Millennial Students Perceptions of Employability: Lessons for Generation X & Y Academics

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Introduction and Background

Employability is a key economic development driver with a role to play in boosting national wealth, (Cranmer, 2006; Tomlinson, 2008). It remains a very important, yet challenging, issue for Higher Education Institutions (HEI). In particular, the initiatives and mechanisms used to develop this are the focus of increasing scrutiny and debate, (Thompson, Clarke, Walker and Whyatt, 2013). The issues of Millennials exacerbate this situation. These are a very distinct group. Generation Xers stayed on average 3.4 years in a post while Generation Yers decreased to 2.7 years' tenure. Research would suggest that 67% of Baby Boomers entered their fifties in long-term employment, which is a changing future trend, (Harris, 2015). They are typically seeking immediate pleasure with low boredom thresholds and are often multi-taskers, (Guardian, 2011). They engage in multiple roles while continually learning as they go. LinkedIn has acknowledged that Millennials will change job 4 times in the ten years' post-graduation, at a minimum, and by 2020 they will make up 50% of the global workforce, (PWC, 2016). Millennial graduates are branching out either to develop a portfolio of different occupations or to switch to different careers/industries in a lifetime, (Guardian, 2014; Forbes, 2012; LinkedIn, 2016; PWC, 2016; BBC, 2017). As educators, we need to respond to these very real trends and challenges. The reality is that a degree is now the career entry-level requirement with a wrap-around of key transferable skills needed, which are developed by Higher Education providers through employability interventions. The best way to respond to these changes and develop interventions is based on research evidence and understanding the specific employability needs and perceptions of this generational cohort.

This research is important for a number of reasons. In the first instance, the drive to encourage employability development to impact upon graduate employment has never been

greater across Higher Education providers especially with the challenging and competitive labour markets. All undergraduate students must be provided with a work-based learning opportunity to support their employability whilst being held accountable for graduate employment through DHLE, like other HEIs. We need to fully understand the perceptions and attitudes surrounding employability with all key stakeholders in this tri-part relationship (academics, employers and students) to inform practice and policy development to deliver more enhanced employability interventions thereby positively influence graduate destinations - a universal challenge across the UK. Furthermore, millennial graduates are facing multiple jobs and careers and present a considerable challenge for HEIs. We need to ensure graduates are equipped with skills to navigate this changing global labour market and career journey whilst ensuring that these students, throughout their academic and employability journey in higher education, are aware of the various interventions to support professional and graduate development and their role within this. Finally, Millennials perceptions of employability are also changing and being impacted upon by global labour market trends and developments. For HEIs to develop and support employability they need to fully understand what their awareness and perception of employability is.

As such the key objectives of this research were to:
- To better understand undergraduate Millennial student's perceptions regarding employability.
- Identity what the barriers, challenges and drivers to employability are from a student's perspective.
- Identify employability preparedness and trends among Millennial students based on demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

Millennials and Employment

Millennials are identified as a generational demographic cohort, following Generation X, dating roughly between the years of 1980 and 2000 (Howe and Strauss, 1991). However, the term is generally used to reference young adults. Levenson cites that the Millennial generation has been described as one that "is both very driven to succeed and entitled about their work options, supposedly leading to them making greater demands than their more experienced counterparts in the workplace". Apparently, they are more driven by workplace satisfaction and work-life balance than financial reward, (Rouse, 2018). This raises questions as to whether Millennials struggle in to workplaces where the power lies with those from Generations X and Y or not, playing into the perceived differences in what level of employability is expected from them, or are these 'differences' more perceived than real?

A few key area of generational differences can be examined and linked to how this generation perform in the workplace. The level of education Millennials have in comparison to previous generations is higher, with more Millennials having university degrees than any other generation of young adults. According to a White House report (2013) 47% of 25-34-year olds had a postsecondary degree. Whilst this would suggest Millennials have a higher level of employability, this can also translate into there being an oversaturation of highly educated and talented young people seeking employment that is already over-subscribed, therefore making it more difficult to obtain employment. In fact, it could be proposed that the critical issue is in fact their employability preparedness.

