily after their degree. In addition to these improved employment outcomes, other gains made from undertaking work placements included; improved grades on return to university after the placement, enhanced team working skills, increased confidence, better developed presentation skills, heightened cultural awareness, refined networking skills and making contacts, learning about the industry coupled with the opportunity to apply educationally developed skills and knowledge into a practical environment:

“My confidence levels grew significantly. When starting first year, presentations scared me, but by fourth year after my placement, it was like a walk in the park”

Alpha graduate in Business Studies, achieved 2.1 classification

“I learnt loads and loads about cultural differences from my placement”

Pi Graduate in Business Studies, achieved 2.1 classification

“I learnt far more on a year's work placement than 3 years of studying and writing essays”

Pi graduate in Public Relations, achieved a 2.1. classification

“I undertook a work placement in a university in Madrid to improve my Spanish”

Pi graduates in International Business, achieved a 2.1. classification

Despite the range of benefits to be gained from undertaking work experience, student uptake of this activity was relatively low. However, engagement in work experience varied across the business disciplines with some subjects experiencing much higher participation rates than others. Furthermore, the qualitative data analysis revealed a range of reasons why graduates either opt in or opt out of work experience during their studies. For those who did undertake work experience, the graduates found they reaped many direct benefits in the forms of employment outcomes, skill development and general enhanced employability.

The next section will move on to detail the graduate views on whether their degree, and time at university, enhanced their employability. The graduate views on how prepared they feel for entering the work place and their concerns about securing employment in the current economic climate will also be reported.

Enhanced Employability and Entering the Workplace

The final section of the graduate questionnaire sought graduate views on whether their employability had been enhanced by their degree and time at university. It also requested information from graduates on their concerns about securing employment in the current economic climate and how prepared they felt to enter the world of work. These three elements will now be discussed in turn.

Employability Enhancement

Graduates were asked outright whether they felt their degree had enhanced their employability, i.e. whether they felt they were now in a better position employment-wise, skills-wise and knowledge-wise, than if they had not gone to university. Of the graduate sample, 74.1% felt that their degree had enhanced their employability, the remaining 25.9% of the graduates were either unsure or felt their degree had not enhanced their employability.

Chapter Three highlighted instances where the institution attended could positively influence a graduates' employability. A cross-tabulation was therefore performed to determine whether the graduates from the three different institutions, reported differences in how they felt their degree had enhanced their employability:

5.2.8 Graduate Feelings on Enhanced Employability

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?	Omega Graduate %	Alpha Graduate %	Pi Graduate %
Yes	82.2	76.2	70.1
No	4.4	4.8	11.2
Unsure	13.3	19.0	18.7

Table 5.2.8 above shows, that Omega graduates agreed the most that their degree had enhanced their employability. This was closely followed by reports from Alpha graduates and Pi graduates agreed the least that their employability had been enhanced by their degree.

The differences between the percentages are not huge; 10.1% more Omega graduates than Pi graduates felt their degree enhanced their employability. However, it does support a slight trend for graduates from different institutions, who undertook similar business school subjects, to rate their employability enhancement differently.

Also highlighted in Chapter Three, was the role of degree classification in enhanced employability, given increasing employer degree classification thresholds. Another cross-tabulation was performed to see how degree classification obtained, influenced graduates' perception on enhanced employability.

5.2.9 Employability Enhancement according to Degree Classification

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?	Degree classification obtained (%)				
	1st	2.1	2.2	3rd	Pass
Yes	79.5	80.7	58.3	44.5	100.0*
No	5.1	5.7	16.7	22.2	0.0
Unsure	15.4	13.6	25.0	33.3	0.0

* There was only one graduate who obtained a pass degree

Interestingly, table 5.2.9 shows that of all degree classifications, those who achieved a 2.1 were more likely to agree that their degree has enhanced their employability. There were also more 1st and 2.1 graduates who felt that their degree enhanced their employability, compared to graduates who obtained 2.2 and 3rd class degrees. This supports that degree classification does have an influence upon whether graduates feel their employability has been enhanced.

Another employability signifier highlighted in the literature in Chapter Three, concerns prior work experiences. A further cross-tabulation analysis was undertaken, to ascertain whether a link was present between graduates who undertook work experience and those who felt their degree had enhanced their employability.

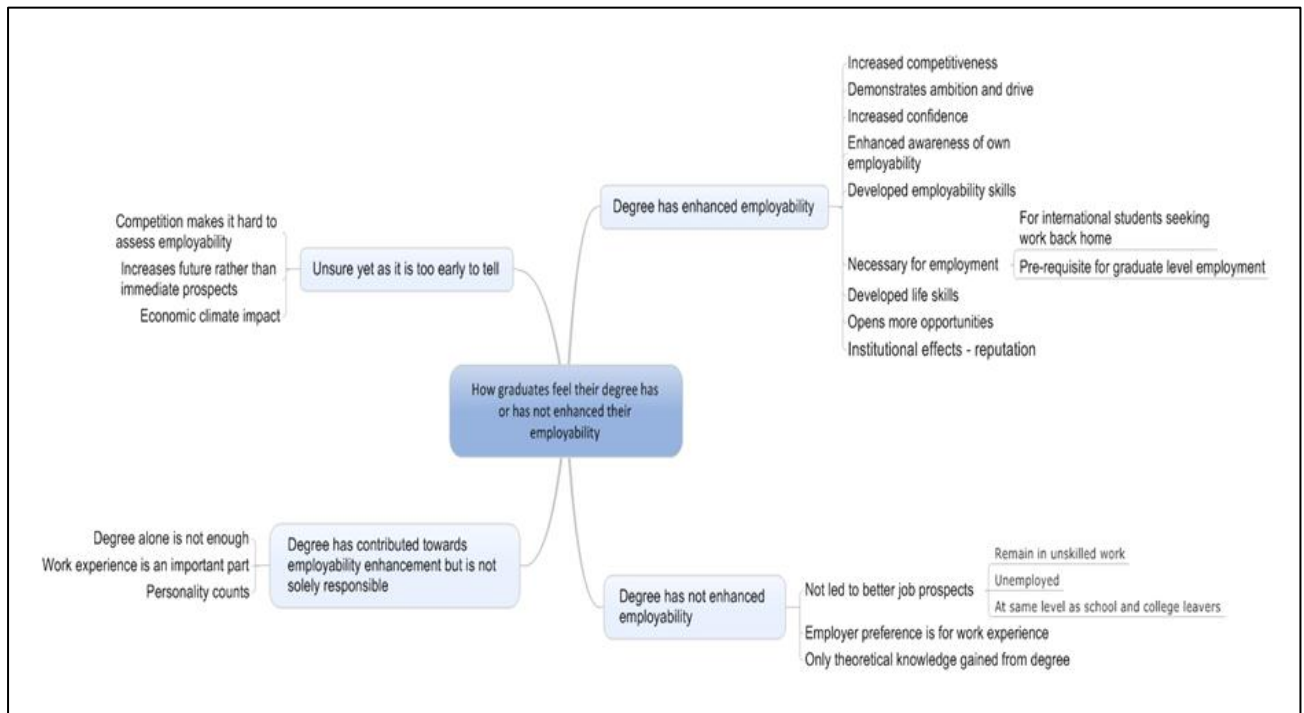
5.2.10 Enhanced Employability and Work Experience Uptake

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?	During your degree did you undertake any work experience?	
	Yes %	No %
Yes	79.7	68.2
No	6.3	10.2
Unsure	14.0	21.6

Almost 80% of graduates, who undertook work experience during their degree, felt their degree had enhanced their employability. In comparison, only 68.2% of graduates who did not undertake work experience, felt their degree had enhanced their employability. This supports a trend that those graduates who had undertaken work experience during their degree, were more likely to feel that their degree had enhanced their employability.

Whilst the quantitative data discussed above, suggests trends in graduate views of employability enhancement, analysis of the qualitative data provides a deeper understanding of these viewpoints. The mind map below illustrates the results of the thematic analysis which was performed on the graduate comments provided in the questionnaire.

5.2.11 Graduates Views on how their Degree Enhanced their Employability



As already reported, the majority of graduates (74.1%) felt that their degree has enhanced their employability, however figure 5.2.11 shows an assortment of issues surrounding this.

For those who outright agreed that their degree had enhanced their employability, the majority of graduates assigned this to the skills developed on their degree and the job opportunities now available as a graduate:

“I feel my degree has increased my awareness of employability as a concept, and therefore made me aware of exactly what skills make me employable and what employers want”

Alpha graduate in Marketing, achieved 1st classification

“It has shown that I can undertake independent study and research and obtain good grades and also my commitment to furthering myself”

Pi graduate in Business Studies, achieved 2.1 classification

“Obviously, not having a degree restricts the jobs one can apply for”

Pi graduate in Business Administration, achieved 1st classification

Three of the graduates from the Alpha institution (a Russell Group University) explicitly linked the reputation of their institution to their now perceived enhanced employability. One of these graduates felt that having a degree from an elite institution improved their CV, whilst another graduate explained how additional job opportunities can be accessed due to this form of cultural capital:

“I have a good degree from a red brick Russell Group University which enhances my CV. The degree ensured my CV would be considered by future employers”

Alpha graduate in Human Resource Management, achieved 2.1 classification

“Some jobs I applied for were specifically for 'top 20' university graduates, so it allowed me to have a chance in those”

Alpha graduate in International Business, achieved 2.1 classification

However, other graduates held some reservation over the role of their degree in enhancing their employability. Some graduates for example, felt it was too early to comment as they had not yet been able to assess their own employability. For others, they felt the economic climate was stifling their employability potential:

“I feel that my knowledge and skills have enhanced a great deal although due to the economic climate employability has not really been enhanced as there is too much competition for each graduate job”

Pi graduate in Business and Management, achieved 2.1 classification

Other graduates argued that supplementary elements were also necessary in their employability enhancement, a degree in isolation therefore is not sufficient:

“I feel that my degree has given me an unarguable stance in education, but I don't feel that in this climate education is as relevant as before. I used my time at university to undertake many additional activities and feel these are very important in improving my options after university life”

Alpha graduate in International Business, achieved 1st classification

Finally there were a group of graduates who felt that the degree did not enhance their employability at all:

“Those that left from GCSE/A-Level have been given the experience and worked their way up. I will still need to do this with a degree”

Pi graduate in Accounting and Finance, achieved 2.2 classification

“University did not teach me many new skills. Job wise, PKF, the accountancy firm that I will be starting the graduate training scheme with were more interested that I could speak 3 languages fluently as opposed to my qualification, which by the way did not meet the 2.1 minimum requirement as I only achieved a 2.2”

Omega graduate in International Business, achieved 2.2 classification

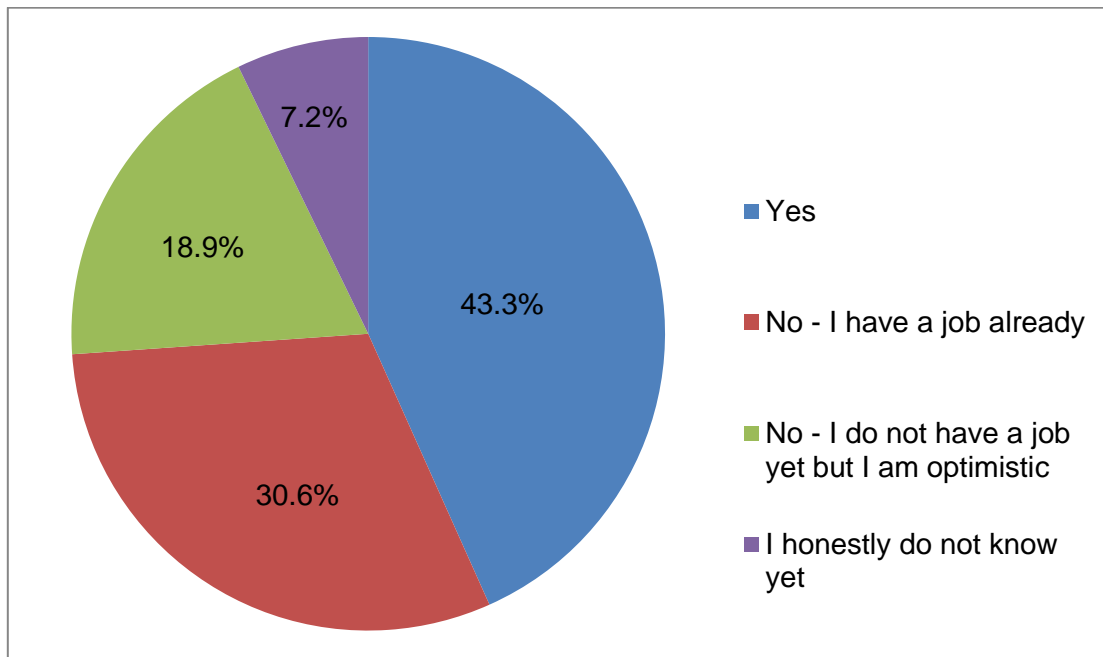
Overall therefore, the quantitative results showed that graduate views on employability enhancement depend upon a range of issues, such as: the university attended, the degree classification obtained and prior work experiences. The qualitative results highlight the importance of additional factors in how graduates view employability enhancement, such as: how successful one can be in the current economic climate, the levels of competition for jobs and the added-extras graduates can provide.

The economic climate and competitive labour market conditions were reoccurring themes throughout the graduate employability comments. The economic climate and the effect this has on graduate views are looked at in the section that follows.

Employment in the Current Economic Climate

The questionnaire contained two questions which specifically sought graduate views on securing employment during the current economic climate. The first question elicited quantitative data and the second question yielded qualitative data. The quantitative data is displayed in chart 5.2.12:

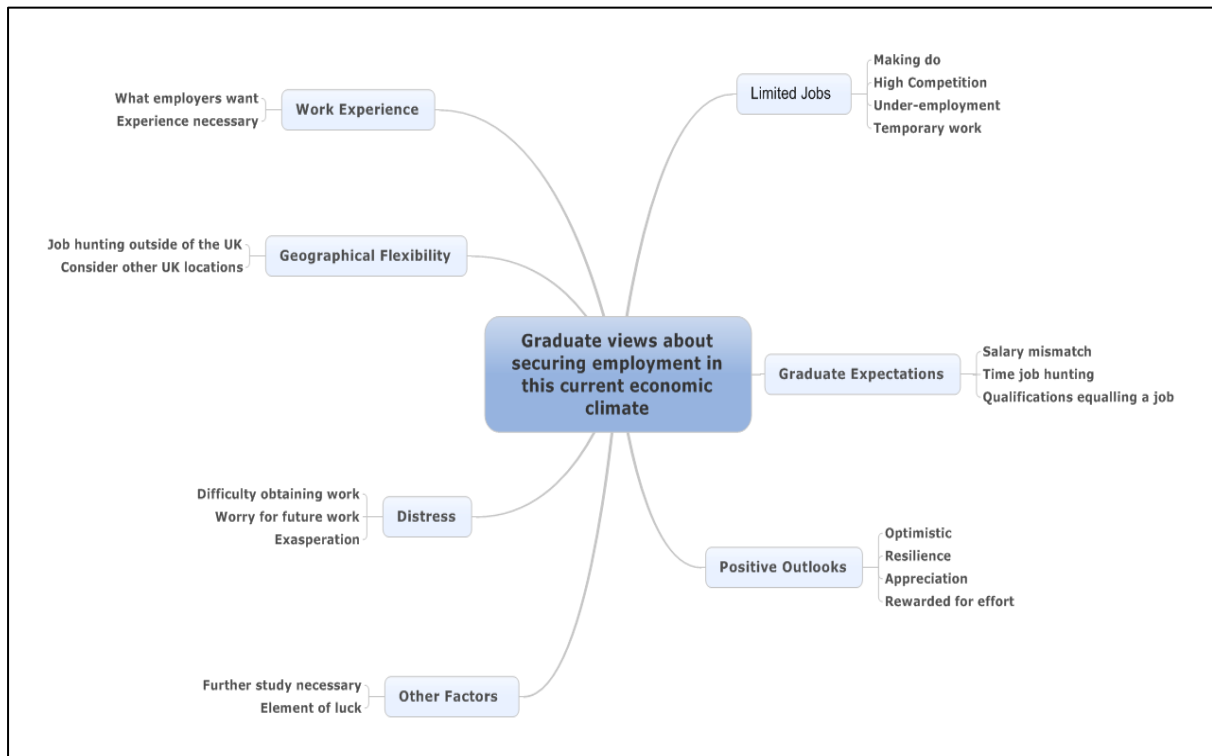
5.2.12 Concerned about Securing Employment in this Economic Climate?



This demonstrates an almost 50:50 split of those graduates who are concerned (43.3%) and those who are not concerned (49.5%) about securing employment in the economic climate. A small number of graduates were unsure as to how they felt about securing employment in this economic climate.

The qualitative data was analysed to obtain a deeper understanding of the graduate's view on this matter. Thematic analysis of the qualitative responses revealed several issues which explained graduates' views on securing employment in the current economic climate. These are detailed in the following mind map:

5.2.13 Graduate Views on Securing Employment in this Economic Climate



As figure 5.2.13 shows, a wide range of issues were raised by graduates as they enter the labour market in this current economic climate. Graduates expressed a variety of ways in which the economic conditions have impacted on them so far: increased competition for jobs, unclear expectations for the workplace, geographical flexibility and the likely option of having to ‘make do’ with any available work whilst seeking their desired employment:

“Since there has not been anything else available, I will take this role until something more suitable comes along”

Pi graduate in Management Studies, achieved 2.1 classification

“I am very worried I will have to work in a low paid job i.e. bar work until I can secure desirable employment related to my degree”

Pi graduate in International Business, achieved 1st classification

Furthermore, some graduates also voiced concerns for the future even though their employment situation is fine at the moment:

“Although my current job is a good one and well paid it is only a temporary contact to cover maternity leave and I don't know what I'll do or what job I'll find when this contract is up”

Pi graduate in Public Relations and Marketing, achieved 2.1 classification

Whilst seeking employment in the economic climate led to distress for some graduates, others did not necessarily feel it resulted in a gloomy outcome employment-wise:

“Obviously there has been a decline in the amount of available jobs for graduates, especially in the current economy. However with the necessary skills and qualifications, I am very optimistic about obtaining a graduate job in my degree subject”

Omega graduate in Management Studies, achieved 2.1 classification

“I think if you put in the time and effort to make sure you apply for jobs that are relevant to your abilities and skills, and make sure the application is specific to their wants and needs, there's no reason you won't get an interview”

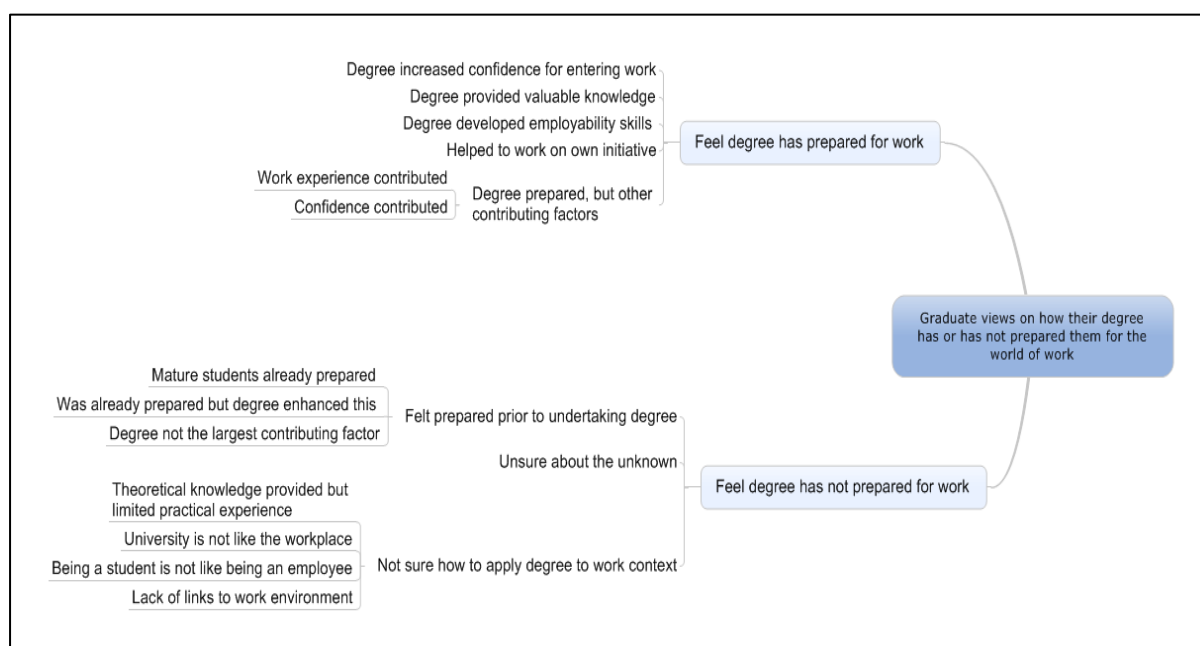
Pi graduate in Marketing, achieved 2.1 classification

Whilst the economic climate was a very contemporary and pertinent matter for all graduates, a range of different levels of concern resulted. Given the economic climate, the increased competition for jobs and that almost 60% of the sample plan to enter into employment after graduation, the next section discusses how prepared the graduates felt to enter the workplace.

Preparedness for the Workplace

Lastly, graduates were asked how prepared they felt to enter the work place as a result of undertaking their degree. Slightly more than half (58.4%) said that upon completing their degree, they felt prepared to enter the world of work. To investigate their viewpoint further, the qualitative comments were analysed, again using the thematic approach, to obtain a deeper understanding of the graduate perspective.

5.2.14 Graduates' Feelings of Preparedness to Enter the Workplace



As shown in figure 5.2.14, graduates provided a selection of reasons explaining their views over whether the degree had, or had not, prepared them for entering the workplace. For the 41.6% of the graduates who either felt the degree had not prepared them or were unsure over this, comments reflected uncertainty over how their education would be applied to a work context:

“I think university and the lifestyle it entails is unlike ‘the world of work’, attending a few hours a week and completing coursework is minor to what will be expected during work. A lot will have to be learnt on the job”

Alpha graduate in Economics, achieved 1st classification

“I have a qualification but no idea how this will be applied within a job”

Pi graduate in Advertising & Marketing Communications, achieved 2.1 classification

However, for the 58.4% of the sample who did feel prepared to enter the workplace, reasons included an increased confidence gained from undertaking their degree, alongside the development of skills and knowledge:

“I have developed as a person and also developed skills and knowledge that were new and challenging to myself. I feel that there are situations at work that I can now manage and make decisions about without having to consult anybody else”

Omega graduate in Management Studies, achieved 2.2 classification

Other graduates had work experiences which had contributed towards them feeling prepared to enter to the world of work. This was due to the first-hand experience of the workplace:

“I feel I am ready to enter the world of work, however I do not feel the sole reason for this is my degree. I feel experience in the workplace has contributed more to me being ready to enter the actual workplace than my degree alone”

Pi graduate in Business Studies, achieved 1st classification

Given the references made to prior work experience as being instrumental in helping graduates feel more prepared to enter the work place, further analysis was carried out. A cross-tabulation was performed to determine whether a trend was present.

5.2.15 Preparedness to Enter the Workplace and Prior Work Experiences

During your degree did you undertake any work experience?	As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?		
	Yes %	No %	Unsure %
Yes	66.2	20.8	13
No	49.4	19.3	31.3

Table 5.2.15 above, shows that of those who undertook work experience, 66.2% felt prepared to enter the work place, compared to 20.8% of graduates feeling prepared to enter the workplace who had not undertaken work experience. Whilst more graduates feel prepared to enter the workplace if they have obtained work experience, the 66.2% figure is surprisingly low. Especially given the importance placed on work experience by employability stakeholders in Chapter Three. Nonetheless, these results do support a trend that graduates will feel more prepared to enter the workplace if they have undertaken prior work experience.

This section has detailed the results of both the quantitative and qualitative graduate questionnaire findings. The results have covered a range of descriptive statistics, cross tabulations and thematic analyses to develop a deeper understanding of the graduate perspective of their own employability development and enhancement throughout their time at university.

The results discussed thus far, have revealed several prevalent trends in the data relating to employability. These require further investigation which involves the undertaking of statistical analyses. The next section details the statistical analyses performed on the graduate quantitative data to establish where any significant relationships are present.

Statistical Analysis on the Graduate Data

Chapter Four provided explanations of the Chi-Square test performed on this data. Furthermore, appendix 7 provides detailed information on the exact mathematics behind this statistical test, along with a template for translating the statistical outputs. However, as a brief reminder, a Chi-Square significance test was performed on the quantitative graduate questionnaire findings. This was undertaken to ascertain whether or not any significant relationships were present. This section details the variables which were included in the analysis and the findings from the Chi-Square analyses.

Chi-Square Analysis

In a Chi-Square test of significance, only two variables can be analysed at once: one independent variable (i.e. the variable being changed) and one dependent variable (the variable being measured). The analysis looks at the effect the independent variable (IV) has on the dependent variable (DV). The IV can be changed for each analysis to determine where any relationships are present. For this data, the Chi-Square analyses aimed to determine whether the IVs caused changes in the DVs and if these differences were statistically significant.

A small selection of the SPSS graduate data analysis outputs are available in appendix 8, however, table 5.2.16 overleaf, shows a summary of the main results produced by the Chi-Square analyses.

