**Employability as a capacity for agency in the workplace: the implications for higher education of a collective perspective on work**

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**Abstract** Graduate employability is now typically conceptualised in terms of the extent to which the capacities of individual students match the available employment opportunities. As a result, higher education is increasingly seen as an investment in a project of the self for economic reward. This theoretical study draws on critical realist perspectives to problematise existing understandings of employability. It explores a collective perspective on work, analysing the institutional, social and reflexive basis for agency in workplaces. This exploration supports a conceptualisation in which graduate employability is understood as the capacity of a graduate to act as an agent within the workplace in ways that contribute to the maintenance and elaboration of collectives. It is argued that were higher education to treat collectives as an integral aspect of learning, then workplaces could be aligned more directly towards values that matter to society.

**Keywords:** Critical realism; work-integrated learning; institutions; structure and agency; reflexivity; workplace collectives; corporate agency.

**Résumé** L'employabilité des diplômés universitaires se définit de nos jours souvent en termes d’aptitudes et compétences qu’acquièrent ces derniers durant leurs études et leur capacité de les ajuster aux opportunités d'emplois disponibles sur le marché du travail. En conséquence, les études supérieures sont de plus en plus considérées comme un projet personnel qui produira plus tard une récompense économique individuelle. Cet article s'appuie sur des théories du réalisme critique pour questionner les notions existantes concernant l'employabilité. Il explore une perspective collective du travail en analysant les bases institutionnelles, sociales et réflexives de l'agentivité humaine et son impact sur le milieu du travail. Cette exploration théorique soutient une conceptualisation de l'employabilité des diplômés universitaires qui englobe la capacité d'un diplômé d’opérer en tant qu'agent capable d’intervenir dans le monde du travail de manière à contribuer au maintien et à l'élaboration de collectifs. Il est avancé que si l'enseignement supérieur traitait les collectifs comme un aspect intégral de l'apprentissage, le monde du travail pourrait être plus directement aligné avec les valeurs qui comptent pour la société.

**Mots-clés:** réalisme critique; apprentissage en milieu du travail; institutions; structure et agentivité humaine; réflexivité; collectifs de travail; agentivité sociale.

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**Introduction**

The term ‘employability’ has come to the fore in higher education across the world in recent years. Tomlinson (2010) argued that graduates are typically thought of as employable in so far as they each individually possess competencies and qualifications that are demanded by employers. This dominant perspective incorporates what Holmes (2013) has termed a possessional conceptualisation of graduate employability, depending closely as it does on attributes that graduates are seen to possess as individuals. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), furthermore, claimed that this conceptualisation of employability has come to play a central role in shaping labour market policy across the world, informing strategies to support training. The report by the European Commission (2016), for instance, sees skills gaps in the economies of the European Union as an occasion for deliberate and targeted investments in human capital. Consequences follow, though, when graduate employability is conceptualised in this manner. Boden and Nedeva (2010) argued that if employability is seen as the potential that an individual has to bring capacities to the workplace, then higher education tends to be viewed as a form of investment in a project of the self for economic reward. Rose (1989), indeed, has argued that the pursuit of such a project means that one’s subjectivity is subordinated to the requirements of the labour market. As a result, higher education is increasingly seen as a commodity that is purchased for one’s own personal reward (Foskett, 2010).

Given this, a focus on gains to the individual from education has the potential to lead to both a marginalisation and a deformation of collective purposes associated with work. Sandel (2012) argued that it is no longer just economies that are shaped by markets, but that society itself has increasingly become marketised. Gabriel, Korczynski and Rieder (2015), indeed, highlighted how an individually-focused consumerism has infiltrated our understanding of what it means to work, even as it has spread across diverse aspects of society. And yet it is the case that collective considerations are significant for the nature of work. Karlsson (2004) argued that activity on its own does not provide a suitable basis for a definition of work, contending that work also inherently entails social relations. It has long been established that cooperation is central to organisational effectiveness (Shamir, 1990). It is not surprising, then, that it is established practice for organisations to influence performativity through adjusting workgroups (Thompson & McHugh, 2009). Ashforth, Harrison and Corley (2008), meanwhile, used the term ‘collective’ to refer to small and large-scale collective entities that are constituted by people, whether groups, departments, organisations or so on. A workgroup may be nested within a wider organisation, with the social relations that people maintain with others relevant to collective identity at different levels. They argued that collectives provide work with meaning through everyday organisational rituals that reinforce shared values, beliefs and goals, thereby connecting the individual to the organisation.

