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RE-CONCEPTUALISING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF PRE-PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Abstract

Despite efforts to broaden the concept of graduate employability, there remains an overarching focus on developing industry-relevant employability skills. The skills-based approach is, however, too narrow and does not fully capture the complexity of graduate work-readiness. This paper argues for the redefining of graduate employability by embracing pre-professional identity formation. Pre-professional identity relates to an understanding of and connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of a student's intended profession. The 'communities of practice' model is drawn upon to demonstrate how pre-professional identity can be developed during university years. Here, a student makes sense of his/her intended profession through multiple memberships and differing levels of engagement with various communities within higher education's 'landscape of practice'. Example communities include professional associations, student societies, careers services and employers. Implications for stakeholders are discussed.

Despite efforts to broaden the concept of graduate employability to incorporate dimensions such as life skills (Bourner & Millican, 2011), career management (Bridgstock, 2009) and personal circumstances (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), the spotlight remains on key employability skills. These skills, such as communication, team working and self-management, are widely accepted as enhancing graduate employment prospects and there has been a worldwide focus on identifying and prioritising required industry-relevant skills and embedding strategies for their development in the higher education (HE) sector. Some acknowledge this conceptualisation of graduate employability as unrealistic and argue it should extend beyond the skills-list approach which is too narrow and does not fully capture the complexity of work readiness. Clark et al. (2011), for example, argue graduate employability ‘cannot be reduced to a simple formula based upon graduate credentials and employability skills’ (p. 148).

There does not appear, however, to be an emergent conceptualisation of graduate employability which offers direction and strategy in a climate of soft labour markets, increasing numbers of graduates and economic uncertainty. This paper argues that graduate employability, which has dominated HE discourse in recent years, should be re-defined to encompass the construction of pre-professional identity (PPI) during university years. PPI relates to an understanding of and connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of a student’s intended profession. It is the ‘the sense of being a professional’ (Paterson et al., 2002, p. 6) and ‘work-related disposition and identity’ (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 409). It may be considered a less mature form of professional identity and, although increasingly linked with graduate employability (see Stott et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2012), is neglected in comparison with the ongoing focus on employability skills.

This paper extends previous work connecting PPI with graduate employability by providing a holistic overview of how this identity can be cultivated in HE. The construction of PPI is described using the notion of a *landscape of practice* (Wenger, 2006), deriving from the Communities of Practice (CoP) model (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Here, the HE landscape of practice is a complex collection of relevant and interacting communities which can enhance student learning in varying ways. It provides a rich setting for students to experiment and engage with different entities (communities) such as professional associations, student societies, community groups, academics, careers services, student support services and employers.

As students undertake their learning trajectory across the HE landscape of practice, they will form PPI through their membership, engagement, non-engagement and boundary and peripheral interactions with different communities. During this process they will acquire disciplinary knowledge, develop non-technical skills, practice applying their learning across different settings, and reflect, visualise and imagine themselves as a graduate and novice professional to develop their understanding of self. Interplay with their landscape will assist individuals in developing a sense of self with ‘an active role in constructing meaning from what they encounter’ (Billet & Somerville, 2004, p. 315). This process will assist them in developing a clear understanding of professional standards, values, culture and ethical conduct, how to manage their career and give them a sense of purpose and meaning in relation to their current position and intended professional stance. The process of identity formation is ongoing and, with adequate exposure and guidance within the HE landscape, will transform students to novice professionals or, using different terminology, make them an employable graduate who is ready to transition into an entry-level professional role.

This paper aims to: a) highlight the need to broaden the concept of graduate employability to encompass PPI; and b) explain the role of the HE landscape, and its various member communities, in constructing PPI. It is structured to, first, outline the nature and importance of PPI as a key aspect of graduate employability and then provide an overview of the HE landscape in which it is formed. This is followed by a discussion of how PPI is constructed and the implications for key stakeholders who are responsible for advancing graduate work-readiness.

Pre-professional identity and graduate employability

The evolving concept of graduate employability.