5.2.16 The Graduate Chi-Square Results

IV	DV	Pearson chi-square	df	p	Cramer's V or Phi value	Effect size
University	Critical Thinking skills	3.119	2	0.210	0.129	Not Sig
University	Problem Solving skills	8.892	2	0.012*	0.219	Small
University	Decision Making skills	12.723	2	0.002*	0.262	Medium
University	Oral Comm skills	0.132	2	0.936	0.027	Not Sig
University	Written Comm skills	0.317	2	0.853	0.041	Not Sig
University	Presentation skills	0.493	2	0.782	0.051	Not Sig
University	Numeracy skills	11.740	2	0.003*	0.251	Medium
University	IT Skills	11.560	2	0.003*	0.249	Medium
University	Self-management skills	0.446	2	0.800	0.049	Not Sig
University	Team work skills	1.776	2	0.412	0.098	Not Sig
University	Leadership skills	2.353	2	0.308	0.112	Not Sig
University	Project mgmt skills	7.027	2	0.030*	0.194	Small
University	Interpersonal skills	0.459	2	0.795	0.050	Not Sig
University	Research skills	2.854	2	0.240	0.124	Not Sig
University	Self-Reflection skills	9.959	2	0.007*	0.231	Small
University	Diversity skills	1.204	2	0.548	0.080	Not Sig
University	Degree Classification	6.694	2	0.035*	0.191	Small
University	Work experience	10.257	2	0.006*	0.246	Medium
University	Been offered a job	13.061	2	0.001*	0.289	Medium
University	Worried about climate	22.260	2	0.000*	0.259	Medium
University	Awareness of Skills	0.610	2	0.737	0.059	Not Sig
University	Enhanced employ.	2.482	2	0.289	0.120	Not Sig
University	Feel prepared	10.116	2	0.006*	0.247	Medium
Degree class	Enhanced employ.	9.933	1	0.002*	0.240	Small
Degree class	Feel prepared	1.863	1	0.172	0.106	Not Sig
Degree class	Work experience	2.931	1	0.087	0.131	Not Sig
Degree class	Worried about climate	1.807	2	0.405	0.104	Not Sig
Work exp.	Enhanced employ.	2.869	1	0.090	0.131	Not Sig
Work exp.	worried about climate	2.184	2	0.336	0.118	Not Sig
Work exp.	Enhanced employ.	2.869	1	0.090	0.131	Not Sig
Work exp.	Feel prepared	4.633	1	0.031*	0.170	Small
Work exp.	Aware of skills	0.383	1	0.536	0.048	Not Sig
Enhanced employ.	Feel prepared	18.672	1	0.000*	0.336	Medium
Enhanced employ.	worried about climate	11.555	2	0.003*	0.269	Medium

(* indicates a significant result)

Table 5.2.16 details which IVs were analysed against which DVs. For each analysis, the following figures are provided: the Chi-Square figure, the degrees of freedom (df), the level of significance (p) and either the Cramer's V value or the phi value for the effect size. The Cramer's V value is reported for 2x3 analyses and the phi value is reported for 2x2 analyses. The final column in the table translates the Cramers or Phi values into an effect size, if a significant result was found. As is detailed further in appendix 7, once a significant difference is found, the effect size gives an indication of the strength of this association. A weak effect is present if the effect size figure is closer to zero and a stronger effect is apparent if the effect size figure is closer to 1.

Of the thirty-four analyses listed in table 5.2.16, fifteen significant results were found. A significant result means that there is a statistically significant difference between the groups within the variables, which is not likely to have occurred by chance. A significant result is not the only aspect to consider, the effect size (i.e. the strength of the association) also needs to also be assessed (Pallant, 2007; Field, 2009). These significant findings will now be discussed in turn with summaries provided from the SPSS graduate Chi-Square outputs.

The University Attended and Demonstrating the Sixteen Skills

The graduates had to state which of the sixteen QAA (2007) skills they felt they can now demonstrate as a result of their degree. The Chi-Square analysis compared these results according to which institution the graduate had attended. Of the sixteen skills analysed, significant differences were found ($p < 0.05$) between the university from which the degree was obtained and the demonstration of six skills; problem solving, decision making, numeracy, IT, project management and self-reflection. Whilst a significant relationship was found, a closer look at the SPSS data is necessary to ascertain the direction of this significant relationship, which is detailed in the table below:

5.2.17 University Attended and Skill Demonstration

Skill	Count	University Attended		
		Omega	Alpha	Pi
Problem solving	Count	38	11	68
	Expected	29.6	13.2	74.2
Decision making	Count	35	6	70
	Expected	28	12.5	70.4
Numeracy	Count	23	13	34
	Expected	17.7	7.9	44.4
IT	Count	26	3	41
	Expected	17.7	7.9	44.4
Project management	Count	29	10	46
	Expected	21.5	9.6	53.9
Self-reflection	Count	35	11	56
	Expected	25.8	11.5	64.7

The count shows the actual numbers who stated that they can demonstrate these skills, whilst the expected count is the number that would be expected if there were no associations between these variables. Looking at the differences between both the actual count and expected count therefore, provides an indication of the direction of the relationship.

As the table above shows, for the problem solving, decision-making, IT and self-reflection skills, the Omega graduates reported higher counts than expected counts on the ability to demonstrate these skills. Whilst the Alpha and Pi graduates reported lower counts than expected counts on the ability to demonstrate these skills. For numeracy and project management skills, both Omega and Alpha graduates reported higher than expected figures whereas Pi graduates reported lower than expected figures.

Similarly to the trend identified earlier on in this chapter, the statistical analysis confirms that graduates from different institutions, report differences in the ability to demonstrate certain skills. Omega graduates were significantly more likely to be able to demonstrate these six skills as a result of their degree programme, whilst Pi graduates were significantly less likely to be able to demonstrate these six skills.

University Attended and Degree Classification

A significant association was found between the university from which the degree was obtained and degree classification achieved as $p < 0.05$. As the statistical test revealed a significant association, a closer look is necessary to determine the direction and strength of this significant relationship.

5.2.18 University Attended and Degree Classification

University Attended		Degree classification obtained	
		1 st or 2.1	2.2, 3 rd , ordinary
Omega	Count	36	9
	Expected count	32.7	12.3
Alpha	Count	19	2
	Expected count	15.3	5.7
Pi	Count	78	39
	Expected count	85	32

To clarify, the count shows the actual numbers achieved and the expected count is the number expected to be achieved if there were no association between these variables. Looking at the differences between the actual count and expected count provides information on the direction of the relationship.

As Table 5.2.18 shows, more Omega and Alpha graduates obtained a 1st or 2.1 class degree than was expected, whereas less Pi graduates obtained a 1st or 2.1 degree than was expected. This supports the direction that more graduates from Omega and Alpha obtained higher degree classifications than Pi graduates.

However, the effect size also needs to be considered. The effect size gives an indication of the strength of a significant association, which for this scenario is small. This therefore means that, whilst the association between institution attended and degree classification obtained is statistically significant, the association is a weak one.

University Attended and Work Experience

The next statistically significant result was found between the university attended and participation in work experience ($p < 0.05$).

5.2.19 University Attended and Work Experience

University Attended		During your degree did you undertake any work experience?	
		Yes	No
Omega	Count	27	14
	Expected count	19.3	21.7
Alpha	Count	12	9
	Expected count	9.9	11.1
Pi	Count	41	67
	Expected count	50.8	57.2

The table shows a difference between counts and expected counts for each university. Higher counts of Omega and Alpha graduates undertook work experience during their studies than was expected. In contrast, lower than expected counts of Pi graduates undertook work experience during their degree. There is therefore a significant association between the university attended and the undertaking of work experience during a degree. The direction follows that those graduating from Omega and Alpha universities were significantly more likely to undertake work experience than Pi graduates.

Furthermore, the effect size figure is larger for this analysis; this means that the association is stronger and therefore more substantiated.

University Attended and Employment Offers

For those planning to enter into employment after graduation, the graduates were asked whether or not they had already been offered a job. There was a significant association found between the university the graduate attended and having already acquired employment ($p < 0.05$). There was also a medium effect size reported, which means that there is a medium strength in the association between university attended and the graduate having already been offered employment.

5.2.20 University Attended and Employment Offer

University Attended		If entering into employment, have you already been offered a job?	
		Yes	No
Omega	Count	22	17
	Expected count	16.5	22.5
Alpha	Count	13	6
	Expected count	8	11
Pi	Count	31	67
	Expected count	41.5	56.5

As shown in table 5.2.20, more Omega and Alpha graduates were offered jobs than expected. For the Pi graduates, their actual count was less than the expected count and therefore less Pi graduates were offered a job than would be expected. This supports that those who graduated from the Omega and Alpha universities, were statistically more likely to have been offered employment than those who graduated from Pi University.

University Attended and Concerns about Securing Work in the Economic Climate

The next significant result was found between the university attended and graduate concerns over securing employment in the current economic climate as $p < 0.05$. Furthermore, an effect size of 0.26 was found which means that there is a medium strength in the association between these two variables. Again, whilst the result is significant with a medium effect size, the data needs to be examined further to determine the direction of this significant association.

5.2.21 University Attended and Graduate Economic Climate Concerns

University Attended		Are you worried about securing employment in the current economic climate?		
		Yes	No – I have a job already	No – I do not have a job but I am optimistic
Omega	Count	11	20	12
	Expected count	20.2	14	8.8
Alpha	Count	7	12	1
	Expected count	9.4	6.5	4.1
Pi	Count	60	22	21
	Expected count	48.4	33.5	21.1

As demonstrated in table 5.2.21, the Omega and Alpha graduates are less concerned about securing employment in the economic climate, than expected. For example, the actual count of those Omega graduates who were concerned is almost half than that expected. Alpha graduates are also less concerned than expected, but not as markedly as the Omega graduates. In contrast, the Pi graduates are more concerned than expected.

This medium strength relationship therefore, supports that graduates are significantly less likely to be concerned about securing employment in the economic climate if they graduated from either the Omega or Alpha universities.

It is important to note here the factor of institutional bias. The questionnaire posed questions to graduates within an educational context e.g. the teaching of employability skills and the employability enhancing initiatives on offer at their university. The graduate responses were therefore expected to rate the institutions, their perceived employability level and current concerns about their employment, based on the provision provided by their institution, rather than as a result of aspects such as university reputation or cultural biases. However, Chapter Three: The Literature Review highlighted some strong employer biases towards graduates from the more elite institutions; what Tomlinson (2012) terms as 'reputational capital'. This bias features heavily in the employer's perspective and although small in number, it also featured in the graduate perspective. Three of the Alpha graduates (who attended an elite institution) commented explicitly on this reputation capital, which they felt would help them to acquire work and bolster their employability, hence why these graduates may be less concerned about the economic climate. This has to be acknowledged as a factor when distinguishing between the graduates from the different institutions. More will be discussed on this issue in Chapter Six: Interpretation of the Results and Discussion.

University Attended and Preparedness to Enter the World of Work

The final significant result found using 'university' as the independent variable, was with graduates' feelings of preparedness to enter the workplace a result of completing their degree ($p < 0.05$). This means that the university attended had a significant effect upon feelings of preparedness. This effect was also shown to support a medium strength relationship.

5.2.22 University Attended and Feelings of Preparedness

University Attended		As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?	
		Yes	No/Unsure
Omega	Count	32	8
	Expected count	23.4	16.6
Alpha	Count	10	10
	Expected count	11.7	8.3
Pi	Count	55	51
	Expected count	61.9	44.1

As table 5.2.22 highlights, there are differences between the actual counts and expected counts, in feelings of preparedness by graduates from each of the three institutions. Higher than expected counts of the Omega graduates felt prepared, whereas lower than expected count of the Alpha and Pi graduates felt prepared. The university attended therefore, has a significant effect upon how prepared graduates feel for entering the workplace. Those graduating from Omega University, feeling more prepared and those graduating from the Alpha and Pi universities, feeling less prepared.

Degree Classification and Enhanced Employability

The next independent variable implemented in the Chi-Square analyses, was the degree class obtained by the graduate. The Chi-Square tests were performed using this IV to establish whether or not this had any significant association with other variables. Apart from the association with university attended (which has already been discussed in the previous section), only one other significant effect was found with this IV. This occurred with graduate views on how their degree had enhanced their employability ($p < 0.05$).

A small to medium effect was found, meaning that degree classification obtained had a modest to moderate strength relationship with graduate feelings over whether the degree had enhanced their employability.

5.2.23 Degree Classification and Enhanced Employability

Degree Classification		Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?	
		Yes	No/Unsure
1st or 2:1	Count	102	25
	Expected count	94	33
2:2, 3rd or ordinary	Count	26	20
	Expected count	34	12

As the table overleaf shows, the actual count of those who achieved either a first or upper-second class degree and felt their degree enhanced their employability, was higher than expected. Furthermore, lower than expected counts for employability enhancement, were observed for graduates who achieved either a lower-second, third or ordinary degree. The direction supports that those who obtained either a first or upper-second class degree, were significantly more likely to feel that their degree had enhanced their employability.

Work Experience and Preparedness for the Workplace

The next independent variable implemented in the Chi-Square analyses, was the undertaking of work experience during the degree programme. This variable was analysed against other variables to ascertain any significant effects present in the data. Whilst the 'university attended' has already been associated significantly to this variable, another significant relationship was found. This significant relationship was between graduates undertaking work experience and their feelings of preparedness to enter the world of work ($p < 0.05$). The effect of this relationship however, was only revealed to be small and is therefore of a modest strength.

5.2.24 Work Experience and Preparedness for the Workplace

During your degree did you undertake any work experience?		As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?	
		Yes	No/Unsure
Yes	Count	51	26
	Expected count	44.3	32.7
No	Count	41	42
	Expected count	47.7	35.3

The figures in the table above show that higher than expected counts of graduates, who undertook work experience, felt prepared to enter the world of work. Additionally, lower than expected counts of graduates, who did not undertake work experience, reported they felt prepared for the work place. The direction of this association follows that those who undertook work experience during their degree, were statistically more likely to feel prepared to enter the world of work.

Degree Enhanced Employability and Preparedness to Enter the Workplace

The penultimate variable implemented as the IV in the graduate Chi-Square analyses, was graduate views on how their degree has enhanced their employability.

A statistically significant association was found between employability enhancement resulting from their degree and graduate preparedness to enter the world of work. This significant result was also found to have a medium effect size and therefore holds moderate strength.

5.2.25 Degree Enhanced Employability and Preparedness to Enter the Workplace

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?		As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?	
		Yes	No/Unsure
Yes	Count	83	39
	Expected count	71	51
No	Count	13	30
	Expected count	25	18

As the figures in table 5.2.25 show, there are differences between the actual counts and expected counts. For example, of those who felt their degree had enhanced their employability, more graduates than expected felt prepared to enter the world of work. In contrast, of those who did not feel their degree had enhanced their employability, fewer graduates than expected felt they were prepared for the world of work. The direction of this association therefore, supports that those graduates who felt their degree enhanced their employability were more likely to feel prepared to enter the world of work.

Degree Enhanced Employability and Concerns about the Economic Climate

The final Chi-Square analysis performed on the graduate data, looked at graduate views on how their degree had or not, enhanced their employability against their concerns about securing employability in the current economic climate. A significant association was found between these variables as $p < 0.05$, which supported a medium effect size.

5.2.26 Degree Enhanced Employability and Concerns about the Economic Climate

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?		Are you worried about securing employment in the current economic climate?		
		Yes	No - I already have a job	No - I do not have a job yet but I am optimistic
Yes	Count	44	47	29
	Expected count	53.3	41.3	25.5
No	Count	27	8	5
	Expected count	17.8	13.8	8.5

The table overleaf shows the direction in the relationship between graduate views of enhanced employability and their concerns over securing employment in the current economic climate. Those graduates who felt that their degree enhanced their employability were less likely to feel concerned about securing employment. However, for those who did not feel their degree had enhanced their employability, these graduates were more likely to feel concerned about securing employment. This was the last significant graduate result found and the non-significant results will be discussed next.

The Non-Significant Findings

Of the thirty-four Chi-Square analyses performed, nineteen yielded non-significant results. Non-significant associations, i.e. where $p \geq 0.05$, were identified in table 5.2.16 earlier in this section.

Firstly, the variable 'university attended' was analysed against the sixteen QAA (2007) skills that graduates stated they can now demonstrate as a result of their degree. Non-significant differences were found for ten of these skills, meaning that the university attended did not influence graduates ability to demonstrate: critical thinking, oral and written communications, presentation, self-management, team work, leadership, interpersonal, research and sensitivity to diversity skills. Additionally, the 'university attended' was not found to have a significant association between the two variables 'awareness of Skills' and 'degree enhanced employability'.

Secondly, when degree classification was implemented as the independent variable, of the four analyses performed, three revealed non-significant results: against 'prepared to enter workplace', 'undertaking of work experience' and 'worries about securing employment in the economic climate'. The degree classification achieved therefore did not have a significant effect upon these three variables.

The third and final set of non-significant findings were produced when the variable 'undertaking of work experience during the degree' was analysed against three other variables: 'awareness of skills developed on the degree', 'the degree enhanced employability' and 'worries about securing employment in the economic climate'.

This Chi-Square section has provided further analysis on the graduate perspective of their employability and has tested the trend identified earlier in this section. These analyses have produced a set of graduate results, which have proved to have either significant or non-significant findings. An interpretation of these findings will be presented in Chapter Six.

Concluding the Graduate Results

The graduate qualitative and quantitative data analysis has revealed much depth to the graduate perspective of employability. The results have uncovered how graduates have viewed elements of their higher education and student experience, and whether or not this has contributed towards the enhancement of their employability.

The main findings comprise of five main areas; skill development, work experience engagement, preparedness for the work place, the impact of the economic climate and institution graduated from. A full and detailed interpretation of these results will be given in the next chapter, instead, this results chapter now moves on to report the results of the curriculum developers perspective.

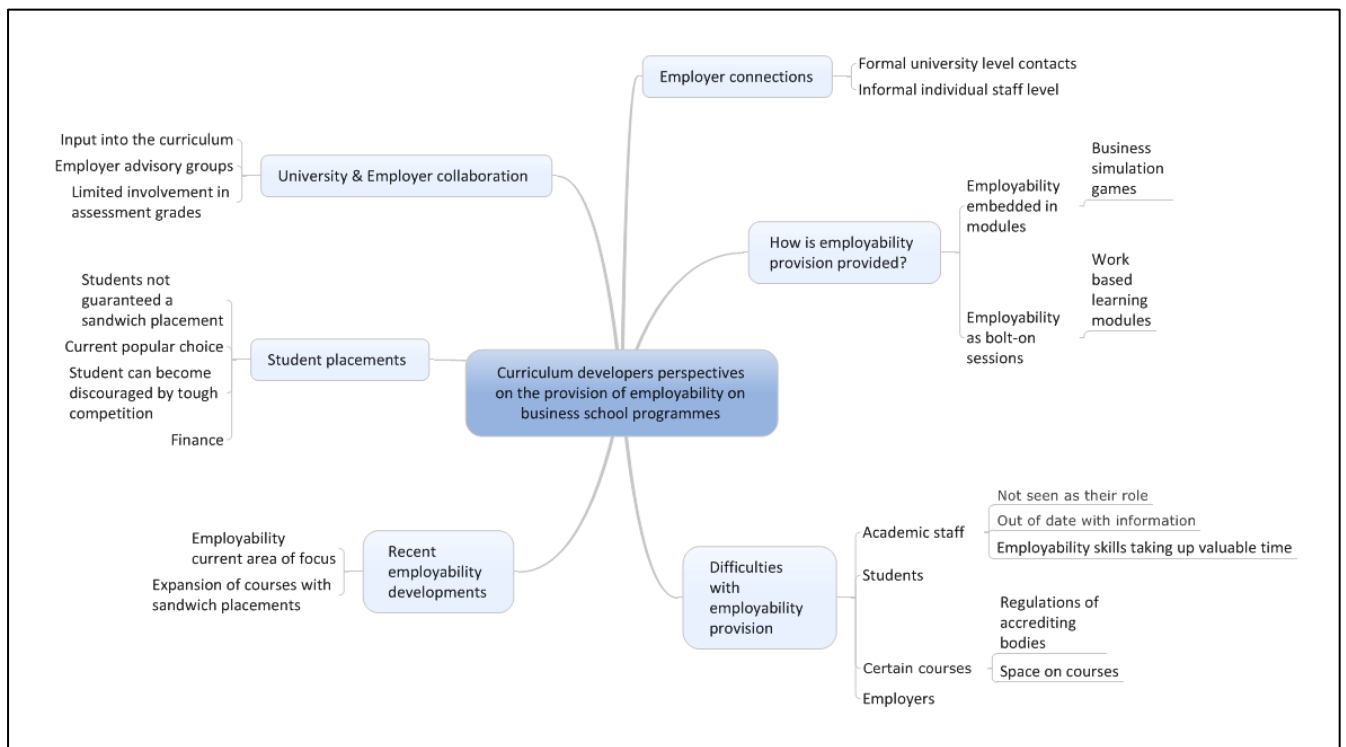
5.3 Curriculum Developers Results

As was fully explained in Chapter Four, semi-structured interviews took place with one person from each business school of the three universities. Once conducted, the interviews were then transcribed (please see appendix 3 for copy of the curriculum developer's interview schedule and appendix 9 for an extract of an anonymised interview transcript).

As interviews were undertaken, qualitative data was produced by the curriculum developers. The analysis of this qualitative data involved conducting a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. This section will detail the results of the thematic analyses performed on the curriculum developer's interview transcripts, to produce a set of results from this employability stakeholder.

Firstly, an overall look at the views of curriculum developers, on employability provision within business curricula will be looked at. These views are depicted in the mind map below, which highlights the range of themes raised by all three curriculum developers regarding the provision of employability on their programmes. For an extract of the curriculum developer's thematic analysis, including definitions and typical quotes, please see appendix 10.

5.3.1 Curriculum Developers Overall Views of Business Employability Provision



As figure 5.3.1 shows, the interviews with the curriculum developers raised an assortment of issues regarding the provision of employability in business curricula's. These six elements will now be discussed in turn.

Firstly, the curriculum developers all stated that employability skills were delivered by a combination of both embedding skills and providing bolt-on modules. When embedding employability provision, programmes had a list of skills which needed to be delivered within the course. For bolt-on modules, the universities either offered PDP, employability skills or work-based learning modules, which students either took as a compulsory or optional module:

“There is a strand of bolt-on employability skills which builds on academic skills from the first year. For example, we have a module in the first year which starts off looking at academic skills and finishes off looking at employability skills and preparations for the second year. In the second year, students would normally choose either a module either aimed at getting a placement or a more general career advice option which is provided by the central careers employability unit”

Pi University, post-92 institution

Secondly, whilst all institutions delivered employability through embedded and bolt-on formats, this was not without difficulty. The reported complications comprised of four main areas; academic staff, students, particular degree courses and employers.

Amongst the academic staff, curriculum developers expressed that some conflicting viewpoints were present. Not all academic staff saw it as their role to deliver employability skills, especially given the research pressures. Staff also voiced their concern that employability skills assume valuable time in the curriculum:

“The question of whether or not an emphasis on employability is at the expense of academic content was raised”

Omega University, post-92 institution

One curriculum developer in particular, talked about the pitfalls of academic staff teaching employability skills, especially if this is not their area of specialism or interest:

“To be quite honest, unless you keep up to date with what employers want you can actually cause more damage, we’ve actually pulled stuff back when students were told how to write a CV and it was the way to write a CV 20 years ago, not now”.

Pi University, post-92 institution

Students also posed a difficulty to teaching employability skills. Curriculum developers highlighted that student engagement was often problematic:

“It’s difficult to get students engaged in something outside of the direct curriculum”

Alpha University, pre-92 institution

Certain courses also presented complications. These mainly involved professional programmes, such as accounting degrees, which are restricted in terms of space and regulatory stipulations. This meant that curriculum developers had to pursue other ways to deliver employability skills for the students.

The final difficulty in delivering employability skills, which all curriculum developers encountered, came from the employers themselves. It was questioned whether employers really did know what skills they wanted graduates to exhibit:

“It can sometimes be a challenge to get feedback from employers regarding how students can improve and what it is they’re really looking for”

Omega University, post-92 institution

“We know what employers say they want i.e. team working skills presentation skills etc but sometimes employers aren’t always sure of what they want”

Alpha University, pre-92 institution

“Most of us understand the generic areas of communication skills, team work and so on, but I don’t think many employers understand where the world of work is going and hence what might be needed in the future”

Pi University, post-92 institution

Despite such problems however, employability remained high on each business school agenda. The third point raised by the curriculum developers, emphasised new developments for enhancing employability provision at their institutions:

“This year an e-portfolio has been introduced for all year 1 undergraduate students. An example is that students have to produce a CV and for that they will need to visit the careers unit. Students also have to reflect on their skill improvements as part of their portfolio development”

Pi University, post-92 institution

“We are currently re-validating and one of the key focuses of our new framework will be employability. Many of the comments we have during open days from parents and prospective students surround the idea of employability and the support we provide in this area. With this to consider, we feel that employability should be emphasised as an integral part of our curriculum as we move forward”

Omega University, post-92 institution

“This year is the first time that each of the undergraduate business programmes within the business school have been offered with a year in industry placement incorporated into the degree”

Alpha University, pre-92 institution

As the quotes from the three curriculum developers above demonstrate, employability strategies continue to be of high importance to business schools. This is supported by the recent implementation of new initiatives and courses, with increased emphasis upon employability.

The fourth point concerned student placements and curriculum developer reports of increasing the number of sandwich courses raised an interesting finding. Whilst in previous year's, curriculum developers highlighted that student demand and enrolments on sandwich degrees had declined, two of the institutions noted an increased interest in these courses in very recent years:

“An increase in applications has been noticed which is attributed to the growing interest in sandwich degree programmes”

Alpha University, pre-92 institution

However, discussions with curriculum developers did highlight many issues attributed to student placements; most notably was the lack of availability of such placements and the effect of a highly competitive market on graduate motivations:

“We can't guarantee placements, but we can guarantee the opportunity to apply for them! And we guarantee the support in how we can help to find them jobs and develop the skills employers will need..... some people get discouraged after they have applied for two or three things and don't get anything, some people are discouraged if they apply for their favourite placement and don't get it. When you get a knock-back it does put students off”

Pi University, post-92 institution

One of the issues raised in the literature review argued that closer university and employer collaboration would increase the availability of placements to students. The fifth and sixth points addressed the topic of collaboration and curriculum developers' connections with employers.

All business schools collaborated with employers to some extent. For example, each business school had an advisory board, which consisted of employers and members of industry. Business schools used this board to consult on ideas and seek opinions. This is a formal way in which employers can input on curriculum developments and considerations. Informal collaboration also took place with employers, this involved smaller scale individual liaisons between members of staff and their personal employer contacts.

Despite having a combination of both formal and informal liaisons, the curriculum developers revealed that employers were mostly utilised in an advisory capacity. Employers therefore, were not involved in the delivery of programmes or in formal assessment processes:

“On some of the live projects, they will watch student presentations and their comments are listened to, but they are not part of the assessment process so they don’t contribute towards the mark, but their comments about the diligence of students in doing the project, might influence the assessor in terms of the grade given”

Pi University, post-92 institution

“Unfortunately, employers are unable to be the sole marker for student work/performance, as university structures do not allow it”

Alpha University, pre-92 institution

Whilst the business schools did liaise with employers, employer involvement was somewhat limited. The relationship therefore, could not be described as ‘collaborative’, as truly joint working has not yet been achieved.

Concluding the Curriculum Developer Findings

The findings from curriculum developers reveal that there are many conflicting issues facing business school employability provision. The interviews highlighted that in delivering employability skills, difficulties were encountered with staff, students, courses and employers alike. Placements also were problematic, as these could not be guaranteed to students despite an increasing demand in recent years for sandwich degree programmes. Regardless such issues, employability remains high on the agendas of business schools, with continued implementation of courses and initiatives, which have an emphasis on employability enhancement.

The employer data will be analysed next, to determine this stakeholder's viewpoint on graduate employability.