Another commonly noted nuance regarding Millennials and their predecessors is what they actually seek from employment. Young adults prioritise establishing an initial income and

home, seeking out a life partner and potentially starting a family. As people age, they start to think more about contribution to society and prioritise purpose (Erikson, 1994). While this concept is not directly couched in the Millennial generation, it does help explain why Millennials have different demands and aspirations than that of the older generations. Research also suggests that Millennials act differently both inside and outside the workplace. According to Randstad's Employee Engagement Study, 42% of employees feel obligated to check in with work when on holiday with Millennials being the "most inclined to remain 'on' during off hours". This can include sharing text messages with colleagues about work and checking work emails at all hours, implying that Millennials are constantly improving upon their further learning, outside of traditional 9-5 hours.

The struggles of full-time work for Millennials would also appear to differ from those of other generations. A study conducted by EY found that 47% of Millennials in a managerial position worldwide saw that their hours were being increased at a time when they were both moving into management and starting families, compared to 38% for 'Generation X' and 28% for 'Baby Boomers'. The same study found that Millennials also find it hard to achieve their much-desired work-life balance as they are almost twice as likely to have a partner who also works full time than Baby Boomers. A further common assumption about Millennials in the workforce is that they are 'job-hoppers' with schools of thought proposing that they are less loyal to employers and unlikely to remain in job roles for a lengthy period of time, (Schwabel, 2011). It is a fact that young people have always had a higher tendency to switch jobs more often than older workers, usually before they 'settle down'. It is also true though that Millennials are both entering the labour market and forming households later than their predecessors did (Deloitte, 2015). This is likely due to the state of the economy they were

born into and due to the increased level of student debt, possibly explaining why Millennials hold onto their 'job-hopper' status longer than previous generations. Millennials 'lack of loyalty' may just be "an artefact of their incomplete entry into the labour force" (Deloitte, 2015). To date, the focus on Millennials seems to be investigating their relationship with work and employment. Critically however what appears to be lacking in investigations is regarding Millennials and their engagement with employability initiatives and perceptions around this. A key employability initiative used traditionally and consistently across Higher Education Institutions is work based placements.

Placements

There is an expected link between increased levels of graduate employment, along with associated employability skills, and the completion of an undergraduate placement. Enhanced employability and work placements go hand-in-hand because employability is considered to not only be developed through one's academic degree, but continuously through employment itself and specifically work-based learning.

Most recent and relevant research on the area tends to focus more on either the impact of placement on graduate employment or assessing the student experience of the placement (Wilton, 2014). Whilst these are key in improving the placement process, it fails to tell exactly what is learned and achieved from the experience or indeed what students' perceptions are of this intervention. Despite its value, reports are showing both a decline of students completing work placements (Walker and Ferguson, 2009) and a decrease in the number of placement positions being provided by employers (UUK, 2009). The Wilson Review estimates that "there has been a decline in this practise in recent years from 9.5% of the total full-time

cohort in 2002-03 to 7.2% in 2009-10". This would indicate that perhaps there is opportunity for improvement in the quality of placements provided or indeed in how students are encouraged to engage with placement offerings. Apparently "employer's reluctance to spend time supervising students is (also) partly to blame," (Purcell, 2016). Wilton (2014) found that, despite universally positive views on work placements, completing a sandwich placement as part of a business and management degree programme does not universally translate into either greater reported skills development or superior labour market achievement, either immediately after graduation or four years post-graduation. To understand the possible reasons behind this, research needs to explore why students choose to undertake or not a work based placement.

