Employability of Arts graduates in the "knowledge economy": An exploration with implications for practice

by

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B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2009

A GRADUATING PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

(Society, Culture, and Politics in Education)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(VANCOUVER)

August 2013

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Abstract

Liberal arts graduates' experience "delayed workplace integration and professional recognition" (Adamuti-Trache, Hawkey, Schuetze, & Glickman, 2006, p.67). This essay explores the issue of employability for liberal arts students and graduates in the context of "knowledge economy" and the increasingly contingent culture of employment. It starts by presenting the problem of liberal art graduate employability as commonly framed through a discussion of underemployment. It then explores issues of employability at the conjunction of the knowledge economy and the contingent culture. It argues that while individual students are compelled to take responsibilities for developing their employability, the notion of employability is often structurally defined. Brown's (2003) concept of the opportunity trap in education is used to grapple with structural inequities within the labour market in connection to higher education. Impacts of employability discourse and the social and structural limitations of employability are discussed. Current school to work transitional programs in experiential learning, including cooperative education are explored with examples from the University of British Columbia. Suggestions for practice are made for key stakeholders including higher education intuitions, employers, students and graduates.

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Introduction

During my undergraduate studies, I participated in a cooperative education program which enabled me to gain experience by working in two companies before completing my Bachelor of Arts degree. Gaining work experience before graduation was pivotal in shaping the direction of my career path. As part of my cooperative education experience, I learned strategies about how to market my skills in job applications and interviews. In addition, I gained concrete work experiences, such as event organizing and volunteer management, which helped me to expand my understanding about the types of jobs in the labour market and to discover a new area of interest. As a result, when I graduated I had an improved understanding about my skills and how to find employment. After graduation, I applied the knowledge I gained from participation in cooperative education and I found a contract job working for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games as a volunteer coordinator. When my contract at the Olympic and Paralympic Games ended, I worked for two months as an assistant in a large insurance firm. I was eventually able to reconnect with a manager I had worked with during one of my cooperative education jobs and use my previous experience working in a university to get a position as a career advisor.

During the two years I worked in the career advisor role, I met with many liberal arts students and recent graduates in one on one advising sessions. I noticed that many of the students I worked with expressed anxiety about finding a good job after graduation while at the same time they conveyed confusion about what types of jobs they were qualified to apply for with a liberal arts degree. I noticed that the liberal arts students who did not complete a school to work transition program like cooperative education or work extensively outside of a formal transition program were often unable to identify the types of work they wanted to pursue after graduation. These students also struggled to identify the skills they needed to work in those positions and to

articulate what skills they already possessed which would be useful in the workplace. At the same time, most of the students I met through my work as a career advisor believed their degree to be worthwhile and that it would eventually lead to a good job.

I observed how liberal arts students struggled during their transition between school and work and I associated it with my own experience after graduation. The jobs I had worked after graduation were not directly connected to my degree choice and those jobs were also not connected to each other. Three years after my graduation, I had acquired concrete, marketable skills and knowledge, yet I still struggled to articulate what my future career path might look like. I had moved from one contract position to another in very different industries which made it difficult to develop a deep knowledge base and skill set that could be applied to a specific industry. As a result, I am motivated to learn more about the social and structural reasons why liberal arts students experience such a challenging transition from school to work; this interesting and significant phenomenon is the topic of this graduating paper and will be explored through a literature review on graduate employability and underemployment.

Students from liberal arts programs face significant challenges during the transition from school to work and those challenges are the main focus of my literature review. In this essay, I examine the contextual background of the shifting labour market towards the knowledge economy and the growing contingent work culture. I describe how with the knowledge economy, contingent employment is becoming more common as is the reality that not all workers have the same power to control their outcomes in the labour market. Because of my professional background, I believe that individuals have some basic responsibilities to take steps towards directing their labour market outcomes. However, individuals act in a context where employability is socially determined, which put some people in a better position to direct their

labour market outcomes than others. I argue this inequality is tied to social relations such as class, ethnicity, and gender, which results in unequal power distribution among people and their ability to negotiate in the labour market. Individuals also act within a structural context; I describe these structural limitations that impact liberal arts students' transition from school to work. The pressure to pursue post-secondary education in order to obtain better labour market outcomes has not led all individuals to experience enhanced returns on their education. Moreover, the discourse of employability can have a negative impact on student's construction of self-identity. For instance, the importance of soft skills in the labour market is described; such skills are often subjectively measured and thus used as a tactic for exclusion of some groups of people. Delayed integration of liberal arts students into the labour market is discussed along with the idea of recycling graduates back into the education system. Additionally, I describe school to work transition opportunities for liberal arts students. Experiential learning programs, such as cooperative education and unpaid internship, are described and critiqued in view of the opportunities they provide. Finally, I relate the information presented in the essay to practices for key stakeholders, including liberal arts students and graduates; higher education institutions; and employers.

Employability of liberal arts students and research questions

The transition experience from school to work for liberal arts graduates is greatly affected by employability. The concept of employability emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. The creation of the idea of employability represents a shift in government economic policy away from the direct creation of jobs in the economy and move towards an emphasis on individual responsibility to secure and maintain employment (Finn, 2000). Employability is commonly distinguished and measured by an individual's level of combined achievements (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Moreau

& Leathwood, 2006; Tymon, 2011; Yorke, 2004). For liberal arts students and graduates, employability is commonly attributed to graduate under-employment because of expected and idealized employment outcomes associated with higher education. Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2011) note that "throughout the literature there continues to be a sense of a chimerical 'ideal type' of graduate occupation which pervades assumptions and expectations of the kind of employment that individuals should be entering upon graduation from higher education" (p.651). As a result, all graduates who possess a bachelor's degree are expected to find good graduate employment and if their jobs do not measure up to this idealized standard, they may consider themselves to be under-employed (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011).

Liberal arts students are often under-employed. The framing of liberal arts students as under-employed is understood as a general concept because of a lack of consistent definition and use of terminology. Terms such as over-education, over-qualification, and under-utilization have all been used interchangeably to describe under-employment even though these terms have different conceptualizations and meanings (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). Given the different connotations attached to under-employment, it may be challenging to measure the exact degree of under-employment experienced by individual. In a comprehensive definition given by Feldman (1996), under-employment is used to describe the following scenarios:

- person possesses more formal education than the job requires;
- person involuntarily employed in field outside area of formal education;
- person possesses higher-level work skills and more extensive work experience than the job requires;
- person involuntarily engaged in part-time, temporary, or intermittent employment; and

- person earning wages 20% or less than in previous job (for new graduates, wages less than 20% or less than the average of graduating cohort in same major or occupational track). (p.388)

Because of inconsistencies in terminology and measurement, it is difficult to determine if liberal arts students are chronically under-employed. However, there is evidence to support the claim that liberal arts students have poorer labour market outcomes immediately following graduation than compared to graduates from other degree programs. In a study of bachelor degree graduates' experiences in the labour market, Drewes and Giles (2001) analysed the Statistic Canada Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics from 1993 to 1997 and found that "humanities and social sciences wage rates were lower than applied program rates by an average of 9.5%". This study demonstrates that liberal arts students receive lower pay than students from other degree programs. In addition, liberal arts students also experience problems related to their employment status. In a study using Canadian survey data, Walters (2004a) found that humanities graduates are least likely to be employed full time and also most likely to be employed part time and unemployed. As a result, liberal arts students clearly face disadvantages in their transition from school to work.