5.4 Employer Results

As outlined in Chapter Four, the employer data collection methods involved both a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The questionnaire held two purposes, firstly, to ascertain a broad data set on the employer perspective of graduate employability and secondly, to obtain contacts for follow-up interviews. The main focus here was upon the in-depth information to be obtained from the interviews and therefore, the quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive and cross-tabulation analysis, rather than detailed statistical analysis. Instead, more extensive analysis took place with the employer qualitative data obtained from the interviews, to obtain a depth to the employer perspective.

Although the emphasis is placed upon the interview findings, a brief overview of the employer questionnaire findings will be reported first. This will provide a foundation of descriptive statistics, before delving deeper into the employer qualitative findings.

5.4.1 Employer Quantitative Data Analysis

Employer Sample Demographics

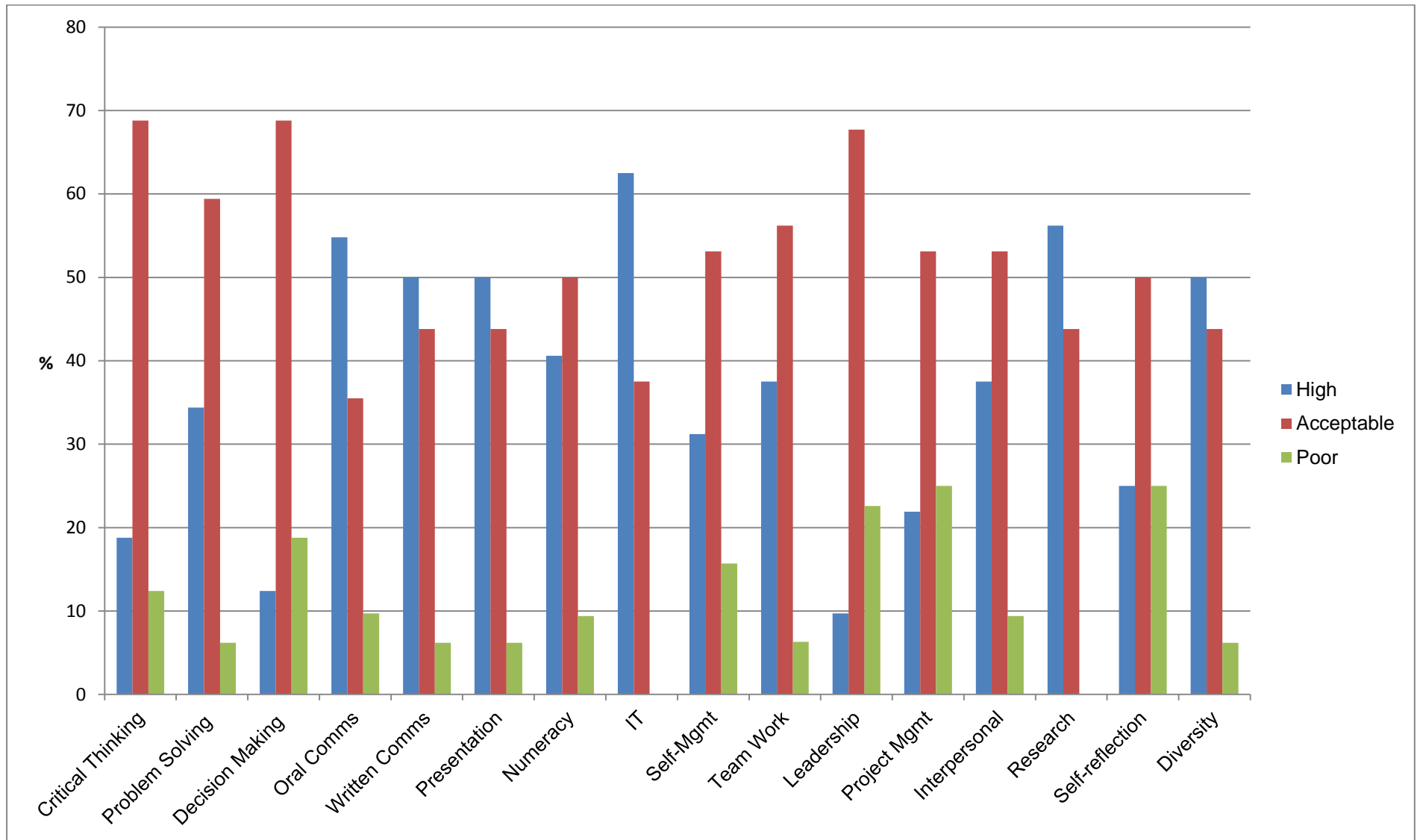
The first section of the questionnaire requested information on the employer cohort. A total of 35 employers responded to the questionnaire and the majority of these (75%), were based within the North-West of England. Employer job titles revealed that all respondents held some form of managerial role (CEOs, directors, managers, supervisors). Additionally, all of the employers had either recruited graduates or had managed graduates in some capacity.

The employers were also asked if they preferred to recruit graduates from a particular degree discipline. Over half (53%), stated that they did have a preference. Of those, 52% favoured graduates from Business disciplines, 30% sought graduates from STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and 18% felt those with a Humanities background were best suited to their industry.

Graduate Skills

The second section of the employer questionnaire, sought employer views on the skills they felt business graduates should be able to demonstrate upon completion of their degree. There is much in the literature already about the types of skills employers seek from graduates, therefore this question asked employers to be more specific about the level at which they feel graduates can demonstrate skills. Using the same sixteen QAA (2007) skills, employers were asked to select whether graduates could demonstrate these to either a high, acceptable or poor level. Figure 5.4.1.a overleaf, displays the findings.

5.4.1.a Employer Responses to Graduate Skill Levels



As figure 5.4.1.a shows, employers overall felt that graduates could demonstrate these skills. However, there are some skills, which employers feel, are demonstrated to differing levels, i.e. a high, acceptable or poor level.

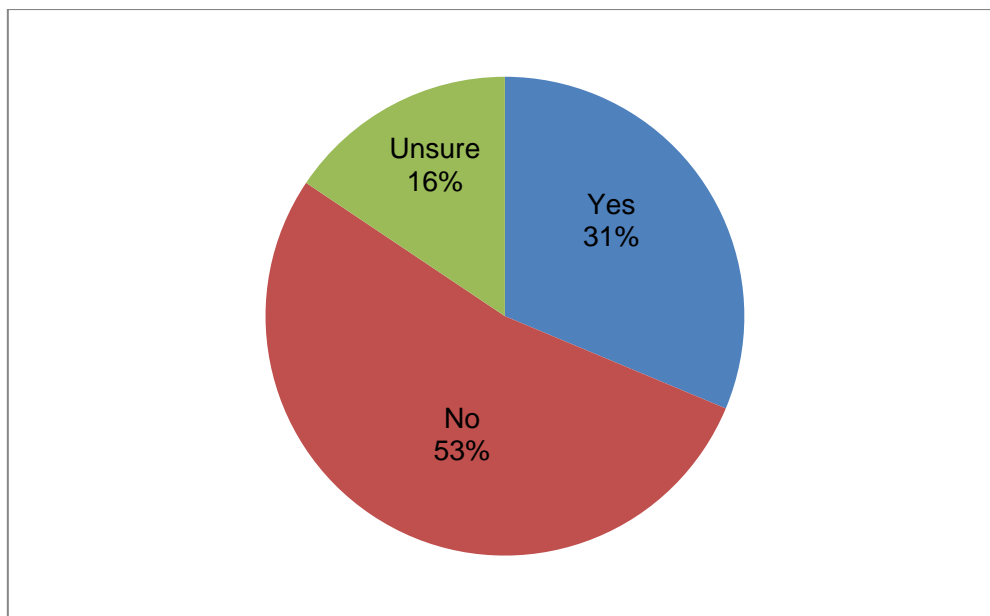
There were six graduate skills which employers rated as demonstrated to a high level: oral communication (54.8%), written communication (50%), presentation skills (50%), IT skills (62.5), research skills (56.2%) and sensitivity to diversity (50%).

With regards to those skills employers felt were demonstrated to a poor level, five skills in particular stood out: decision making (18.8%), self-management skills (15.7%), leadership skills (22.6%), project management (25%) and self-reflection skills (25%).

Work Readiness

The final quantitative data eliciting question posed to the employers, concerned graduate preparedness for entering the workplace. The figure below shows that the majority of employers (53%), felt that graduates were not prepared to enter the work place.

5.4.1.b Are Graduates Prepared to Enter the Workplace



Given that a large proportion of the employers felt that graduates were not prepared, more analysis is necessary to ascertain why employers feel this way. This involved an analysis of the qualitative data which was mostly obtained via the interviews, but the questionnaire also included some qualitative data eliciting questions. Both are analysed and reported on in the following section.

5.4.2 Employer Qualitative Data Analysis

Whilst the questionnaire was mainly quantitative in nature, it did elicit some qualitative data. However, the majority of the qualitative data was obtained via the nine employer follow-up interviews (please see appendix 11 for an extract of an employer interview transcript). This combined qualitative data (from the questionnaire and interviews) was to provide a rich dataset from which to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the employer perspective on graduate employability.

As undertaken with other stakeholder qualitative data analysis, the employer qualitative data was analysed using the thematic approach and five main themes were covered: skills, work experience, employer recruitment processes, the current economic climate and university-business collaboration. Each of these will be discussed in turn, detailing the employer findings in these areas.

Graduate Skills, Attitudes and Competencies

The questionnaire provided an insight into employer views on graduate's demonstrable levels of skills; however more information was required about the potential existence of a hierarchy to skills. For example, do employers deem some skills, attitudes and competencies as more valuable and important than others? Employers therefore, were specifically asked in the interview, which particular skills were important to them and if it was possible to identify the elements which were of highest priority.

Although employers did not always agree on what the most important elements were, the employers did all report that some skills, attitudes and competencies took priority over others. A trend became apparent that employers had a preference for behaviours and competencies, rather than skills. The table overleaf shows the employer responses to the question 'which skills, attitudes and competencies are more important than others'.

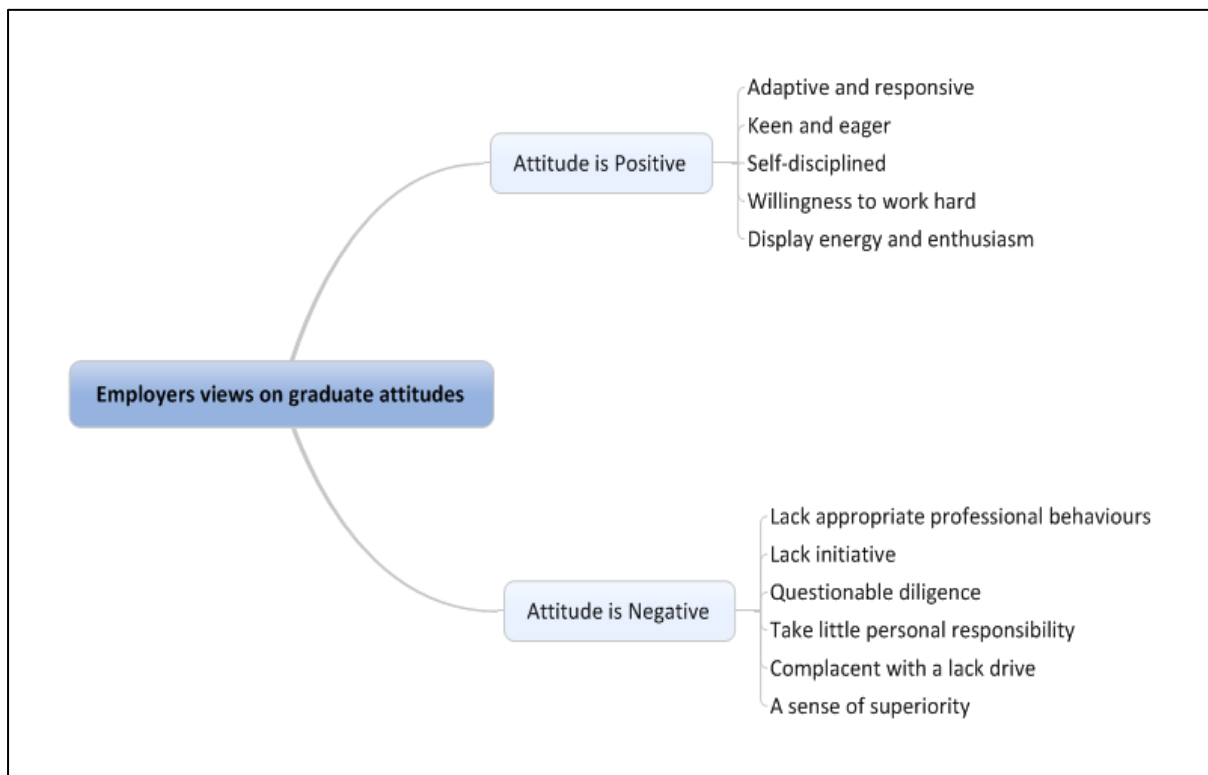
5.4.2.a Quotes from the Nine Employer Interviews on the Most Important Graduate Skills and Abilities

Employer	Employer quote giving their view of the most important skill(s)
1. Small-Medium employer in construction industry based in North-West England	<i>"I personally think that you can have all of those skills but if you've got no common sense you're not going anywhere fast. For me, the most practical thing someone can have is good common sense – that is the foundation, then everything else falls into place"</i>
2. Large employer in marketing sector based in North-West England	<i>"Over the years, I've moved away from specific skills and moved more towards behaviours and the primary reason for that is, if I have someone who can apply themselves to a vast array of different key skills because they have the attitude and the adaptability and the aptitude and courage to commit to new ideas and thinking"</i>
3. Small-Medium employer in training and development based in North-West England	<i>"Really wanting to be there to work and as a close second common sense"</i>
4. Large employer in energy sector based in South-East England	<i>"In my personal view I would choose whether the graduate has 'fire in the belly'. In other words someone who displays high energy and motivation to get things done"</i>
5. Large employer in Human Resources based in North-West England	<i>"We find that the graduates who have done a placement year they come across more confident at interview and can give lots of examples and show they can work well in a team. So we tend to look for people who have done some experience rather than just studying"</i>
6. Small-medium employer in legal sector based in North-West England	<i>"Common sense and confidence they are the two things we are looking for"</i>
7. Small-medium employer in oil & energy industry based in North-West England	<i>"Graduates tend to come with many of the soft skills which are required, communication and IT skills we can't stress enough, negotiation skills, people skills, which are important, but if I'm looking at a CV, I am looking for things that makes them stand out from the next person"</i>
8. Large employer in HMRC based in South-East England	<i>"One, a bright mind and a positive outlook. Two, a mature and resilient personality to cope with setbacks and put in the hard work; 'character' or 'grit'. And three, confidence to try new ideas out and to say what you think, because that's why you were hired. With these three things present, all other competencies can mostly be developed or learned"</i>
9. Small-medium employer in marketing sector based in South-East England	<i>"I would say they need to show work experience in the field they've applied to get the job – then it is the interviewer's job to see if what they learnt is transferable or not. In my experience most students are well grounded in theory but seem to lack the required behaviours, skill set &/or competencies for the roles they're interested in. So work experience and speed to learn on-the-job used to be my guide to sift through 'potential'"</i>

These nine employer quotes provided in table 5.4.2.a, highlight that certain graduate elements are more valuable than others. Namely, employers desire graduates with a positive attitude (such as drive and work ethic), a diligent character (of resilience and confidence), common sense and practical thinking alongside relevant work experience. The ability to exhibit all these pre-requisites, would classify a graduate as employable. The argument offered by employers is that skill possession is not necessarily important, as a graduate with the right attitude can develop other necessary requirements as and when needed.

The positive attitude element is a particular aspect which was raised in the literature review and forms the core of the CBI skills model. A closer analysis of the 'positive work attitude' concept was undertaken with the employer qualitative data. The findings of which are illustrated in the figure below:

5.4.2.b. Employer Views of Graduate Attitudes



As figure 5.4.2.b shows, employer experiences of graduate attitudes are split. Some employers had encountered graduates with a positive work attitude, which led to the following employer comments:

“In my experience the graduates I have worked with have had a positive work attitude adapting their capabilities to the environment they are working in”

Questionnaire comment, male employer in Facilities Management, based in South-East England (unknown company size)

“On the whole graduates are keen to learn and progress and so are prepared to work to achieve this”

Questionnaire comment, large female employer with the NHS, based in North-West England

However, other employers had experiences of working with graduates who held a negative attitude and were consequently left disappointed by such graduates:

“There seems to be a trend where graduates have very little personal responsibility, which impacts on to work ethic”

Questionnaire comment, female employer in recruitment sector, based on North-West England (unknown company size)

“They need to understand how to behave in a work place as this is a professional environment and not the same as a University”

Questionnaire comment, large male employer in motorcycle manufacture, based in South-East England

For a minority of employers, some acknowledged that given time and acclimatisation to a new work environment, graduates with a negative attitude have the potential to become an employee with a positive attitude:

“Initially, they have a poor perception of working life appearing to think it should be 100% interesting, work should be spoon fed to them, and they should immediately be able to fit work around their other social commitments. They do however learn and after a couple of months can be re-educated and highly productive and flexible”

Employer 9 interview. Small-medium female employer in marketing sector based in South-East England

Employers therefore, expressed different views about graduate attitudes, for some employers their experiences were positive and for others, they were negative. One way to bring graduate attitudes into alignment with employer expectations, is work experience. The above quotes have illustrated a range of issues for graduates: a change of context into a work environment, learning how to behave professionally and getting a better insight into what work involves. All of these could be addressed by prior work experience. This is supported by some of the other employer comments, who felt that those with prior work experience exhibit more preferable attitudes and behaviours:

“It is more often than not, the students with work experience who display better behaviours”

Questionnaire comment, female employer in retail, based in North-West England (unknown company size)

“Work experience helps with the general work ethics and the understanding that there will be expectations for example being on time”

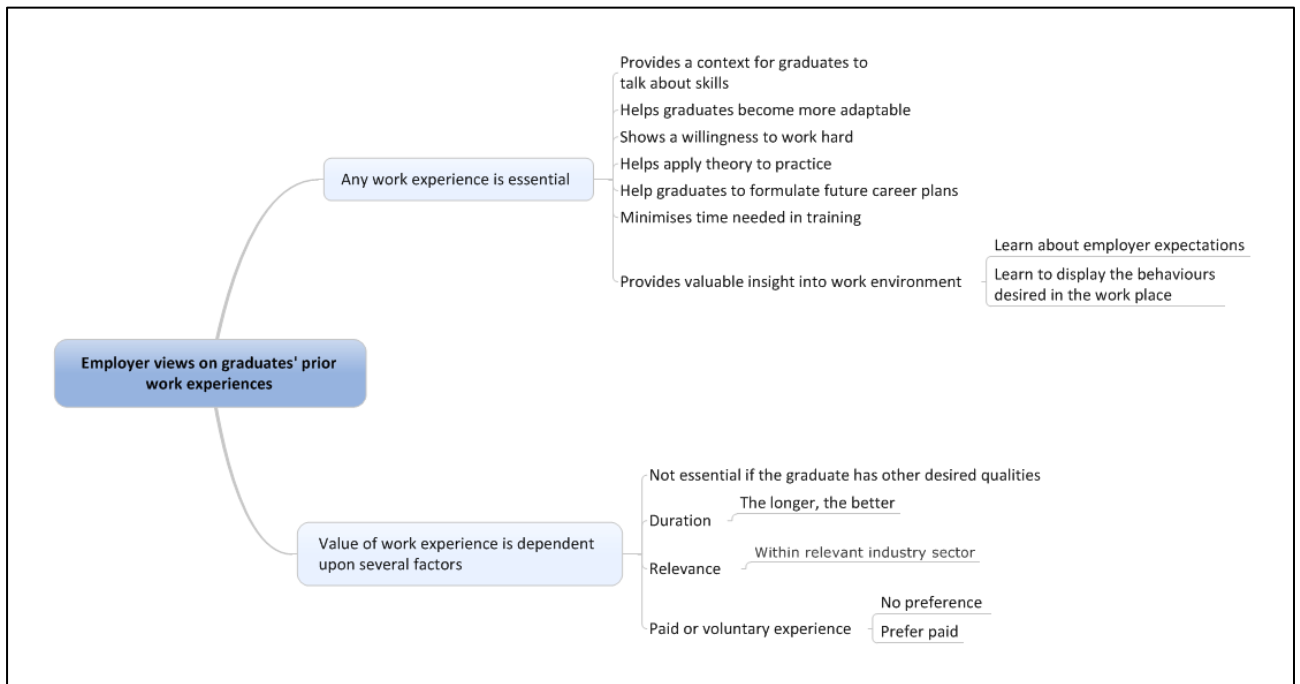
Questionnaire comment, large female employer in Human Resources, based in North-West England

A more detailed look at the employer’s views on graduates prior work experience will now follow.

Prior Work Experience

Work experience was discussed a great deal in Chapter Three, which highlighted the importance the government and employer stakeholder’s, placed on graduates possessing prior work experience. A thematic analysis of the employer interviews and questionnaire comments provides a deeper understanding of the employer viewpoint on work experience.

5.4.2.c Employer Views on Work Experience



Whilst all of the employers stated that the possession of prior work experience was valuable, the vast majority stated that this was a necessity. The employers gave numerous reasons why prior work experience was beneficial, which included enhanced development of skills which could be demonstrated in a work context:

“Work experience allows graduates to experience what going to work means, the daily routine of waking up early, commuting and being punctual”

Questionnaire comment, male employer in communications and public relations, based in North-West England (unknown company size)

“Experience is important and any is valuable, looking through the CVs recently it stands out the people who have had significant periods of work experience. They’ve got more to say, they’ve got achievements they can highlight and identify”

Employer 3 interview. Small-Medium female employer in training and development based in North-West England.

Some employers however, did make stipulations about the nature of any prior work undertaken by graduates. In particular, comments were made about relevance, duration and payment. On the whole, the employers appeared to particularly value work experiences that were relevant to the industry the graduate wished to enter:

“I think it is very important in our industry to have undertaken some form of customer facing work experience as these graduates tend to adapt quicker to being able to engage with people”

Employer 1 interview. Small-Medium male employer in construction industry based in North-West England.

Another key work experience element reported by employers, included duration. Overall, employers were in agreement that the longer the periods of work experience, the better:

“I would consider 6 to 12 months to be necessary for both graduate and organisation to gain benefits”

Questionnaire comment, large female employer in Human Resources based in North-West England

“Work Experience for a week, 2 weeks or a summer not considered. The minimum is 1 year for a paid role”

Employer 8 Interview. Large male employer in HMRC based in South-East England.

Alongside relevance and duration, the other important aspect of work experience, was payment. Chapter Three: The Literature Review reported some employer literature which favoured paid work experiences over voluntary. Similar comments were found with a minority of employers in this research:

“Voluntary work experience with relevant companies is reviewed, but Charity is work not considered”

Questionnaire comment, male employer in recruitment, based in North-West England (unknown company size)

“Paid is more valuable as they will then be more keen to work and they see the benefits”

Questionnaire comment, female employer in logistics, based in North-West England (unknown company size)

Whilst a small number of employers did speculate that paid employment was preferred, most employers felt that voluntary work experience did still contribute towards graduate employability:

“Paid experience is preferred, but voluntary experience can be good too”

Questionnaire comment, female employer in retail banking, based in North-West England (unknown company size)

“Voluntary can be just as valuable as paid as this at least shows the determination of the graduate to learn if they are prepared to do this voluntarily”

Employer 4 interview. Large male employer in energy sector based in South-East England.

Although employers stressed the value of work experience, and even made ideal requirements over the relevance, duration and payment of these, employers felt that graduates were not meeting their expectations in this area. Employers commented that graduates lacked industry specific experience, commercial awareness and real-world skills:

“Some graduates have poor hands on experience and are unaware of our specific industry and what is required in the work place”

Questionnaire comment, female employer in voluntary sector based in North-West England (unknown company size)

For those graduates who did have the desired work experiences, benefits were noted by employers. This mainly concerned an increased preparedness for the workplace:

“If the graduate has had work history or a placement year, they are more prepared for the work place, as they have learnt this in previous roles. The graduates we recruit generally display these qualities, else we would not recruit them if we felt the gap was too great to bridge with training”

Employer 4 interview. Large male employer in energy sector based in South-East England.

As the employer questionnaire findings revealed, only 31.2% of the employers felt that graduates were prepared to enter the work place. Prior work experience was seen to facilitate graduates in becoming prepared to enter the workplace. However, employers did acknowledge that acquiring work experience was no easy feat:

“It is difficult to get work experience, I think what students then have to do is volunteer in charity work, which for me is equally valid. There is a lot of volunteer work around. All experience is valid as it still teaches you something”

Employer 3 interview. Small-Medium female employer in training and development based in North-West England.

Whilst work experience appears to be a key element in enhancing graduates' preparedness for entering the work place, the current economic climate means that competition for such opportunities is high. Not all graduates therefore, will be successful in obtaining the types of experience employers desire.

Increased competition for work experience was only one of the issues raised, when discussing the impact of the current economic climate. This will be analysed further in the following section.

The Current Economic Climate

The employers revealed that they had not escaped the effects of the economic climate, with many stating that they were recruiting lower numbers as a consequence:

“All our positions that are professional appointments are graduates. We've taken one graduate on in the last 12 months and this has been affected by the economic climate. We reduced our numbers substantially around 2 years ago and we've only just started to build up again this year”

Employer 6 interview. Small-medium male employer in legal sector based in North-West England

“I have noticed particularly with the previous organisation I worked for, they used to have an active graduate development programme and the numbers on that have declined steadily over the years, so that the last three years they didn’t recruit at all on that basis and would recruit on other levels instead”

Employer 3 interview. Small-Medium female employer in training and development based in North-West England

The reduction in the number of graduate jobs offered, has led to increased competition for these positions which are available. As a result, employers now have a larger recruitment pool from which to appoint. Given this choice, some employers considered carefully the recruitment graduates, in light of the alternative options available to them:

“I thought about whether it was worthwhile trying to take on a graduate because they won’t have any practical experience and it clearly stated in their CVs that they didn’t have experience, but they did have degrees”

Employer 1 interview. Small-Medium male employer in construction industry based in North-West England

For other employers, the current economic climate had revised their graduate expectations. Some employers had increased their demands, which they stated was now necessary in meeting current business needs:

“If you didn’t take customer service seriously before, you have to now. Because it’s a buyer’s market and the customer can go anywhere else, so we have to be attentive to the needs of the customer, and differentiate us from the competition, no matter what time it is, nowadays it’s not the case of 9-5 anymore, because of the economic climate you have to be contributing more to the organisation, and overall be smarter and sharper than they were two or three years ago”

Employer 7 interview. Small-medium male employer in oil & energy industry based in North-West England

The increasing demands of employers require graduates to hold the right work ethic and attitude. Several of the employers commented during the interviews, that the economic climate had an influence in molding graduate attitudes:

“There’s this attitudinal side to being able to be resilient and stick at something. Resilience is critical in this environment particularly, and you have to work hard to make something happen”

Employer 1 interview. Small-Medium male employer in construction industry based in North-West England.