This paper assumes that, through the collaborative efforts of the various communities within its landscape, HE is aiming to produce work-ready graduates. Much has been written on the responsibilities of the HE sector to produce graduates who are rounded, employable and meet industry needs (see Jackson & Chapman, 2012). Although there is less exploration of graduate perspectives (Johnston, 2003), students also expect HE to prepare them for their chosen profession (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). Achieving enhanced states of employability can bridge endemic skill gaps, raise organisational productivity and achieve innovativeness in the face of intense global competitiveness. It is now widely accepted that work-ready graduates who are self-assured, technically proficient and equipped with a range of non-technical skills are better prepared for rigorous recruitment processes, a seamless transition into post-graduation employment and long-term career success. The shift in HE's strategic focus from the development of higher order skills, intellect and mastery of disciplinary content to skilled and vocational readiness is challenged (Pegg et al., 2012) yet employability remains a broad strategic priority and continues to influence HE policy and curriculum reform.

Recent literature, practice and policy relating to graduate employability have been dominated by the clarification, development and assessment of a range of non-technical skills perceived by industry as critical in new graduates. These skills include team-working, communication, critical thinking and self-management (AAGE, 2014) with considerable attention paid to exploring their relative importance and performance levels in today's graduates (see Jackson & Chapman, 2012). Graduate employability models assert the necessity of these skills (see Yorke & Knight, 2004), along with disciplinary knowledge, in producing rounded, work-ready graduates. Although the value of non-technical skills is broadly accepted, many (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011) lament the narrow skills-list approach to employability. Bridgstock (2009) argued 'employer-driven lists ... do not address the full picture of what is required by the graduate facing the prospect of the labour market' (p. 34). Work is no longer characterised by rigid tasks with graduates proceeding along predictable, linear and vertical career progression pathways (McMahon et al., 2003) but, horizontal organisational structures, global job mobility and rapidly evolving work environments. This requires graduates to be prepared for volatility and challenge (Reid et al., 2011); have the right attitude (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006); be globally minded and able to operate in an increasingly diverse workplace under varying contractual arrangements; and be passionate about lifelong learning and have a desire for change (AAGE, 2014). This calls for a broader conceptualisation of graduate employability which extends beyond current thinking.

There is evidence of broader interpretations of employability yet they appear, at this stage, rather haphazard. Examples focus on career identity, social and human capital, and personal adaptability (Fugate et al., 2004); learning style, ambition and motivation (Tamkin & Hillage, 1999); confidence, academic performance and engagement with learning (Rothwell et al. 2008); personal characteristics (Hogan et al., 2013); workplace learning (Billet, 2011);

personality traits (Rae, 2007); reflectiveness and global citizenship (Barrie, 2004); ethical awareness (Zegwaard & Campbell, 2014); cultural fit and resilience (AAGE, 2014); entrepreneurship and an ability to manage change (Bennett, 2012); and a student's orientation to the labour market and attitude to career choices (Bridgstock, 2009; Tomlinson, 2007). Intertwining these various strands into a more holistic concept of graduate employability, which aligns with PPI, may assist stakeholders whom are both affected by graduate employability and responsible for cultivating it (Jackson & Hancock, 2010).

Required graduate qualities have been more richly understood in the non-employability space in both the UK, as 'graduateness', and in Australia as graduate attributes. Glover et al. (2002) defined graduateness as "a set of qualities that usually mark a person who has undertaken a degree course" (p. 303) while definitions of graduate attributes emphasise "equipping graduates as global citizens and effective members of modern day society" (Barrie, 2004, p. 262). Discussions of the nature of these broader educational outcomes have also identified the need for more complex formulations beyond 'skills'. Entwistle and McCune (2009), for example, described the overall aim of HE as developing 'ways of thinking and practicing' and Barrie (2007) considered the development of 'enabling' dispositions through participatory learning. These align with the proposal that employability could be recast as developing identity.

Pre-professional identity.

While there is considerable literature on identity formation among mid-career professionals (see for, example Dent & Whitehead, 2013), the process for emerging professionals is relatively unexplored (Trede et al., 2012). Trede and colleagues connected aspects of PPI formation in HE with work-readiness among graduates and identified 'learning

professional roles, understanding workplace cultures, commencing the professional socialisation process and educating towards citizenship’ (p. 365) as key areas of overlap. Their exploration of professional socialisation and identity formation in HE highlighted the broad and encompassing nature of PPI. In addition to required levels of disciplinary knowledge and non-technical skills, they drew on the work of Paterson et al. (2002) and argued it is ‘closely related to values, reasoning ability, clear understanding of responsibilities involved, technical skills, judgement, professional knowledge and expertise, self-directed learning, critical self-evaluation and reflective practice’ (p. 375). Trede et al. (2012) found the literature converged to highlighting PPI as ‘a way of being and a lens to evaluate, learn and make sense of practice’ (p. 374).