Generally, under-employment is attributed to the individuals' employability for liberal arts students. Evidence suggests liberal arts graduates face many challenges in terms of employment outcomes. However, this essay pursues an understanding of students' employability from a more holistic viewpoint. Specifically, this essay seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors influence employability for liberal arts graduates?

2. What has been done by liberal arts students and other stakeholders about improving graduate employment outcomes?

3. What can be done to improve the employment situation for liberal arts graduates?

In the next section, I examine how the labour market has changed into a knowledge economy and the influence of contingent work culture. This framing of the modern labour market provides a contextual understanding of the environment where liberal arts graduates look for employment.

The creation of a flexible workforce within the knowledge economy: Understanding the contextual background

Labour market shift towards the knowledge economy

Current education and training policies come from "the belief that we are witnessing a paradigm shift out of Fordism towards a post-Fordist, high-skill, or knowledge driven economy whereby investment in human capital and learning constitutes 'the key' to national competitiveness and social cohesion" (Lloyd & Payne, 2003, p. 85). During the Fordist period in the labour market, employers valued technical skills which were often applied to specific work task and industries. However, globalization and changing technology has pushed labour markets to shift its emphasis and valuation of skills. Within this intensely globalized labour markets "flexibility, product quality, design and innovation are paramount" (Lloyd & Payne, 2003, p. 85). Policy makers adopted new strategies to ensure a healthy domestic economy, including a strategy that promised a new type of economy centred in the knowledge base of the workers. Advanced industrial economies needed to find ways to adapt to the shift away from domestic manufacturing by investing in new "value added commodities for the global marketplace" (Jackson & Jordan, 2000). These value added commodities reside within the workplaces of advanced industrialized economies and their high levels of skills. As a result of the shift in labour

markets, the skills which were previously respected and valued in the Fordist labour market were replaced by different skills. Examples of valued skills in the knowledge economy include communication, team work, problem solving, and the ability to engage in lifelong learning (Lloyd & Payne, 2000). As a result, the changing labour markets have created a new class of worker who has the skills which are valued in the knowledge economy. This perspective is supported by human capital theory which argues that a person's human capital "encompasses an individual's knowledge and skills obtained through education, training and on-the-job experience…Wages are seen either as a return on an individual's investment in human capital or as determined by the marginal utility of the skill attained" (Attewell, 1990, p.425). High skills levels are considered the means to adding value to the process and these commodities are the catalyst for growth which create prosperous economies with high wages and living standards (Jackson & Jordan, 2000).

Individuals within advanced industrialized countries, including Canada, are encouraged to support the knowledge economy through obtaining additional education. There is an assumption that higher education will facilitate the development of the skills needed to become a desirable and valued employee. Secondary level education is no longer considered sufficient schooling for individuals who want to participate in the knowledge economy. As a result, there is a societal expectation for many individuals to pursue education past the secondary level. Massification is characterised by a significant growth in the number of students attending higher education. Statistics Canada states that "the number of students graduating from Canadian universities rose 43% between 1992 and 2007, increasing from 169,000 to 242,000 in 2007" (Statistics Canada, 2009). Moreover, universities are seen as producers of an appropriately trained workforce which can compete in a globalized knowledge economy by meeting the needs

of employers (Boden and Nedeva, 2010, p.37-38). In this environment, individual industries and employers put pressure on education institutions to produce people with the right skills that are sought after by industries (Biemans, Nieuwenhuis, Poell, Mulder, & Wesselink, 2004).

Contingent and flexible work culture

Contingent work culture is a derivate of a new and more competitive globalized economy. It loosely refers to a culture of hiring workers as short-term, temporary employees and represents a shift from a culture of hiring permanent workers. "The term contingency or contingent work was developed by analysts in an attempt to capture this 'new' phenomenon" (Mirchandani et al., 2008, p.171, from Rodgers, 1989). Companies have expanded the use of contingent workers in order to reduce costs by limiting or eliminating training and benefits for temporary employees (Matusik & Hill, 1998, p.681-682). Firms also use temporary workers because it allows them to easily change the number of workers on the payroll at any given time. Hiring contingent help is a low risk strategy to adapt to changing market conditions, such as incorporating new types of work or decommissioning projects which are unprofitable (Matusik & Hill, 1998, p.681-682). Under this line of thinking, temporary workers are expendable and can be easily hired and dismissed; these workers are not recipients of extensive training or professional development because they are brought into a firm on a temporary basis.

There are varying perspectives of contingent culture, its origins, and its core beliefs. For instance, the institutional and free agent perspectives both claim to explain contingent culture, but from very different modes of understanding (Barley & Kunda, 2006). The institutional perspective focuses a "historical and social lens" to understand contingent culture and claims that it undermines workplace security and the social welfare system, which is based on the assumption of full time employment (Barley & Kunda, 2006, p. 46). The free agent perspective

comes from supporters of capitalism and neoliberalism (Barley & Kunda, 2006). Free agent supporters believe entirely in the power of the market and "encourage… people to view themselves as free agents, to develop and market their own skills to the highest bidder, and to view themselves as a business, even when in a full-time job" (Barley & Kunda, 2006, p.47). Temporary work culture manifests itself within firms in many different ways, and firms which adopt this culture employ temporary workers for many different kinds of work. For example, contingent workers known as "knowledge workers" typically act as expert contractors who are self-employed and are hired by firms to work on specific projects or contracts (Fenwick, 2007, p.510). Information technology (IT) contracting is an area of contingent work which is explored by Barley and Kunda (2004). Using the terms "gurus, hired guns, and warm bodies", highly paid IT contractors are described as workers whose roles vary based on their levels of experience, business savvy, and types of work (Barley & Kunda, 2004). These workers eagerly commoditized their human capital and embraced a flexible orientation to work in niche markets where their skills are highly valued. Conversely, there are also cases of workers who are disenfranchised through the expansion of contingent work culture. In a study of clerical workers in a telecommunications company, internal staff restructuring and a new human resource policy based on contingent work principles caused a large number of staff to be dismissed and rehired as temporary workers (Fox & Sugiman, 1999). The employees in Fox and Sugiman (1999) case study worked in the knowledge economy, but not as self-employed and highly-valued commodity contractors. These examples demonstrate how individuals do not benefit equally from the contingent culture of employment. Contingent workers are not always empowered individuals and instead can be exploited by companies as part of a strategy to increase competitive advantage for the firm.