“It is heart-breaking to send out lots of applications and receive negative responses back but that’s just building character in the real world and that is what the world is about. That toughness they’ll develop through being tenacious in applying for the job, once they’ve got that job they’ll translate what the experience of finding the job i.e. the time it’s taken to get that job, to make sure they keep hold of that job and develop it, because once they’ve got that opportunity they won’t want to let go because of the effort they put in”

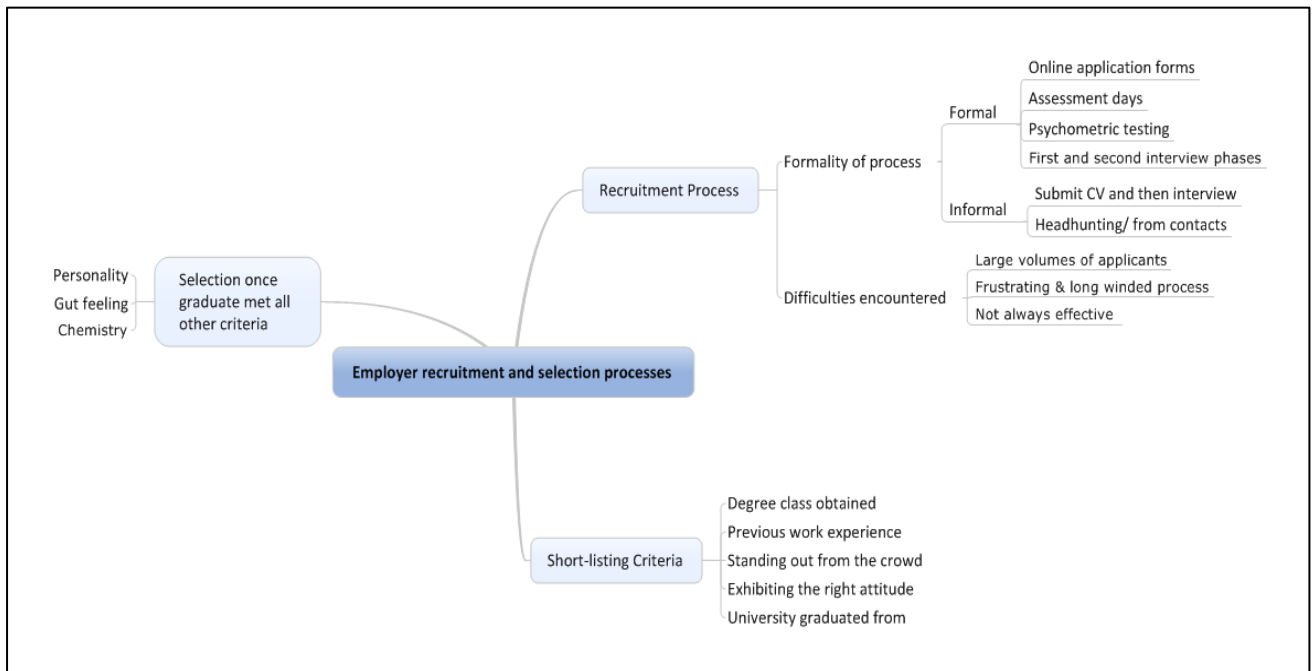
Employer 2 interview. Large employer in marketing sector based in North-West England.

The economic climate goes some way to explain employer expectations and their emphasis upon graduate positive attitudes. However, assessing a positive attitude under current employer recruitment practices, poses some difficulty. Employer recruitment is the next area to be addressed.

Employer Recruitment and Selection Processes

As identified in the literature review, smaller and larger employers can differ significantly in their recruitment processes. The interviews also found that different employers, implemented different recruitment and selection processes. Whilst some adopted the more formal processes, such as online psychometric testing and assessment days, others were less formal and simply involved CVs and interviews. Whichever process employers used, there was a common theme that recruitment was frustrating, especially given the large volume of applications. A thematic analysis took place with the employer interview responses and the following mind map depicts the recruitment and selection issues that were raised.

5.4.2.d Employer Recruitment and Selection Processes



As figure 5.4.2.d shows, the employers commented on all aspects of the recruitment process, from what practices they employed through to how selection was finally made. With regards to the stages of recruitment, most employers adopted the formal route which is summarised by this large South-East employer:

“It depends upon what stage of the recruitment process you are in, because the reality is that you aren’t going to get an interview unless you’ve got a particular degree subject, possibly at a particular university which is important initially, the second stage is you fill in the online form so you need to be able to fill that in and the third stage it’s the psychometric tests and you really need to know how to do psychometric tests, which involve skills learnt through experience and your own ability. Then of course, it’s the interview”

Employer 4 interview. Large male employer in energy sector based in South-East England.

For other employers, a more flexible and informal route is adopted, which is described by this small North-West employer:

“It depends on the level, but everyone does CV and interview, usually on a one-to-one basis, and then there might be a panel after that. We do sometimes do some online psychometric testing, but it depends on the role”

Employer 6 interview. Small-medium male employer in legal sector based in North-West England.

All of the nine employers interviewed, commented on the large volume of applications they have been receiving for vacancies. They also stated that their recruitment processes are not necessarily well-equipped to deal with these large volumes. Employers also expressed frustration over the long-winded nature of their recruitment process, which were not always effective in finding the right graduate:

“For just for one vacancy we can get around 200 responses, just for one advert! Which is about standard now.....There are some applications who haven’t got a 2.1 or above and they get discounted straight away as they haven’t got the qualification we are looking for as you have to limit the criteria somehow.....We shortlist from the 200 to around 20 or 30 and then telephone interviews. From that we will shortlist again and invite for a face-to-face interview, it’s a long winded process as you can’t always tell from the CV what they are going to be like. But that doesn’t always get you the graduate you want”

Employer 5 interview. Large female employer in Human Resources based in North-West England.

Similarly, employers highlighted that their recruitment process made it hard for graduates to either “stand out from the crowd” or help them to clearly convey their skills and abilities prior to the interview stage:

“Our recruitment process doesn’t help graduates to get their skills across. It’s a criticism of my own business, but as a small business we’re not as sophisticated as bigger businesses and it’s more of a personal gut feel that swings it”

Employer 6 interview. Small-medium male employer in legal sector based in North-West England.

“I tend to look at the range of things that people do or have done. While focus is good, someone who only ever socialises with the peer group, who is passionate about one thing to the exclusion of all else would not interest me. I want to see the variety of what they read, do and think. But recognise it's very difficult to see these things prior to interview”

Employer 8 interview. Large male employer in HMRC based in South-East England.

“It's very difficult for graduates because the problem is you don't actually talk to somebody until quite a long way down the process. The problem is now you enter stuff online, have a psychometric test and if you don't get through those you don't get to speak to someone. The other thing is, the way you apply online now it's a set format, so how do you stand out?”

Employer 4 interview. Large male employer in energy sector based in South-East England.

By their own admission, employer recruitment processes are therefore far from ideal. Before reaching the final stages however, employers listed a range of elements which they used to shortlist graduate candidates. The employer findings support a range of criteria, including degree class (namely 2.1 or above), previous work experience, being distinctive from the other candidates and for some, the university from which the candidate had graduated:

“I don't have a preference for which institution candidates have graduated from, but my partners do, but they are red brick and I am not”

Employer 6 interview. Small-medium male employer in legal sector based in North-West England.

“My belief is that there are students, the ones who have got the top notch degrees, from the top notch places, got the work experience and got the contacts, my guess is that those students probably get multiple job offers. I think there is almost a two tier system, were some students get lots of offers and others get nothing, or one or two”

Employer 4 interview. Large male employer in energy sector based in South-East England.

Interestingly, once the graduate candidates have made it to the final recruitment stage, employers admitted that job offers were based on personality and the gut feeling of the interviewer:

“Once you’ve gotten through to the interview we’ve already made the assumption that you can do the job, so then it’s all about you as a person and the chemistry between you and the interviewer and our company”

Employer 4 interview. Large male employer in energy sector based in South-East England.

At the interview, it usually comes down to personality. Usually with graduates they just need a base knowledge which training in the company will build on anyway, so selection often comes down to personality once other criteria’s have been met”

Employer 5 interview. Large female employer in Human Resources based in North-West England.

“The old adage that you succeed in your job interview in the first 30 seconds very much applies to us. You stack up on paper and got through the first interview, it’s then a gut feel”

Employer 6 interview. Small-medium male employer in legal sector based in North-West England.

“When it comes to the interview, I always consider that its 51% personality and 49% CV”

Employer 7 interview. Small-medium male employer in oil & energy industry based in North-West England.

Employers therefore, do not always find recruitment and selection a straightforward, effective nor objective process. One way for employers to assist in locating appropriate graduates is through university and business collaboration. This will be the final theme to be addressed in the employer findings.

University-Business Collaboration

Similarly to the discussion in the literature review, this research found that employer liaisons with universities differed considerably. Of the nine employers interviewed, only four reported that they had liaised with a university. In addition, the levels of engagement and reported effectiveness of such collaboration also varied amongst these four employers.

Employers chose to liaise with certain universities, which included: the university belonged to the elite red brick group, or the university was geographically convenient to the employer i.e. a local institution:

“Initially I just did some research to find the best business schools that were based in the North West and took it from there. We have now got liaisons with two universities and there is a third institution which has just bought a site right on our doorstep, so we may look at forging links there in the future. We offer internships to a few students at these institutions and with one institution our staff has enrolled on a procurement course there, so it works both ways”

Employer 7 interview. Small-medium male employer in oil & energy industry based in North-West England.

“In my current job, I have developed good relationships with certain business schools and universities. I am based in London, London business school for example I have a very good link with and I see a lot of their students and alumni who are related to the energy industry which I recruit in. For me it’s critical, because it’s all about getting to know people who at some stage of their careers may be interested in particular roles”

Employer 4 interview. Large male employer in energy sector based in South-East England.

Three of the four institutions implied that their liaisons were largely driven by future employment needs of the business, their links with universities therefore assisted recruitment:

“Usually by contacts, the Unite scheme has been very effective in terms of identifying people but also by personal networks, two local universities being the providers of the majority of our graduates”

Employer 2 interview. Large male employer in marketing sector based in North-West England.

Only one of the employers stated that they were formally involved in curriculum development however, this employer also reported that liaisons were not effective. This was largely attributed to a mismatch between academic and employer outlooks:

“I sit on the advisory board for a local university which helps me understand some of the issues in the system and as a board we’ve been able to drive some positive steps within the curriculum that reflect the need of employers. My own experience is that in introducing business that will be beneficial to the institution, that’s not always been properly handled by the establishment, I think there’s a gap between the academics and what they perceive is required and how to go about things and the employers in industry and how they thing things should be dealt with and how the university should handle things”

Employer 6 interview. Small-medium male employer in legal sector based in North-West England.

The literature review highlighted the pressure from government to increase university – business collaboration and making liaisons more effective. The findings from this employer research also support this view, as most employers appeared to have no engagement with universities. Of those who did however, the majority of employers used this for reaching graduates to recruit rather than as a collaborative relationship. Of the nine employers, only one contributed towards curriculum development, which they identified, was in need of improvement.

5.4.3 Concluding the Employer Findings

This section has detailed the findings from the employer questionnaire and interviews. The data analysis revealed that employers do value certain skills, abilities and competencies over others and therefore a hierarchy of importance does exist. The nine employers of differing size, from different industries and different areas of the UK, all highlighted the desire for graduates with a positive work attitude, a diligent and resilient character, alongside the possession of prior work experience.

Despite stressing the importance of work experience, the overwhelming majority of employers felt that graduates remained unprepared to enter the world of work. With regards to size comparisons, the larger employers made more stringent stipulations for graduates to have experienced longer periods of prior work. Similarly, employer preferences for paid or voluntary work also differed according to size; with a tendency for the larger employers to prefer paid experiences. However, one of the large employers did acknowledge that voluntary work experience could also be useful.

The economic climate was again a salient feature in this stakeholder group which occurred irrespective of size. Larger and smaller employers alike had felt the effects of the economic climate, which consequently either caused a reduction in recruitment or increased their expectations and demands of graduates.

With regards to employer recruitment practices, size differences were noted. Following the theme highlighted in Chapter Three: The Literature Review, larger employers adopted more rigorous recruitment practices involving numerous stages; application forms, telephone interviews, online tests, assessment centres and final interviews. In contrast, the smaller employers largely utilised the two-pronged CV and interview approach. Interestingly, larger and smaller employers alike unanimously appointed candidates based on personality and cultural-fit.

Another interesting find concerned employer biases and preferences for graduates from certain institutions; both larger and smaller employers revealed organisational biases for candidates who had graduated from the more elite institutions. Additionally, several of the employers also sought out the more desired institutions with whom to collaborate with. The techniques for approaching business schools about collaboration appeared to differ according to employer size. The larger organisations discussed their use of contacts and existing networks to build university-business relationships. This differed to the experiences of one small employer who effectively used a cold-calling approach once he had undertaken some research to locate what he deemed to be appropriate business schools. Regardless of the collaborative approach taken however, the employer findings support that university and business liaison was found to be modest, with areas remaining for improvement.

5.5 Concluding the Results and Data Analysis Chapter

This results chapter has detailed the findings of the data analysis undertaken for each of the three employability stakeholders: graduates, curriculum developers and employers. These results have given huge insights into each of the stakeholder views, especially in the areas lacking in the current literature, and the following key themes were identified:

- The university was found to be a significant factor in graduate employability, as supported by graduates and employers
- Degree classification was also a factor in employability, which was reflected by both the graduate data and the employer data.
- Curriculum developers reported pressures from each employability stakeholder and experience difficulties with staff, students and employers in their endeavors to enhance employability
- The effects of the economic climate were felt by all stakeholders; graduates endure increased competition for jobs, curriculum developers experience difficulties in offering a sufficient number of placements to meet demand and employer expectations have intensified in line with their business needs
- Prior work experience is vital, which all stakeholders acknowledged to some extent. However, employers still feel graduates are lacking in this area
- Despite preferences for behaviours over skills, employer recruitment and selection processes are not very effective at detecting these elements
- University- business collaboration does exist, but this relationship does not always reflect a teamwork approach and the relationships are not as effective as they could be

This chapter has outlined the research findings and the next chapter will move the discussions forward to relate these to both the research questions and the current literature.

Chapter 6: Interpretation of the Results and Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets and discusses the results obtained by this research, which were outlined in Chapter Five. In particular, these discussions include three main areas, which comprise the structure of this chapter:

1. Firstly, the results will be discussed in relation to both the three research questions and in light of the literature reviewed in Chapter Three of this thesis
2. Following on from these critical discussions of the different stakeholder perspectives of employability, a revised model of employability is proposed and considered
3. Finally, the research is appraised, with limitations and implications provided

Before commencing discussions of the results, a reminder is given on the philosophical approach employed within this research; the critical realist perspective. The data collection approach, detailed in Chapter Four, justified the adoption of this philosophy and therefore, the following interpretations of the results are made within the context of critical realism. Critical realism holds that realities differ between individuals and groups, given the numerous social structures and mechanisms inherent (Danermark et al. 2006). This data was collected to provide a deeper understanding of employability realities according to the individual stakeholders researched. The discussions that follow, therefore, correspond with the critical realist perspective, which are embedded throughout debates in this chapter.

6.2 Research Question 1: What is the graduate perspective on the employability provision they received during their business programme and student experience, and to what extent does this differ according to institution?

As stated in the Chapter One, the overall purpose of this research was to investigate employability from the graduate perspective, which is often omitted from employability debates. Researching this perspective represents an element of originality, particularly as it aimed to directly obtain graduate views on their employability within an uncertain economic climate.

Applying the critical realism philosophy, interactions between social structures and mechanisms (belonging to the graduate stakeholder group, the institution attended, the economic context and employment market within which they are situated) influence the way graduates perceive their employability. It is the interplay between these structures which lead to the way individuals see their reality, this section will unpick these elements to explain the concept of graduate employability according to the graduate stakeholder.

Five main themes were identified from the graduate data analysis which included: skill development, work experience, the current economic climate, whether or not a degree enhances employability and the differences between the institutions attended. These five themes will now be discussed in turn, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the graduate perspective on employability.

Skill Demonstration

The first theme arising from the graduate data analysis, involved their perspectives on skills, in particular, which skills they could now demonstrate as a result of undertaking their degree. The graduate results showed that certain soft skills such as: presentation, communication, research, teamwork and time management, could be demonstrated by around three-quarters of the graduate sample upon completion of their business degree. This correlates with the research findings of Futuretrack (2012), detailed in the literature review.

Whilst the majority of graduates in this sample felt they could demonstrate these skills, the employer arguments identified in Chapter Three, do not always agree. For example, research from Jackson (2009), Ben & Roger (2011) and Middleton (2011), all highlighted employer dissatisfactions with graduate standards of written communication and literacy skills. This therefore, represents a mismatch between graduate and employer opinions. This mismatch could be explained by what Taylor (2005), Tomlinson (2012) and Holmes (2013), referred to as a lack of clarity on terms such as 'skills', this can mean different things, at different levels, to different stakeholders. Graduates may therefore feel that they are proficient in a given skill, yet an employer may feel that this is not demonstrated to a desired level of ability.

The graduate respondents also identified those skills which they felt they were less able to demonstrate: information technology, numeracy, project management, sensitivity to diversity and self-reflection. The literature discussed in Chapter Three supports these findings, as Nabi & Bagley (1999) found that graduates rated their IT skills as 'low' and CBI & Pearson (2012) reported that employers had reservations regarding graduate numeracy and IT skills. Graduates also rated their sensitivity to diversity skills as 'low', which is supported by CBI & Pearson (2012) who found that employers expressed dissatisfaction with graduate levels of international cultural awareness.

More unexpectedly however, was the low number of graduates who felt that they could demonstrate self-reflection skills as a result of their time at university. Self-reflection is encouraged throughout university business degree programmes (QAA, 2007) and it is therefore surprising that more graduates did not feel that they could demonstrate these skills. Futuretrack (2012) provides an explanation for this, their research suggests that whilst graduates may be exposed to such skills at university, these may not be extensively developed over the full duration of their studies, thus leaving graduates unsure over their abilities in certain areas.

However, the question posed to graduates concerned the skills which they could now demonstrate '*as a result of undertaking their degree*'. The graduates could have developed these skills via other mediums, such as extra-curricular activities. Graduates may be able to demonstrate these skills, but the reason may not be attributable to their business higher education. Nonetheless, these results highlight that some skills are not adequately addressed at university, given that not all respondents felt that they can demonstrate the full range of skills as a result of undertaking their degree.

When compared with the employer views, these findings highlight that both similarities and disparities are prevalent. It is the disparities which are interesting, as this supports that there is variance amongst different stakeholder views of employability. This correlates with the critical realist perspective, as those under different structures hold different realities of the same phenomena. This needs to be understood in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the graduate perspective on graduate employability.

Further analysis, involving statistical testing of graduate skills, showed a significant association between the graduates' demonstrable skills and the institution which they had attended. For example, six significant results were found from the Chi-Square test, showing that the university attended, influenced how graduates felt they could demonstrate: problem solving, decision making, numeracy, IT, project management and self-reflection skills ($p < 0.05$). The relationship supported that those who graduated from Omega University (a post-1992 institution) were more likely to report that they could demonstrate problem solving, decision making, IT and self-reflection skills.

For numeracy and project management skills, these were more likely to be demonstrated if the graduate had attended either Alpha University (a pre-1992 institution) or Omega University. Those who graduated from Pi University (another post-1992 institution) were significantly less likely to be able to demonstrate these skills.

The university from which the degree had been obtained, was therefore shown to have a significant effect on graduate reports of skill demonstration, with a preference being for Omega, followed by Alpha institution. This is a noteworthy finding as Chapter three illustrated differences between institutions, but the direction of these relationships differ to the graduate findings of this thesis. For example, the literature highlighted that newer institutions (such as Omega and Pi) have been more proactive in implementing employability agendas and have responded the most to employer skill requirements (Mason et al. 2003; Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2012). It could reasonably have been expected therefore, that Alpha would fare the worst in this analysis, given that it is an older red brick institution, yet it was Pi which scored the lowest in skill demonstration.

These findings raise important questions over the type of institution studied at and the effect this has upon the skills which graduates can then demonstrate. Chapter Three made a distinction between old and new university's engagement with employability skills. However, these findings conflict with this direction, as it is not always a clear cut case that the age or status of the university, dictates the skills which individuals will be able to demonstrate upon graduation. These findings show that one post-1992 institution fared very well in graduate skill demonstration, whilst the other post-1992 institution received the lowest score.

Another element linked to graduate skills, involves the skill training sessions provided as part of the business degree programme. The findings revealed that graduates were rather disengaged with and indifferent to the PDP, study skills and employability sessions, which was reflected in their poor attendance. The data showed that many graduates were aware such sessions existed, yet considerably lower numbers of graduates actually attended. This is a thought-provoking finding, given that employability is so high on the agendas for institutions, yet student engagement is a particular cause for concern.

The thematic analysis provided reasons for graduate's lack of engagement in such skill sessions. This included the need to improve the sessions, making them more relevant, up-to-date, interesting and appealing. This is a vital area for development as HEIs are providing skill development provision, yet the uptake is so low, that few graduates reap the benefits of this help to further develop their skills. This calls into question the HEIs sincerity in implementing such employability initiatives, if many graduates rate these sessions as poor and attendance is low. Given the employer complaints outlined in Chapter three, more skill development is needed, not less, and therefore improving student engagement in such skill provision is of crucial importance.

Furthermore, the data showed differences amongst the three institutions surrounding the awareness of such sessions on offer. Omega graduates (post-1992) were most aware of the availability of PDP sessions, Pi graduates (post-1992) were the most aware of the existence of study skills sessions and Alpha graduates (pre-1992) were the most aware of employability workshops on offer. Each institution therefore, appears to have its own particular focus with regards to the development of employability skills. Despite such awareness, however, uptake across all three institutions was generally low and instead, graduates seemed more interested and willing to engage in work experiences; preferring to develop skills through employment, rather than via abstract skill development sessions provided by the university.

This supports the literature provided by Jameson et al. (2012), who argues that incorporating basic key skills into the curriculum is not the most effective way to develop graduate employability. Instead, employer involvement in both curriculum design and providing work placements, is more successful. Graduates also appeared to support this view, as low numbers across all three institutions actually engaged with the skills sessions provided. However, whilst graduates may generally prefer work experience, not all engaged in this either, which will be the next theme to be discussed.

Work Experience

Only 46.8% of the overall graduate sample undertook work experience. The graduate data analysis illustrated a large variation in the uptake of work experience across the range of business degree subjects. Graduates in Public Relations and Information Technology, engaged the most with work experience, whilst Retail Management and Human Resource Management graduates participated the least. Chapter Three observed that student engagement with work experience, and in particular sandwich degree placements, has been exceptionally low in recent years. For example, in 2010, only 7% of all full-time undergraduate students undertook a placement as part of their degree (Vasagar, 2012). Students' low engagement with work experience placements has led policy makers to reiterate the need to increase the uptake of sandwich degrees and work experience internships (The Wilson Review, 2012).

Furthermore, a discrepancy was identified in the literature between placement uptake in new universities compared with that of older institutions, with post-1992 establishments experiencing the lowest numbers of placement engagement (Little & Harvey, 2006). Whilst further statistical analysis on the graduate data found a significant result when comparing the institution attended against work experience undertaken, this however, did not reflect the findings of the literature outlined in Chapter Three. For example, significantly higher numbers of Omega (post-1992 institution) and Alpha (pre-1992 institution) graduates, undertook work experience compared to Pi (post-1992 institution) graduates. In this research, Omega graduates had the highest engagement with work experience, which contradicts the trend observed in the literature. However, this was not true for the other post-1992 institution (Pi University), which had significantly lower than expected uptake of work experience; this university is consistent with the existing literature conclusions. The institution attended was therefore a factor in terms of work experience participation rates, but this does not follow the "new versus old" patterns outlined by previous research; instead this was determined on an individual basis, irrespective of the age or status of the institution.

Of those graduates who did undertake work experience, the thematic analysis in Chapter Five identified many benefits. One of the main reasons graduates stated for engaging in work experience was to further enhance their employability, thus increasing their competitiveness when entering the labour market.

This view is consistent with Human Capital Theory, as the graduates were engaging in additional activities alongside their degree to increase the value of their human capital; i.e. making themselves more attractive to employers and thus reaping the benefits associated with possessing the right skills and knowledge.

The statistical analysis also revealed a significant association between the undertaking of work experience and graduates' preparedness to enter the work place. The Chi-Square test showed, that those graduates who had undertaken work experience as part of their course, felt significantly more prepared to enter the work place after their degree. Those who had not engaged in a placement during their studies, were more likely to report that they were less prepared. This correlates with Brook's (2012) assertion, that employers place such importance on prior work experience because it assists new graduate recruits in their preparedness for the workplace.

This also partly explains the policy makers views, outlined in the documentation, which encourages increased undertaking of work experience to enhance graduates' work-readiness. This leads to graduates contributing earlier to the productivity of the company, rather than the 18-24 month time scale cited in the literature (AGR et al. 2002; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Crebert et al. 2004; Shah et al. 2004; Stringfellow et al. 2006).

With regards to those graduates who did not partake in any work experience, the analysis found that this was not always due to personal choice. An additional 14.4% of the graduate sample reported that they had applied for work experience opportunities, as they saw the value to be gained from it, yet they had been unsuccessful in either finding or securing placements. Had these graduates been successful in their endeavours, it would have equated to a participation rate of 61.2%. These findings are consistent with those of Blackwell, Bowes & Harvey (2001), who found that less than half of their graduate sample had undertaken work experience. However, the graduates stated that it was as a consequence of too few opportunities available, coupled with unsuccessful attempts to acquire work experience.

This again, explains the calls from policy makers for increased collaborations between employers and universities, as this would increase the number of work placements available to students. However, during times of recession, with employer cut backs and reduced numbers of jobs available, achieving this political aim has been problematic. These issues will be discussed in full, later in the HEI and employer discussions.

Since Blackwell et al's research undertakings in 2001, the situation they identified of a limited availability of placements, has exacerbated. The current economic climate, combined with the massification of HE, has intensified competition for placements in recent years and the impact of the economic climate upon graduate perspectives of employability is the third theme to be discussed.