Other aspects of PPI include self-awareness (Klenowski et al., 2006); the ability to reconcile personal values with those of his/her intended profession and being a critical learner (see Trede et al., 2012); gaining a clear understanding of the responsibilities, attitudes, beliefs and standards associated with a particular profession (Higgs, 1993); confidence (Nicholson et al., 2013); having a sense of purpose and self-esteem (Henkel, 2005); personal development and lifelong learning (Bridgstock, 2009); the capacity to transfer skills across contexts (Jackson, 2013); having a positive attitude, including a willingness to participate in new activities (CBI, 2011); and being able to reflect on experience (Yorke & Knight, 2004).

In terms of differences between pre-professional and professional identity, Trede et al. (2012) argued there are three aspects to identity once you are an established professional: having the same knowledge, skills and ideology as others in your profession; becoming different to those who are not part of your profession; and identifying with your profession. This is supported by observed differences between *becoming* and *being* a professional

(Scanlon, 2011) with early professionals immersed into the community with a ‘strong sense of who they are as professionalised individuals’ (Nystrom, 2009, p. 16). The transition into the labour market as a novice professional and then progressing to an early career professional are simply different stages in the lifelong journey of identity construction.

The multi-faceted PPI is clearly allied with broader models of graduate employability and Daniels and Brooker (2012) lament their prevalent weak association. They emphasised that while students are acquiring relevant knowledge and learning non-technical skills, they could be developing their understanding of PPI if the connection had been made. Similarly, Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) argued ‘universities and government would be better employed promoting student employability indirectly through the promotion of graduate identity and well-being ... rather than directly through employability skills’ (p. 582). Holmes (2013) emphasised the importance of a new graduate acting ‘in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of a person worthy of being employed’ (p. 549) and our conceptualisation of employability should focus on *process* and not *position* or *possession* which refer to social status and skill capabilities respectively. Pursuing and cultivating PPI in HE should assist in producing the rounded graduates which industry desires and who are prepared for entry-level professional roles. Enhanced self-awareness and developed sense of self will assist graduates not only in productivity and career success but also in articulating to potential employers their credibility, strengths and capabilities. This is critical to the notion of graduate employability (see Stott et al, 2014) and a key focus for career development learning (Pegg et al., 2012).

The higher education landscape of practice

Communities of practice.

Many authors (for example, Cox, 2005) provide useful overviews of CoP which were introduced in Lave and Wenger's (1991) theorisation of situated learning and Brown and Duguid's (1996) focus on occupational communities in the work setting. CoP are 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Key features are their sense of purpose; a focus on practice and not locality; shared identity in the face of heterogeneous membership; and their internal structure (see Cox, 2005). In terms of practical use, they facilitate peer learning; professional development; disband professional silos; and capitalise on emerging technology, particularly social media (Wenger, 2010a). Although not always harmonious (Wenger, 1998), the notional benefits of CoP are critiqued in regard to managing internal politics and identifying tangible benefits; possible divergence from organisational needs; and their potential for undermining formal, managerial control (see Cox, 2005).

The landscape defined.

As different CoP interact and connect with each other, they form a broader landscape of practice (Wenger, 2010b) which is symbolised by 'shared practices, boundaries, peripheries, overlaps, connections, and encounters' (Wenger, 2010a, p. 130). Wenger emphasised the landscape is defined by practice, not affiliation or rules, and the mix of elements may vary in different places and individual perceptions. Employers are a prominent community in the HE landscape through their involvement in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) which includes placements, internships, client-based projects, simulations and mentoring programs. WIL encourages PPI formation by providing students with a clear

understanding of the responsibilities, standards and expectations of their chosen profession (Simon, 2004). It develops critical awareness among students so they can enact improvement in their new profession, rather than simply being socialised into it (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011). In alignment, Trede et al. (2012) argued WIL allows students to reconcile personal and professional values and understand the importance of giving voice during this process. This is not easy for undergraduates who encounter tension and conflict while speaking up (Zegwaard & Campbell, 2014), yet vital for their learning as a critical and reflective practitioner. WIL also enables students to reflect on their current position and develop strategies for achieving their professional goals (Clark et al., 2011). There is a cultural disparity between work and classroom settings (Nystrom, 2009) and practical exposure to the social and ethical practices of working in their intended profession, rather than unrelated, casual term-time employment, is critical for bridging this gap.

