

Publishing with dissertation students: A covert strategy for developing psychology students' employability skills?

Dely Lazarte Elliot

With continuing priority given to the development of Higher Education students' employability skills, this paper reflects on the employability framework as well as recommended principles for promoting and embedding employability within and outwith the curriculum. Given existing traditional and innovative approaches for promoting employability skills, this paper is an attempt to share what could be regarded as an effective but covert practice that can considerably contribute to both the development as well as demonstration of psychology students' acquired employability skills. Based on the supervisor's four examples of collaboration – two completed and two ongoing – this paper discusses various considerations for this type of collaboration, ending with the reciprocal lessons learned. This paper encourages other supervisors to consider harnessing and realising the potentially multiple benefits of working further with their dissertation students in the post-supervision stage.

Keywords: *Employability, psychological literacy, publishing dissertations.*

Introduction

MORE THAN a decade ago, Yorke and Knight (2006, p.8) defined employability as:

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

Since then, this definition has continued to generate attention and discussion – extended to distilling what employability skills entail, what the nature of graduate attributes are, what career management skills mean and how the development of such skills are promoted and enacted. According to the recent Framework from The Higher Education Academy on employability in Higher Education (HE), to embed employability is a means of 'providing the opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitude to enable graduates to make successful

transitions and contributions, benefiting them, the economy and their communities' (HEA, 2015). In this respect, three key principles are advocated. Whereas inclusivity, as the first principle, refers to all students being given equitable opportunities to enhance their employability to assist successful career transitions, the second principle, i.e. collaboration, highlights how 'collaborative approaches to learning and teaching can enrich and inform the curriculum and support graduate employability'. Engagement, being the third principle, points to stakeholders' shared understanding of employability as students proactively engage in their own development (HEA, 2015, p.3). Accordingly, promoting employability is beyond embedding it in the programme but also taking a joined-up approach with various stakeholders, including academic and support staff, students, career services, and employers. Irrespective of the type of employability skill to be developed, the three principles – inclusivity, collaboration, and engagement – arguably apply. With a specific

focus on publishing with psychology dissertation students, this is a point that I will return to.

Predictably, employability is very important to students – for the majority of whom academic learning is generally driven by an aspiration to become employable, as seeking a job is typically the next step after university education, subsequently leading to contributions to community and society. Well-developed employability skills are regarded as a vital factor in university experience – to the extent that it can exert a strong influence on student satisfaction (Lenton, 2015). There are also suggestions where support tailored to developing student employability skills is essential in addressing what might be ‘skewed perceptions of the relevance of generic employability skills to [students’] chosen career path’ (Scott et al., 2019, p.692) or simply acquiring more knowledge and skills to enhance students’ chances as they enter the job market (Skipper & Kent, 2015).

The importance of employability skills is also widely acknowledged in psychology. A closely-related term, i.e. psychological literacy or ‘apply[ing] psychological principles to personal, social and organisational issues in work, relationships and the broader community’ is worth mentioning. While primarily focused on psychology, it is likened to employability skills because beyond assisting students in their employment, it considers how graduates’ understanding of psychology is meant to contribute to a better society (McGovern et al., 2010, p.11, cited in Skipper & Kent, 2015, p.35). When Cachia, Lynam and Stock (2018, p.437) undertook a small-scale investigation involving undergraduate psychology students in a modern British university about their understanding of academic success and factors contributing to it, their study led to three key messages:

- a. Academic success is perceived by university students as both a process (personal development) and an end goal (university qualification).
- b. Developing employability skills is

perceived by students to be as important as gaining knowledge for academic success.

- c. Students are aware of their responsibility to take charge of their independent learning but also acknowledge the need for support to develop the required skills.

These messages reinforce the significance of developing employability skills. Collectively, they highlight that employability development is equally as important as knowledge acquisition and while taking responsibility, students welcome and do require support in this process. Yet, at the moment, there seems to be no consistent way of developing employability skills among psychology (or other) students. These valuable skills are learned through traditional and carefully-designed programmes (e.g. Scott et al., 2019) or, at times, through indirect and perhaps somewhat innovative or creative approaches, including use of peer assessment (Cassidy, 2006) or staff-student collaboration (Dickerson et al., 2016). What makes it more tricky, is that even when employability skills or psychological literacy skills have been embedded and subsequently developed among students, students may still not recognise these skills, leading to potential underutilisation (Mahmood, 2014; Skipper & Kent, 2015).