Does it matter, though, if a collective downplays the social basis for work? It remains the case that workplaces can treat collective aspects of work in different ways. Donati (2011) argued that work may be configured on the basis of qualities that either distinctively pertain to human beings or that are non-human in orientation. He claimed that human qualities are present when social relations are characterised by reciprocity, with non-human qualities in place when an action is simply functional. The introduction of Weberian theories that entail a bureaucratization of production through the monitoring of work performance favours control systems that are grounded in technical skills and managerial hierarchies, at the expense of relational aspects of work. Archer and Donati (2015), however, contended that the well-being of society depends not merely on a nation’s economic growth, but also on the extent to which people’s social lives are oriented in a direction that is distinctively human. Collective action that takes into account a human orientation within work will, undoubtedly, be integral to any attempt to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), just as such collective action is integral to effective responses to the coronavirus pandemic current at the time of writing. There is evidently a great deal at stake for society in how work is approached.

Given that collective considerations are significant for work and given the critical importance for society of the way in which collectives position the work that occurs within them, it is important to understand how graduates are oriented to this aspect of their working lives through university education. This is not to suggest that higher education is likely to be the primary influence on the manner in which an organisation approaches the social basis for work, but it nonetheless remains one that is significant. Mutch (1998) contended that the inclusion of group work in higher education was supposedly modelled on patterns of workplace behaviour, and that mastering these patterns was intended to prepare students for subsequent working life. Cooley, Cumming, Holland and Burns (2015), for instance, argued that group work in higher education develops key skills for students such as assertiveness and the capacity to cooperate that can be transferred into workplaces. The study by Mutch (1998) suggested, however, that the expectations and patterns of the workplace cannot easily be replicated in academic settings. A group of students cannot be straightforwardly equated to a workplace collective.

It is partly as a result of such concerns that work-integrated learning has become a key feature of higher education policy. Work-integrated learning has been defined as the practice of exposing students to workplace settings as an integral feature of their studies, with the aim of providing students with an enhanced preparation for work in comparison to study conducted solely within academic settings (Jackson, 2015). What has received less attention in the research literature, however, are the means by which work-integrated learning can lead to enhanced contributions to workplace collectives¾and this is despite the importance of such collectives to work. Rather than focus on explanation, most studies of work-integrated learning focus on the outcomes that result for skill development, as Jackson (2015) has argued. It remains the case, furthermore, that simply working within a collective does not mean that one will be able to appreciate how it operates. Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick and Cragnolini (2004), for instance, saw cases of students on work placements who remained isolated from their co-workers. There is no particular reason why promotion of work-integrated learning should in itself address a marginalisation of reciprocal social relations, for instance, either within education or workplaces.

It is surprising, furthermore, that relatively few studies have sought to draw together understanding of the role that collectives play in learning within higher education, despite the contention by Thomas and Brown (2011) that a new culture of learning is required in a time of precipitous change, one that is based on collections of people rather than on teachers or classrooms. Research tends, rather, to focus on specific collectives such as learning communities (DuFour & DuFour, 2013; Jaffee, 2007), communities of practice (Wenger, 2000), small groups (Jaques & Salmon, 2007) or large-scale collectives such as those that are linked to ethnicity (Jarvis, 2012). Studies based on the theory of expansive learning, it is true, are something of an exception to this, given that this theory identifies collectives rather than individuals as the subjects of learning. According to Engeström and Sannino (2010), it is learning that is characterised by expansion rather than by transmission or participation that most evidently generates transformation and leads to the construction of knowledge.

There are evidently limitations to existing understanding of the way that higher education develops the capacities of students for collective action within work settings. This theoretical study thus aims to consider how higher education can prepare graduates for work that involves making constructive contributions to organisations and to workplace collectives in general. The study addresses this overall aim by first of all exploring the nature of capacity for action within workplace collectives. This exploration is undertaken in order to support a conceptualisation of graduate employability that extends current understandings through the way that it incorporates a collective perspective on work. Burke, Scurry, Blenkinsopp and Graley (2017), indeed, argued that many researchers now agree that employability would benefit from further conceptualisation. The study concludes by offering new avenues for practice and policy within higher education around graduate employability, with these avenues outlined in light of the re-conceptualisation.