There are many recognised and widely cited benefits to undertaking a placement, one being how it enhances future career endeavours. Almost 50% of participants in the High Fliers Annual Review (2017) of graduate vacancies agreed that graduates who have no previous work experience are unlikely to be successful during the selection process and have little or no chance of receiving a job offer (Willison, 2017), therefore a work based placement can be seen as a fool proof way of eliminating this fear. The Wilson Review of Higher Education agrees that such opportunities may alleviate barriers to employment for graduates. Additionally, work based placements may have a positive impact on academic performance. Research conducted by the University of Aston explored this link and found that placements do in fact improve degree performance. However, the research also suggested that more able students are more likely to undertake a placement in the first place, and that not every placement leads to higher degree classification, but instead a successful placement does. It is also important to consider that in many degrees, such as nursing, placements are compulsory.

There are therefore nuances within disciplines and industries that may impact upon conclusions drawn.

As to why many students choose not to complete a placement or internship, there are just as many valid reasons. Some researchers have noted that for many students, the burden of paying (albeit often discounted) tuition fees during their placement year can be quite off-putting (Syer, 2012). Currently, this fee can be as much as £4,500 across the UK, however a guideline of £1,000 has been suggested by the Wilson review. This can be frustrating enough for a student being paid on placement. Additionally, not every student is able, or needs to undertake a placement. It has been argued that many students "join us with a substantial amount of work experience already, have families and existing work commitments. They would not be keen to push their graduation one year further into the future" (Curtis, 2015). This highlights that perhaps universities need to be more accommodating in ways, other than placement to students from different socio-economic, demographic backgrounds in terms of developing their employability. The only way to achieve this is to be better understand how students perceive employability. This study will attempt to achieve this.

Findings

Respondent Demographics

This study was targeted at all undergraduate students studying a business related subject at Ulster University Business School during the academic year 2017-2018. The broad population was selected to ensure that the respondents participating in the study had a breadth of understanding of employability across the various years of programmes from Years 1 to 4 and not specifically focusing on those currently engaging with placement. In total there were

395 respondents with a split of 48% male and 52% female. The majority of respondents were as expected in the age groups 18-21 (50%) and 22-35 (44%) with a nearly even split. There was a small percentage aged 26-55 (6%). In addition, the large majority of respondents (97%) were studying full-time with only 3% part-time. This in itself is an interesting outcome as it may be an indication that part-time students feel less of a connection with employability related matters for a variety of reasons including maybe stage of life, on-going employment, skills levels achieved and lack of awareness. This is an area that requires further investigation. In addition, the majority of respondents were undergraduate students (n = 374). Interestingly, when asked if they worked and studied it was concluded that n = 315 (80%) of respondents worked and studied while n = 80 (20%) did not. In terms of year of study, the majority were in final year (n= 232, 59%) with the next largest group in second year (n= 153, 39%) and the smallest number of respondents in first year (n= 10, 2%). This is not surprising since employability and its awareness and importance becomes more pronounced as students progress through their academic studies.

Employability Perceptions and Understanding

The study sought to gauge what students understood by the term employability. Interestingly the majority of students (n= 287, 73%) indicated that they understood the term employability while n = 108 (27%) of respondents indicated that they did not understand the term. Across the study a number of statements about what employability is were considered. A number of headline outcomes are identified.

- The majority of respondents agreed that employability is for all student ages (strongly agree and agree (91%).

- Strong agreement was found for employability being about graduates getting the right jobs after graduation (70%).

Graph I shows that the majority of students agree that employability is an individual students responsibility.