Knowledge economy and the contingent culture of employment

The negative impacts of knowledge economy and contingent work are connected through power relation issues, such as limiting worker's rights and upward mobility in the labour market. Technological developments have led to new forms of work organization, different managerial philosophies, a switch to an international distribution of production, investment, and trade (Jackson & Jordan, 2000). The emphasis on efficiency as a result of globalization and increased competition intersect with contingent culture to negatively impact workers. In particular, it reduces workers' rights and increases exploitation. For example class, ethnicity, and gender are lenses which are often used to explore negative and unforeseen consequences of knowledge economy. Exploitation based on gender is explored in critiques by Sassen-Koob (1984), who found that economic restructuring towards an increasing polarization of high and low wage workers promotes an increased number of migrant women workers from third world countries to the United States. Sassen-Koob argues that "the shift in services and the technically induced downgrading of many jobs have generated an expansion in types of jobs associated with women workers" (p.1152). The gap between high and low income earners will increase in highly industrialized countries because the shift to a service based economy relies on the availability of low-wage workers (Sassen-Koob, 1984, p.1153-1155). However, low-wage workers are not necessarily also low-skilled. Workers can become devalued in the workplace through actions and processes rooted in contingent work practices.

Worker's rights and mobility in the labour market are further reduced in some instances of contingent work. In a qualitative study of low-paid contingent workers in Toronto, Canada, Mirichandi et al., (2008) found:

> This new economy is characterized by the use of temporary and part-time employees who do not receive the same protection and benefits as the full-time permanent workforce, and who can be dispensed of or shifted around quickly and expediently by employers. (p.171)

Employees in contingent workplaces are not always nurtured, but instead can be devalued, exploited, and rendered disposable. Smith (2001) describes this as a restrictive model which "seeks to enhance organizational adaptability and efficiency by turning labour into [an] easily manipulatable quantity, primarily by bringing in and discarding labor according to fluctuations in demand" (p.37). In addition, "most workers lack the skills, and hence the bargaining power, to make the economy their oyster, to manipulate jobs and labor markets to their advantage" (Smith, 2001, p. 158). It is important to recognize in Smith's analysis that workers without bargaining power are not necessarily lacking skills, but that some skills are devalued in the workplace. At Reproco, a company which specializes in providing outsourced copy room workers, the positions of the temporary workers were devalued and this devaluation manifested itself through the use of inferior materials in the workplace, disrespectful treatment by other workers in the firm, and divisions in identification and recognition (Smith, 2001, p.24-52). Furthermore, Smith found that temporary workers' positions "were located at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy; and the jobs offered extremely limited opportunities for upward mobility" (p. 36).

This exploration of knowledge economy and contingent work has provided a contextual background for understanding the labour market environment which students and graduates enter when they look for work. This environment can be seen as highly competitive where companies seek profits sometimes at the expense of workers' rights. Power is not equally held between employers and employees. Also, employees have different levels of bargaining power based on their positionality in particular social structures. The next section talks about employability and

transition in the context of liberal arts students and graduates. It brings together my understanding of employability from a professional perspective and the literature review to argue that employability is a complex and layered concept, influenced by personal, social, and structural factors.

Exploring employability and transition issues for liberal arts students

Given my professional background as a career advisor working in a university, I believe the actions taken by individuals can possibly have important impacts on peoples' careers and employability. Moreover, I believe that universities are taking steps to support the experiences of students as they transition out of the university by providing links to employment and learning opportunities, such as experiential learning programs. However, as a result of my research, I have also come to a deeper understanding of social and structural limitations which affect liberal arts graduates employability and university to work transition. Employability is influenced by a combination of individual, social and structural factors. This argument combines information from my literature review and my professional understanding of employability which I have acquired through work experience. In the next section, I review the impact of individual actions on employability for university graduates. I critically analyse social limitations of employability through a discussion about employability, skills, and their implications for university graduates. I also discuss structural limitations which influence employability and transition through a review of opportunity trap and massification.

Individual responsibility for employability and transition

Broadcasting messages which argue for individuals to take action in order to build their own careers was an important part of my job as a career advisor. These messages deeply influence my understanding of graduate employability through the lens of individual

responsibility. The message of individual responsibility for career was a reoccurring theme in my interactions with students through individual and group advising settings. Secondary messages included actions and decisions students could take to build their careers. For example, in my role I taught students employability skills by encouraging students to develop basic job search skills such as how to write a job application and look for work before graduation. In advising sessions, I often encouraged students to pursue interest areas and to explore career interests through gaining experience and reflecting upon these experiences in order to better understand their individual passions. These steps taken by students to improve job search skills and hone interest areas are not unique for liberal arts students. In fact, the steps can be adapted by students and graduates in any area of study. However, for liberal arts students and graduates the lack of direct connection between school and work (Walters, 2004b) and emphasis on soft skills make improving job search skills and clearly identifying interest areas especially important.

The argument for individual responsibility for employability is supported by my experiences meeting students as a career advisor. For example, I met some students in advising sessions who did not address job search or career exploration until very near to or after graduation. In these cases, personal inaction created significant roadblocks for those students in their transition out of school into the workplace. In some cases, inaction caused a prolonged transitional period for finding work because graduates missed out on opportunities which were only open to current students, such as school supported transition programs like cooperative education or government sponsored wage subsidy programs like Canada Summer Jobs Program[1]. This type of personal delay is not unique to liberal arts graduates and is found in graduates from

[1] The Canada Summer Jobs Program is only available to individuals returning to full time school (Service Canada, 2013)

all disciplines. Nevertheless, my observations of students demonstrate that individual responsibility is an important factor in employability; individuals who do not take any actions or delay taking steps to improve their employability seem to be worse off than students who are proactive about leveraging their employability.

As a result of my work experience as a career advisor, I believe that individual graduates can influence their career outcomes. I do not mean to say individual graduates can completely control their career outcomes and employability, because there are many factors beyond individual control which are discussed in the next few sections of this essay. My background in career advising gives me a unique insight into the understanding of employability from the perspective of individual responsibility. In the remainder of this section, I define employability from an individual perspective and review the social and structural limiting factors impacting employability and transition for liberal arts students. I focus on the notion of employability and skills in the next section and explain how interpretations of these concepts tend to individualize a social problem.

Social limitations on employability and transition

Employability and skills. A common definition cited in the literature (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tymon, 2011) describes employability as "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Yorke, 2004, p. 8). This definition of employability focuses on how the concept applies to individuals. In this interpretation, employability is acquired through a compilation of accomplishments which a single person acquires over time. Individuals are considered to be on an equal playing field and are set apart

based on their achievements. However, this viewpoint does not address how society is implicated in constructing employability and as a result it hides social problems by blaming issues related to employability on individual mismanagement. There are deep social inequities associated with gender, ethnic, and cultural norms. People with more cultural and economic capital will have more opportunities to improve their employability (Walters, 2004b, p.102).