**Research approach**   
In promoting collective perspectives on employability, this paper employs an explanatory critique based on the paradigm of critical realism (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, & Norrie, 1998). Research conducted from within this paradigm identifies ways in which specific cultural and social structures influence the nature of the societies in which we live, interacting as these structures do with the powers and properties of persons. Critical realism embraces the idea of a layered reality, whereby knowledge about the world is acquired through reaching beyond the effects that we can experience, in order to identify the casual mechanisms that lead to such effects. Such mechanisms are seen to be present as tendencies rather than as constant conjunctions between events (Bhaskar, 1993). Such a perspective contrasts with much of the existing literature investigating employability, which effectively suggests that there is a constant conjunction between personal skills and attributes, and employment outcomes (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Tomlinson, 2010, 2017) An understanding of the casual tendencies in play, however, can assist in attending to the possibilities for a free flourishing and emancipation of persons, in which the constraints that influence the agency of persons are themselves desired rather than undesired (Bhaskar, 1993).

The research design that then underpins this paper is best described as a conceptual analysis (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015), in that the argument primarily seeks to apply a synthesis of existing critical realist theorising to a novel context, that of graduate employability. Jaakkola (2020), furthermore, argued that it is important that any non-empirical research design highlights the main stages of its argument (as already indicated above) and that a theoretical synthesis should pay explicit attention to the compatibility of the theories that are employed. While this paper seeks to draw together empirical and theoretical literature from the fields of both Management Studies and Higher Education Studies, the coherence of the synthesis that is attempted depends in significant part on the paradigm of critical realism. Empirical literature, furthermore, is helpful in assessing the validity and usefulness of our novel conceptualisation of employability. In employing critical realist perspectives to make sense of employability, the study follows a path staked out by Cashian (2017). He viewed employability primarily as a social phenomenon that needs to be understood and researched, arguing that the current employability discourse lacks a sufficiently robust conceptual basis. It is possible, however, to extend the analysis beyond that undertaken by Cashian (2017) in that he did not consider the relevance of a significant body of critical realist theorising, including research that is relevant to approaching labour from a collective perspective. He similarly failed in large part to consider any direct connection between employability and human emancipation. The discussion that follows is thus framed by analysis that depends upon the paradigm of critical realism and the theoretical resources developed under the aegis of this paradigm. These resources include the realist social theory of Margaret Archer, which highlights the interplay between social structures and human agency (Archer, 1995, 2003, 2013).

**Understanding capacity to act within workplace collectives**

An extensive body of literature suggests that workplace collectives incorporate within them systems of norms and conventions, with the term ‘institution’ used to refer to such a system (Fleetwood, 2008). An institutional logic, meanwhile, is used to refer to a frame of reference that is shared by those who act within the system of norms (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). One can think of a logic as a pattern within the norms of the institution, a pattern that influences the practice and identities of those participating in the associated collective. For instance, Mangen and Brivot (2015) looked at how the introduction of a new knowledge management system into a law firm ensured that lawyers focused their attention on the costs entailed in providing new opinion letters to clients, highlighting this as part of a bureaucratic logic of efficiency and control that contrasted with a professional logic focused on service to one’s clients. Delbridge and Edwards (2013) contended that an institutional logic constitutes a social structure, one that conditions action and thus influences the agency of individuals. They argued that these notions of institutions and institutional logics straightforwardly fit into critical realist theorising.

If one is looking at the development of capacity to participate effectively within a workplace collective, then, it is important to understand the process by which members of the collective come to adopt a given institutional logic or happen to accept the norms in play. Elder-Vass (2010) argued that the sharing of normative beliefs among members of a collective plays a causal role in how collectives come to standardise their practices. He argued, furthermore, that social relations between those who belong to a workplace collective enable such a sharing of beliefs, and that the sharing of standardised practice is reinforced through advocacy and the offer of rewards. Fleetwood (2008), similarly, suggested that the causal power of an institutional logic is brought to bear on individuals through an unconscious process of habituation that incorporates repetition of actions over an extended period, reinforcement of incentives or disincentives, and close proximity. It is this process of habituation that effects a shared attachment to a set of norms and a standardisation of practices. Delbridge and Edwards (2013) argued, nonetheless, that one should not see such a conditioning of actions and beliefs as a process that is narrowly dependent on routinization. Drawing on work by Archer (2003), they argued that it is important to retain a role for reflexivity in the way that one acquires the capacity to act in line with a norm, at least if one is to avoid a conflation between an institutional logic and human agency. Reflexivity is a conscious process, one that entails mental deliberation on one’s own social placing. Agency, meanwhile, is specifically understood by Archer (2003) to refer to a process by which agents prioritise concerns, take forward projects and establish ongoing practices, with this process directly supported by reflexivity. One’s identity is then specifically seen in terms of the configuration taken by one’s concerns (Archer, 2003). Agency, furthermore, is seen by Fleetwood (2017) as essential aspect of a labour market, in his definition of a labour market as a set of socio-economic phenomena that is acted on by *agents* in pursuit of needs related to work. It should be noted in Archer’s model of agency that the knowledge, skills and attitudes that someone possesses as an individual are relevant to one’s capacity to move forward the different aspects of this process, but that it is reflexivity which determines the direction that is taken. This account also grants that outcomes are affected by structural influences, with the influence of structures mediated by the reflexive deliberations of individuals. Fleetwood (2008) specifically identified a role for reflexivity in mediating the influence of those social structures that are constituted as lattice-works of relations. He argued that social structures that pertain to employment are best described as lattice-works of relations, whether between an employer and an employee, or between employees with different institutional roles. One can also identify lattice-works of relations between people that relate to gender, race, class and so on.