Graph I Employability is the responsibility of individual students

The responsibility of each individual student
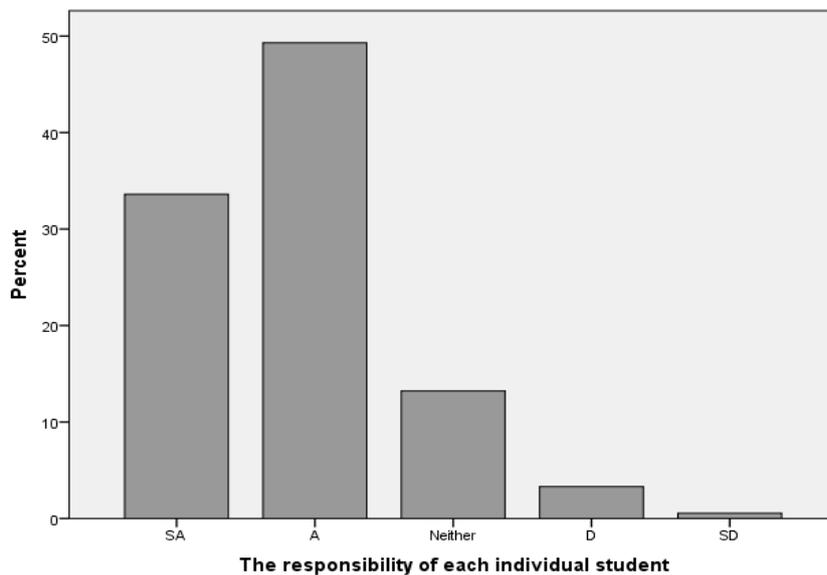
- The majority of students (94%) agreed that employability is about lifelong skills and ongoing professional development.
- Employability was considered to be about creating an environment where employment attributes were developed (90%).

Graph II shows how the study population agreed that employability is very much what employers want (41% Strongly Agree and 37% Agree).

Graph II Employability is what employers want
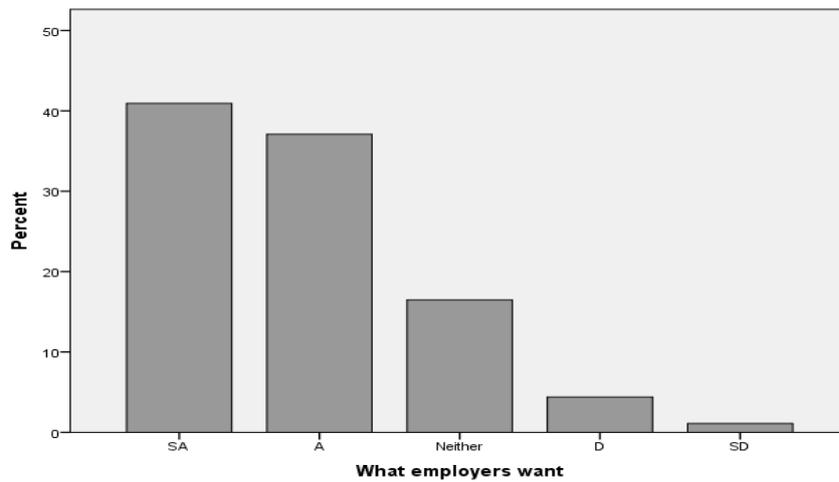
- It is reassuring to note that the majority of students (64%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that employability was a distraction from their academic studies. Furthermore, 69% supported this stating that they disagreed that employability was unrelated to academic learning – they clearly see a connection between academic development and professional development.

- 70% of the respondents felt that employability relates to how academics can make their students employable so the link is being made between career development and employability activities.

- 94% of students agreed or strongly agreed that employability is about helping to reflect on strengths and weaknesses to inform their professional and personal development.

- Interestingly only 44% of students saw a role for clubs and societies in supporting their employability development.

Graph III shows how the student respondents agree that employability is a commitment between the university and student (67%) however there is some disagreement because 23% feel that this is neither true nor untrue. This presents an issue in terms of consensus.