In order to gain a better understanding of the social aspect of employability, the underlying conception of skills must be more closely examined. To start with, the value of skills may be understood in a social context within which Eurocentric biases may prevail (Dunk, 1996). The skills, experiences and personal attributes valued by employers are often based on a western, Eurocentric value system which may favor western cultural norms (Dunk, 1996). A measure of subjectivity is built into how skills are valued and can lead to discrimination in the acquisition and use of skills. For example, making eye contact and smiling when meeting a new person in a networking situation is a western cultural norm describing how someone is supposed to act, but this action may not fit the practices of people with different cultural norms. As a result, certain groups of people may be systematically disadvantaged in their pursuit of becoming employable because they must adopt a value system which is different from their native culture. In addition, skills may be understood as a function of supply and demand. For instance, Dunk (1996) states:

> As certain abilities become widespread throughout the population, they are no longer seen as skills, and the social status and economic rewards that had formerly been accrued to those who possessed the skills decline. (p.104)

Skills may therefore not be measured and valued based on merit, but instead interpreted based on its scarcity. Additionally, Darrah (1997) provides a frame through which we can view skills and argues that skills do not exist independently from individuals and workplaces. He states, "skill

requirements are constructed through a social process" (Darrah, 1997, p.266). In this process, some skills are valued as more important than others based on workplace needs. Additionally, skill requirements are widely used to "describe both the attributes of jobs and the characteristics of people that allow them to perform those jobs" (Darrah, 1997, p.249). However, the common understanding of skills as possessed only by individuals reinforces our tendency to overlook how jobs can impact skills. Darrah describes when workers are seen to possess a specific bundle of skills "our attention is thus directed to whether incumbents possess particular skills, rather than how their jobs shape their learning or the incentives they have to perform at work" (p.252). Finally, the gender perspective is also important in the understanding of skills as socially constructed because some skills, particularly skills associated with women's work such as caring, are typically perceived as being "natural" and are therefore devalued (Dunk, 1996, p.105).

Relating our subjective and socially constructed understanding of skills back to employability, there is a "pecking order" which results in "the 'positional' aspect of employability [which] assumes major importance in understanding who will find elite employment" (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams, 2003, p.111). The idea of positionality relates back to how employability is more than a characteristic of individuals and is heavily influenced by how society constructs and measures employability using a western values system. Within the labour market, some people will be at a positional advantage to obtain the most coveted jobs because their employability is perceived to be higher due to greater cultural, and economic capital (Walters, 2004b, p.102). Conversely, other people will be positioned at a significant disadvantage within the pecking order for employment because they are perceived as lacking in employability due to social and cultural differences. Overall, the social construction of skills is often hidden within the popular discourse of employability. As a result, "issues of inequity

disappear within this discursive framing, with achievement and/or failure in the labour market located solely as the responsibility of the individual" (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, p.310).

Impact of employability on students and the role of education. The understanding of social construction of skills and the built in positional advantage which some individuals have over others in access to employment conflicts with the individual notion of employability. Yet it is within this paradox, that students construct meaning and ideas about their own employability. This occurs as they interact with the labour market. Tomlinson (2010) describes "students' and graduates' engagement with the labour market [as] active, on-going and in the process of continual negotiation: graduates are making active and meaningful choices, reflexively constructed and linked to agency and self-identity". Therefore, the individual experiences of students contribute to their interpretation and understanding of employability. These experiences with the labour market ultimately directly impact their own understanding of agency and self-identity. Moreover, students are able to go beyond individual conceptualizations of employability when prompted to think specifically about issues of discrimination and bias in employability. In an analysis of student responses from inner-city London universities after 1992, Moreau and Leathwood (2006) found:

> Aspects of identity such as gender or ethnicity were not spontaneously identified as exerting an influence over their employment, although different employment-related outcomes depending on, for example, gender… Yet the possibility of discrimination and the potential impact of gender and ethnicity on employment opportunities were acknowledged when graduates in this study were specifically asked about these issues, some graduates were conscious that their gender, ethnicity and/or disability might create additional difficulties. (p. 316-317)

The understanding of employability by individual students is built through their unique lived experiences. As a result, understanding employability as more than an individual responsibility may be easier for some students depending on their own position in the labour market and the experiences they have had so far in their career development.

In addition, enrolling in higher education is seen as a step students can take to improve their employability. Students believe higher education institutions provide their graduates with the skills demanded by the labour market; students therefore believe there is a connection between credentials of higher education and specific skills which are thought to directly impact an individual's employability (Tomlinson, 2010). The connection between schools and employability is directly related to the knowledge economy. Educational institutions are given greater responsibility for producing graduates with the skills required to participate in the knowledge economy (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Adamuti-Trache, Hawkey, Schuetze, & Glickman, 2006). Moreover, the connection between schools and employability is established before students reach higher education. Hyslop-Margison (2000) conducted an analysis of the Career and Personal Planning (CAPP) high school curriculum in British Columbia, Canada. Hyslop-Margison claims that this type of curriculum "reflects the growing trend towards skills education as a way to enhance the occupational relevance of schools".

Structural limitations on employability and transition

In addition to socially constructed limitations of employability and transition, there are important structural constraints placed on graduates. These structural limitations are driven by market practices. Students pursue individual interests to improve their chances of obtaining employment through additional education. However, when more and more individuals are able to pursue higher education, there are impacts and negative consequences related to the scarcity of

employment opportunities in the labour market. In the next section, I describe structural limitations, including opportunity trap, massification of higher education, and increasing credential standards.

Education and the opportunity trap

Opportunity trap. Brown (2003) refers to the idea of the opportunity trap to explain the imbalanced relationship between people, labour force, and education. The opportunity trap is a concept which describes the promised opportunity related to pursuing further education and actual limited occupational opportunities available to graduates. As more individuals from a wide array of social classes are convinced of the increasing necessity to pursue higher education, the elite job opportunities related to obtaining a degree are lost because the degree which was once a means to differentiate between people in the labour market has become too common. The rise in the number of graduates has also not been met with an equivalent growth in the number of elite job opportunities (Brown, 2003, p.150-151).

One of the key arguments Brown (2003) makes is:

> …opportunity depends on the opportunity of others. Absolute performance is not sufficient because cashing in one's opportunities depends on access to scarce credentials, jobs, and networks. For societies, this means that what can be offered to the winners cannot be offered to the population as a whole. There are simply not enough good jobs to go around. An important part of the attraction of elite universities or blue-chip companies is the fact that they offer social status and lifestyles that are in short supply. They are sought after because they are exclusive rather than inclusive. (Brown, 2003, p.150)

Brown's argument about diminishing returns on individual investment into education caused by disproportionate numbers of people pursuing higher education is supported by research from

other scholars. Research into "learning and work relations in capitalist societies" conducted by Livingstone (2003) demonstrates "formal educational qualifications now clearly exceed the formal job entry requirements in many advanced industrial countries" (p. 363). Livingstone describes a six-fold growth in participation in post-secondary education in Canada from 1960s to 1990s and a rapid expansion in participation by adults from four percent to thirty five percent during the same time frame. This phenomenon extends past a worker's experience finding initial employment to an ongoing, lifelong pursuit of higher academic credentials (Brown, 2003).