Archer (2003), furthermore, referred to primary agents as those people who lack a say in the reshaping of social contexts, even as they retain the power to progress their own individual concerns. When acting within the setting of a workplace collective, for instance, primary agents would be expected to take forward projects and practices that comply with the institutional logic(s) in play. In addition, Archer (2003) used the term ‘corporate agent’ to refer collectively to a group of people who frame new collective interests and pursue those interests in an organised fashion through a shared pursuit of projects and practices that seek to shift the status quo. This framing and pursuit of collective interests is supported by collective reflexivity, that is by the (individual) mental deliberations that the subjects share with each other (Archer, 2013). Such a mode of reflexivity entails social relations that are characterised by the reciprocity that allows for a sharing of concerns. Corporate agency can be directed at promoting the well-being of others (Gorski, 2017; Smith, 2010) or it can focus on the economic self-interest of given individuals or groupings within organisations.

The Figure below provides a visualisation of what are seen as the key aspects of agency in the workplace, with the possibility of overlap allowed between the *institutionalised* agency that occurs within one or more institutional logics (primary agency) and agency that seeks to shift the status quo through establishing and pursuing *novel-shared* concerns (corporate agency). The recognition of the possibility of this overlap does itself constitute a development in understanding the nature of agency, given the clear delineation that Archer (2003) provided between primary agency and corporate agency. It is possible for a new set of collective interests to be framed and pursued by a corporate agent in order to bring about change in ways that remained framed by an existing institutional logic. A range of social structures are also in view in the Figure, with Archer’s model giving a role to reflexivity in mediating the influence of social structures on agency. The role played by reflexivity and the influence of social structures means that agency is not something that depends predominately on expertise that one possesses.