Graph III Employability is part of the commitment between the university and the student
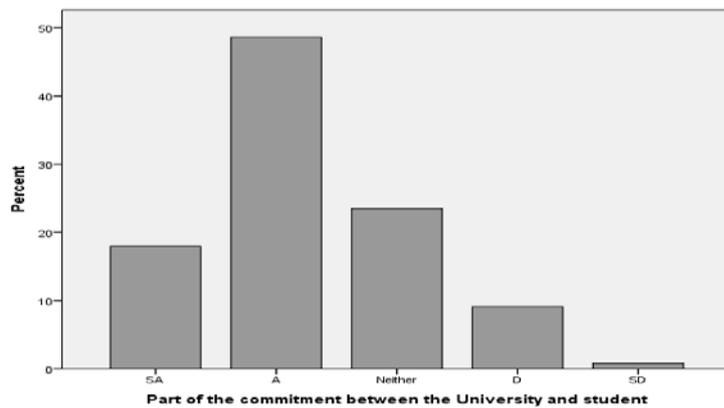
- There appeared to be limited consensus regarding the extra-curricular activity undertaken as part of enhancing employability with 44% agreeing or strongly agreeing however 32% neither agreed nor disagreed and 24% actually disagreed or strongly disagreed that it involved undertaking extracurricular activity.

Graph IV largely shows that the student respondents agreed (85%) that employability is a continuous activity involving professional development.

Graph IV Employability involves undertaking continuing professional development
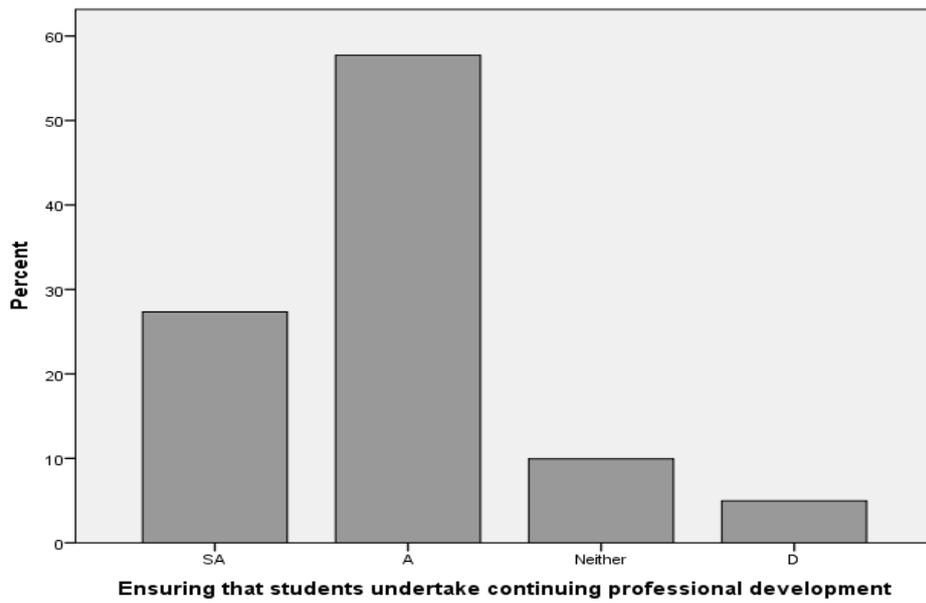
Furthermore, as depicted in Graph V there was varying consensus, despite existing knowledge and assumptions, regarding whether employability was about securing placement and internships with 58% strongly agreeing or agreeing while 42% either disagreed or were unsure.

Graph V Employability is about securing a placement/internship
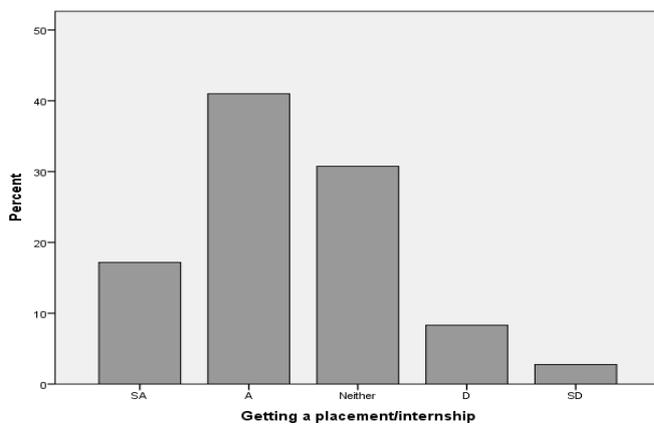
- As expected the students confirmed overwhelmingly (92% agreeing or strongly agreeing) that employability is about covering key skills and attributes.