Massification of higher education in the opportunity trap. Massification of higher education is one of the policies which has reinforced the opportunity trap. As part of Adamuti-Trache et al. (2006) review of British Columbia graduates from 1996, fifty percent of liberal arts graduates identified "job oriented goals" as a goal for their education (p.63). As more and more people seek higher education, there are more graduates competing for the same or similar jobs. As a result, "many graduates find themselves in inferior jobs, despite having the same 'knowledge' as their senior colleagues. This has weakened the differentiating power of knowledge (credentials) in the legitimation of labour market and workplace inequalities" (Brown, 2003, p.160). The concept of knowledge economy underpins the concept of massification. The knowledge economy is built on the assumption that human capital can be acquired through schooling. Therefore, individuals who want to be employed in the knowledge economy are directed to pursue further schooling as a step to acquire labour market skills. This has the effect of pushing more and more people into the education system in order to acquire the proper credentials to compete in the labour market. However, massification does not benefit all students equally. "Research shows that women graduates from 'new' universities, minority ethnic

groups and/or working class backgrounds are likely to benefit less from having a degree in terms of employment opportunities and/or salary" (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, p.307).

Rise in credential standards. The rise of credential standards, also known as credentialism, describes the increasing requirements for professions. Brown (2003) compares this to monetary inflation, using ideas of supply and demand to explain how as more people attain higher level credentials, others are forced to also seek equal or higher credentials and specializations in order to compete in the labour market, thus resulting in an inflation of required credentials for work opportunities. The rise in credential standards can also reinforce inequity within social classes because individuals who have greater economic capital will be able to more easily meet the financial costs of pursuing additional education (Brown, 2003). However, "there are a large number of graduates, particularly those of liberal arts programs, who are in jobs not related to their schooling" (Walters, 2004b, p. 116). As a result, some graduates may not have degrees which match their job requirement and this leaves many graduates under-employed during their transition from school to work (Walters, 2004).

Impact of employability on liberal arts students' transition into the workplace

Employability and self-identity construction of graduates

Self-identity is constantly being re-negotiated and re-constructed for university graduates (Tomlinson, 2010). The emphasis on personal responsibility for employment outcomes combines with a socially constructed and an idealized conceptualization of good graduate jobs to create a high pressure environment for graduates. Graduates also internalize and reproduce the messages they receive about employability, especially because university practices and policies are heavily influenced by employability discourse (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Using data collected over

telephone surveys and semi-structured interviews of students from an inner-city university in England after 1992, Moreau and Leathwood (2006) found:

> Graduates put a great deal of emphasis on their individual aptitudes and skills, thereby reflecting rather than challenging current policy discourses of employability...These graduates reflected the discourse of employability in their expectations that an increase in skills and qualifications will translate into benefits in the labour market. They assumed that systematic returns would accrue from doing a work placement, or conversely they blamed their lack of experience as a major factor hindering their career development. (p.314-316)

As a result, graduates internalize the common discourse of individual based responsibility for employability. This process feeds into the development of their own identities. Failure to obtain employment is therefore seen as a personal failure instead of a holistic problem based in personal, social, and structural issues.

Graduates may also reproduce socially dominant forms of inequity in the labour market, because they are constructing their self-identity based on dominant ideas of employment and employability. Tomlinson (2010) states, “for instance, a graduates’ location within a particular social structure (e.g. their class background, gender, or ethnicity) may propel them towards a particular labour market they perceive to be appropriate based on these culturally derived dispositions”. For example, gender bias within employability exists within the wage gap between men and women’s income. Adamuti-Trache et al. (2006) demonstrate in their study of Canadian graduates one and five years after graduation that among liberal arts graduates men

consistently make more money[2] than women in categories of graduates over the age of 25. Therefore, some graduates limit their perspectives of what types of employment are suitable for them based on socially constructed and restrictive conceptions, thus reproducing the status quo of exclusion based on class, ethnicity or gender.

“Soft” skills

One of the reasons that liberal arts student can easily find themselves in different industries after graduation is the broad application of their soft skills. “The term ‘soft skills’ has come to refer to a whole range of behaviours and communicative techniques that are integral to group dynamics and thus to workplace ‘culture’” (Jackson & Jordan, 2000). Borrowing from Moss and Tilly (1996), soft skills are defined in this essay as “skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behaviour rather than to formal or technical knowledge” (p.253). A binary is created between formal or technical knowledge and soft skills. In this binary, soft skills tend to be devalued in comparison to formal or technical knowledge.

The demand for skills is shaped by developments in the workplace, such as growth of service sector (Grulis & Vincent, 2009). The University of Toronto compiled a list of fifteen top competencies which are sought after by firms, all of which are considered soft skills. These top competencies are “communication, collaboration/teamwork, continuous learning, innovation/creativity, leadership, problem solving, self-management, adaptability, results-oriented, relationship management, global/cultural fluency, initiative, interpersonal, customer service/obsession, judgement” (University of Toronto, 2012). These competencies are Canadian business’s version of knowledge economy skills which are highly valued and sought after. Yet,

[2] Except within the under 25 years old category studied one year after graduation where the participants made an equal median income of $31,500 (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2006, p. 62).

soft skills can also be used as a legitimizing discourse for discriminatory practices in the workplace.

Considering that liberal arts graduates have less formal and technical knowledge, they rely on their soft skills to find entry level employment. However, the process of assessment and measurement of soft skills in job candidates is subjective. Individual employer's values and cultural beliefs influence the process interpretation and measurement of soft skills. Moss and Tilly (1996) reason that when hiring employees, "employers may discriminate against whole classes of people based on (correct or incorrect) perceptions of the mean productivity (or variation in productivity) for these classes" (p.254). This means that employers may decide to overlook candidates based on their perceived lack of soft skills because they belong to a group associated with specific negative stereotypes. These decisions are not based on an accurate evaluation, but instead grounded in deeply held assumptions based on class, ethnicity, and gender. For instance, in a study of employment problems of Black men in America, Moss and Tilly found that employers avoid hiring Black men because they "perceive Black men as possessing fewer soft skills, along both dimensions [i.e. interaction and motivation type soft skills]" (p.270). In this study, "three factors underlie negative evaluations of Black men as workers: racial stereotypes, cultural differences between employers and young Black men, and actual skill differences" (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p.270). Consequently, "re-defining personal attributes and behaviours as skills puts individuals in a double blind: legitimatizing gendered and racialized assumptions while ignoring the structural aspects of work that create and reinforce such assumptions." (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009, p. 599). For liberal arts graduates the emphasis put on soft skills can be understood to be problematic because it uncovers discrimination such as

racism which is based on subjective interpretation of skills founded on assumptions and cultural values.

