



Unsettling our Understandings of Employability and Transforming our Practice: A Sociological Perspective on the Employability of Liberal Arts and Business Students from an Elite University

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Recent statistics indicate university graduates of many disciplines are experiencing increasing difficulty in securing employment, with only 70.9 per cent of undergraduates, on average, finding full-time work within four months of course completion (QILT, 2016). At the same time, government rhetoric suggests Australia's workforce serves a 'knowledge economy' that demands adaptable graduates with strong transferable skills, who can contribute to the uncertain labour market of the future. Nevertheless, graduates of generalist disciplines thought to possess these skills report amongst the lowest rates of employment of all disciplines. This suggests that whilst economically-oriented employability researchers argue that highly skilled and adaptable graduates will be in demand in the future, there is a paradox, in that such predictions often do not align with graduate outcome statistics or the labour market experiences of the students we support.

This presentation seeks to consider why this paradox exists, by offering an alternative, sociological way of understanding employability, explained through applied doctoral research into the employability of liberal arts and business students from an elite Australian university. Using policy document and interview data collected from one Group of Eight case study institution, I will discuss the role of institutional policy, and career service and faculty policy and practice, on students' employability. The findings reveal stark differences in the way arts and business students, and those from different family backgrounds understand and navigate higher education and their employability, which in turn shapes how they prepare to enter the labour market. This research raises questions about the effectiveness of skills-based policy and 'best practice' at Australian universities and within their career services. The presentation seeks to encourage participants to reflect on their own understandings of employability, and consider how we could improve our practice to support students as they prepare for an increasingly uncertain labour market.