Current Economic Climate

Due to increased competition for jobs, many of the graduates were very much aware of the need to be distinctive and "stand out" from other candidates. This is supported by the number of graduates who engaged with, or planned to engage in, work experience opportunities. This was seen by graduates as one of the ways to enhance their competitive advantage. However, the research findings also suggest that more could be done to increase work experience availability, especially for those who wanted experience but could not locate or obtain any. Given that work experience is such a crucial factor in graduate employability, increasing the availability and uptake of student placements is crucial.

With regard to securing work within the current economic climate, 43.3% of graduates reported they were concerned, whereas 49.5% stated they were not (either as they had already secured employment or were optimistic about obtaining work). References to the current economic climate were prevalent in the graduate responses, demonstrating their awareness of the situation. It was therefore a surprise, that more graduates were not concerned about their future prospects in this current economic climate. Nonetheless, this shows that graduates were somewhat mindful of the issues associated with the current situation, but graduate responses to this situation differed. This supports the critical realist perspective, which highlights that realities are specific to individuals and open to subjective interpretations. All of the graduates are experiencing the same consequences of the economic climate, yet half are not concerned, just less than half are concerned and the remaining small percentage are undecided as to how they feel. For those graduates who are not concerned, this could be explained by their belief in Human Capital Theory. For example, graduates optimism could be attributed to the assumption that employment was a given, as a result of their investment in developing themselves.

Given the diversity of graduate responses, a statistical analysis was performed to determine how any underlying structures (such as which institution group they belonged to), shaped their view of securing work in the current economic climate. A significant result was found between the university attended and graduate concerns. Those who graduated from Omega

(post-1992) and Alpha (pre-1992) universities, were significantly less concerned about securing work, compared to Pi (post-1992) graduates who were significantly more concerned. The medium effect-size also supports a moderate strength to this association, which describes a substantial relationship.

These findings are noteworthy, given the 2012 career score data for each institution outlined in table 4.3.1.a in Chapter Four. This career score data revealed that 54% of Pi graduates, 53% of Alpha graduates and 33% of Omega graduates were in graduate-level employment, or further study, six months after graduation (The Guardian, 2012). It is somewhat surprising therefore, that the 2013 Pi graduates included in this sample, are the most concerned about securing work in the current economic climate, given that in the previous year this cohort fared the best out of all three institutions. Conversely, Omega graduates were the least concerned about securing work in the current economic climate, yet the previous year only 33% of graduates were in graduate-level employment or further study six months after graduation.

It could be argued however, that Omega and Alpha graduates were significantly less concerned due to the increased number of those who had already secured work; significantly more Omega and Alpha graduates had been offered a job than Pi graduates. This again, can be linked to the significant result discussed earlier regarding increased numbers of Omega and Alpha graduates who had undertaken work experience, compared to Pi graduates. Adding further to the comparative analysis, significantly more Omega and Alpha graduates reported that they could demonstrate more employability skills as a result of their degree programme. Overall, the data supports that the institution from which a student graduates, has a significant impact upon how they perceive their own employability. This phenomenon will be discussed in more detail in section 6.2.5. Next, the fourth theme identified by the graduate data analysis will be discussed; whether a degree enhances employability.

Enhanced Employability

Almost three-quarters of the graduate sample felt that their degree had enhanced their employability. This confers favourably with the results from HECSU (2012), who found that 80% of the graduates in their sample felt that their overall university experience had made them more employable. These three-quarters of graduates stated, that investing in their education had given them a competitive advantage in the labour market and achieving a degree had presented them with more opportunities, than if they had not acquired this

qualification. This suggests that the majority of graduates considered that their investment in education, had increased their human capital, thus making them more attractive to employers.

However, whilst 74.1% of this sample did feel that their degree enhanced their employability, there were still 25.9% who either disagreed or were unsure as to how their degree had influenced this. Some of these graduates felt that their degree alone was not responsible for developing their employability, while others felt that they had received no benefit from partaking in university. This suggests that for a number of graduates, the advantages put forward by Human Capital Theory, had not been realised. This questions whether or not, deliberate investment in higher education actually result in equal benefits for all.

Chapter Three: The Literature Review discussed the wage premiums graduates experience as a result of their investment in a university education (Universities UK, 2007; Million+, 2013). Over a quarter of this graduate sample however, did not feel (or were unsure about) whether or not their investment in human capital had been successful. This reflects the argument supported by Brown et al. (2011), who stated that not all graduates will experience the benefits to be gained from investing in their human capital, due to the large inequalities inherent in society. Furthermore, Berntson et al. (2006) stress the importance of the labour market situation when evaluating employability, and therefore the notion of human capital may not be feasible during uncertain economic conditions. During a more favourable economic climate therefore, it could reasonably be expected, that more than three-quarters of graduates would feel their degree enhanced their employability.

Investigating the issues further, the university attended did not affect how graduates perceived their employability enhancement; but the classification of the degree obtained did. Those graduates who achieved 1st or 2.1 classifications, were significantly more likely to report that their degree had enhanced their employability, when compared to graduates who had achieved 2.2 classifications or lower. The university attended was found to have a significant relationship with degree classification obtained, as those from Omega (post-1992) and Alpha (pre-1992) universities, were more likely to obtain a 1st or 2.1. Those who obtained a 1st or 2.1, were more likely to feel that their degree had enhanced their employability. This suggests an indirect relationship between the university attended and graduate perceptions on whether or not their degree had enhanced their employability. This will be discussed further in the next and final graduate theme.

The University Attended

Whilst the variable of 'university graduated from' has already been discussed, this section will clarify the relationships identified by this research, together with the significance of this variable.

The university from which the students had graduated, significantly influenced: the degree classification obtained by the graduates; graduate's engagement with work experience; the demonstration of certain employability skills; graduate concerns about the economic climate; whether graduates had already been offered employment and graduate feelings of preparedness to enter the workplace.

These relationships did not always follow the current trends identified in the literature however. For example, previous research supports lower level engagement of newer universities with work experience. This research found conversely, that those graduates from Omega University (post-1992 institution) engaged the most with work experience. Furthermore, the literature supported that newer universities have expressed greater responsiveness to employability skill enhancement. Whilst graduates from one of the post-1992 (Omega) university's concurred with this trend, graduates from the second post-1992 institution in this research (Pi University) disagree, as they scored their skill demonstration as a result of their degree, the lowest. In fact, Pi University consistently scored the lowest out of all three institutions on all employability variables. This finding provides a fresh insight into the debates surrounding the link between the type university attended and employability inferences. Previous research tends to suggest a "new versus old" dichotomy; yet the data collected from the graduates in this research, does not support this widely held view.

A conclusion cannot be drawn that newer universities fare better or worse than older institutions; instead the argument can be made that graduate experiences and perceptions of employability differ according to the university from which they have graduated (irrespective of the age or status of the institution). However, some biases were prevalent.

Graduates were asked to consider how their institution had enhanced their employability, based upon the provision they received and the employability enhancing initiatives made available to them. The institutional effects on graduates' perceived employability therefore ought to derive from the differing levels of provision experienced at each higher education institution. However, even though graduates were not explicitly asked about the reputation of their institutions, or any associated beneficial or detrimental effects to their employability as a direct result of studying at that institution, three graduates from the Alpha University did make

reference to this. These Alpha graduates were acutely aware of the advantages to be gained from obtaining a degree from a Russell Group University. The three graduates inferred that their CV will be more attractive to employers because of the university they studied at and they were mindful that their acquiring their degree from such an institution has enabled them to apply for jobs within 'the top 20 employers' group.

These graduates are therefore very much aware of the cultural capital they have gained as a result of studying at this red brick institution. This endorses Tomlinson's (2012: 417) "*reputational capital*" phenomena, raised in Chapter Three: The Literature Review. There must be recognition of these biases and acknowledgement that the institution from which one graduates can alone influence the perceived employability of graduates.

Similarly to the graduates, employers tend to show a preference for graduates from red brick institutions. Interestingly however, whilst the Alpha graduates often had very positive feedback regarding their employability provisions and experiences at university, these were still secondary to the Omega graduate's feedback. This employer preference for older red brick institutions could be partly attributed to the higher academic standards stipulated by these older institutions. For example, revisiting the data in table 4.3.1.a in Chapter Four, Alpha, which was the oldest institution in this study, required an average entry tariff of 379 UCAS points. This is higher than Pi institution (requiring 299 UCAS points) and Omega institution (requiring 241 UCAS points).

Another possible explanation for employer biases towards red brick graduates is 'cultural fit'. The employer results section revealed that final selection of candidates was based upon chemistry, personality and how well that individual would fit in with the company. Those employers who are also red brick graduates, or now work with red brick institutions, will look for graduates who display similar characteristics, values and behaviours so that they are compatible with that organisation and existing personnel. This is a form of cultural capital which is therefore a factor in graduate employability.

Chapter Three revealed that employers have increasingly become focused upon skills, abilities and behaviours, with academic qualifications seen purely as a minimum requirement used for screening purposes in the recruitment process. Those employers who omit graduates from newer institutions, may be missing out on highly employable graduates with demonstrable skills and abilities. A distinction should not be made therefore, purely on the age or status of the university attended when considering the employability of graduates.

In summary, this research supports that the view that the variable 'institution graduated from' was a significant factor in a variety of issues linked to graduate employability. However, the findings do not correlate with the trends identified in the literature. Instead, universities should be judged based upon their own individual merits, as the newest institution included in this research, was the most favourable according to the graduate perspective.

Concluding the Graduate Perspective

The data collected and analysed from the graduates, provides a much needed insight into their perspective of employability. Following the critical realist philosophy, the subjective views of the graduates have enabled a more comprehensive picture of the graduate viewpoint to emerge. Critical realism supports that a graduate universal employability truth is not conceivable. This data however, increases current understandings of graduate perceptions and highlights the social structures of cultural capital, social capital, the economic climate and the prevailing employment market, as influencers of a graduates' perception of their employability:

- The institution from which the graduate obtained their degree, is a key determinant of how they perceive their overall employability and how their employability has been enhanced by their business degree
- The current economic climate is only a concern for half of the sample, but almost all graduates made reference to the economic downturn in their responses, which demonstrates that this it does feature in graduates awareness
- Whilst not true for all, the majority of graduates made reference to Human Capital Theory, implicitly stating that their degree had helped to increase their appeal to prospective employers

Gathering the much neglected graduate viewpoint has provided fresh insights into their employability perceptions. Whilst there are some findings which overlap those identified in Chapter Three, unique findings have emerged, which can now be included to greater inform employability debates. Firstly, however, the graduate viewpoint must be compared against those of the other stakeholders: curriculum developers, employers and policy makers, which will be discussed in the next section when addressing research question two.

6.3 Research Question 2: Do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in the policy documents?

As discussed in Chapter Four, a triangulation design was adopted which involved four stakeholder viewpoints on graduate employability: the graduate, curriculum developer and employer perspectives, which were all obtained using primary data collection methods, and the policy maker's viewpoint, which was analysed through secondary data sources. This triangulation approach increases the accuracy of the findings, as the different viewpoints on the same concept were obtained via different techniques (Cohen et al. 2007; Lee & Lings, 2008). This adds to the validity of this research in its attempt to further understand the graduate perspective of employability.

Furthermore, the critical realist philosophy holds that individuals construct their own interpretations of the world around them and different people will therefore, have different views, of the same experiences. Understanding all these different perspectives will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of graduate employability. Bringing together these four viewpoints, also addresses a current gap in the literature surrounding a lack of comparisons between employer and graduate viewpoints, on business higher education employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008; 411).

Rather than discuss each stakeholder in turn, this section includes a discussion of all four stakeholder perspectives on each main theme identified by the data analysis. The structure of this section will use headings that closely align to those in the graduate discussions above, so to allow direct comparisons between graduate viewpoints and those of other stakeholders, on the same themes. Human Capital Theory will be a re-occurring topic within the following discussions, to determine the views of each stakeholder in relation to graduate employability.

Skill Provision and Demonstration

Whilst the graduate results discussed above, highlighted that certain skills could be demonstrated more than others as a result of undertaking a business degree programme, employers also agreed that not all skills were demonstrated equally. Graduates reported that presentation, communication, research, teamwork and time management skills could be demonstrated the most and employers also tended to agree that these same skills, could be demonstrated by graduates to a high or acceptable level.

However, for those skills which graduates reported were less likely to be demonstrable upon completion of their studies, employer views did not always corroborate. For example, 63% of employers felt that graduate IT skills were demonstrated to a high level, whereas only 37.6% of graduates felt they could demonstrate this skill. Similarly, 90% of employers felt that numeracy skills were demonstrated by graduates to an acceptable or high level, whereas again, only 37.6% of graduates felt they could now demonstrate this skill as a result of their degree. The final skills discrepancy involved sensitivity to diversity, where 94% of employers felt graduates can demonstrate this skill to an acceptable or high level, but less than 50% of graduates felt they could demonstrate this.

These discrepancies could be explained by one of two factors. Firstly, graduates may have acquired these skills elsewhere and therefore, skills such as IT, numeracy and sensitivity to diversity have been developed, but not at university on their business programme (which is what the question specifically asked). Secondly, the variations could be explained by the critical realist perspective, which highlights how different structures (i.e. which stakeholder group you belong to), can determine how your understandings of the world is constructed and therefore, result in different interpretations of the same reality. If due to the latter, this supports the notion that graduate and employer viewpoints differ on these same issues, due to the different realities each stakeholder experiences. An awareness of these different realities is necessary to better inform employability discussions.

There were however, some similarities as employers were more inclined to agree with graduates over the poor demonstration of project management and self-reflection skills; 25% of employers stated that these two skills were both demonstrated to a poor standard.

Chapter Three revealed a large number of skills which employers have been demanding from graduates, yet enhancing all of these numerous skills is proving difficult for HEIs and graduates. Given this situation, employers were asked in the interview if they felt all skills were equally weighted, or if they had a preference for some skills and abilities over others. Their response unanimously supported that skills are not equally weighted, as employers valued some skills and abilities over others. In particular, there was a clear emergent trend that employers were more interested in behaviours and characteristics as opposed to skills. The nine employer interviews revealed a tendency for employers to value behaviours such as a positive work attitude, characteristics such as resilience and 'grit' (perseverance), alongside relevant prior work experience. Employers often argued that once those key elements were in place, other skills could then be developed.

Interestingly, whilst Chapter Three highlighted employer focuses upon soft skills, this research suggests that there is another dimension to this, as not all skills were considered to be of equal importance. This research supports the viewpoint of the CBI & NUS (2011) model, in that a positive attitude is a core element for graduate employability. However, this research goes further to include other core elements; the characteristics of grit and resilience alongside practical thinking and a common sense approach. Finally, work experience was already highlighted as a key element of graduate employability in the literature, which is supported by these research findings, as again it forms a central element of how employers perceive graduate employability.

Given this employer focus upon these specific attitudes, characteristics and work experiences, the curriculum developer views can now be considered to determine how they incorporate such skill provision into business degree programmes.

The curriculum developers described different ways in which employability skills were delivered on business courses, which included a mixture of embedded and bolt-on skill provision. Curriculum developers reported that the academic year 2012-2013 (which coincided with the increase in tuition fees) witnessed the continued implementation of employability initiatives, including new courses, e-portfolios and a renewed employability focus throughout the curriculum. Whilst business school commitment to employability enhancement is evident, all curriculum developers reported difficulties in identifying exactly what employers required. A lack of feedback, clarity and understanding regarding the skills employers want, is problematic for HEIs when trying to anticipate and deliver skill developments which fully address the needs of industry.

Furthermore, the behaviours and qualities of positive attitude and grit are harder to teach and assess than skills such as team-working or communication skills. As highlighted in Chapter Three, the QAA (2007) benchmark statements are largely skill based and therefore currently, there are no best practice guidelines on what behaviours to include, or how to teach and assess these. Even if therefore, HEIs were more aware of the specific elements required by employers, it may not be possible to develop these within the current curriculum. This is especially true where academic staff have come under scrutiny in terms of both the delivery of employability skills and their preference for subject content. The Omega institution (a post-1992 university), explained that their staff had expressed biases against employability provision in the curriculum and instead preferred to devote more time to academic content.

Additionally, Pi institution (another post-1992 university) referred to the inability of some academics to teach employability skills, especially if they were not up-to-date with current industry trends and employer practices. Such staff resistance, or inability, provides an explanation as to why graduates did not highly rate the skill development and training sessions provided by their institution and therefore opted not to attend them.

The curriculum developer findings reveal that there are many conflicting issues confronting business schools with regards to their provision of employability. These include difficulties over the specific skills to focus upon, resistance from staff, lack of engagement of students and a lack of clarity on the exact needs of employers. This corresponds to the points raised in the literature review highlighting that HEIs and business schools have many stakeholder to consider and are often pulled in conflicting directions. Despite this, pressures remain for HEIs to persist with the employability agenda, to contribute towards economic prosperity following the commitment to Human Capital Theory.

Curriculum developers are not however, the only stakeholder experiencing a lack of clarity over employer demands; graduates are also not fully aware of the importance employers place on particular skills and abilities. Graduate comments mostly reflected their awareness of the importance of work experience and this aspect was therefore rather clear, yet graduates did not comment on aspects such as a positive work attitude or the characteristics of grit and resilience as aspects employers' value highly.

The final employability stakeholder perspective to consider on the matter of skills, is that of the policy makers. A skilled workforce, as advocated by policy makers, contributes directly to economic prosperity and thus, developing workers with the skills required by industry is of critical importance. The policy makers' approach to developing graduates with the relevant skills involves the encouragement of collaborative relationships between HEIs and employers (which was demonstrated in the review of the policy documentation in chapter three). The theme of business-university collaboration will be discussed later in this section, but part of the reasoning behind this approach, is to create more work opportunities for graduates during their studies in order to provide them with direct prior work experience and hands-on contextual skill development.

Work Experience

A dominant theme occurring in both the policy makers and employer literature is for students to undertake more work experience during their studies. As discovered in Chapter Three, for work experience to be considered valuable by employers, it should be of sufficient duration (Harvey, 2001), be paid where possible (NACE, 2012) and also be relevant (High Fliers, 2012).

Policy makers provided their own perspective on the work experience students should undertake while studying and advocated smaller placements, either over the summer vacation or via several shorter work experience periods that equated to 12 months overall (The Wilson Review, 2012). It was argued that this would provide graduates with more variety than if they did one long placement of 12 months with the same employer. The employer views in this research support the observations of the literature and advocate longer periods of work experience, although not all employers would necessarily agree with the policy makers recommendations for a series of shorter placements. The value placed upon these shorter work experience placements by employers, would depend on their relevance to the organisation and the industry as a whole.

Employers unanimously agreed upon the importance of work experience, and graduates also recognised its value in enhancing their own employability. Graduate comments suggested that they generally see much value in obtaining work experience and although less than half of the sample undertook work experience, the benefits they reported arising from this experience was compelling. Graduates stated that as a result of undertaking work experience they secured graduate level employment more readily upon completing their studies. Furthermore, graduates who had engaged in work experience opportunities found that their grades improved upon returning to studies, particular work-based skills were enhanced (such as team working, presentation and networking skills), as well as developing a heightened awareness of the real world and cultural differences. These findings support the work of many authors who have researched the benefits of work experience which were discussed in Chapter Three (Greenbank, 2002; Mason et al. 2003; Little & Harvey, 2006; Andrews & Higson, 2008).

Given these benefits, work experience appears to be a viable solution to addressing many of the criticisms expressed by the employers, which were again highlighted in Chapter Three. For example, chart 3.2.1F.c on page 55, illustrates that cultural awareness along with business and customer awareness, were the graduate skills employers were dissatisfied with the most (CBI & Pearson, 2012). In contrast, the graduates in this research found their work experiences had enhanced these skills in particular, alongside other relevant skills and competencies necessary in the workplace. Despite these benefits, uptake of work experience was low. However, there were a significant number of graduates who tried but failed, in their pursuit of securing a work experience placement. The employer findings illustrate the insufficient work placement opportunities available, as only one employer offered experiences to current students. Clearly, this is an area where further action needs to be taken to ensure more students are able to access work experience.

The curriculum developers also understood the importance of providing work experience opportunities to graduates. At the time of the study, two of the business schools had already expanded their course portfolio to include sandwich placements for all business degree courses and the third business school was going through validation, with a renewed focus on enhancing employability provision; which included more work experience opportunities. This demonstrates that HEIs are responding to pressures from policy makers and employers, to provide students with industry experience as part of their studies. These findings therefore reject the literature which details a decline in the popularity of sandwich placements, as graduate interest in these appear to be increasing. As such, HEIs are responding to this demand by providing additional courses involving a work placement element.

However, the interviews looked closer at specific employer views on work experience. Of the sample, 53% felt graduates were not prepared to enter the work place and many employers explained that prior work experience could improve this situation. Employers highlighted that work experience provides an insight into the working culture and environment, helps adjust graduate expectations, assists in graduates demonstrating the desirable work attitude and minimises the need for subsequent training. However, employers views varied on the nature of experience they wanted graduates to exhibit.

Employers valued longer terms of work experience, consisting at least of six months but ideally being 12 months in duration. Some preference was also given for paid experiences, yet several of the employers stated that voluntary work could still be beneficial as long as it was of the right duration and preferably within a related field. Relevance was also raised as a key element, and if graduates could obtain work experiences which were related to the employment they wished to enter upon graduation, this would enhance their employability. Ideally therefore, graduates need to obtain a 12 month work placement which is paid and within the field they hope to ultimately work.

Whilst graduates and curriculum developers are aware of the importance of work experience, the research findings question just how knowledgeable they are of the specific work placement stipulations made by the employers. This concerns human capital, as those graduates with the right skills and experiences will be the most desired by employers, and ultimately, as the theory postulates, be rewarded financially.

In light of the current economic climate, some employers did acknowledge that securing the ideal work experience challenging for graduates, nonetheless work experience was still deemed a necessity in enhancing a graduates' employability. The next theme to be discussed addresses whether a degree enhances employability, which also incorporates graduate recruitment processes.

Enhanced Employability

A degree is a requirement for graduate-level employment and so fundamentally, the possession of a degree provides more employment opportunities. Three-quarters of graduates felt that their degree had enhanced their employability with comments reflecting the benefit of increased employment prospects. This supports the notion of Human Capital Theory given that graduates, having invested in their education, would go on to reap benefits. However, following the discussions with employers, conflicting issues became apparent.

Employers reported that when recruiting, they looked for distinctive graduates who “stood out from the crowd”. Distinction was made on the grounds of prior work experience, character, behaviours and/or additional activities or abilities. Graduate employability therefore, concerns more than the possession of a degree; an argument supported in Chapter Two and Chapter Three discussions. Unfortunately however, some employers reported that their recruitment processes did not facilitate distinctive applications until later on in the recruitment stages.

Davidson (2011) who was discussed in Chapter Three, highlighted that relatively little is known about the recruitment processes of smaller organisations. Furthermore, Bartram et al. (1995) suggests that there can be large differences in the recruitment processes of large and small employers. This research also found differences between the larger and smaller employer recruitment processes, however, irrespective of size, employers were generally in agreement that their recruitment processes had weaknesses. Employers were therefore aware that their recruitment strategies were imperfect, which resulted in known limitations when recruiting graduates. Standard application formats and longwinded processes were argued to be somewhat ineffective in recruiting graduates. The more formal the process, the longer it took for employer and graduate to meet face-to-face in interview; which is where employers stated it was easiest to see the particular elements they were looking for.

These employer findings support that graduates need to engage in more varied activities, to help make their application distinctive in the early stages of the recruitment process; which would involve graduates developing their social and cultural capital. This is demonstrated by the quote given in the Chapter Five by the International Business graduate. This individual had secured graduate-level employment with the global accountancy firm PKF, based upon her ability to fluently speak three languages, despite her not meeting the 2.1 degree class criterion. Whilst there is no uniform way to “stand out from the crowd”, graduates need to know how they can become a prominent candidate when competing for jobs in the current competitive conditions.

The final element of the recruitment process largely involved a face-to-face interview. Once at this stage, employers then used their own personal criteria for final selection, including: gut feeling, personality matches and chemistry. This concurs with the findings of Stringfellow et al. (2006), who found that the personality of the candidate was the deciding factor in which graduate was appointed. This scenario could be attributed to what the graduates referred to as 'luck' when securing employment. It is understandable to appreciate why graduates might assign success through an imperfect recruitment process, with a personality that matches the employers, as involving a component of luck. This idea is supported further when several employers revealed biases towards graduates of certain universities, which are discussed next.

Institution Influence and University-Business Collaboration

The university attended is clearly an important factor for graduates in their employability enhancement, as was advocated in the graduate discussions earlier in this chapter. The employer data also revealed that that this stakeholder holds certain views on employability enhancement and the university which the graduate attended

Five of the nine employers interviewed, explicitly stated their preferences for particular types of institution. Some employers reported that they sought out what they considered the 'best' institutions and other employers explained that whilst they may not have a preference for older more elite institutions, those in similar management roles within their company did.

The clear employer bias towards older red brick institutions was also raised in the literature review. Tomlinson (2012) commented on the earning premiums observed by graduates from elite institutions, which could be attributed to the social and cultural capitals gained from studying at such institutions. For this reason, many large employers target their recruitment efforts on elite establishments (High Fliers, 2013), which has led to the suggestion that elite institutions need not engage in the employability agenda to the same extent as newer institutions. This supports the findings from Yorke (2004), who found that newer institutions have been the most enthusiastic in developing their employability provision.

However, whilst over half of the employers were found to favour older, more elite institutions the graduate data did not agree. For the graduates, differences between institutions' employability enhancement was not based upon the age or status of the university. For example, Omega graduates (a new university), reported the most favourable employability outcomes. The second most favourable outcome, was given by Alpha graduates (a red brick institution) and in third and final place came Pi University, another new institution. If certain employers are exclusively targeting red brick graduates, they will miss valuable employable graduates from other institutions. Moreover, employers will be excluding certain areas of society, thus further compounding the inequalities prevalent in the graduate labour market as explained by Brown et al (2011).

Although five of the nine employers interviewed showed a preference for elite institutions, not all of these engaged with HEIs. Only four employers reported any form of liaisons with HEIs. All four employers had links with more than one HEI, whilst the other five employers held no links at all. This supports the findings from Lowden et al. (2011) who found that few employers have links with HEIs.

The reasons given by employers for such liaisons were threefold; recruitment, placements and curriculum development, however, these are not all equally weighted. For example, three of the four employers engaged with HEIs primarily for recruitment purposes. These employers therefore, mostly used HEI connections to access new graduate recruits. This finding is similar to that of Hogarth et al. (2006), who found that employer engagement was largely initiated by employers looking for graduates to recruit; recruitment therefore was the driving force behind the initial contact.