Psychology dissertation projects and employability in one Scottish university

The importance of employability skills and psychological literacy skills and how such skills can be made more visible (Hugh-Jones & Sutherland, 2006), prompted reflection on practices that are likely to lead to this and will be the focus of the discussion as contextualised in one ancient Scottish university. Following the HEA employability framework, ‘graduate attributes’ in the University of Glasgow refer to ‘the academic abilities, personal qualities and transferable skills which all students will have the opportunity to develop as part of their University of Glasgow experience’ (<http://www.gla.ac.uk/>

students/attributes/). These attributes vary and include development of their confidence through project participation, critical thinking and research skills through essay writing, ability to work in a team, problem-solving, and time management – to name but a few (see Nicol 2010, cited in Swingler et al., 2016).

Psychology – recognised as one of the most popular undergraduate majors – reflects the relatively large number of local and international students who come to the University of Glasgow to undertake a British Psychological Society (BPS)-accredited conversion programme in psychology. This conversion programme, jointly delivered by psychologists from the Schools of Education and Psychology, means that students come from varied disciplinary backgrounds with the intention of pursuing either further postgraduate study or a career in psychology. The material covered in the programme is, therefore, equivalent to BPS-accredited undergraduate programmes. Successful completion of this programme makes graduates eligible for the Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership of the Society (GBC), which serves as a stepping stone, so to speak, to the world of psychology. On top of developing a critical understanding of the distinct theories, principles and concepts that reciprocally inform and are likewise informed by psychological research, conversion students are also expected to acquire a broad range of general and specialised skills specific to psychology. Such in-depth appreciation of psychological knowledge and skills is essential as these students proceed to execute empirical psychology projects (or research dissertations) on a specific topic – constituting a third of the programme credits, i.e. 60/180 credits. While working closely with designated supervisors, the process of undertaking research dissertations is arguably a practical task, by which students are able to consolidate their acquired psychological understanding and skills by applying them to real contexts. The final products

are research studies of between 10,000 and 12,000 words.

Converting a dissertation into a peer-reviewed journal article

A continued collaboration between psychology students and supervisors after the formal dissertation is over, i.e. dissertation submitted, marked and with grades officially released, is arguably challenging; this might explain why this is not extensively practised. Yet, an attempt to do so is not only innovative, but potentially offers multiple and tangible benefits to students, supervisors and the academic and research communities. While a publication project requires extra effort and time, likely to be outwith the staff members' workload hours, the outcomes strongly suggest that the pros outweigh the cons. In exploring students' motivation for taking the extra step of wanting to publish their dissertation, there seems to be a common thread arising through my informal discussions with these students, i.e. former psychology conversion programme graduates from the University of Glasgow – two of whom collaboratively engaged and successfully published two academic articles based on two separate psychology dissertation projects, and two other students who are working on their respective manuscripts during the publication of this paper.

On top of the personal satisfaction and a unique learning experience that awaits these students, there is an appreciation of potential benefits in relation to their future career or postgraduate education:

- writing and publishing with supervisors is a rare opportunity, a fun and enriching experience;
- writing with a scholar involves further learning from a scholar;
- having invested a lot of effort to produce novel dissertations, sharing ideas with the research community is fulfilling;
- working in the educational field, being able to write and publish a journal article can strengthen one's credibility in this field;

- being able to publish looks good on one's CV;
- a published paper can give an edge when discussing career plans with future employers, particularly for those who aspire to pursue a career in academia;
- a dissertation-based publication is a practical demonstration for students that they are prepared to go the extra mile.

One international student who successfully published her article shared how during job application as a visiting faculty member at a local university in her home country, presenting her published work enabled her to communicate her subject knowledge. Moreover, it was regarded as tangible evidence of her passion, hard work and dedication to work in this area. Taken together, these four students' responses are a reflection of the messages conveyed in the study undertaken by Cachia et al., (2018) on contributory factors to academic success.

In the sections that follow, the illustrative ideas are primarily based upon these four cases of working with former psychology graduates from the University of Glasgow, i.e. a) with two who collaboratively engaged and successfully published academic articles based on their dissertation projects; and b) with two other students currently working on their respective manuscripts.

Starting with a finished canvas

The idea to develop the dissertation into publishable manuscripts was inspired by a comment made by one of the programme's External Examiners who highlighted the excellent quality of students' dissertations, particularly those who obtained an A grade. The comment came with a recommendation to encourage our students to disseminate their findings via journal publication.