- The students further confirmed the credibility of employability by disagreeing that it is in any way a business fad or trend (48% disagreed or strongly disagreed). In addition, 52% disagreed it was university hype. There is however concern in relation to this as a further 52% indicated that they were unsure whether employability is a fad and likely to disappear or if in fact it was simply university hype (48%).

- The study concluded that employability has an additional role to play in enhancing the student learning experience with 80% in agreement further demonstrating the value of employability.

- 89% agreed or strongly agreed that employability is about the skills necessary for the marketplace which demonstrates students grasp and understanding further whilst not surprisingly 70% agreed that it is about having work experience and 86% stated that it related to learning about the world of work.

- Interestingly 73% either agreed or strongly agreed that employability is about keeping the graduate labour market expanding so in some ways the students see this as continuing to raise the bar among graduate employers regarding their expectations and aspirations in terms of standards of student skills and expertise.

Graph VI depicts an interesting conclusion. The respondents suggested that (43% agreed or strongly agreed) that employability is a challenge to how universities traditionally worked. This is quite interesting as the focus traditionally in institutions has predominantly been academic journeys but there has been a shift to a simultaneous and related academic and employability journey which has fed down to the student population.

Graph VI Employability is a challenge for how universities traditionally worked

A challenge for how Universities have traditionally worked
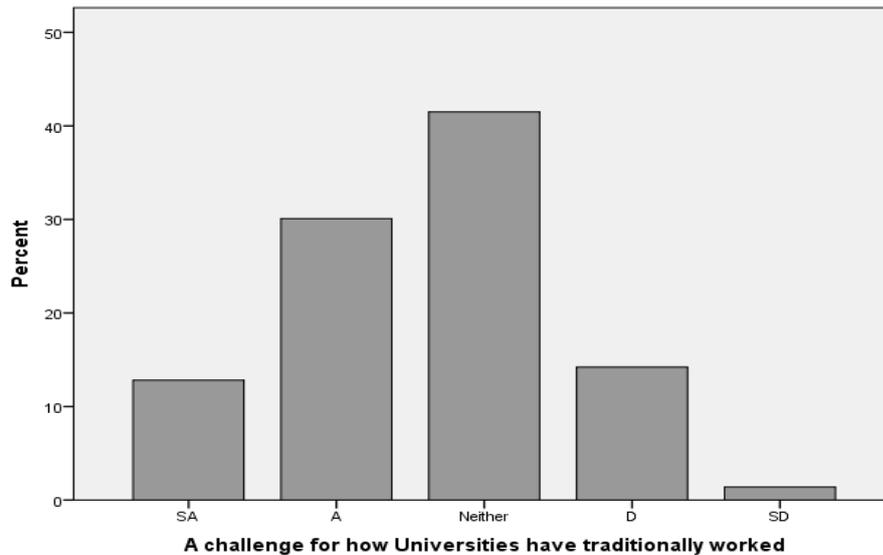
- The students showed less consensus when it came to identifying who was responsible for developing employability. In relation to the Career Development Centre 45% agreed that it was their responsibility while a further 28% were unsure and 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In fact, 59% disagreed with the Students Union having any role to play in supporting students in developing and enhancing their employability skills. This issue becomes even more unclear because the Millennials concluded that employers were in fact responsible for developing employability albeit marginally with 34% in agreement whilst 27% were unsure. However, the student respondents overwhelmingly agreed (98%) that employability is the responsibility of the student. They did however suggest that there are multiple stakeholders in developing employability ranging from Module Coordinators with 56% arguing they are responsible for developing employability, Course Directors (57%) and Placement Tutors (72%). There is therefore an obvious need for clarity regarding who the key players are in supporting and developing a student employability skills development and journey.