In addition to recruitment, one of these employers also used liaisons to offer student work placements. This supports a more reciprocal relationship, yet was only demonstrated by one employer. This is a concerning finding, as all employers felt work experience was important, however, only one employer liaised with universities to offer students such experience. Employers must pay attention to the graduate perspective, which argues that the amount of available work experience falls drastically short of demand. If employers want graduates with prior work experience therefore, they must become more involved with HEIs to increase their provision of work placements.

While three of the four employers mainly engaged with HEIs for recruitment motives, the fourth employer engaged with universities on a different level. This employer sat on a Business School advisory board, contributing towards curriculum design and development. This employer however, reported somewhat negative experiences in their liaisons, whilst the first three employers were relatively satisfied with their engagements. Most notably, this fourth employer reported a level of frustration from ineffective liaisons which resulted from a discrepancy between HEI and employer perceptions. This supports the findings of Lowden et al. (2011) discussed in Chapter Three, who found that different expectations and priorities of the employer and HEI stakeholders, led to problems in university-business collaborations. For example, Lowden et al. (2011) stated that employers felt their opinions were somewhat ignored by HEIs.

Similar discussions also took place with the curriculum developers, which found that unlike the employers, all the HEIs were engaged with employers to some extent. All business schools had an advisory board consisting of employer representatives, which curriculum developers stated were used to seek opinion and to consult over curriculum matters. These liaisons however, whilst formal, were mostly in an advisory capacity. This meant employer inputs could be accepted or rejected as the university saw fit; this goes some way to explaining the fourth employers' frustrations over such liaisons.

Curriculum developers also discussed the involvement of employers in course delivery and formal assessment procedures; which curriculum developers concluded as being a somewhat passive involvement. Employers were not involved in the delivery of any curriculum offered by the three institutions, neither were employers formally allowed to mark and grade work. Instead, employers could give their views, but again it was at the discretion of the academic staff whether recommendations were implemented.

These findings therefore demonstrate that university–business collaboration is not currently operating to its full potential. This concurs with the findings of Chapter Three and explains policy makers repeated calls for more effective liaisons to take place. Employers have certain expectations and requirements from HEIs, and HEIs have certain expectations and requirements from employers, but there does not seem to be a collaborative relationship; it is more a case of each party accessing what they need at that time. However, policy makers have made it abundantly clear that relationships between employers and HEIs are very important and given the resources dedicated to improving such liaisons, there is pressure for both HEIs and employers to build better working relationships.

Summary of the Four Stakeholder Viewpoints

This summary section details the key findings concerning the second research question: do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in the policy documents?

The findings demonstrate that there are not only similarities and disparities amongst the four stakeholder views, but that there are also similarities and disparities between the findings of this research when compared to the existing literature discussed in Chapter Three. For example, with regard to graduate skill demonstration as a result of their business degree, graduates felt their IT skills were poor, whilst the majority of employers felt that IT skills were demonstrated to a high level. Another example involves the curriculum developer reports of a lack of clarity over what skills employers think they want, which therefore makes it difficult for them to fully incorporate employability skill provision into business curriculums.

The most notable finding with regard to graduate skills and abilities, was employer reports of a hierarchy present for particular employability elements. Not all skills were considered equally important by employers with their preference evident for positive attitudes, grit and resilience, common sense and practical thinking alongside prior work experience. The political, curriculum developer and graduate stakeholders all appeared rather uninformed about such a hierarchy and were only aware of the significance employers placed upon work experience. This clearly shows a lack of clarity over the term “skills” and what specific capabilities employers are looking for. It also suggests a communication issue with regards to how explicitly employers are stating which elements they are looking for from graduates. This goes some way to explain the skills shortages identified in Chapter Three, as the lack of transparency around such issues could lead to graduates not exhibiting capabilities that match employer demands.

All of the employer interviews revealed that work experience was exceptionally important for enhancing a graduates’ employability. Ideally, employers are seeking those with prior work experience comprised of sufficient duration, paid roles and within a related field. The extent to which employers are prepared to deviate from these criteria however, is dependent upon individual employer views. Policy makers, HEIs and graduates were all in agreement that work experience was of significant importance, but how aware these other stakeholders are regarding the employers ‘ideal’ preferences was not clear. Sandwich degree placements are becoming more popular, which include a 12 month work experience placement, which suggests an acknowledgement from the curriculum developers that longer duration

placements are more valuable. However, a full appreciation of the possession of relevant work experience was not forthcoming, as it was impossible for HEIs to guarantee any work experience, let alone work experience that was relevant to the specific industry the student was interested in.

The results support the argument that the economic climate did influence stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability; most notably employer and policy maker perspectives, whose concerns revolved around business success and economic prosperity. The labour market conditions also had a substantial impact upon graduates and HEIs. The climate has reduced the availability of work experience placements and consequently, it has become increasingly difficult for HEIs to provide opportunities and for graduates to acquire prior work experience.

This is extremely detrimental to graduate employability, given the significant weighting employers place upon the possession of prior work experience, and so for those graduates who could not obtain work experience, employability inequalities were experienced. Whilst policy makers have actively encouraged closer collaborations between universities and businesses to assist in increasing the availability of placements, the situation still needs vastly improving. The employer interviews revealed only one employer who had liaised with HEIs on a placement offering basis; more employers need to engage in this way if they wish to have access to more graduates with the required work experience.

With regard to other aspects of the collaborations between universities and businesses, the findings supported that there was a need for further developments in this area. The three HEIs had some engagement with employers, but this was purely for advisory purposes or for seeking work placements. Employers were not allowed to be formally involved in the assessment procedures. Whilst three employers were satisfied with their liaisons, one employer was rather disgruntled with their collaboration experiences and highlighted the differences in outlook between employer and HEI; thus again demonstrating the barriers to successful collaboration. The findings echo those of Howells et al. (2012), who stated that employer experiences of engagements with HEIs varied significantly. Policy makers therefore, need to do more than just repeatedly call for action; more co-ordination and support is required to assist these organisations collaborating together more effectively.

The final noteworthy finding concerned graduate recruitment processes. The employers interviewed confirmed that their recruitment practices were not always effective in recruiting the right graduates. Issues were raised surrounding the processes involved; primarily, that they did not allow graduates to distinguish themselves. Additionally, the interview stages, where a better indication of the graduate's skills, abilities and behaviours could be obtained, was often towards the latter stages of the recruitment process.

Graduates felt that the possession of a degree provided them with more employment opportunities and thus enhanced their level of human capital; however being successful in the recruitment process involved more than just the possession of a degree. Firstly, graduates had to display a range of aptitudes to progress through the various recruitment stages, they needed to demonstrate that they were distinctive and to be successfully appointed, they needed to fit employer's criteria of personality and chemistry matches. Clearly, not all applications will be successful, which calls into question the theory of human capital, as there are more complex issues to consider; it is not simply the case that obtaining a degree will guarantee a graduate job.

These discussions have highlighted the specific areas of notable divergence, which add further understanding to the current literature in the field of graduate employability. There were also findings which complemented each other. One of the main similarities between all four stakeholder perspectives was the links each made between higher education and Human Capital Theory. All four perspectives, in some way and to some extent, made reference to the human capital to be obtained from participating in higher education. Similarly, it was also made clear that prior work experience was considered by the stakeholders to be an important element in employability enhancement.

However, whilst there are some connected viewpoints, there are many areas of disagreement with conflict resulting. For example, HEIs are largely focusing on skill development, when employers now state their preference is for behaviours and characteristics. Whilst all stakeholders agreed upon the importance of work experience, there were ambiguities over the type and duration of such experience. Policy makers recommend summer internships or several smaller work experience placements, whilst employers suggested that longer duration placements are better i.e. 12 months. Furthermore, employers stated that they are looking for graduates who can distinguish themselves from the competition, given the large numbers of graduate applicants, yet clarity is still required on how graduates can achieve this.

Additionally, HEIs explained that they were not always certain that employers knew what they were looking for, and this makes it difficult to deliver the right provision. Finally, whilst Business Schools did liaise with employers, the extent and reciprocity of this collaboration varied. Employer involvements in curriculum design were limited, which does not compare well with government recommendations for more collaborative relationships, i.e. working together in partnership rather than in the current limited capacity.

These findings offer an explanation for the reasons why the concept of employability is such a convoluted and complex one. These findings also justify, why many issues highlighted in the literature decades ago are still being debated today. The variety of perspectives can be explained by the critical realist philosophy, which postulates that individuals hold their own subjective interpretations of the world around them, which are determined by structures, mechanisms, context and time. Researching and communicating these individual realities, will aid understandings of the concept of employability and contribute towards the furthering of current knowledge. This communication of individual realities will be discussed further in section 6.6 of this chapter, where a revised model of graduate employability is proposed. This model pulls together all of these perspectives to assist in a more complete comprehension of the employability concept. Firstly however, the findings surrounding the final research question will be discussed and interpreted.

6.4 Research question 3: How are stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability influenced by the current economic climate?

As outlined in Chapter One, the research addressed the concept of graduate employability within the context of an uncertain economic climate. Specifically, it was the graduate and employer cohorts who were asked about their views relating to employability, given the current economic conditions. Curriculum developers indirectly discussed the prevailing labour market situation and its impact upon work placement opportunities. The policy maker's perspective was analysed with reference to the theory of human capital, which is considered to be the driving force behind recent employability agendas.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Sanders & De Grip (2004) highlighted that the context of the economy's current climate can dictate the perspective taken on the concept of employability. Employers were asked in the interviews about the effects they had witnessed given the recent recession and whether this had changed their business needs or the criteria they used to employ graduates. Two main issues arose; firstly, employers reported that they were employing fewer graduates, which has consequently increased competition for the jobs that are available. Secondly, several employers stated they had increased expectations of graduates given the current climate.

As employers had a larger pool from which to recruit, some employers considered opting for older and more experienced individuals, over new graduates, when hiring for new vacancies. Graduates therefore, are not just in competition with other graduates, but with members of the general workforce; backing up employer iterations on how competitive it was for current vacancies. Additionally, many of the employers reported an increase in expectations of graduates, given the current economic climate; graduates were expected to work harder, to be more attentive to the needs of the business and possess the necessary skills required for success in a difficult climate. This is where the employers expanded upon their reports of wanting resilient graduates, who can display grit with a positive attitude and strong work ethic. The employer perspective therefore supports the point made by Sanders & De Grip (2004) as their views of what makes a graduate employable has been shaped by the current economic climate. This also correlates with the critical realist supposition that viewpoints change over time and within different contexts.

Graduates were also asked about the current economic climate and how concerned they were about securing employment. The sample was split almost in half, for those who were and those who were not concerned. As discussed in the graduate section above, the university which the graduate attended had a significant influence over how concerned graduates felt; Omega and Alpha graduates were significantly less concerned than Pi graduates about securing employment. Of those graduates who were not concerned, comments were made regarding the amount of effort they had concentrated into their studies and subsequent job applications, so they were expecting to soon secure work. However, HCT critics such as Brown et al. (2011) state that not everyone will be rewarded for their efforts in trying to enhance their stock in human capital; only a select few graduates will actually reap such rewards. Discussions relating to human capital theory will be covered in section 6.5 of this chapter.

Furthermore, employers expressed concern regarding the conditions facing new graduates entering the job market. They questioned whether graduates have realistic expectations about securing work in the current economic climate.

When addressing HEI concerns over the current economic climate, all curriculum developers commented on their inability to guarantee placements to all students; which was further exacerbated by the current labour market conditions. Furthermore, curriculum developers identified difficulties in maintaining student motivation, as increased competition for placements often led to repeated rejections and failures in obtaining such experience. However, for those graduates who do persevere despite very competitive conditions, there could be potential rewards. Employers placed great importance on positive attitude and resilient characters, thus demonstrating a level of perseverance, should help graduates to enhance their employability.

Finally, the policy maker's perspective follows in the belief of Human Capital Theory, that a more skilful workforce is key to economic growth and international competitiveness; paramount during times of recession and economic uncertainty. The current economic climate therefore has only reinforced policy maker's focus upon graduate employability, with enhanced pressures for HEIs to engage with the employability agenda.

6.5 Human Capital Theory

As was explained in Chapter Three, the theory of human capital was carefully chosen over the pedagogic theory put forward by Bourdieu, to be the underlying theory for this thesis. Human Capital Theory was thus used to contextualise the research carried out into the concept of graduate employability. Although human capital has been examined throughout the discussions pertaining to the three research questions above, this section will draw together those points, to clearly report on the data collection findings on the applicability of Human Capital Theory to graduate employability.

Whilst the links between higher education and political pressures for improved skills, was well documented in Chapter Three, the data analysis results also showed that the notion of human capital was represented in each of the stakeholder perspectives on graduate employability. The extent to which each employability stakeholder made reference to human capital did vary. Policy makers and employers made explicit reference to this theory and graduates made more implicit comments concerning their higher education attainment and increases in human capital levels.

Human Capital Theory explains the policy maker's viewpoints as investment in higher education is seen as a way to increase the skills base in the UK, and thus improve productivity, economic growth and international competitiveness. The increased focus upon employability from policy makers is therefore understandable, given the recession and subsequent economic instability. However, whilst the theory of human capital drives the policy maker's perspective and tends to be accepted amongst the remaining three stakeholders, the theory was not always realised for the graduates. Despite such investment in themselves, through partaking in university business education, a large number of graduates were not yet receiving the benefits predicted by HCT. This could be attributed to a time delay, given that graduates do not reach their full potential immediately upon entry into the work place (Sunderland, 2008). Very little is detailed in the Human Capital Theory literature about when graduates, employers and the economy can expect to see such pay-offs from higher education; thus revealing further difficulties in the measurement of the impact of human capital.

Furthermore, the data collected from the employers and the graduates supports the argument that Human Capital Theory is only relevant under certain circumstances. There is an abundant the supply of graduates, which exceeds demand (Nabi & Bagley, 2003; Tomlinson, 2008) and this therefore, suggests that a degree alone is not sufficient to compete effectively in the current labour market. Other elements are necessary, which include work experience, the demonstration of certain behaviours and characteristics, alongside aspects of social and cultural capital. The investment in oneself has gone beyond education and has become augmented to encompass many other elements.

Human capital therefore, in this current climate, is only of limited value and thus the findings concur with Berntson et al. (2006) in that human capital is only applicable under certain economic and labour market conditions. This explains why around half of the graduate sample, questioned how successful they would be in such a competitive environment and displayed concerns about securing employment under such conditions.

Additionally, Human Capital Theory is subject to bias. For example, for those employers who prefer graduates from red brick institutions, human capital is automatically enhanced if the graduate attended a red brick institution. Similarly, if the graduate completed their degree at a newer institution, their human capital is detrimentally affected. These findings support those of Brown et al. (2011); human capital is fraught with inequalities, and comes to the same conclusions as Tomlinson (2008), in that HCT is too limited in scope to be of any practical use to a complex issue such as graduate employability.

Despite these criticisms, the policy makers retain Human Capital Theory at the centre of their employability policies, which also drives their education policies. The repeated calls by the policy makers for further actions in the enhancement of graduate employability, can therefore, be explained by the shortcomings in the theory of human capital. This is evidenced further by the recent economic downturn and prolonged post-recession recovery during a time of massification in HE. With such huge participation rates in higher education, the theory postulates that the economy should be flourishing and not suffering.

Given the flaws this research has identified in the Human Capital Theory, the next section proposes a new model for graduate employability, taking into consideration the findings from this theory in which the employability concept was contextualised.

6.6 Revised Employability Model

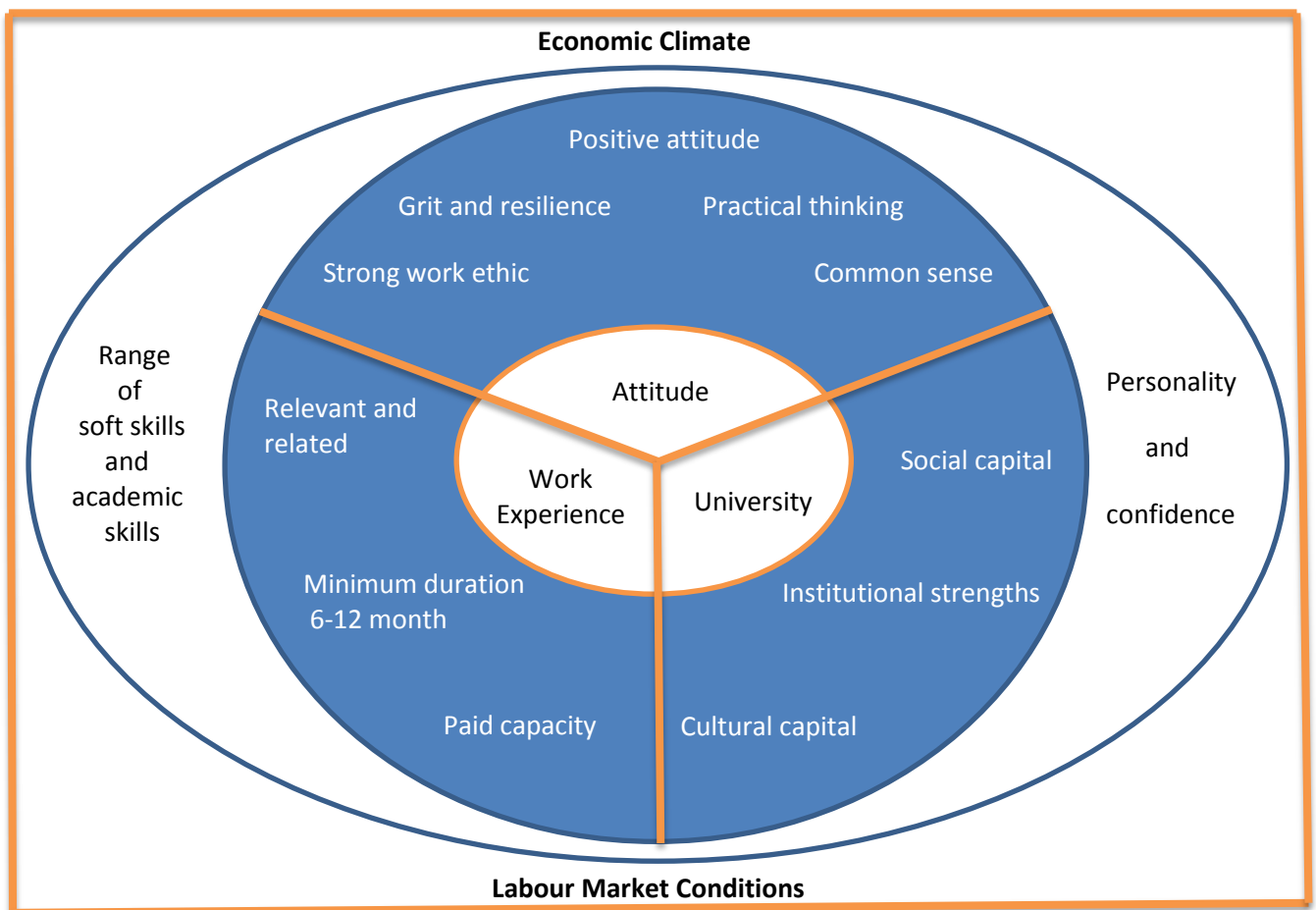
As Chapter One and Chapter Three highlighted, the graduate perspective of employability has been largely neglected in the employability research arena. This thesis aimed to rectify this, by directly researching the graduate viewpoint to obtain a deeper understanding of their perspective. To achieve this fully, the other main stakeholder views were also evaluated and compared against the graduate perspective. Obtaining these four stakeholder perspectives in the current economic climate has provided valuable insights, which can now be used to form a revised model of graduate employability.

This proposed model of the concept of graduate employability draws together the findings from each of the stakeholder perspectives, which includes the under-researched graduate viewpoint. The critical realist philosophy states that individuals hold subjective realities of the social world, which differ according to social structures and mechanisms. Such social structures include the stakeholder group one might belong to and therefore bringing together the different stakeholder perceptions into one model, provides a more holistic view of the concept of graduate employability. Additionally, the model includes the key social structures when explaining graduate employability perceptions by acknowledging cultural and social elements, institutional effects and the over-riding economic condition in which these are all situated within. These social structures were found by the research to exert influence over stakeholder perceptions of the concept of graduate employability. The model therefore is a reflection of the salient research findings and how these social structures link together through the critical realism philosophy.

Chapter Two of this thesis outlined three models pertaining to employability. These models pre-dated the 2008 recession however, and now need to be up-dated given how heavily the economic conditions impact upon graduate employability. Additionally, the institution which the graduate attended was also shown to be a significant factor in determining graduate employability (from the views of both graduates and employers), yet this aspect was absent from the previously discussed models. The proposed new model is a revision of the older models which addresses their shortcomings.

The most notable contributions of this revised model are the graduate viewpoints coupled with a more detailed breakdown of employer requirements, all set within the context of the current economic climate. By including these salient elements, and other findings, from all the employability stakeholders, it is believed this model represents an all-encompassing view of the concept of graduate employability.

6.6.1 Revised Model of Graduate Employability



This research has identified three core elements which lie at the heart of graduate employability and this revised model emphasises these aspects over the others. The core of the model comprises the three main elements which were derived from the data analysis; positive attitude, type of university and prior work experience, each of which will now be discussed and explained.

The first element involves a positive attitude encompassing elements such as resilience, grit and perseverance, a strong work ethic alongside practical and common sense thinking. These were all highlighted by the employers in the interviews as being of utmost importance and it was these elements employers sought first from potential graduate recruits. The employers then explained that other skills and abilities could be developed providing these core attitudes were in place first. For example, graduates who displayed positive attitudes and behaviours were perceived to be more employable as it was easier to develop other desired skills or competencies once the attitude was already in place. Teaching a positive attitude is harder than teaching skills; therefore employer's preference was for graduates to have the correct work attitude in place first and of secondary importance was skills. This is a significant finding of this research as it impacts on what is developed at university and where graduates need to concentrate their developments when trying to enhance their own employability. This element however, is not explicitly included in the other employability models which were discussed in Chapter Two.

The second element refers to the institution from which an individual graduates, as the graduate perspective highlighted how graduating from different institutions can have different influences over employability provision and experiences. This does not refer to the simple dichotomy of either redbrick or non-redbrick institution, but instead advocates that individual institutions have their own strengths (demonstrated by graduates from one post-1992 university rating their employability experiences very highly, yet graduates from another post-1992 university rating their employability experiences significantly lower). Also under the 'university' heading, are the elements of social and cultural capital. These reflect the employer preferences for graduates from certain institutions, or employer demands for graduates to distinguish themselves from the competition. Depending on individual employer preferences, graduates will also need these elements of social and cultural capital to increase their chances of success in the graduate recruitment process. Graduates and employers alike referred to elements of social and cultural capital obtained from attending certain HEIs and again, this was a significant finding of this research, yet institutional effects were not included in the other employability models highlighted in Chapter Two.

The third element concerns the prior work experiences of the graduates. All four of the employability stakeholders stressed the importance of this element in enhancing graduate employability and therefore, this takes a central position within the revised model. The element of work experience (or having skills practice in an employment content) is not unique to this employability model; this element was raised by the other models covered in Chapter Two. However, what does differentiate this revised model and the models discussed in Chapter Two is the specific detail about the types and levels of work experience obtained. This revised model informs of the exact criteria employers showed a preference for: experience within a related role and/or relevant industry, of sufficient (6-12 months) and finally, if possible, within a paid capacity. These work experience elements were considered to vastly increase a graduate's employability and thus they should be something which graduates aim to achieve, not just obtaining any type of experience, but experience which fits this specific criteria.

With the core elements addressed, the model then highlights the range of skills and personality traits that are considered to be of secondary importance, whilst still being necessary for enhancing graduate employability. This provides an insight into the hierarchy of skills and abilities when attempting to enhance employability. This model therefore informs both graduates and curriculum developers on the key aspects to focus upon first, before branching out to cover those elements deemed of secondary importance. Chapter Three reviewed a plethora of skills and elements which employers have reported as necessary for a graduate to be considered employable and this revised model helps to break this mass of information down into hierarchies of importance, so stakeholders know the weighting of certain elements.

The final elements within the revised model include the economic climate and the labour market conditions. As discussed in the earlier section, the theory of human capital is flawed, given that the economic climate and labour market conditions of the time factor heavily in the concept of graduate employability. These elements need to be embraced as they dictate the conditions which students will experience after graduation and provide a context for them to prepare and enhance their employability accordingly. For example, the depressed economy has resulted in increased competition for jobs and new graduates are therefore competing with graduates from previous years, in addition to other applicants who are also seeking employment. This increase in competition makes it harder for graduates to distinguish themselves from the competition and therefore, they need to work harder to increase their employability.

Furthermore, the needs of industry have changed somewhat given the recession, and employers reported that this has increased their desire for graduates possessing a positive work attitude. The context of the economic climate and labour market conditions cannot be ignored and this context needs to be acknowledged when addressing the concept of graduate employability.

This revised model of graduate employability brings together the four stakeholder perceptions to provide a holistic model covering the range of social structures which were raised by the research to explain stakeholder views of the graduate employability concept. Following the critical realist philosophy, how graduates engage with the concept of employability will determine how they (and others) perceive their employability. For example, the model highlights that those graduates who attended a certain type of institution, where cultural and social capital has been developed, alongside undertaking work experience which is paid, of a sufficient duration and relevance, coupled with exhibiting a positive work attitude and other relevant behaviours will perceive their employability to be higher than their counterparts who have not engaged to this level. However, the caveat to this model is that this is all contextualised with the economic climate and labour market conditions, and therefore even if a graduate engages with the employability concept to this extent, they may need to revise their perceptions based on the prevailing macro-economic context.

This model is meant to be informative to assist in the clarification of the complex concept of graduate employability. For example, the literature details a vast array of elements, lengthy lists of desired skills and viewpoints from the different stakeholders. This model has attempted to bring these aspects together to provide one model encompassing the four stakeholder viewpoints, alongside highlighting the salient features within a hierarchy of importance. This model differs from the other models as it focuses on the most important elements given by the four employability stakeholders in identify graduate employability.

The model requires individuals to rethink the graduate skills lists currently in circulation in the literature, as not all skills are equally weighted in the employer's perspective. The core skill areas identified in the model above therefore, must take precedence. It also raises the issue surrounding social and cultural capital acquired by the graduate and some employer preferences for graduates from certain institutions. This is coupled with graduate's own viewpoints on how each institution enhanced their employability and the differences reported. The impact of the university attended upon graduate employability has been raised in the literature, but is missing from previous employability models. This research argues that the institution a graduate attends is a significant factor in graduate employability and this needs to be emphasised. This again calls for a rethink of current graduate employability understandings.

It is intended that a variety of individuals and groups who have an interest in graduate employability (i.e. students, graduates, HEI management, academic staff, employers and policy makers) will be able to refer to this model to improve their understanding of the core elements of graduate employability. However, there are three particular issues concerning this model which need to be acknowledged.