Delayed workplace integration for liberal arts graduates

In comparison to graduates who study in areas with connections to specific industries, such as applied sciences, liberal arts graduates experience "delayed integration and professional recognition" in the labour market (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2006, p.67). Because liberal arts students enter the workforce without many industry specific skills, it takes them longer to build experience and become established within their chosen industry. Liberal arts graduates show different patterns of employment goal setting when compared with graduates from applied programs. In a study of liberal arts graduates in British Columbia, Adamuti-Trache et al. (2006) found that liberal arts graduates take more time to negotiate their career opportunities and this impacts their ability to achieve their goals one year after graduation. Adamuti-Trache et al. also found that liberal arts graduates do increase their earnings over time, but the salary gap between liberal arts graduates and applied program graduates only shrinks from 19% to 16% over the first five years after graduation. Overall, the Adamuti-Trache et al. study demonstrates that liberal arts graduates have a longer transition time when moving from school to work and establishing themselves and their career goals.

While working as a career advisor, I observed many liberal arts graduates struggle through a period of uncertainty while they tried to identify what skills they possessed. This struggle typically occurred during the process of identifying what industry to focus their job search. In my opinion as a career advisor, many graduates do not clearly understand what skills they have from school or previous life experience and how these skills may be applied to a potentially different workplace setting.

> To effectively enhance employability and the immediacy of adding value to enterprises, not only must businesses articulate what they need and want from graduates, it is also important that graduates are aware of what they are learning and its uses in the workplace. (Jackson. 2009, p.55)

Furthermore, identifying skills is a particularly difficult challenge for new graduates, because the soft skills they have are commonly described using vague language within job descriptions. I encountered many students in career advising sessions who did not have the industry based knowledge needed to understand the jargon language used in job descriptions. In order for a job seeker to understand the exact skill or type of knowledge which is desired in a vague job description, they must either be closely familiar with that industry or the employer must clearly define it for the job seeker. This typically does not happen and causes the new graduate job seeker to be more confused about how to best market themselves in an application.

"Recycling" graduates back into the education system

Combining the beliefs that employability is an individual responsibility and that liberal arts graduates do not have sufficient skills to find a job, many graduates turn to further education in an attempt to get skills and improve their employability. In a 2012 survey of Baccalaureate graduates in British Columbia, 65% of respondents in the survey of arts and science graduates confirmed they took further education since their graduation (2012 Survey of 2010 Baccalaureate Graduates, Arts and Sciences). This practice of "recycling" or "obtaining an additional post-secondary credential that is not designated to be a continuation of the first credential" has become a common phenomenon (Walters, 2003). "The popular belief that a university degree provides knowledge, while a college diploma provides concrete skills that are more valuable in the modern labour market has led a number of university graduates to pursue shorter-term

technical programs at community colleges after university graduation" (Walters, 2003, p.475). However, not all graduates' choices to recycle into a new educational program result in increased earning (Walters, 2003). Overall, the phenomenon of recycling grows out of credentialism while further subjecting students to the opportunity trap.

Employability and rise of temporary work culture: Impact on training and support

Employers are increasingly influenced by the individual focused ideas of employability which remove them from the responsibility of training employees. Within the growing influence of contingent culture, businesses and non-profit organizations are increasingly reluctant to fund employee training, especially training which teaches transferable skills (see Jackson, 2009). The responsibility for developing skilled workers is being pushed on to higher education institutions, which are criticised for producing graduates who do not possess the soft skills desired by the knowledge economy (Jackson, 2009).

Additionally, the creep of temporary work culture is influencing employers' expectations about the skill levels which graduates should possess. Barley and Kunda (2004) noted the "sink or swim" philosophy of management (p.178). Within this philosophy "managers expected contractors to arrive fully proficient and ready to work, to 'hit the ground running.' They threw contractors directly into the work and said they had no qualms about demanding agencies replace contractors who floundered, much like they would return any other defective good" (Barley & Kunda, 2004, p.178). While this harsh philosophy of management is commonly used for highly skilled contractors, it is also beginning to influence the thinking of employers when dealing with other employees. A Globe and Mail article titled "When employers duck responsibility for training, Canada loses" picks up on the frame of employer expectations when it states "there is a clear disconnect between what universities think they're delivering and what employers say

they're getting. Business, naturally, wants fully formed employees, ready to step in and become instant producers" (Mckenna, 2013, para.17).

School to work transition: Opportunities for liberal arts students

Connecting students to the workplace through experiential learning programs

Graduate transition from school to work can be assisted through targeted higher education programs with support from employers. In this section, I explain how experiential learning programs connect students to the workplace. There are many different types of school to work transition programs and I will focus on two common varieties – cooperative education and internships. Within the discussion, I will examine how transition opportunities can be reserved for elite students, thus excluding participants who might benefit from the learning opportunity.

Experiential learning programs. Student learning and graduate employability can be supported through participation on experiential learning programs. These types of programs aim to extend learning beyond the classroom and to "make 'knowledge' into 'know-how'" (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999, p. 240). Experiential learning programs are usually voluntary, but can sometimes be incorporated into a mandatory credit-bearing course (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). These programs typically involve bringing students out of the classroom into a community setting and can come in many forms, often known as community based learning (CBL). There are six types of CBL options identified by Mooney and Edwards (2001) including: out of class activities, volunteering, service add-ons, internships, service learning, and service learning advocacy. Service learning is described as an important learning opportunity where students interact with the community by providing a service to acquire and apply skills in a curricular credit course; additionally, structured reflection adds to the rich learning opportunity for students (Mooney and Edwards, 2001). All of these CBL options provide valuable learning

experiences for students and many of them engage students in the acquisition of skills. This essay focuses on internship and cooperative education because they are the CBL experiences which are most directly linked to the school to work transition.

Mooney and Edwards (2001) describe internship, practicum, and cooperative education as one subset of CBL experiences which "illustrates practical application of skills/knowledge, fosters development of new skills/knowledge, acquires practical 'hands-on' experience, applies discipline specific theory and methodological skills" (p.198). School based internships and practicums as part of mandatory credit based courses where "students serve the community by relating course content, existing skills and experience to real life settings" are not broadly applied to all students in liberal arts programs (Mooney & Edwards, 2001, p.186). As a result, in this essay I limit my exploration to cooperative education and optional and unpaid internships as examples of optional opt-in learning opportunities for students.

Cooperative education. Cooperative education is a form of experiential learning; it is also known as work integrated learning. Cooperative education is an "intensive and programmatic approach to the expanded classroom" and was first started in 1906 at the University of Cincinnati (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999, p. 243). It typically mixes classroom study with periods of employment (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Some of the benefits of work-integrated learning are: to improve graduate employability by building "confidence in their capabilities in professional practice"; build "appreciation of the importance of employability skills"; and to provide an "introduction to the workplace, enhancing understanding of workplace values and culture and developing professionalism" (Jackson, 2013, p.101).