Curriculum is a critical community within the HE landscape, providing a rich learning source for students in relation to both disciplinary expertise (Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008) and non-technical skills. There has been considerable focus on non-technical skill development initiatives including embedding outcomes into disciplinary curricula, implementing stand-alone skill programs at a central or Faculty level, and capstone units which focus on applying a range of non-technical skills in group settings. The success, or otherwise, of these skill initiatives on PPI formation is yet to be affirmed although Good and Adams (2008) argued that academic achievement and positive learning outcomes will assist in the development of identity.

Careers services within the university setting play a critical role in the HE landscape (Jameson et al., 2012). Piazza (2011) argued the support provided by careers services,

individual interests and the student's skill repertoire feed into strategic career planning, professional growth and the identification of development opportunities which culminate into lifelong learning. Other prominent communities are academic mentors (Duchesne et al., 2007) whose relationship, personal interaction and interest in students as individuals can impact on study motivation, self-efficacy and outcomes (see Lairio et al., 2013). Academic peer networks (see Lairio et al., 2013) and the mentorship and support they provide (Feldman et al. 2013) feature in the landscape, alongside student clubs and societies (Coles & Swami, 2012); student support services (Candy, 2000); school; alumni; professional associations and professional networks and forums (Clark et al., 2011).

Interacting with members of the local community through service learning and volunteering is also important. Bourner and Millican (2011) emphasised the importance of extra-curricular activity on employment outcomes yet, in relation to identity formation, it can augment more deep reflection of oneself and the relationship held with others, as well as exposing individuals to a wealth of new experiences (Jones & Abes, 2004). Parental support and family networks can influence identity formation (Duchesne et al., 2007), as can social activities and interaction with friends from pre-university years (Nystrom, 2009) and living arrangements (Jordyn & Bird, 2003). Brown and Duguid (1996), in their discussion of distance learning, emphasised the important role of the university for engaging learners and meeting individual needs. Practice within the university, such as cross-Faculty collaboration to achieve quality student learning in, for example, generic skills (Owen & Davis, 2010), is also important. The HE landscape may be perceived differently across the globe with interpretations varying by geographical location, culture, economic and social systems.

Professional practitioners support the landscape of practice as a valuable context for learning, including acquiring and sharing technical knowledge (Van den Hooff et al., 2005); cultivating generic skills (Flowerdew, 2000) and professional socialisation (Hunter et al., 2007). The notion of HE as a landscape of practice is less explored although Reid et al. (2008) acknowledged ‘students...reside within a complex learning, professional and social environment, all of which contribute to their developing notions of identity (as learners and for a profession) and the way in which they engage with supporting activities’ (p. 731). Further, there is an ongoing disconnect in the literature between fostering graduate capabilities and professional development (Daniels & Brooker, 2014), which ‘fails to capture the holistic nature of the HE student experience’ (p. 74).

Interactions and tensions among communities.

Tensions among certain communities are inevitably present. A prominent example is the engagement between universities and industry and, on a more micro-level, professional and academic practitioners. While this engagement may enhance the curriculum and empower stakeholders (Currie, 2007), it can also be problematic (see Cranmer, 2006) due to differing perceptions on the degree of responsibility and level of effectiveness of university and industry input in developing non-technical skills in undergraduates (see Cranmer, 2006); the role of industry in curriculum design and delivery (see Jameson et al., 2012); the degree of familiarity among academics with current legislation, conduct and practice in their field (Southgate et al., 2010); and expected graduate outcomes in light of funding and resource pressures (Jameson et al., 2012).

Pre-professional identity formation in the HE landscape

Interestingly, Trede et al. (2012) found most studies on PPI development focused on the student and not the influence of external bodies, other than brief reference to work environments. The broad process of identity formation in HE is widely acknowledged (see Lounsbury et al., 2005) with considerable focus on reflection as a means of identifying strengths, weaknesses and development opportunities to achieve professional goals (Archer, 2008). While Clegg (2008) recognised the role of the external environment in shaping identity among students, she refers more to *academic* or *student* identity (see Good & Adams, 2008; Henkel, 2005). While there is some discussion in the literature of the importance of constructing PPI in HE, or what Lairo et al. (2013) term as ‘navigating into working life’ (p. 116), there is relatively little on how to actually achieve this.