Firstly, the data was obtained via case study methodology and therefore, does not permit generalisations to the total population. For this reason, the model does not represent a universal truth; a notion which the critical realist approach rejects anyway. However, this does not decrease the value of the model however, as there are still many worthy features identified by the findings. These contribute greatly towards the current understanding and provide a deeper appreciation of graduate employability; which may be applicable to the wider context.

Secondly, the critical realist philosophy, whilst acknowledging everyone has their own versions of reality when face with the same phenomena, also states that these views change both over time and between contexts. This model therefore, only shows the current stakeholder realities, which will not remain constant.

Thirdly, this model identifies the key areas upon which to focus, but it does not give any indication of how to achieve the development of these. For example, it highlights that graduates need to possess the correct attitude, but this could be difficult to acquire. HEIs may find it problematic to teach and assess developments in attitude and graduates may not be aware of how to portray the right attitude to prospective employers. This model must therefore be viewed in light of these boundaries.

6.7 Appraisal of the Research

Chapter Four detailed the approach this research would take and highlighted how the adoption of a triangulation design would increase the accuracy, validity and reliability of the findings. These findings, together with the proposed revised employability model, are based upon the views of four stakeholders, rather than just one stakeholder perspective. This increases the confidence that these findings are valuable and strengthens the arguments raised in this discussion chapter.

However there are some limitations which need to be considered and these are discussed in the next section.

6.7.1 Limitations of the Research

The findings from the study need to be viewed in light of the limitations experienced in carrying out the research. There are two main areas of limitations in this research; firstly, a methodological concern with online survey methods yielding low sample sizes and secondly, the strength of the Chi-Square test employed in the statistical analysis.

The first limitation concerns the online questionnaire method employed for the graduate data collection. As highlighted in Chapter Four, adopting an online approach is less intensive on resources than postal approaches, but this can also negatively affect response rates. Whilst this did not prove to be a significant problem for the Omega and Pi graduate samples, the online survey approach yielded a much lower response rate from Alpha graduates. The sample sizes of graduates from each institution were not of equal size and this needs to be acknowledged when drawing conclusions from these results.

Despite being transcended from positivism, the critical realist perspective is more qualitative in nature and is therefore, not so concerned with the sizes of the samples the data is drawn from. Instead, critical realism is first and foremost concerned with understanding reality from individual perspectives, which takes priority over methodological stipulations such as obtaining stratified samples from which to draw conclusions (Clark, 2008). Furthermore, larger and equally weighted sample sizes are deemed a necessity for making generalisations from the sample studied to the total population. Whilst the case study methodology employed limited the generalisability of the research, the critical realist perspective acknowledges that universal truths are not obtainable, as everyone has their own subjective views on the social world around them. Additionally, these realities not static but are subject to change.

This research was not concerned with making generalisations, but instead attempted to obtain a deeper understanding of the concept of graduate employability from differing stakeholder perspectives.

For this research, the main concern with the smaller sample size of Alpha graduates was with regards to the Chi-Square statistical test employed. This test states several assumptions which must be met in order for the results to be accurate. Namely, there must be a minimum of five cases within each category of a variable when analysed, otherwise the analysis becomes confounded. Small sample sizes are more likely to fall short of this stipulation given the numbers involved, so the main concern here was to ensure that this did not occur during the graduate data analysis.

There were a few instances in the analysis where this occurred; so the analysis was repeated amalgamating categories to ensure the numbers were high enough to meet the assumptions of the Chi-Square test. For example, when analysing how prepared graduates felt they were to enter the world of work, against which institution they had attended, the 'yes', 'no' and 'unsure' categories did not all receive equal numbers of cases. Whilst 'yes' achieved higher than the minimum threshold of five cases, the 'no' and 'unsure' categories did not always reach the five cases minimum stipulated by the Chi-Square test. As the main interest was in those who had replied 'yes', the analysis was repeated with the 'no' and 'unsure' groups merged together to ensure the number of cases exceeded five. Whilst this action involved the loss of specific data, it ensured that the analysis adhered to the Chi-Square assumptions so not to invalidate the results.

The second limitation within the research concerned the strength of the statistical test employed. The methodology section highlighted that non-parametric tests, such as the Chi-Square test of significance, tend to be less sensitive than parametric tests. The less sensitive the tests are, the less likely they are to detect relationships. This can therefore result in a non-significant result being found, when in fact there is a significant association between the variables. For example when the variable 'university graduated from' was tested against how graduates 'feel the degree enhanced their employability' the Chi-Square results showed no association between these variables.

However, other significant relationships were found which might suggest that the non-significant association found between 'university graduated from' and graduates opinions of whether their degree has enhanced their employability may not be entirely accurate. The analysis revealed a significant relationship between the degree classification obtained and graduates' feelings of enhanced employability.

Furthermore, a significant relationship was also found between the university the graduate attended and the degree classification obtained. The university which the graduate attended therefore has a significant association with the degree classification obtained and the degree classification obtained had a significant relationship with graduates' feelings of enhanced employability. Indirectly therefore, there appears to be a relationship between the 'university graduated from' and feelings that the degree enhanced employability; yet the Chi-Square analysis does not support this.

This could be explained by the Chi-Square test itself, as it is argued that non-parametric tests are not always strong enough to detect relationships (Pallant, 2007; Huizingh, 2007; Field, 2009). Whilst this is a concern, the only way to check this analysis would be to undertake additional statistical tests; however the graduate data type (comprising solely of nominal data) does not lend itself to another statistical test. In conclusion therefore, given that the assumptions of the Chi-Square test have been met in the graduate data analysis, these results remain; meaning that the non-significant results will stay non-significant. One benefit to this limitation however, is that for those significant associations identified, the relationships must have been strong enough to have been detected, which therefore adds further credibility to those associations and subsequent conclusions drawn from them.

Despite these limitations, the research findings still provide a much needed insight into the graduate perspective of employability which enhances current understandings in this field.

6.8 Concluding the Discussion Chapter

This chapter has interpreted the research results to address not only the three research questions but also the underlying aim of this research; to investigate employability from the graduate perspective and in particular, ascertain how graduates feel their business education has affected their employability. Furthermore, the current economic climate has provided a valuable opportunity to collect data within such a context and this has added a further dimension to the findings.

The findings and key discussions outlined in this chapter can be summarised as follows:

- The different stakeholders held many different realities on a range of graduate employability elements, which underlines the complex nature of this concept
- The prevailing economic climate is an important factor in graduate employability which impacts upon all employability stakeholders
- Given the complexities of the employability concept and current climate conditions, the research suggests that the theory of human capital is not applicable to graduate employability
- A revised model of employability is proposed in light of these new findings

Researching the graduate perspective has contributed towards filling the gap in the current knowledge and has provided a valuable insight into the graduate viewpoint. The next chapter provides a conclusion to the thesis and identifies areas for future work.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis draws together the research results to determine whether or not the aims and objectives, outlined in Chapter One: Introduction, have been fully addressed and to draw conclusions from these findings. A brief overview is provided on the key findings generated by this research and the contribution these make to the current knowledge base is explained. Finally, areas for future research are identified and discussed.

7.2. Research Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of this thesis was to investigate employability from the business graduate perspective, within the context of the current economic climate.

Initially, a critical review of the literature was undertaken to appraise the current body of knowledge on graduate employability. This helped to decipher how the graduate perspective is currently represented. The literature review identified that the graduate perspective was under-researched and largely neglected from discussions on employability. Instead, the views of employers and policy stakeholders dominate, and this is therefore a limitation within the current body of literature. Furthermore, the literature reveals that conflicts were prevalent between different stakeholder perspectives of graduate employability, yet little attempt had been made to address the concept holistically. This adds to the complexity of the concept and again supports the weakness in omitting the graduate viewpoint.

The initial step of appraising the existing literature addressed research objective one: to ascertain how complete the current literature is, given that the graduate perspective is often left out of the debates. Once the under-researched graduate perspective was identified, this thesis then moved on to address research objective two: to collect primary data from graduates and compare their views against those of the other main employability stakeholders: employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in the policy documents.

Primary data collection took place with recent graduates, employers and curriculum developers. Secondary data was used to analyse the policy maker's perspective. The research therefore directly obtained graduates' views on their employability and evaluated how they compared to the viewpoints of other stakeholders, thus helping to understand the concept of graduate employability further. In particular, the data was collected during a period of economic uncertainty. This assisted in the development of a deeper understanding of the graduate perspective within this context, thus fulfilling the overall aim of this research.

The third and final research objective involved drawing on the findings from the data collected to develop a revised model of employability. Utilising the data findings, a revised model was outlined in Chapter Six which incorporated the new dimension of the graduate perspective. This revised model contributes greatly to our understanding of graduate employability, especially during the current UK economic conditions. Furthermore, this revised model builds upon the empirical contribution made by this research to provide a theoretical framework to the existing knowledge.

This research, therefore, met the overall aim and the associated research objectives. The next section looks at the main findings of this research when addressing the three research questions:

Research question 1: What is the graduate perspective on the employability provision they received during their business programme and student experience, and does this differ according to institution?

Research question 2: Do the perspectives of graduates corroborate with the perspectives of employers, curriculum developers and those laid out in policy documents?

Research question 3: How are stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability influenced by the current economic climate?

7.3 Summary of the Main Findings

Several key and interesting findings have been generated by this research, which were discussed in Chapter Six and are summarised according to theme in the following sections.

The University

With regard to the graduate viewpoint, the institution which they attended proved to be a hugely significant factor in developing and enhancing employability. The university from which the individual graduated was found to have a significant effect upon a range of variables including: the degree classification obtained, the demonstration of certain skills, work experience uptake, level of concern due to the current economic climate, offers of employment and feeling prepared to enter the work place. The direction followed that Omega University (a post-1992 institution) was consistently given the most favourable outcomes by their graduates. In second place, came Alpha University (a pre-1992 institution) and invariably taking the third and final place was Pi University (another post-1992 institution).

This direction however, does not clearly support the preference of some employers for pre-1992 red brick institutions. Of the nine employers interviewed, five revealed a preference for particular institutions, which employers described to either be 'the best' or the more elite institutions. The employer and graduate viewpoints on the relationship between institution and employability therefore differ. Acknowledging these differences, both viewpoints were incorporated into the revised employability model.

Employability Provision

The interviews with the curriculum developers highlighted that employability skills were already integrated into business programmes, via a mixture of bolt-on and embedded methods. For example, one institution detailed how they had a list of numerous skills which had to be covered across the curriculum and a second institution incorporated a specific module across all three years of some business programmes, which focused exclusively on the development of such skills.

All three curriculum developers however, revealed that they were somewhat unsure of what employers wanted. In some cases, this was because the curriculum developers felt the employers themselves did not know the exact skills they deem necessary for the future. This is a concern given that a sandwich degree course is four years in length and therefore universities have to anticipate the skills and abilities employers will need several years into the future.

A further concern relates to the development of behaviours. Employers did show a preference for some employability competencies over others, and behaviours were weighted with more importance than skills. Employer requirements of a positive attitude, grit, perseverance, strong work ethic and resilience, can be difficult for curriculum developers to incorporate into business curricula's. Although the teaching and assessment of such behaviours is difficult, one solution could be to include more work experience opportunities into programmes. Work experience could help in the development of these required behaviours given that developing these in an educational setting presents difficulties.

All three curriculum developers saw the importance of work experience; two institutions had already increased the number of sandwich degrees on offer and the third had factored more work experience into their course review. However, all institutions expressed concern at their inability to guarantee students with work experience.

Two final concerns relating to employability provision involves both the lack of engagement from students and resistance from academic staff. The figures from the graduate questionnaire, clearly show the lack of uptake at PDP, employability and study skills sessions which HEIs provide. One of the reasons graduates offered for this trend, was the unsuitability of some teaching staff delivering such sessions, where they supplied out-of-date or irrelevant materials. HEIs also experienced conflicts, with academic staff questioning the need to teach employability and skill enhancing sessions, utilising valuable time which they would rather dedicate to traditional academic content. HEIs therefore, have opposing pressures to overcome to ensure that employability is developed adequately throughout any given business degree programme.

Whilst HEIs are addressing employability skill provision, more needs to be done to incorporate behavioural development and work experience opportunities into degree programmes, alongside addressing the conflicting pressures from students and staff. However, solving all of these problems should not be to the sole responsibility of the universities; instead employers need a more active role. This could be initially achieved by employers increasing work experience availability.

Availability of Work Experience

The limited availability of work experience was raised by graduates as an obstacle to the enhancement of their employability. The economic climate and resulting labour market conditions have increased the competition for placement opportunities. A noteworthy number of graduates (14.4%), stated that despite their efforts, they were unable to obtain any work experience. This is supported by the lack of opportunities provided by the employers who were interviewed. Of the nine employers, only one offered any form of placement which a student could undertake during their studies, yet all nine of the employers felt prior work experience was important. This discrepancy, involving employers wanting graduates with experience, yet not offering any themselves, is intensifying the competition amongst graduates. Employers need to increase the number of placements they provide in order to increase the number of graduates who gain prior work experience. This is an area of concern and something which the policy makers have been trying to address by encouraging improved university-business collaboration and providing funding for such engagement.

University-Business Collaboration

The interviews with the curriculum developers revealed that all three HEIs had liaisons with employers yet of the nine employers interviewed, only four reported any liaisons with HEIs. Given the aforementioned problems of teaching certain behaviours and providing more work experience, this research supports the fact that more employers need to engage with HEIs.

Whilst in general terms, stronger engagement between university and business is required, there also needs to be a concerted effort towards a collaborative relationship. For example, the employer interviews highlighted that they were primarily interested in engaging with HEIs for recruitment purposes, i.e. employers made links with universities purely to access their graduate recruits. Additionally, the curriculum developers reported that engagement with employers largely centred on seeking guidance and relationships were therefore restricted to an advisory capacity only. This research demonstrates that these business school and employer samples, were not working together collaboratively, in that a joint effort to enhance graduate employability was not represented; instead each party focused only on accessing what they required from that relationship in the short-term.

Recruitment Practices

Another notable finding from this research was the recruitment practices of employers. Employers openly admitted that their recruitment practices were not always conducive to finding the best graduates, given that their processes and procedures did not necessarily allow graduates to fully demonstrate or convey their competencies.

Employers highlighted that the interview stage was their first opportunity to meet with the graduate and uncover more about their behaviours, attitude and personality. However, employers complained that the interview stage was too far along in the recruitment process and therefore by this end stage, many of the potential graduates would have been eliminated. This drawn out recruitment process, where a face-to-face meeting occurs right at the end, was reported by employers as being ineffective in recruiting the right graduates. Current practice is for employers to complain that HEIs are not producing the desired calibre of graduates, yet employers' ineffective recruitment practices could partly explain the difficulties employers have been experiencing. Irrespective of this, employers revealed no attempts to change their current inadequate practices.

Human Capital Theory

The theory of human capital is the driving force behind government pressures for enhancing graduate employability. The analysis of the policy perspective in Chapter Three, showed that numerous references were made throughout all four policy documents to Human Capital Theory and its links to economic growth. Additionally, connections between investment in education and individual and economic gains were also expressed by graduates, employers and the curriculum developers; although some stakeholders were more explicit about this relationship than others.

The graduate results demonstrate that the benefits professed by Human Capital Theory had not yet been realised, if indeed they ever would be. This led to the conclusion that not all graduates would benefit from their investment in human capital. This inequality was also noted between the graduates of pre-1992 institutions and post-1992 universities, when some employers remarked on their preference for the former. Furthermore, the current economic climate and competitive labour market conditions, mean that the previously anticipated benefits of investing in education are no longer guaranteed. The findings from this research conclude that Human Capital Theory is subject to bias which results in inequalities. Furthermore, benefits are not guaranteed during economically turbulent times, therefore Human Capital Theory does not apply to certain labour market conditions. Given these limitations, the application of Human Capital Theory to the graduate employability concept was consequently rejected by this research.

Current Economic Climate

The current economic climate, and the prevailing labour market conditions, did feature heavily in the results as all stakeholders made reference to the current situation. The graduates and employers commented on these effects the most, with graduates experiencing the negative impact of employers recruiting less and expecting more.

Despite the economic downturn contributing significantly to perceptions of graduate employability, previous research into this concept tends not to acknowledge this factor. This is largely due either to the fact that earlier research was conducted during an upswing period, or that authors wrote about graduate employability in an abstract way without such economic contextualisation.

The revised model of graduate employability proposed in Chapter Six includes this element as the context in which graduate employability should be viewed. This therefore highlights the importance of the current economy in graduate employability and advocates that it is acknowledged rather than ignored.

7.4 Contribution to Knowledge, Impact and Practical Recommendations

Debates around skills shortages and employer complaints have endured for decades, as was highlighted in Chapter Three: The Literature Review. Recent years have witnessed policy maker advocating closer university-business collaboration, as this is seen as a possible solution to the skills shortages. Despite this focus however, employer complaints persist. This research has identified that there are deeper underlying issues which explain why the situation has not moved sufficiently forward over the years. For example, stakeholder viewpoints on the concept of graduate employability differ and the neglect of the graduate viewpoint has been a serious limitation in the body of literature. Without a full understanding and awareness of this key perspective, employability enhancing initiatives are left weaker.

Furthermore, HEIs are under immense pressure, yet this research supports the claim that employers need to play a more active part in developing graduate employability. Offering more work experience opportunities is a crucial step that employers need to take which would benefit all employability stakeholders. Furthermore, recruitment practices of employers are known to be ineffective in enabling graduates to showcase the skills employers require. Consequently, employers reported that current processes do not lead to the recruitment of the right graduate. Despite this knowledge, employers revealed no plans to change their recruitment practices. If current ineffective recruitment practices remain, employers will continue to struggle in recruiting the right graduates, meaning employer complaints will persist. Instead of pressures being placed upon HEIs to enhance graduate employability, employers must first consider the impact of their ineffective recruitment processes and acknowledge whether a change of these would increase their ability to appoint the right graduates with the required skills and abilities.

This research therefore deepens current knowledge in this area, as it looks at four stakeholder viewpoints on the concept of graduate employability. This holistic approach highlights where similarities and disparities occur which enables a more comprehensive understanding of this concept. Also, by directly addressing the graduate perspective, a much needed insight into graduate perceptions of employability has been obtained and therefore contributes a new dimension to the employability debates. Additionally, by embracing the current economic climate, this research is set within a unique context of considerable economic turbulence, coupled with mass participation rates in higher education. This adds a fresh and contemporary element to the current body of employability knowledge.

This research therefore has specifically obtained the previously neglected graduate viewpoint and examined this against three other employability stakeholder viewpoints; the findings of which then formed the basis of a revised model of employability. This revised model details the underlying social structures to explain the four stakeholder viewpoints of graduate employability. The revised model does more than just extend current understandings of the graduate employability concept; it provides a new working framework for use in practice. This research has found that previous employability models require modification to include the significant elements of social and cultural forms of capital alongside the prevailing macro-economic conditions and employer preferences for behaviours over skills. This revised model brings these previously omitted elements to the forefront and also stratifies them within an importance hierarchy. Key stakeholders such as curriculum developers, business educators, students and graduates can use this model in their pursuit of enhancing graduates' employability. Furthermore, this research makes a contribution to addressing the problems around graduate employability and is applicable to a variety of individuals and groups who have a vested interest in this concept: students, graduates, academic staff, HEI management, employers and policy makers.

In summary therefore, this thesis makes both empirical and theoretical contributions. Firstly, the empirical contribution comes from the data collected from the graduates to provide a deeper insight into the perspective of this previously neglected group, and how this correlates to the other employability stakeholders. The most significant empirical findings are:

- The importance of institution and the effect this has on graduate employability
- The current economic climate and the influence this has on employer demands and new capabilities desired of graduates
- Work experience encompasses different types, which are not all considered equal by employers
- Social and cultural capital are significant features within the graduate employability concept
- Employer recruitment practices are not fit for purpose and biases are prevalent
- More support and encouragement needed to increase university-business collaboration

Secondly, the revised model of employability provides a theoretical contribution which incorporates the findings from the empirical data. This theoretical contribution is primarily made to employability within the business school literature, but the findings are also applicable to wider graduate arenas of employability. The model is a revision from older models on offer, which pre-dated the current economic crisis. The macro-economic environment is a contributory factor in changing views of graduate employability and therefore the revised model proposed by this research, addresses this new context.

Given the current high profile of graduate employability due to political pressures, increased tuition fees and the current economic climate resulting in formidable labour market conditions, this research makes a real contribution to further understanding the graduate employability concept and several recommendations have now resulted:

1. To disseminate the findings from this research to curriculum developers and business educators. These key staff can then inform current students of the difficulties they face upon graduation. HEIs have addressed some of these issues already as all three institutions offered degree programmes with a placement year, however, staff could provide further encouragement and support for students to seek out work placements in year one. This would encourage students to take ownership of their own employability development early on and enable students to build up their academic and work credentials in tandem throughout the course of their degree.
2. Curriculum developers highlighted their difficulty in guaranteeing placements to students (which is one solution to developing a positive work attitude) and therefore three recommendations are made with regards to this issue:
 - a. HEIs provide more internships and placements for students within the institution
 - b. HEIs look into other ways of developing behaviours in students and create working groups to share best practice
 - c. To seek more guidance and support on developing university – business collaboration
3. Employer recruitment practices need to be reviewed as they are currently not fit for purpose

7.5 Limitations

This research is not without its limitations and the findings generated by this thesis must be viewed in light of these boundaries. A review of the limitations was offered in Chapter Six, but a synopsis now follows.

The first main limitation concerns the size of the graduate samples. Chapter Four highlighted that employing online questionnaire methods can lead to lower samples sizes and this was experienced in this research. Whilst the sample sizes obtained from Omega and Pi graduates posed no major concerns, the Alpha sample size was considerably smaller. Alpha only yielded a 9% response rate, compared to 19% from Omega and 21% from Pi. This comparatively low number of responses from the Alpha cohort must be considered when comparisons between institutions are made.

However, the critical realist perspective is not concerned with achieving stratified sample sizes, as the aim is not to produce generalisable findings. Instead, the critical realist philosophy accepts that universal truths do not exist, only individual and subjective realities of the social world can be researched. The graduate data helped to provide an insight into this stakeholder's reality and how these realities might differ according to the institution from which they graduated.

The second limitation derives from the statistical test employed to analyse the data. The Chi-Square test belongs to a group known as 'non-parametric tests'. Non-parametric tests have been questioned over their strength in detecting relationships between variables. The data gathered in this research was only suitable for employing the Chi-Square test and therefore an acknowledgement must be made that some associations may have been significant when the test found them to be non-significant. A positive outcome of this however, is the argument that when significant relationships have been found, these must be strong enough for the test to detect which therefore adds to the accuracy of such findings.

Given these limitations, which are specific to the collection and analysis of graduate data, areas for future research are identified.

7.6 Future Research

The main aim of this thesis was to address the under-researched area of graduate perceptions of their employability and to undertake this within the context of the current economic climate. Whilst this study goes some way to enhance current understandings of this viewpoint within such a context, there is much scope to further develop work in this area. Two ways in which to develop further areas of research are now detailed.

Firstly, the long term impact of the current economic climate upon graduate employability is uncertain and therefore one possible future area for research involves undertaking a longitudinal study. This research addressed graduate perceptions of employability immediately after graduation, and therefore adopting a longitudinal element would enable a deeper understanding of how graduate views change over time and within different employment and economic contexts. Given the confines of time associated with doctoral study, employing a longitudinal research design was not practical.

Secondly, another area for future work could involve interviewing graduates about their perceptions of employability. This research experienced limitations in employing online questionnaire techniques and a practical next step could be to build upon these with qualitative interviews.

7.7 Conclusion

Overall, a wealth of data has been collected from the employability stakeholders, which most importantly focused on the graduate perspective. Given the under-researched nature of the graduate viewpoint, the data gathered by this study is both interesting and valuable. Furthermore, little exists on how the graduate perspective correlates with other employability stakeholders, thus the information generated by this research also contribute towards these debates.

Researching graduate employability within the context of the current economic climate, presents a timely and unique piece of research into this concept. However, the economic situation is not static, especially long-term, and therefore the labour market conditions are subject to continuous change. Continued research into this area is vital to keep abreast of contemporary perspectives and developments relating to the graduate employability concept.

Finally, this chapter has revisited the original aims and objectives devised by this thesis and detailed how these have been achieved. The key findings were also discussed along with the contributions made and the impact of these. This chapter has also reminded of the limitations experienced by this research, which provides a basis upon which future research could be developed.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Graduate Pilot Survey

About your Degree

1. What is your degree type?

- BA
- BSc
- Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma
- MBA
- MA
- MSc
- MPhil/PhD

2. What area of business is your degree in?

- Accounting and Finance
- Business Administration
- Business Studies
- Economics
- Human Resource Management
- Information Technology
- International Business
- Management Studies
- Marketing
- Public Relations
- Retail Management
- Tourism
- Other (*please specify*):

3. Was your degree full or part time?

- Full time
- Part time

4. What degree classification did you obtain?

- UG First-class Honours (1st)
- UG Second-class Honours, upper division (2:1)
- UG Second-class Honours, lower division (2:2)
- UG Third-class Honours (3rd)
- UG Ordinary-Degree (Pass)
- PG Pass
- PG Merit
- PG Distinction

5. What do you plan to do after graduation?

- Employment
- Further study
- Travel
- Other (*please specify*):

6. If you plan to go into employment, have you already been offered a job?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

a. If Yes, what is your job title?

b. How does your job role relate to your degree subject?

7. Are you worried about securing employment in this economic climate?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Please briefly explain your views about securing employment in this current economic climate:

Skill Development

8. Which skills did you develop during your degree?
(select all that apply)

- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Decision making
- Oral communication skills
- Written communication skills
- Presentation skills
- Numeracy and quantitative skills
- Information technology
- Self-management in terms of time, planning and organisation
- Team work
- Leadership
- Project management
- Interpersonal skills (including listening, negotiating)
- Research skills
- Self-reflection
- Sensitivity to diversity (in terms of people and cultures)
- Other (please specify):

9. How aware do you feel you are of the skills and knowledge you developed during your degree?

	Very Unaware	Unaware	Neutral	Aware	Very Aware
a. Awareness of Skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Awareness of Knowledge	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. During your degree did you undertake any personal development or study skills modules which were dedicated to the development of your skills?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

If 'yes', what personal development or study skills modules did you undertake?