- Another area that presented some discontent in terms of agreement related to how employability can support a student in terms of securing a higher degree classification. The assumption is that employability skill enhancement and work experience often leads to students performing better and thereby impacting their final degree classification. It would appear from this study that the students are not fully sure about this with 52% agreeing or strongly disagreeing whilst 33% were unsure and 15% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

This study further went on to explore how well informed Millennials are in relation to their academic choices and graduate plans. Worryingly only 61% agreed that they were knew what their career plans and ambitions were. This would suggest that there is at least 39% who are unsure and this is further compounded by the fact that the majority of respondents in this study were either in second or final year of their studies. Largely students agreed that they understood what employers were looking for in terms of skills with 80% agreement. Another concerning issue from this study was that the students were varied in how confident they felt about applying to job roles with employers as only 52% felt confident and a further 48% were unsure or unconfident. This is a very challenging outcome as, regardless of employability skills, a lack of confidence in front of employers is likely to impact negatively on graduate opportunities. Equally so a similar picture emerged when reflecting on how confident Millennials are that they will secure a graduate level role as depicted in Graph VII with only 48% feeling confident.

Graph VII Confidence in ability to secure suitable graduate level job
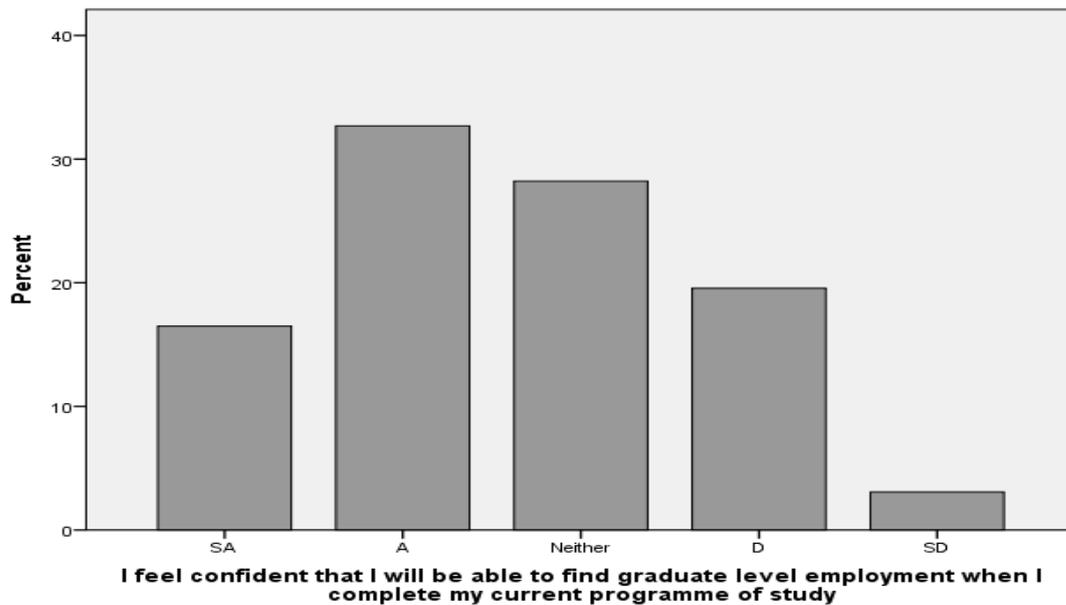
Interestingly placement figured very strongly in terms of importance among the respondents. It is clear they value placement with 47% having completed placement, 4% undertaking currently and 22% planning to undertake with only a small percentage (27%) unlikely to complete placement. However, despite this level of engagement with placement there remains uncertainty as to when enough has been done to enhance employability skills – which is really a characteristic of this professional development area. 180 respondents felt they had done enough while a large number (n = 215) felt they did not or perceived that they had not.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study can conclude that, albeit variable, there is a baseline of understanding among Millennial students about what employability is and its credibility and value in the context of higher education, learning and careers. Furthermore, the employability initiatives and interventions being provided for students currently are delivering positive benefits in terms of skills and professional development with a distinct value placed on the role of placement.