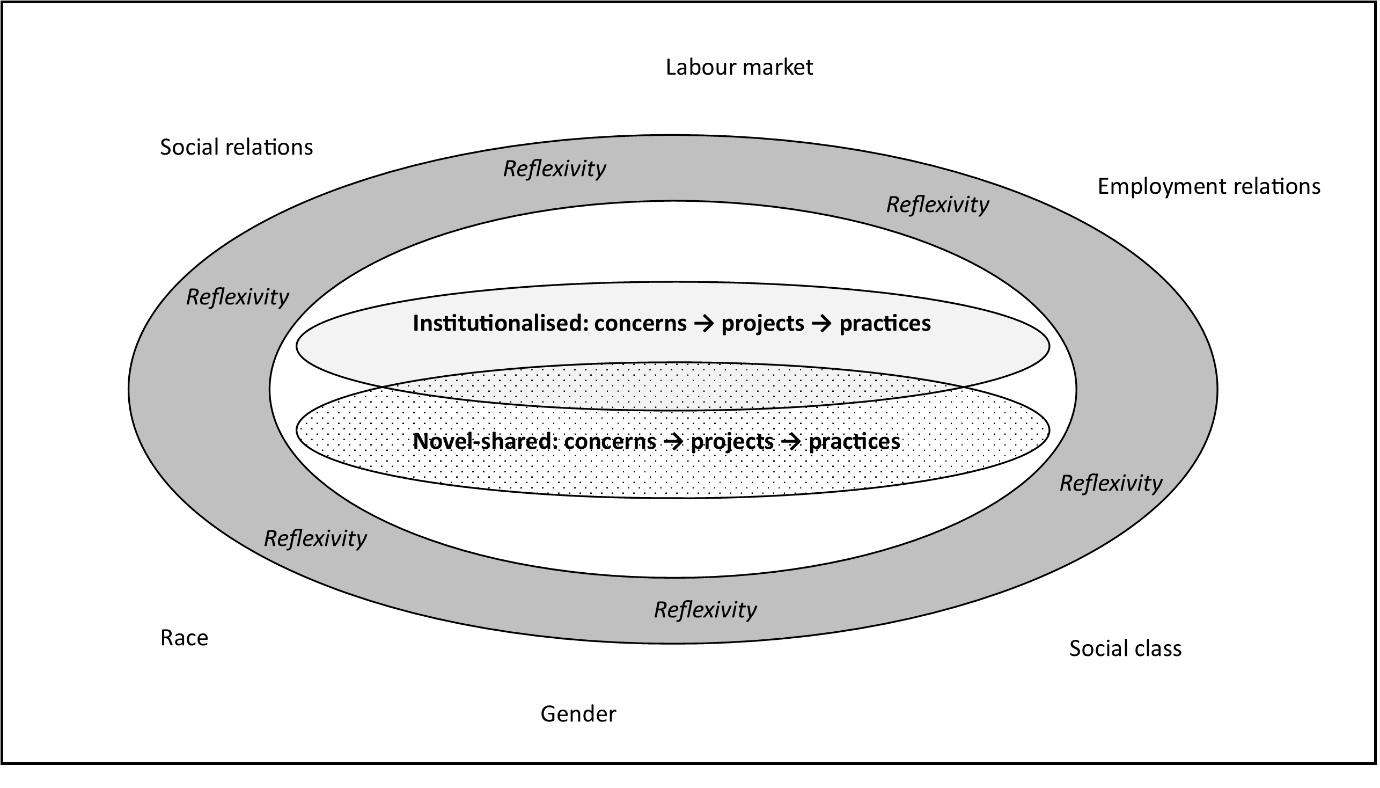


Figure: A conceptualisation of agency within the workplace, with reflexivity mediating the influence of social structures on that agency.

It should be noted by way of conclusion to this explication of workplace agency that the pursuit of collective agendas around organisational elaboration is not without its challenges. Flam (2010) noted that organisations tend to expect conformity from the people who work for them. Not every actor in a situation can support institutional change, but only those who have the necessary power and motivation to reflect and act on shared concerns and problems differently than prescribed by existing organisational norms and rules (Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007). Nonetheless, corporate agency would be essential to shift an institutional logic operating within a collective from a focus on maximising economic returns within a market to a focus that takes into account agendas that lie beyond the self-interest of the collective. Donati (2011), indeed, argued that organisations need to change from a restricted social responsibility associated only with their own employees towards a corporate social responsibility encompassing the surrounding community and stakeholders. He suggested that organisations need to find ways to relate to their external environment in order to thrive over the long term. Such a perspective is supported by Stakeholder Theory which contends that companies’ activities and resources should benefit the community as a whole and not only parts of it (Bird, Hall, Momentè, & Reggiani, 2007).

**Conceptualising graduate employability: the centrality of agency**

The above analysis suggests that capacity for agency closely affects the extent to which one is able to make a contribution through one’s work, whether this occurs within or beyond existing institutional logics. This study thus defines graduate employability as the capacity of a graduate to act as an agent within the workplace in ways that contribute to the maintenance and elaboration of collectives. The exercise of this capacity is subject to the constraints and enablements under which both primary and corporate agency are exercised, agency that needs to be put into effect if one is actually to secure employment, retain work or make contributions through one’s work. Goods will accrue both to the individual agent who exercises such agency, and to collectives. It is recognised that it is possible to take up work exclusively as an individual, without any connection to a workplace collective, but it remains the case that work undertaken by graduates is dominated by collectives (Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013) and that even self-employment entails a collective dimension.

The approach taken here to conceptualising employability has the benefit of remaining within the broad definition offered by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), in which employability is the capacity of an individual to secure and maintain employment, even if it is recognised that simply securing employment represents an initial stage only in making a contribution to a workplace collective. However, the emphasis given to agency enables one to relate employability both to influences on agency and to values that matter to society. For instance, our definition of employability connects to recent theorising by Finn (2017), who argued that current debates about employability focus on individual graduates. She argued that the personal accounts of the recent graduates she interviewed gave a priority to intimate relationships with others in making choices about work and career.