There is high demand for experiential learning programs at universities. For example, the University of British Columbia (UBC) Arts Cooperative Education Program[3] received 367 applications from undergraduate students during the Fall 2011 recruitment cycle and only accepted 188 new people into their program that year (UBC Arts Co-op, 2013a). Clearly, there is high level of interest in the programs, but there are only enough resources to support roughly half of interested students. High levels of interest in experiential learning is also common outside of Canada. For example, Swirski and Simpson (2012) discuss work integrated learning within the Australian context, stating "an increase in student numbers, alongside greater expectations for such experiential learning from a range of university stakeholders, has led to this burgeoning of WIL [work-integrated learning] practices" (p.239).

Within a challenging and competitive admissions environment, academic achievement is used as one of many qualifications that student applicants must meet in order to get into experiential learning programs. For example, the UBC Arts Cooperative Education Program requires a 72 percent academic average to be admitted into the undergraduate program (UBC Arts Co-op, 2013b). Therefore, students with low academic achievements are not considered to be competitive candidates. In addition to grades based screening of students, the UBC Cooperative Education Program evaluate student candidates based on their written communication skills assessed through an application package including a resume, cover letter, and other documents; the candidates are short listed for in-person interviews where they are further evaluated on their communication skills, demonstrated leadership, time management, and teamwork qualities as well as how well they demonstrate "professionalism, maturity, enthusiasm,

[3] UBC claims to be the "largest co-operative university in western Canada" (UBC Arts Co-op, 2013a).

flexibility and career motivation" (UBC Arts Co-op, 2013b). This application process ensures that only top students are entered into the program. Admission into this specific cooperative education program acts as a pre-screening process with the hope that the students with the highest likelihood to succeed in work placements are given opportunities. The UBC Arts Cooperative Education website states "given students compete for co-op jobs once they are in the program, we strive to admit students who are well-rounded, and would be strong ambassadors for our program when they are meeting and working with employers" (UBC Arts Co-op, 2013b). Tough admission standards presumably helps to recruit and retain employers to the programs by framing the program as exclusive to top students only. However, these admission practices exclude many students from useful experiences because not all students will fit the requirements for this program. Therefore, using academic averages in the admissions requirements creates an unnecessary barrier for students to obtain work experience during their time in higher education.

Cooperative education programs, such as the one at UBC, are currently too small to meet the needs of all students at the institution. In their current structure, they do not have the capacity to admit all students who are interested in their program, yet the actual number of admitted students is small when compared to the total number of eligible students within the faculty. Specifically, within the UBC Faculty of Arts, the cooperative education program received less than 400 applications in the 2011-2012 year, but there are more than 5,000 second and third year students within the faculty (UBC Enrollment Services, 2013). While not all 5,000 students are eligible to apply, there is presumably still a large gap between the number of eligible students and number of interested students reflected in actual applications. As a result, there is a comparatively low level of student engagement in experiential learning in part due to a lack of capacity of the institution.

Internships: Reinforcing inequality in transitional opportunities. A different, but commonly used approach by students to gain work experience is through participating in internship or volunteering outside of a formal school program[4]. Schugurensky and Mundel (2005) describe the "intern volunteer" as a person "who works in an unpaid or poorly paid capacity in order to gain entry into a particular segment of the labour market" (p. 1004). Students and new graduates learn about internship opportunities through many of the same methods used to find paid jobs, including online job boards, social media, company websites, and word of mouth recommendations. Some universities, including UBC, offer voluntary non-credit internship programs for liberal arts students.

Many internships function like a short-term work contract. These internships do not guarantee employment with the company after completing the internship. Schugurensky and Mundel (2005) state "this category could be understood more as 'unpaid work for self-benefit' than as volunteer work" (p. 1004). However, Schugurensky and Mundel also concede that "if the intern does not obtain a paid job as a result of the internship, the real self-benefit will be very low, even if the motivation to volunteer was based on self-benefit" (p. 1004).

These volunteer interns are typically either people who have little or no experience because of age or career history, or whose experience and education are not recognized (Schugurensky & Mundel, 2005). New graduates belong to the former category and commonly look to internships as a method of attaining marketable skills, work experience, and industry network contacts. Internships are often marketed as a development opportunity for motivated

[4] Internships can take place as a part of a voluntary or mandatory school curriculum and can also be pursued independently during or after graduation. This section focuses on internships which exist separately from formal school programs.

graduates to jumpstart their careers. The learning that takes place within internships is typically considered to be informal learning, or learning by doing. Getting a foot in the door of a company by proving value and potential during an internship is a common strategy for interns. A key benefit of internships to students is to build contacts and networks so that job seekers can "make their names known for when paid work opportunities became available" (Holmes, 2006, p.249). Meaningful internships have "rich mentoring experiences". However, employers can be unwilling to invest resources to support mentorship. In the Holmes (2006) study of museum volunteers, "the host museums reported that the biggest constraints from taking a volunteer placement, whether independently or as part of a formal university or college programme, were resources, usually staff time and work space" (p.248). As a result, a rich mentoring relationship may be more a "matter of luck, rather than design" (Holmes, 2006, p.248).

Skill development is highly sought after by graduates who believe in the value of developing skills through experience-based learning or work experience programs. Internship programs within recognizable and reputable companies market themselves directly towards senior undergraduate students and their desires to build experience. An example of a volunteer intern program is with the popular athletic wear retailer lululemon athletica, and the internship program called "Make Your Mark," which is advertised as "a unique learning environment that attracts, retains and develops world-class leaders. If you're a magnetic self-starter who's already making an impact in your school and community, we want to talk to you!" (lululemon internships, 2013). From my perspective as a career advisor, the lululemon athletica internships advertisement indicates that the company wants to hire students who already possess work or volunteer experience when they state that candidates should already be making an impact. Therefore, it is likely that the students who are hired into these internships will already have paid

work experience, but choose to work in an internship role because of the unique opportunities provided by the employer.

Previous experience is not always required for internships, which make them an attractive option for soon to be or recent graduates without work experience. The Vancouver Aquarium has a popular internship program which advertises "no previous experience required" on their job descriptions for internships. For example, the Vancouver Aquarium's Event Planning Internship (2013) advertises that "this internship is designed to introduce practical experience in event planning and management. Support our External Relations team and develop your event planning, coordination and administrative skills during this three month placement".

Many internships require commitments of multiple months where interns work full time hours without wages or for a small stipend yet unpaid internships are not very helpful in securing paid work. For example, the Vancouver Aquarium describes one of their internships as:

> The Event Planning Internship program requires a commitment of three to four months. The schedule is 37.5 hours per week consisting of 5, 7.5 hour days. Alternate/flexible schedules will be considered and some evening work may be required. This is an unpaid (volunteer) internship.