Process of formation.

Individuals must first engage with their HE landscape which offers them ‘the proposal of an identity’ (Wenger, 2010b, p. 135). From a broad perspective, evidence suggests those learners who had greater access to and/or actively participated in relevant CoP report relatively stronger outcomes (Billett, 2001). More specifically, engagement with a landscape of practice will help an individual develop, or negotiate, his/her identity through the experience of participation; community membership; establishing a learning trajectory and the process of reconciling multiple membership with several communities into one identity (Wenger, 2010b). This importance of *doing* and *practice* in identity formation is echoed by Piazza (2011) who argued that ‘knowledge about a career is not simply acquired by people, but is constructed through activity and in interactions with a variety of people’ (p. 179). While it is not possible for students to engage fully with all elements of their landscape, Wenger (2010b) maintained that varying levels of participation with different communities will enact

identity formation. He contended, ‘we not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in’ (p. 140). Developing PPI also involves students visualising professional membership and considering possible responses to arising scenarios (Ross & Beuhler, 2004).

Individuals will determine their learning trajectory through navigating within their communities and across their landscape of practice. They will experience different levels of engagement with communities from *peripheral* to *insider*, depending on their level of involvement and membership (Wenger, 2010b). Klenowski et al. (2006) emphasised that identity formation is ongoing and the trajectory provides context to our continued negotiation and learning. As Wenger asserted, an individual trajectory highlights what matters and what does not. Tomlinson (2007) also noted that identity construction is an ongoing social process, resulting in identities which are fluid and in constant flux. In alignment, professions are also changing, ‘the professions have arguably become more volatile, with what counts as the marks of a good professional constantly shifting’ (Trede et al., 2012, p. 382).

Also critical to identity formation is the *nexus of multi-membership* (Wenger, 2012a). Identity formation is a complex pathway where we construct different aspects of ourselves through our interaction with different parts of the landscape and reconcile and coordinate these into our own identity. Wenger emphasised that individuals are not expected to automatically integrate their simultaneous relationships and interactions with different elements of their landscape (such as being a parent, child, casual worker, student and pre-professional job seeker) in complete harmony but learn to reconcile these different identities so they can coexist in one single identity. Managing this process of reconciliation is what defines the individual, particularly salient for the growing number of non-traditional

undergraduates and graduate-entry students who are often mature-age and juggling full-time work and caring responsibilities with their study.

Influences on individual trajectories.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, potential influences on learning trajectories must be acknowledged. Course discipline may produce significant variations in the perceptions and realities of the HE landscape with extant literature indicating that both classical liberal arts and more specialised degree programs produce different discipline-based identities among students (see Dahlgren et al., 2008). Age and gender (see Clark et al., 2011; Nystrom, 2009), socio-economic status and ethnicity may affect identity formation (see Haight, 2012). Some students, for example, may not have the middle class cultural capital which employers relate to (Greenbank et al., 2009). Mode of study could also influence a student's perceived sense of community (see Reinhart, 2010) and can restrict access to certain entities and groups (Brown & Duguid, 1996). International student status can also affect levels of engagement with certain communities, and therefore identity formation, due to inhibitors such as local languages and culture (see Coles & Swami, 2012). External influences, such as economic health, political and social systems and labour market conditions, may impact on employment prospects (see Clark et al., 2011) and the construction of PPIs. The status and reputation of a university can influence self-efficacy and identity construction as those from highly esteemed institutions may consider themselves more worthy than others (Rothwell et al., 2008). Government policy, such as visa regulations, funding models and associated student loan structures; and the implementation of mandated skill frameworks for academic qualification levels can determine student access to certain communities and the level to which they can engage with them.

Implications for stakeholders

Key concepts from the CoP model should be deployed to develop PPIs among students during their university learning journeys. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders to develop an explicit awareness and connection among students with the identity formation process. Daniels and Brooker (2014) argued PPI formation needs to be more integrated and formalised into HE through a better understanding of its role among students, starting from when they commence university. Tomlinson (2007) believes there is little point in undertaking extra-curricular activities and engagement with other communities, what he described as a *discourse of experience*, if students are unable to translate the benefits to potential employers.