Viewing employability through such a theoretical lens offers the potential for a comprehensive treatment of different aspects of employability. Our conceptualisation recognises that the social positioning of graduates affects their capacity to exercise agency within workplaces, and thus their employability. Holmes (2013) categorised research that explores how employability and labour market structures are affected by gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic class as positional, in that employability is primarily seen in such studies as an outcome of one’s position within society. The empirical study by Moreau and Leathwood (2006), for instance, highlighted how graduates in the UK could expect differential economic returns from higher education depending on gender, ethnicity and social class. Holmes (2013), though, argued that seeing employability through a lens of social positioning can lead one to think that employment outcomes are essentially pre-determined, and to downplay the scope for change. Nonetheless, while severe constraints might well be in play for an individual who is discriminated against as they seek to secure some specific form of employment, scope endures for agency on the part of that person.

It remains the case that properties and powers that pertain to an individual, such as knowledge and skills, are relevant to an individual’s capacity to take forward concerns through progressing projects and practices, whether this occurs within or beyond an institutional logic. A possessional view of employability is relevant to the exercise of agency within the workplace, but the knowledge and skills that one possesses should be seen as a secondary rather than a primary feature of what makes someone employable given the centrality of both agency and collectives to workplaces. It is also the case that securing and maintaining employment entails a process, as individuals make their way into and within the workplace. Holmes (2013) advocated what he termed a ‘processual’ understanding of employability, in which the gaining of employment entails interaction between individuals pursuing desired opportunities and gatekeepers. Jackson (2015) argued that the empirical evidence is clear that graduates often require multiple bids in order to secure work – this fits well with the analysis of Archer (2003) that saw agency as entailing the pursuit of a project. Rather than consider a processual approach over and above one focused on personal attributes or social positioning, however, the approach advocated here integrates perspectives from across the body of literature on employability within a single theoretical treatment.

**Implications for promoting employability within higher education**

The main purpose of the above analysis has been to open up insight into ways for higher education to prepare graduates for their working lives. The definition of employability offered above is based upon a critical realist analysis of the way in which graduates pursue projects that are related to work, highlighting as this definition does the capacity of students to contribute to the maintenance and future shape of workplace collectives. What this does is to follow through on the insights of Fleetwood (2017) as to the nature of a labour market – namely a set of socio-economic phenomena that are acted on by agents in pursuit of needs related to work – in order to understand what is entailed in graduate employability. In what follows, the primary emphasis is thus placed on the ways that universities could more effectively develop the capacity of their graduates to exercise agency within workplace collectives, although connections are also made to the relationships that graduates have with their workplaces and the labour market. What, then, are the implications of this re-conceptualisation of graduate employability for practice and policy within higher education?

While the expertise that individual graduates possess is relevant to securing and maintaining employment, the capacity to contribute to a workplace collective has been seen to extend well beyond this expertise. If the capacity to operate within one or more institutional logics is integral to working life, then programmes of higher education should take this into account. As already noted, work-integrated learning plays a central role within higher education in activity to enhance the employability of students, and yet research on work-integrated learning has failed to appreciate sufficiently fully the basis on which higher education enables graduates to make contributions to workplace collectives. Billet (2011) synthesised good practice identified in 20 relevant projects involving students learning in workplaces across Australia. He contended that students should be able to experience authentic activity in a workplace, but the analysis offered above provides a rationale for this. Participation in a workplace collective offers a basis on which to develop the capacity to engage in the reflexivity that is relevant to establishing relevant concerns and projects that lie within the insitutional logic(s) in play. Work-based learning can only be expected to shape the identities of students if scope is present for them to become attached to specific work-related concerns. Participation in a workplace collective can also be expected to support the habituation that arises from encountering repetition, incentives and intimacy. Work-integrated learning can be designed to articulate to a lesser or greater extent with systems of norms that are in operation in workplaces Martin and Hughes (2011), for instance, emphasised in their guide to work-integrated learning that students benefit from work placements that are clearly linked to developing skills and attributes that pertain to common practice within the organisation. There would be clear value, then, in universities prioritising work placements and links with organisations in which an institutional logic of sustainability (Glover, Champion, Daniels, & Dainty, 2014) is in evidence in the partner organisation, in order to promote the common good at the societal level.