If this is of interest to students, this could be an attractive idea, because the entire project has already been completed. With the literature in the area already reviewed, ethics approval sought, instruments piloted, data collected, analysed and synthesised, and

contributions to knowledge offered, all the basic components for a manuscript are already at hand. Their previous working together is an added bonus as it does not pose any ethics implications should the supervisors need to access the data again. Also, supervisors' and students' foretaste of working with each other acts as a useful consideration when deciding whether it is wise to enter into another collaborative working partnership. Although working towards publication can only happen after the formal supervisor-supervisee relationship has ceased, supervisors may hint even at the beginning of this relationship that working towards publication could be a possibility if students are able to produce high-quality dissertations. This can then serve as a motivator for those who aspire to engage in publication as a possible outcome of their dissertation.

Supervisors' fuller understanding of the publication standards

While some of these dissertations convey sound research and are clearly written leading to excellent 'A' grades, they are typically presented within a dissertation structure and specified word count. They are also written with no specific audience in mind. As a result, some sections can be less focused or more wordy, with some areas being more descriptive than necessary. Although the dissertation may have its potential for publication, this is where the supervisor's expertise may come in handy. As Cachia et al. (2018) suggest, students typically still need support; this is true even for strong students who do not yet have any publication experience. Through a careful scrutiny of existing journals (and/or the journals' reputations), supervisors are in a better position to advise students on the suitability of identified journals for their paper. Together, they can investigate the aims and scope of the journal, its requirements, including the referencing and journal house style, its readers, and the types of articles it publishes. Research-related learning is then taken to the next level, i.e. presentation of research that is able

to withstand reviewers' scrutiny in assessing whether or not it is worthy of publication.

Supervisors' sharing their knowledge of publication standards enables the student to work further in terms of cutting down, editing, adding text and polishing their work in order for the manuscript to conform to the requirements of the target journal, e.g. abstract and manuscript length. Some of the topics commonly discussed during post-dissertation discussions include: routes to identifying a potential journal (e.g. reviewing the cited references, checking journal focus, reviewing types of articles published), pinpointing a debate to contribute to, thinking about which bodies of research/authors might support or critique the presented argument and attending to the journal's editorial style. These topics can be converted into mini-tasks and latterly serve as a checklist after converting the dissertation project into a publishable manuscript. As in their previous supervisor-supervisee relationship, students receive feedback as they finalise the manuscript. Notably, communication and sharing documents even with students who have already returned home, does not pose an issue with the assistance of technology. International students, for example, are therefore, not disadvantaged by not having an opportunity to publish their work.

Instructions, feedback and encouragement

An important point that is worth impressing on students is that the shared aim is that prospective papers should reach the high standards required by peer-reviewed journals. Supervisors can explain why some manuscripts are: a) desk rejected; b) rejected after the manuscript was read by two independent reviewers; c) recommended for 'revise and resubmit' – often requiring substantial revisions; d) given some minor revisions; and e) accepted instantaneously (which is far from common). These potential outcomes are generally well known to the supervisors but not to students, who are more likely to be attempting publication for the first time. Clarity on various possible outcomes then

serves as a reminder to both supervisor and student about the high standards that they need to meet. Likewise, it helps prepare the student for the potential eventuality, i.e. that their effort may not be successful for the first time – part of the harsh reality when it comes to publishing peer-reviewed manuscripts. Even in the face of failure, both parties can consider the valuable learning and skills they may gain through this experience and can support any future publications, particularly if the student is intending either to pursue another postgraduate study in psychology, and/or consider embarking on doctoral research. It is best to strike a balance – being aware that a published article is not guaranteed, but together they are in the business of attempting to make that possible. One benefit of working together is that it affords mutual encouragement and staying optimistic despite the publication challenge that lies ahead. Others may also view it as a means of strengthening one's working relationship with another scholar with whom one shares similar research interests.

In this important process, I would argue that combined specific instructions, further instructions and continuing encouragement need to be offered by the supervisor in equal measure – stressing that student work has the potential but that that potential needs to be realised, i.e. it should meet the journal requirements before it can even be considered for review. Ideally, meetings conclude with a summary of tasks and further considerations following a comprehensive discussion; this takes into account the next course of action and agreed timeline, as well as the other commitments either on the student's or the supervisor's part.