11. With regards to the skills and knowledge that you developed on your degree, how useful are these to you now and why?

Your Employability

12. Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?
i.e. do you feel you are in a better position now employment-wise, skills-wise and knowledge-wise than if you had not gone to university?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Please comment on how your degree has or has not enhanced your employability:

13. Do you feel that your degree adequately prepared you for the world of work?

Yes No Unsure

Please comment on how your degree has or has not prepared you for the world of work:

Your Degree Overall

14. What are your overall views about your degree and time at university? (for example, did you enjoy it, was it useful in finding a job, with hindsight would you do the same again?)

Future Contact

If you would be willing for me to contact you again in the future with regards to employability research, please provide some contact details below.

15. Please provide your contact details if you are happy to be contacted again in the future about this research (e.g. name, email address, mobile etc.)

Appendix 2: Graduate Questionnaire

Section 1: About your Degree

1. What is your degree type?			
BA:			
BSc:			

2. What area of business is your degree in?			
Accounting and Finance:			
Business Administration:			
Business Studies:			
Economics:			
Human Resource Management:			
Information Technology:			
International Business:			
Management Studies:			
Marketing:			
Public Relations:			
Retail Management:			
Tourism:			
Other (<i>please specify</i>):			

3. Was your degree full or part time?			
Full time:			
Part time:			

4. What university did you graduate from?			
Omega University:			
Alpha University:			
Pi University:			

5. What degree classification did you obtain?			
First-class Honours (1st):			
Second-class Honours, upper division (2:1):			
Second-class Honours, lower division (2:2):			
Third-class Honours (3rd):			
Ordinary-Degree (Pass):			

6. What do you plan to do after graduation?			
Employment:			
Further study:			
Volunteer:			
Travel:			
Other (<i>please specify</i>):			

7. If you plan to go into employment, have you already been offered a job?			
Yes:			
No:			
7.a. If Yes, what is your prospective job title?			
7.b. How related do you feel this role will be to your degree subject?			
Very related:			
Somewhat related:			
Unsure:			
Somewhat unrelated:			
Very unrelated:			

8. Are you worried about securing employment in this economic climate?			
Yes:			
No - I have a job already:			
No - I do not have a job yet but I am optimistic:			
I honestly do not know yet:			
8.a. Please briefly explain your views about securing employment in this current economic climate			

Section 2: Skill Development

9. Which skills can you now demonstrate as a result of undertaking your degree?			
Critical thinking:			
Problem solving:			
Decision making:			
Oral communication skills:			
Written communication skills:			
Presentation skills:			
Numeracy and quantitative skills:			
Information technology:			
Self-management in terms of time, planning			

and organisation:			
Team work:			
Leadership:			
Project management:			
Interpersonal skills (including listening, negotiating):			
Research skills:			
Self-reflection:			
Sensitivity to diversity (in terms of people and cultures):			
Other (<i>please specify</i>):			

10. During your degree, were you aware of the following and if so, did you undertake any of these?			
10.a. PDP (Personal Development Planning) -- I was aware this was on offer			
Yes:			
No:			
10.a.i. PDP (Personal Development Planning) -- I undertook this			
Yes:			
No:			
10.b. Study Skills Modules -- I was aware this was on offer			
Yes:			
No:			
10.b.i. Study Skills Modules -- I undertook this			
Yes:			
No:			
10.c. Employability Workshops -- I was aware this was on offer			
Yes:			
No:			
10.c.i. Employability Workshops -- I undertook this			
Yes:			
No:			

11. What are your views about PDP, study skills and employability sessions? (i.e. are they useful?)

12. During your degree did you undertake any work experience (e.g. internships, volunteering, industry placement)			
Yes:			
No:			
12.a. Why did you chose/not chose to undertake work experience?			

13. How aware do you feel you are of the skills and knowledge you developed during your degree?			
13.a. Awareness of Skills			
Very Unaware:			
Unaware:			
Neutral:			
Aware:			
Very Aware:			
13.b. Awareness of Knowledge			
Very Unaware:			
Unaware:			
Neutral:			
Aware:			
Very Aware:			

14. With regards to the skills and knowledge that you developed on your degree, how useful are these to you now and why?			

Section 3: Your Employability

15. Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability? i.e. do you feel you are in a better position now employment-wise, skills-wise and knowledge-wise than if you had not gone to university?			
Yes:			
No:			
Unsure:			
15.a. Please comment on how you feel your degree has or has not enhanced your employability:			

16. As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the work of work?			
Yes:			
No:			
Unsure:			
16.a. Please comment on how your degree has or has not prepared you for the world of work			

Section 4: Your Degree Overall

17. What are your overall views about your degree and time at university? (for example, did you enjoy it, was it useful in finding a job, with hindsight would you do the same again?)

18. What are your specific reasons for undertaking a degree? (e.g. was it to get a better job, to improve your cv, to develop your knowledge?)

Section 5: Future Contact

19. Please provide your contact details if you are happy to be contacted again in the future about this research (e.g. name, email address, mobile etc)

Appendix 3: Curriculum Developers Interview Schedule

The purpose of this interview is to find out specific information about the provision of employability in the curriculums within the business school in which you work.

The interview will take approximately 15 minutes to complete depending upon how detailed your responses are. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You have the right not to answer any question and to stop the interview at any time or for any reason.

With your permission, I'll tape record the interview so that I do not need to take many notes during the interview. Taping the interview is purely as a memory aid for me and will only be used by me. However, if you are not comfortable with this I will turn the recording device off.

Finally, your responses will be kept in the strictest of confidence. Your identity and the identity of your university will only be known by me and will not be disclosed in any part of the write up of the research. In the research, your responses will be written up anonymously.

If you are happy with this, I will proceed with the interview questions.

1. With regards to the undergraduate curriculums, are employability skills embedded in the modules or are they provided on a bolt-on provision?
2. Do you have examples of how employability is currently provided in UG business programmes?
3. Are any paid work experience or voluntary experience incorporated into the programme? E.g. sandwich degree or work placement modules?
4. Does the business school (or individual staff) have liaisons with employers? If so, how were these liaisons struck up?
5. How do you engage collaboratively with employers? I.e. what input (if any) do employers have in the development of curriculum?
6. What are the main difficulties encountered with employability in the curriculum? Either with employers, staff and/or students.
7. Do you feel you know what employers want?

Thank you very much for taking part.

Appendix 4: Employer Pilot Questionnaire

1. Around how many new recruits do you employ each year?
2. Roughly how many of these are graduates? (Either expressed as a number or percentage).
3. If you do employ graduates, what subject(s) do you recruit from? (E.g. Science/Business/Humanities graduates).
4. In your experience, do you feel that graduates, as opposed to non-graduates, hold more skills relevant to your company? Can you please explain below your reasons for giving this answer:
5. In your view, do you think a graduate is better equipped to do the job over a non-graduate? Can you please explain below your reasons for giving this answer:
6. Are graduates useful to your company? Can you please explain below your reasons for giving this answer:
7. Do you believe that graduates, when compared to non-graduates, move up the ranks quicker in your company? Can you please explain below your reasons for giving this answer:
8. Do you feel that a degree adequately prepares graduates for the world of work? Can you please explain below your reasons for giving this answer:
9. What are your overall views about recruiting graduates? (for example, do you prefer to recruit graduates over non-graduates, do you feel they are adequately prepared for employment?)

Appendix 5: Employer Questionnaire

Section 1: About you

1. Are you male or female?			
Male:			
Female:			

2. If you are happy to, please disclose your current job title:

3. Please describe the industry sector in which you work:

4. Which UK region do predominantly work in?			
England - South West:			
England - South East:			
England - North West:			
England - North East:			
Scotland:			
Wales:			
N.Ireland:			

5. In what capacity have you dealt with graduates?			
I have worked alongside graduate recruits:			
I have recruited graduates:			
I have managed graduate recruits:			

6. Do you prefer graduates from a particular discipline (for example Science graduates, Business graduates, History graduates etc)			
Yes:			
No:			

6.a. If yes, which disciplines do you prefer graduates from?
--

Section 2: Graduate Skills and Work Attitude

7. Below is a list of skills which any given Business School graduate should be able to demonstrate upon completion of their degree.

7.a. Critical thinking -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills

High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

7.b. Problem solving -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills

High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

7.c. Decision making -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills

High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

7.d. Oral communication skills -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills

High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

7.e. Written communication skills -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills

High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

7.f. Presentation skills -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills

High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

7.g. Numeracy and quantitative skills -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills

High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

7.h. Information technology -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			
7.i. Self-management in terms of time, planning and organisation -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			
7.j. Team work -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			
7.k. Leadership -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			
7.l. Project management -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			
7.m. Interpersonal skills (including listening, negotiating) -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			
7.n. Research skills -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			
7.o. Self reflection -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

7.p. Sensitivity to diversity (in terms of people and cultures) -- For each skill, please select the level which you feel graduates demonstrate these skills			
High level:			
Acceptable level:			
Poor level:			

8. In your experience, do graduates exhibit the right work ethic with a positive work attitude? If possible, please give examples

9. On the whole, do you feel that graduates are prepared when they enter the work place?			
Yes:			
No:			
Unsure:			

9.a. Please comment on your views of graduates' preparedness for the workplace

10. I would like to know what graduates bring to the workplace - both negative and positive elements.

10.a. What positives do graduates bring to the work place?

10.b. What negatives do graduates bring which need further addressing?

Section 3: Work Experience

11. In your view, how important is it for graduates to have undertaken prior work experience? Why?

12. Do you have a preference for the work experience graduates have undertaken? E.g. does it have to be of a certain duration? Is paid experience more valuable than voluntary?

Section 4: Your Overall Views

13. Do you feel that a degree enhances a person's employability?

14. What are your overall views of graduates?

15. In your view, could universities do more to enhance graduate skills, work experience opportunities, behaviours and attitudes in order to help better prepare them for the work place?

Section 5: Future Contact

16. If you are happy for me to contact you, please provide some details which I can contact you on (including your name, email address, mobile etc)

Appendix 6: Employers Interview Schedule

Informed consent statements:

The purpose of this interview is to follow up on the recent graduate employability survey you completed online. I want to find out more specific information about your views of graduates and how graduates are perceived in the workplace.

The interview will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You have the right not to answer any question and to stop the interview at any time or for any reason.

With your permission, I will tape record the interview so that I do not need to take many notes during the interview. Taping the interview is therefore purely as a memory aid and will only be used for the purposes of the researcher.

Finally, your responses will be kept in the strictest of confidence. Your identity and the identity of your company will only be known by me and will not be disclosed in any part of the write up of the research.

Questions:

These will build on from your responses given in the online survey you recently completed.

Ice breakers:

On average, how many new recruits does your organisation employ each year?

How many of these are for positions open to recent graduates?

Has the economic climate influenced the number of vacancies you have on offer? If so, by how much?

Skills related:

What employability skills do you expect graduates to already have?

In the survey you reported the skills which you felt graduates have developed to either a high, acceptable or poor level (**refer to their survey responses**). However, which of these skills are most important to you and your business needs? Is it possible to rank these in order of importance?

Over the past few years, has the turbulent economic climate influenced the types of skills your business needs? Or are there any other factors which are changing your business's needs?

For your company's needs, are there any other addition skills which would make one graduate stand out from the others (e.g. fluent in foreign languages)

What skills do graduates need the most help with developing during the first 2 years in the workplace?

Work Experience related:

Do you think graduates have realistic expectations about the world of work?

Specific work experience question depending on the employer's response to the survey questions on work experience.

Do you currently offer student placements or work experience opportunities for students? If so, what proportion do you offer jobs to at the end?

Your recruitment of graduates

What is your recruitment and selection process for recruiting graduates?

Do you think that graduates express their skills well – do they should a good awareness of the skills they have developed at university and in any work placements?

University collaboration related:

Recent policy documents (E.g. The Wilson Review) have recommended forging closer links between HEIs and employers. Do you currently have any links with any higher education institutions?

Would you like to become more involved with Universities in developing their programmes?

How could universities help prepare students so that more 'work-ready' graduates are produced?

The final set of questions link to findings from a similar survey I undertook with recent graduates.

The survey with graduates showed that....

Some graduates had unrealistic expectations about starting salary and job roles. Would you agree?

Many graduates underestimate the length of time it may take to obtain work. How long do you think graduates should realistically expect to be job hunting for?

Many of the graduate views on skills were conflicting. For some graduates they felt further study was necessary, for others work experience was what they needed. Other graduate comments included a luck factor. Would you agree with any of these?

Amongst their most highly developed skills, graduates listed: presentation skills, written communication skills, research skills & team work. In your experience, do you generally find graduates are competent in these areas?

Amongst their most poorly developed skills, graduates listed: numeracy, IT, Project management and sensitivity to diversity. In your experience, do you generally find graduates are not competent in these areas?

Less than half of the graduate sample (47%) undertook work experience during their degree. Does this surprise you?

Finally, 59% of the graduates surveyed reported that as a result of their degree, they felt prepared to enter the work place. Would you agree?

Thank you very much for taking part in this interview and sharing your views with me.

Appendix 7: Chi-Square template for graduate data analysis

The Chi-Square test of significance is used to ascertain whether an association is present between the categorical variables being analyzed (Huizingh, 2007; Pallant, 2007; Field, 2009). The test itself compares two figures; the observed number directly taken from the raw data and the expected number which is the frequency that would have been expected had there been no association i.e. by chance (Huizingh, 2007). The Chi-Square equation is presented as:

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O_{ij} - E_{ij})^2}{E_{ij}}$$

Key:

χ^2 = Chi Square

\sum - Add

O= Observed count

E = Expected count

ij =the rows and columns

(Field, 2009)

For the Chi-Square calculation, two hypotheses are involved; called H_0 and H_1

H_0 = is the null hypothesis which states that there is no association between the variables

H_1 = is the alternative hypothesis which states that there is an association between the variables

When the test reveals any significance, the H_0 is rejected and the H_1 is accepted and vice versa for when no significance is found the H_0 is accepted and the H_1 is rejected.

In terms of significance, this research adopted the 0.05 confidence level which is often used as the conventional level (Field, 2009). A Chi-Square outcome under the 0.05 level is classified as significant and therefore the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Alternatively, if the Chi-Square outcome is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted:

$$P = > 0.05 = H_0$$

$$P = < 0.05 = H_1$$

If H_1 is accepted, i.e. there is a significant association between the variables, then a closer examination of the data is required to ascertain the direction and strength of that association. This is where effect size is taken into account.

Effect size acknowledges the size of the sample and the degrees of freedom in the calculation to test the strength of any association found. In order to ascertain the effect size, two calculations are used in this research: Phi and Cramer's V tests. Phi and Cramer's V tests measure the strength of any association found between the categorical variables (Field, 2009). Phi is the figure to look for with a 2x2 table (i.e. variables with two categories) and Cramer is used for tables bigger than 2x2 (i.e. variables with three categories or more). These figures are interpreted according to the following scales:

Effect size	Phi value for 2x2 And Cramer's V value for 2x3
Small	0.10
Medium	0.30
Large	0.50

(Pallant, 2007; Field, 2009)

The effect size (small, medium or large) give an indication of the size of any effect found in the data, i.e. when the variables have been measured and a significant relationship has been found, the strength of this association is provided by the effect size. As the table overleaf shows, the closer to zero the effect size figure is, the lower the strength of the association between variables. Furthermore, effect sizes closer to 1 mean that the association is a stronger one and therefore a more substantiated finding. This means that whilst a statistical test may show that there is a signification relationship, the effect size determines the strength of this relationship.

(Field, 2009)

Appendix 8: Graduate Data Analysis: A selection of SPSS Chi-Square Outputs

8.1 What university did you graduate from? * Critical Thinking - Which skills can you now demonstrate as a result of undertaking your degree?

Crosstab					
			Critical Thinking		Total
			No	Yes	
What university did you graduate from?	Omega	Count	12	35	47
		Expected Count	16.9	30.1	47.0
	Alpha	Count	9	12	21
		Expected Count	7.6	13.4	21.0
	Pi	Count	46	72	118
		Expected Count	42.5	75.5	118.0
Total	Count	67	119	186	
	Expected Count	67.0	119.0	186.0	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.119 ^a	2	.210
Likelihood Ratio	3.227	2	.199
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.221	1	.136
N of Valid Cases	186		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.56.

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.129	.210
	Cramer's V	.129	.210
N of Valid Cases		186	

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

8.2 Chi-Square output for what university did you graduate from? * What Degree classification did you obtain?

What university did you graduate from? * What Degree classification did you obtain?					
			What Degree classification did you obtain?		Total
			1st or 2:1	2:2, 3rd or ordinary	
What university did you graduate from?	Omega	Count	36	9	45
		Expected Count	32.7	12.3	45.0
	Alpha	Count	19	2	21
		Expected Count	15.3	5.7	21.0
	Pi	Count	78	39	117
		Expected Count	85.0	32.0	117.0
Total		Count	133	50	183
		Expected Count	133.0	50.0	183.0

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.694 ^a	2	.035
Likelihood Ratio	7.448	2	.024
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.997	1	.046
N of Valid Cases	183		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.74.

Symmetric Measures

	Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.191
	Cramer's V	.191
N of Valid Cases	183	

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

8.3 Chi-Square output for during your degree did you undertake any work experience * As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?

During your degree did you undertake any work experience * As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?					
			As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?		Total
			Yes	No/Unsure	
During your degree did you undertake any work experience	Yes	Count	51	26	77
		Expected Count	44.3	32.7	77.0
	No	Count	41	42	83
		Expected Count	47.7	35.3	83.0
Total	Count		92	68	160
	Expected Count		92.0	68.0	160.0

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.633 ^a	1	.031	.038	.023
Continuity Correction ^b	3.970	1	.046		
Likelihood Ratio	4.664	1	.031		
Fisher's Exact Test					
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.604	1	.032		
N of Valid Cases	160				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 32.73.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.170	.031
	Cramer's V	.170	.031
N of Valid Cases		160	

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

8.4 Chi-Square output for do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability? * Are you worried about securing employment in this economic climate?

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability? * Are you worried about securing employment in this economic climate?						
			Are you worried about securing employment in this economic climate?			Total
			Yes	No - I already have a job	No - I do not have a job yet but I am optimistic	
Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?	Yes	Count	44	47	29	120
		Expected Count	53.3	41.3	25.5	120.0
	No/Unsure	Count	27	8	5	40
		Expected Count	17.8	13.8	8.5	40.0
Total		Count	71	55	34	160
		Expected Count	71.0	55.0	34.0	160.0

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.555 ^a	2	.003
Likelihood Ratio	11.614	2	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.934	1	.003
N of Valid Cases	160		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.50.

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.269	.003
	Cramer's V	.269	.003
N of Valid Cases		160	

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Appendix 9: Employability in the Curriculum: Extract of a Curriculum Developer Transcript

Pi Curriculum Developer Interview
Division Leader.
22 mins long

R- Researcher

I - Interviewee

.....

R Brilliant, so with regards to the undergraduate curriculums, are employability skills embedded in the modules or are they provided as a bolt-on?

I It's actually both depending on which courses you are looking at. There is a strand of bolt-on employability skills which builds on academic skills from the first year. For example, we have a module in the first year which starts off looking at academic skills and finishes off looking at employability skills and preparations for the second year. In the second year, students would normally choose either a module either aimed at getting a placement or a more general career advice option which is provided by the central careers employability unit. It varies by programme though, so some professional programmes haven't got space so its more embedded into what's going on?

R Is that the more accountancy based programmes?

I Yes, accountancy is where there isn't actually any space to put in the module, but they are give advice alongside that, but ideally inside it. Retail is particular group which does a lot of stuff inside their modules about employability.

R Has that been a conscious effort to include that in?

I It's been added to through the aims of the university, but it was the involvement of employers giving guest lectures and providing ideas about what they look for in employees, but it's also about relating a lot of the activity to how things work at work so people can talk knowledgeably about the specific skills for retail as opposed to the more general skills of employability which you might get for a lone standing module on employability for other business courses.

R You mentioned year 1 and year 2, but what happens with employability in year 3?

I That varies. Some students don't take the year 3 option. For those students who have done a formal placement on a business sandwich degree programme have a compulsory debriefing module about the placement in year 3. We also provide career development and employability skills for top-up courses, so that students who have done years 1 and 2 elsewhere, have to do an employability skills module in their final year which is compulsory.

R You mentioned about the sandwich degree programmes, do you offer many of those?

- I Every programme has a sandwich degree year as an option. So you can effectively, whatever business degree you are doing, you can do a sandwich year. Because it is everyone, so for example there are four different accounting programmes which run one, 2 marketing ones, business studies, business management, all the retail programmes, PR, Information technology. All the programmes in the business school. All we look for is that they have done the pre-placement module so that its part of a structured work experience, not just a case of they find a job and that's it, it goes though formal approval for the jobs through a centralised placements unit and to ensure that those jobs meet health and safety requirements and that the work offered is of an appropriate standard to give students a meaningful work experience.
- R How long have these been running? How long have these sandwich courses been established?
- I Right, some of these are very long standing. The Business information systems, business studies, PR and retail are all quite long standing. Probably for the last 4 years or so, it has become an option for every course, so it has shifted.
- R And what are enrolments like for sandwich degrees? Are they a popular choice?
- I In terms of students who take the pre-placement module it is very popular, especially in those which are longer established like business studies and business and management are quite well established in people doing those. The actual number of people going on to do the placement after the pre-placement module is not as high, some people get discouraged after they have applied for two or three things and don't get anything, some people are discouraged if they apply for their favourite placement and don't get it. This year is up on last years, so we have about 20-odd people on placement this year. So whilst over the years it's gone down, it's beginning to climb up again. There are costs associated with it and people especially when taking out loans, it's a disincentive. Plus when you get a knock-back it does put students off.
- R Is there any voluntary work experiences incorporated in any courses or modules?
- I We have modules called internship modules which can be for voluntary sector companies or private sector companies and effectively it's a short term project that you do for a particular organisation and again that's being expanded outwards to build more contacts with
-

Appendix 10: Extract of Curriculum Developers Thematic Analysis

Category	(Sub-category) Code	Definition of code and a typical employer quote to illustrate
Recent employability developments	Employability current area of focus	Employability is high factor for current and future decisions <i>"We are currently re-validating and one of the key focuses of our new framework will be employability"</i>
	Expansion of courses with sandwich placements	Providing more courses with the placement year option <i>"This year is the first time that each of the undergraduate business programmes within the business school have been offered with a year in industry placement incorporated into the degree"</i>
Student placements	Students not guaranteed a sandwich placement	Whilst students are interested in placements, they are not guaranteed a placement <i>"We can't guarantee placements, but we can guarantee the opportunity to apply for them! And we guarantee the support in how we can help to find them jobs and develop the skills employers will need"</i>
	Current popular choice	More students are applying for sandwich degrees now than in previous recent years <i>"An increase in applications has been noticed which is attributed to the growing interest in sandwich degree programmes"</i>
	Student can become discouraged by tough competition	Students need more resilience when applying for placements and not give up after a few attempts <i>"Some people get discouraged after they have applied for two or three things and don't get anything, some people are discouraged if they apply for their favourite placement and don't get it"</i>
	Finance	Cost implications for students taking a placement year <i>"There are costs associated with it and people especially when taking out loans, it's a disincentive"</i>
Employer connections	Formal university level contacts	Contacts obtained from pre-existing university networks <i>"Many contacts come from careers service"</i>
	Informal individual staff level	Contacts obtained from staff on an informal basis <i>"There are individual staff who have employer links and contacts which consists of more informal initial liaisons"</i>

Appendix 11: An Extract of an Employer Interview Transcript

Male Employer, based in SW, in Energy company.

Executive search consultant.

25 mins long

R- Researcher

I - Interviewee

.....

R That's great and have you noticed a difference in the number of graduate recruitment in the recent years given the economic climate?

I I would say the situation, if i compare it to when i first entered into the job market which is quite a few years ago now, it's a lot tougher now. I left with a degree in '76, you could apply to 5 or 6 companies and you'd probably get at least 1 or 2 job offers and the way they recruited graduates was an interview, and as you are probably aware nowadays with a lot of the companies now, you apply online you have a psychometric test, a telephone interview, another interview and then an assessment centre. It's a very very long drawn out process, it takes longer now, more complex, many more hurdles. I think the average graduates per job, according to that high fliers organisation, about 73 graduates per job and i think many years ago when i came into the jobs market it cant have been more than 5 to 10. That's definitely a factor, its more complex and the other thing is that there are more graduates now, 50% going to university, when I went it was around 5-10% so that's another factor as there are less graduate jobs. So when students are going out in to the jobs market with their nice degree, probably only 20% of the available jobs are what might be deemed graduate jobs and having to take a position that doesn't need a degree. I think there has been a massive change in the market and it's a lot more difficult and graduate, of course another factor, 30+ years ago we had very little support as a student or graduate, and now they get a lot more support but they probably need it now as its much tougher to get a job. And the only other thing i would say is i think if you go back 20-30 years, the range of jobs available was fairly small, so when you looked at options, it was fairly small. Now there are more opportunities available in terms of jobs and sectors but then there is more competition. I think t has got more difficult and for a whole bunch a good reasons.

R Thank you very much, that was a great answer. Now you mentioned a more complex process, I'm just wondering what you thought about how graduates express their skills in this complex recruitment process, you mentioned in the past the main process was just an interview, but now you have all the assessment centres and psychometric tests, do you think graduates are apt at explaining their skills and getting that across to employers?

I I think it's very difficult for graduates because the problem is you don't actually talk to somebody until quite a long way down the process, whereas before if you applied for a job you got an interview immediately, you saw someone very quickly. The problem is now you enter stuff online, have a psychometric test and if you don't get through those you don't get to speak to someone. The other thing is, the way you apply online now it's a set format, so how do you stand out? You stand out by the things that you've done. Your degree now can still be a factor, some companies now say at least a 2.1, the trouble is 70% of students get a 2.1 or a 1st, whereas 20-30 years ago it was more like 20%, so again it's getting more and more difficult. Companies now look for reasons to fail people, not to put them through. It's difficult to stand out as you don't get to see someone until quite a bit down the process.

R Now it's obviously hard for the graduate, but it also must be hard for the employers too trying to get through so many potentials?

I Totally, it's much more difficult. I saw an article a week ago where 8 jobs were advertised in a new Costa coffee and over 1700 people applied. I suspect there were many graduates who applied, and if 200 people are applying for every place at Costa it tells you a lot about what's going on in the market. My belief is that there are students, the ones who have got the top notch degrees, from the top notch places, got the work experience and got the contacts, my guess is that those students probably get multiple offers. I think there is almost a two tier system, where some students get lots of offers and others get nothing – or one or two.

R Is that because employers are more familiar with the likes of Oxford, Cambridge and the red brick institutions?

I Some of them are, in fact it's well-publicised, as an example, the investment banks have supposedly an inner circle and an outer circle of universities from which they recruit from and they are Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial etc, now that doesn't mean that if you are a student from another university you can't get into investment banking but you probably have to make more effort, so you can do it but it's tougher.

.....