The relevance of reflexivity to one’s employability is particularly apparent, however, when one seeks to promote agendas that reach beyond the confines of the institutional logic(s) in play. The study by Lundgren-Resenterra and Kahn (2019) saw that students on a professional doctorate were only able to contribute to the elaboration of the organisations within which they worked if they were able to support either a collective reflexivity that was either performative in orientation or in which the reflexivity was focused on social ideals. Archer (2003) used the term meta-reflexivity to refer to mental deliberations focused both on such ideals and on one’s reflexivity itself. Degree programmes could support students in engaging in collective meta-reflexive deliberations about their own learning and about the scope for that learning to impact on actions in the workplace. This implies the need to systematise learning into a critical thought process that helps the student to reach beyond the mechanical application of existing organisational rules, norms and regulations by raising their self-consciousness as human beings (Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, the criticality that is entailed in the collective meta-reflexivity needed to support corporate agency can be maintained at least in part by the inclusion within collectives of people with a diversity of perspectives, whether these stem from a range of professional expertise, from ethnic diversity or in other ways. There is an evident danger, otherwise, that an integration of academic learning into workplace settings could lead to an attenuation of criticality, and thus to a weakening of the capacity of graduates to develop collective commitments to alternative workplaces.

It is perhaps surprising that no mention is made in the syntheses of work-based learning offered by either Billet (2011) and Jackson (2015) of a role for anything that is comparable to corporate agency. And yet such agency is an important element of the social purpose of employment. Powell and Walsh (2018), meanwhile, argued that apprenticeship degrees shift control of the curriculum to collectives that may have little or no commitment to public values. But what if one were only to establish an apprenticeship degree with organisations in cases where an additional partnership was also included with a civic organisation? Such an approach could also play to interests of the employer that provides the focus for the degree by promoting corporate social responsibility. If universities are to develop their capacity to contribute to the flourishing of societies, then a service dimension (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000) is likely to be as important as work-integrated learning.

The model of agency offered in the Figure above includes within it a place for a mediated contribution from a range of social structures. For example, the key role that lattice-works of social relations play in labour markets has already been noted (Fleetwood, 2008). Empirical studies have demonstrated, furthermore, that social relations play a significant role in graduates securing employment. Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2017) found that the development of social relations that are linked to networking and to seeking guidance was positively associated with higher levels of employment, relative to an absence of such development. Bradley, Bathmaker, Waller et al. (2013), meanwhile, undertook a three-year qualitative longitudinal project involving participating students from across 11 disciplines to demonstrate that middle-class students were able to draw upon social relations within their families to access social networks connected to work. A focus on social relations would thus provide a means for universities to promote social mobility, and to fulfil their obligations to promote equality of opportunity for under-represented groups to access professional life. A labour market is not simply constituted by the supply and demand of those with appropriate expertise or experience. In addition, it is also clear that the social relations one maintains can influence one’s capacity to engage with institutional norms. For instance, some organisations are shaped by an institutional logic that is predicated on favouring the local region in its dealings (Greenwood, Díaz, Li, & Lorente, 2010). This means that an incentive exists to maintain social relations with others in the same region. Small firms, meanwhile, are known to prioritise personal exchanges with other members of staff and clients (Marlow, 2006).

If learning in either academic or workplace settings were to establish social relations that were relevant to the workplace, then a pathway would be in place by which to influence the capacity of graduates to make contributions to workplace collectives. Abbott-Chapman (2011) argued, furthermore, that universities are often metro-centric in ignoring the commitments of students to particular localities and regions. A prioritising of social relations implies not simply a consideration of place within higher education, but also attention to the frequency of interactions with others that students encounter as a result of their studies. Programmes of education could incorporate learning outcomes for students that specifically develop both stable social relations and the capacity to establish and sustain such relations, as Kahn (2017) suggested. This would be supported by learning and assessment that is based on collectives that are stable over the entire length of a degree programme. That is something that is quite different to simply giving students opportunities for groupwork. In regard to corporate agency, Lundgren-Resenterra and Kahn (2019) argued that the social relations that were maintained by the students who participated in the study constituted a key influence on capacity to engage in collective reflexivity. Furthermore, universities could build on the existing opportunities that students have to participate in collectives that extend beyond their immediate studies, whether those linked to student unions or student accommodation, for instance. Extra-curricular activity has been shown to exercise a powerful influence on what employment is taken up by graduates through the way that it connects people to each other (Greenbank, 2009).