Clear role division

Immediately after agreeing to convert a dissertation into a manuscript for publication, the supervisor and the student may decide on undertaking the different tasks required, i.e. who will initiate and/or complete each task. As no formula exists for how best this can be achieved, there is some leeway for trial and error so long as they come to an agree-

ment. Clarity of roles in dividing the tasks can assist both parties as they take forward each specific area, gradually leading to the final paper. This also enables an agreed timeline to be established with the end product in sight, i.e. a manuscript complete and ready for submission. If students are hesitant to communicate with the editor directly, they can remain the first author since the paper is based on their dissertation, while the supervisor may function as the corresponding author for the first attempt at publication. At times, this is to the student's advantage since the supervisor can support the authenticity and rigour of the research project as well as briefly explain how the manuscript was developed. Even when the supervisor is taking the lead, students may shadow and learn from these processes, e.g. communicating with the editor, writing covering letters, preparing the 'For Review' version of the manuscript and other requirements. Once submitted, the supervisor and supervisee can anticipate responding to the review outcomes by addressing reviewers' comments that are intended to enhance the article. Even in the face of rejection, both parties need to be continually reminded that engaging in the publication task itself is a learning process – perhaps, even stressing employability skills learned – and that regardless of the outcome, there are benefits to be gained.

Conclusion

Having considered various aspects when entering a publication partnership with a psychology student, is co-publishing a dissertation-based journal article worth it?

As a supervisor or if I were to put myself in my students' shoes, my response would be the same – a strong 'Yes'! Firstly, it is worth highlighting that a publication partnership with a former student addresses the previously discussed three key principles that HEA endorses with respect to embedding employability in the curriculum (HEA, 2015). In terms of 'inclusivity', this collaborative working partnership between a supervisor and a student is open to all psychology students,

e.g. full-time or part-time students, local or international students, as long as the quality of their dissertation achieves an excellent grade – an indication of its strong potential for publication. Likewise, the 'collaboration' between the supervisor and the student strongly supports graduate employability. To illustrate, published articles as shown by the two students who managed to publish findings from their psychology projects, are regarded as concrete demonstrations of students' knowledge and skills, e.g. critical thinking, research skills, teamwork, problem-solving, time management (see Swingler et al., 2016). Anecdotal conversations with them and other students who publish articles based on their research highlight the unique and authentic manner by which they learn further concerning research dissemination. In particular, the process enables a deeper appreciation of what each of the following entails: a) speaking to a specific audience; b) knowledge creation; c) articulating ideas more concisely; d) conveying an important argument throughout the paper; and e) demonstrating in-depth understanding of the research topic, research processes and techniques. As one student commented: the writing process is itself a 'morale booster'; seeing a tangible outcome from their effort inspires them to pursue other tasks they never thought they were prepared to attempt.

As a concrete demonstration of employability, this is worth highlighting in the student's CV and perhaps, elaborating on during a job interview, as one former student shared. Linking back to Skipper & Kent's (2015) suggestion, students' effort to publish needs to be accompanied by reflection on all the various knowledge and employability skills they acquired through the process. Recognising these skills (e.g. writing for publication, ability to work in a team, problem-solving and time management) is merely a starting point for harnessing and using them further leading to personal, academic and professional development. As for the third principle, 'engagement' highlights inspiring the stakeholders proactively to seek engagement

and in turn, facilitate continuous development. A publication partnership is a mechanism for further learning and development, which equips psychology students with extra knowledge, understanding and skills that are specific to conveying their ideas, putting forward their voice and disseminating the findings from their research projects for public scrutiny – arguably a combination of practical skills demonstrating employability-related characteristics. This is also a courageous act, which if successful will inspire these students to continue joining scholarly conversations in a particular area. Even as a learning experience alone, their engagement has given them another opportunity to grow and develop personally, academically and professionally, which is a potential source of encouragement that can furnish a sense of achievement.

On final reflection, there should be a recognition that although the supervisor might have greater experience in submitting manuscripts for publication, a publication partnership paves the way for reciprocal learning, as supervisors continue to learn from their students and through the publication process. So here

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- comes the challenge: fellow supervisors may identify a potentially strong dissertation and just be pleased with the grade achieved by the student. The student's programme-related goal has been satisfied after all. However, if as a supervisor you agree that there is some potential still waiting to be realised, then you may consider embarking on a further writing and publishing journey with your student. As argued throughout the paper, it can be a covert strategy for contributing to the development of psychology students' employability skills.

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Dr Dely Lazarte Elliot

Senior Lecturer

School of Education, St Andrew's Building

University of Glasgow, Glasgow

G3 6NH

Dely.Elliot@glasgow.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0711-5719>

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