Educators must encourage students to reflect on their positional stance and strategies to improve on this so they can operate more effectively as an entry-level professional (Hunter et al., 2007). Bennett (2012) described networking and ‘speed dating’ exercises as effective ways of encouraging students to visualise themselves in professional roles. Assessment is critical for PPI development (Barrow, 2006), providing students with a benchmark for expected performance. Evidence strongly suggests educators should incorporate experiential learning to encourage students to gain insight into professional ideology (Cornellissen & Van Wyk, 2007). Practical work experience within the curriculum is fundamental for graduate employability, employment prospects and forming PPI (Reid et al., 2008). West and Chur-Hansen (2004) argued the workplace is more effective in shaping identity than the university classroom; student dialogue and interaction with employers is therefore imperative. Self-directed learning is also important for identity formation as it can encourage lifelong learning, one’s capacity to learn from others, self-esteem and a greater sense of self (Grow, 1991). Bramming (2007) believes transformative learning is central to PPI formation, particularly

critical incident learning which involves finding potential solutions to challenges and dilemmas in workplace scenarios (Clouder, 2005). Here, educators must recognise the idea, argued by Keleher and Hutchinson (2010), that ‘teaching is not merely the transmission of a curriculum but more an invitation to a journey of self’ (p. 3).

At an institution level, universities are responsible not only for a quality education experience but also for appropriately connecting students with external practice and relevant communities and debates which will engage them beyond their university years (Wenger, 2006). They must provide the infrastructure and opportunity for students to interact with their HE landscape, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds that may have little exposure to professional networks. Given evidence that careers and student support services are not used by the majority of students (Jameson et al., 2012; Pegg et al., 2012), these functions must concentrate on engaging with a wider audience and particularly those with relatively weak labour market positions. Alumni are often effective role models for students, providing guidance through WIL, mentoring programs; online forums and newsletters. Similarly, collaborative partnerships with professional associations can educate, mentor and socialise students through sponsorship opportunities and events.

Finally, the role of the student as the driver in constructing PPI is widely acknowledged (Hallier & Summers, 2011; Hunter et al., 2007). Holmes (2013), for example, argued identity is both socially constructed and formed through self-concept; it is driven from within and developed through negotiating and interacting with significant others. The need for students to engage with communities to develop their identity aligns with graduate employability literature emphasising the importance of students embracing extra-curricular activities (Tomlinson, 2012); community engagement (Bourner & Millican, 2011), and career

management (Bridgstock, 2009) to shape their preparedness for employment. While universities can encourage participation, the onus is on students to engage with identity formation and harness opportunities presented to them (Crebert et al., 2004). Navigating the landscape and reflecting on identity formation suggests an acute awareness and control of their journey to work-readiness. This contrasts greatly with the skill agenda's underlying premise that framing and embedding industry-relevant skills into the curriculum will guarantee the emergence of work-ready graduates (Daniels & Brooker, 2014).

Conclusion

There is some agreement in the literature on the inadequacies of confining the concept of graduate employability to a skill-based approach. Construction of PPI is allied with more contemporary notions of employability which continue to emerge somewhat haphazardly. Critical reflection, self-belief, career identity, lifelong learning, global citizenship and resilience are underlined in discussions of work-readiness, and developing these characteristics and abilities emphasises the range of interacting forces which undergraduates must engage with during their studies. These forces, depicted here as communities, form an HE landscape of practice which provides a rich arena for students to develop a better understanding of the requirements, expectations and ideology of their intended profession; their own professional stance and a sense of self. Drawing on the CoP model, reflection, reconciliation, imagination and visualisation will assist individuals in constructing PPI during their learning journey at university. This identity will assist them in demonstrating preparedness for employment and successfully applying their acquired skills and knowledge in the graduate labour market as a novice professional.

This paper provides a holistic overview of how PPI can be cultivated in HE and highlights that, while students are the driver of identity formation, it is a shared responsibility among stakeholders concerned with enhancing graduate employability. This is particularly important amid a backdrop of rising HE costs, highly competitive graduate labour markets and global economic uncertainty. Importantly, HE's drive to enhance employability encompasses, and is not separate to, the broader aim of developing global citizens who are socially responsible, empowered and engaged with the needs of the community. Accepting that the development of individual employability can be achieved through the formation of PPI also affirms the construction of a broader social identity during university years. Further research in PPI formation would significantly benefit our understanding of graduate employability and efforts to improve it. This may include exploring interactions among communities and their precise influence on identity formation; the impact of specific interventions within communities on identity construction; and variations in identity formation by demographic, study and employment characteristics.

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