**Conclusions**

How can higher education prepare students for work that involves making constructive contributions to organisations and to workplace collectives? This study has offered a definition of graduate employability in which employability is conceptualised as a graduate’s capacity to act as an agent in the workplace in ways that contribute to the maintenance and elaboration of collectives. This innovative conceptualisation supports an identification of both individual qualities and structural influences that affect the extent to which students are employable, given links to relevant critical realist theorising. Fleetwood (2006) argued that it was important to offer an alternative to the mainstream labour market model, rather than just to critique the model; this is what this paper offers in relation to marketized notions of graduate employability. Collectives, furthermore, have been seen as closely relevant both to the agency that is exercised in the workplace and to the social structures that influence agency, whether institutional logics, social relations or other structures. It was argued that collectives should be open to the criticality that supports their elaboration and to the presence and contributions of those perceived as ‘other’. Such openness will affect the possibilities for collectives to promote goods that lie beyond their own self-interest.

The analysis in this paper suggests that the capacity to contribute to workplace collectives requires a broader conceptualisation than one that is centred on personal attributes, social positioning or individually-focused processual views of employability. This capacity encompasses networks of social relations, participation in institutions and commitments to concerns that are shared with others. Both primary and corporate agency entail a sharing with others, rather than something that can be possessed in exclusive terms by individual graduates. As such, the conceptualisation of graduate employability that has been offered in this study has the potential to support both learning and work that reaches beyond projects of the self that are framed around economic reward (Rose, 1989), strengthening the possibilities for higher education to be framed as a collective project undertaken for the common good. These considerations lend further weight to the view that employability should not to be equated to a set of skills required by the labour market that are gained through experience of higher education, while also offering a processual view of employability that is not limited to an individualistic framing on lines offered by Holmes (2013).

With such a view of employability in view, graduates would have greater freedom to pursue projects that are framed in common with others, rather than to have their subjectivities subordinated to the requirements of the labour market. This study thus also makes a contribution to reframing our understanding of what it means to work, in promoting subjectivities that are taken forward in agency that is supported by social relations with others. Such a view of work offers additional sources for dignity at work beyond those identified by Sayer (2007). Would it be worth pursuing a collective project over and above one that might offer a higher level of ‘return on investment’ to an individual? It is possible to dismiss the difficulties facing society that stem, for instance, from climate change, un-sustainable development, inequity, exclusion and the ongoing reality of colonisation, but it is evident that another approach is needed in responding to these challenges than simply one that relies on markets. And it remains the case, in certain respects, that work is dignified only to the extent that it takes seriously such key global challenges.

It was proposed, in addition, that development of the capacity to act as an agent in the workplace is likely to benefit from learning that occurs within systems of norms that are explicitly identified, as well as from learning that is designed to support subsequent agency within workplaces. Such learning can occur in academic and workplace settings, and both within and beyond the curriculum. Work and learning can be brought together through advancing both collective agendas and social relations as an integral aspect of student learning – and not only through an integration of learning itself into work settings. What we see here is an expansion of learning not primarily in relation to knowledge (Engeström and Sannino, 2010), but in relation to shared expressions of subjectivity. Such a re-framing of education through a social lens represents a key contribution of this paper to advancing theory and scholarship in relation to graduate employability.

Reorienting higher education towards a collective approach to employability is clearly challenging, as if one could just turn the clock back to a time when work was oriented towards what is distinctively human (Donati, 2011). Nonetheless, this article has demonstrated that collectives play a key role in learning within universities. There is a clear need for innovations in practice and for further research that builds on this agenda. If graduates are to be prepared to make contributions to organisations and workplace collectives rather than just to manage projects that entail self-investments or that serve the needs of markets, then it is important that higher education promotes and engages with collectives across a range of settings, whether internally, in workplaces or in civic society. There is scope for policy and practice within higher education to promote collectives and to ensure that such collectives articulate with workplaces in a way that is supportive and critical. This paper has argued that current research agendas within higher education have failed to draw together understanding of the ways in which collectives are implicated in learning. A conceptual focus on the notion of a collective itself has opened up the scope to consider fundamental purposes to education. Significantly more is entailed than developing individual competence and securing qualifications if one is to contribute to a collective agenda through one’s work. Imagination and agency would be required, of course, to revise programmes, universities and policy agendas in light of the insights offered by this article (Barnett, 2013). Nonetheless, the analysis offered in this article provides a means by which higher education could work to ennoble the purposes which it serves.

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