Interestingly, five key factors have emerged around employability based on student perceptions namely university customers, skills and experience, stakeholder responsibilities, extra-curricular activities and the academic link of employability which require further exploration and development in Stage II of this study. It is very clear that a lack of clear direction in terms of career aspirations may be impacting employability engagement – '*I don't know what I want to do therefore I do not know what I need to do to get there!*'

In addition, there are a number of key conclusions and recommendations that can be drawn.

- There is a need to explore further how part-time work can be linked with the academic journey and employability development. A large number of students work and study and there is a need for them to realise that the skills they are developing in a part-time setting are relevant and can be transferred to full-time graduate level jobs – often this link is not made. In addition, there is also those students who do not work and these become a priority group in terms of needing employability interventions to enhance their overall professional and skill profile.

- Nearly ¼ of the study did not understand the term employability which is a startling outcome as the population for this study would have been assumed to be most likely to understand or be aware of the term. In addition, these are the group most likely to have exposure to communication regarding employability development. As such it is important that assumptions are not made about understanding and more enhanced promotion and marketing of the basics of employability are undertaken to reduce the lack of understanding/misunderstanding among the student population. Indeed, this may even require reviewing what current messages are being communicated for effectiveness.

- There is a clear understanding among students that employability is part of the academic journey and development. It is important that this message is reinforced.

- There is a greater need on the part of teams within Higher Education to develop the message that employability is not just about skills development in placement but it can be developed in other ways. The use of societies and extracurricular activity is noted as undervalued or misunderstood among students in this particular study as a means to develop professional skills. As such this very important mechanism is being discredited by students in terms of its value.

- There is a need to develop consensus around the tri-part relationship for employability where the students, university and employers/other relevant stakeholders have a part to play. This may be in the form of an employability agreement.

- The conclusions from this study further support the need to develop enhanced awareness and promotion of employability to address any concerns that this is in some way is a trend or fad in education with no legitimacy. It is important to reinforce the importance of employability, similar to academic performance, as a requirement for graduates life-long career progression and success post-graduation.

- This study would suggest that there needs to be clarity given to students around who is responsible for or indeed supports employability development during their academic journey. It would appear that there is a lack of consensus on this and it is obvious that if there is misunderstanding in relation to this then this may impact upon a student's likelihood to seek counsel or advice from the right, or indeed all, available sources.

- With a lack of consensus on employability skill developments impact on performance this will further discourage and dissuade students from engaging and developing skills.

It is necessary to generate greater awareness among students of how employability is not about employment and jobs but it is about enhancing their ability to perform better academically and can support lifelong learning. This message exists but it would appear that it is not fully accepted or embraced by the Millennials.

- It is clear from this study that there is a need for additional careers advice to inform students of potential career opportunities from their degree programmes. With a lack of understanding of what they plan to do post-graduation it is perceived as more difficult for students to meaningfully engage with employability and initiatives to secure maximum benefit and impact on professional development.

- Additional resources need to be dedicated to further enhance student confidence in dealing, and interfacing, with graduate employers. There is distinct lack of confidence although this is one of the most difficult employability skills to develop as it varies greatly from one student to another with little similarities based on demographics or socio-economic backgrounds to guide course teams.

- Course teams have a role to play in encouraging students to reflect more often on their employability skills development and journey to help them decide on how far they have come and give confidence in how much professional development has taken place or when there is a need for more engagement. This is very much a fluid area and subjective in terms of evaluation but self-reflection and employability diaries completed during the academic journey can help achieve this.

Future Research

A number of future research study areas are proposed. This study leaves a number of unanswered questions in relation to how do we predict the likely propensity of a Millennial

student to engage with placement and employability initiatives and the key contemporary, generation specific barriers as to why students do not widely engage with employability and placement interventions? Future research also needs to investigate how part-time students engage with employability and perceive its relevance to their academic journey and personal development. Increasingly students are selecting differing modes of study and as such this is a priority student cohort that require greater investigation and better understanding.

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