However, unpaid internships have been shown to be less beneficial than paid internships in terms of securing paid employment afterwards. A 2013 National Association of Colleges and Employers survey of over 38,000 college students from the United States demonstrates that "63.1 percent of paid interns received at least one job offer. In comparison, only 37 percent of unpaid interns got an offer; that's not much better than results for those with no internship—35.2 percent received at least one job offer" (Class of 2013: Paid interns outpace unpaid peers in job offers, salaries). The news report does not clearly state why unpaid internships are not rewarded

by employers with equal hiring rates when compared to paid internships. The report also does not clearly explain if job offers are for additional internships or for general paid employment. However, this statistic does suggest that paid internships are more beneficial to students than unpaid ones in terms of ability to find future paid employment. From my perspective as a career advisor, I speculate that the unequal rates of employment could be attributed to assumptions made by hiring employers. For example, employers may assume that paid interns typically receive more responsibility than unpaid interns; therefore unpaid interns may be assumed to have demonstrated less overall responsibility in their previous experience.

Internship culture and temporary work culture both share a belief in human capital theory and individual-focused conception of employability. The internship culture stems partially from a power imbalance between graduates and employers. With a surplus of graduates flooding the labour market, employers are empowered be more selective about who they hire. This power imbalance leads graduates to need more work experience in order to make themselves competitive in the job market. Employers benefit from the internship culture because they get to know interns on a short term basis and are able to evaluate them closely as potential future employees. This practice of using temporary employment as a screening process is common in contract work culture as well (Barley & Kunda, 2004).

There is a societal cost to the culture of unpaid internship because it perpetuates a classed based bias against people from low income households. For graduates who are not financially secure enough to be able to sustain themselves for months without a steady income, they are deprived of the opportunity to gain experience or build upon existing experience through participating in internships. The Holmes (2006) study of museum volunteers demonstrates that "evidence that aspiring museum professionals need to rely on relatives [for financial support]

reinforces the concern that the requirement to volunteer in order to gain a paid museum job may discourage applicants from poorer backgrounds or without such support networks" (p.247). This connects to Brown's (2003) discussion of positional conflict theory which focuses on the "positional issues such as the exclusionary tactics of elites and the reproduction of educational and occupational inequalities" (p. 147). Internships can therefore been seen as an example of how economically wealthy classes can mobilize their capital to keep themselves and their families ahead in the labour market.

Implications for Practice

This essay reviews how the social construction of skills hides inequities and discrimination within the labour market. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) summarize it by saying:

> Equating skills and power fails to recognise that skills are socially constructed, and valued and rewarded in different ways by employers depending on workers' identity markers and educational path (such as the type of university from which individuals graduates). Issues of inequity disappear within this discursive framing, with achievement and/or failure in the labour market located solely as the responsibility of the individual. (p.310)

The human capital theory based understanding of employability describes it as a set of skills which people acquire over time, but this does not address how issues of inequity influence people's ability to find jobs. As a result, social problems are masked in the process of blaming individuals for not meeting societal expectations of labour market outcomes.

Liberal arts graduates face a difficult transition from school to work characterised by lower wages and higher rates of unemployment, part-time, and temporary employment (Drewes and Giles, 2001; Walters, 2004). In addition, liberal arts graduates' experience "delayed

workplace integration and professional recognition" because they take longer to negotiate career opportunities and establish themselves within specific industries (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2006, p.67). In order to improve employment outcomes for liberal arts graduates, students need more opportunities to connect to the labour market before graduation. This would allow students to develop a better understanding of their own skills and interests in relation to work opportunities.

One method to increase connections between students and the labour market is by increasing funding for experiential learning programs. This would allow programs to expand to offer all students the opportunity to participate in school to work transition programming. Many programs, including the UBC Arts Cooperative Education program, currently limit student enrollment using measures such as academic achievement. However, these processes exclude low academic achieving students from participating in programs. By expanding programs to allow access from all students, it would require a significant investment by the university in resources, but it would also make transition opportunities more accessible to the entire student population. Likely not all students will be able to obtain paid positions because the limited number of jobs available. However, through implementing a program model which is open to all students, the benefits from training workshops and guidance from student service practitioners in learning important employability skills could be shared across all students and not only high academic achievers. Additionally, the program would help to raise their level of awareness and understanding of the types of jobs that exist and that they can apply for in the labour market. Providing easy access to transition support for students is important because it equips them with the tools to compete in the labour market which is highly competitive as a result of massification. However, within the range of experiential learning opportunities, there are some forms of experience which are more equitable in terms of student accessibility than others. Higher

education institutions should be concerned with policies which systematically exclude students from lower socioeconomic brackets. Unpaid experiential learning programs, such as internships, inadvertently exclude students who cannot afford to spend time volunteering. While internship programs offer opportunities for students to learn new skills, unpaid internships are shown to not have significant benefit for improving the intern's ability to subsequently find employment (Class of 2013: Paid interns outpace unpaid peers in job offers, salaries). As a result, higher education institutions should develop relationships with the business industry which ensure experiential learning opportunities including cooperative education and internship are paid experiences.

Liberal arts students can improve their own labour market outcomes by embracing and seeking out opportunities to work in the labour market before graduation. If cooperative education demand is a reliable indicator of students' interest and ability to participate in formal workplace experience programs, then at least in the case of UBC Faculty of Arts, the vast majority of students are either uninterested or unable to participate in these programs. This low level of student interest is problematic because participation in transition programs, such as experiential learning, can help students gain valuable skills which can be used to find employment. Part of the benefits of participating in transition programs is that students gain basic employability skills, such as learning how to write a job application, before graduation. Also, as a result of gaining work experience, students can better define their interest areas in order to understand what type of industry to focus on for job search after graduation. Overall, evaluating student motivations and reasons for engagement or disengagement in university programs is beyond the scope of this paper, but is an interesting area for further research.

Employers play an important role in improving the employability outcomes for liberal arts students. For example, support from industry is required in order to hire students. Without this support, students will not have the opportunity to improve and increase their connections with the labour market while completing their degrees. Therefore, employers should make an active effort to hire students in experiential learning programs. There is also a self-interest based case for hiring students. For employers, hiring students allows them an opportunity to more accurately identify which future graduates will best fit into their organizations. Evaluating a student employee over four month cooperative education work-term provides the employer a lot more evidence about the student as a potential candidate for a professional position after graduation than a traditional interview. However, simply hiring students into jobs is not enough to support the effort to improve employability outcomes for liberal arts students. Mentorship and developing network connections to workplaces is an important part of the learning experience for students (Holmes, 2006). In addition, employers need to provide training to teach students about how to complete specific tasks related to their jobs. This is especially needed for liberal arts students who may not have the exact skills which are required for workplace tasks. While time and monetary constraints may deter some employers, training student workers can be seen as an investment into future employees. By taking these steps, employers can help to ensure they hire graduates with the skill sets they want because they have helped in the process of teaching those skill sets.

Liberal arts students often lack a direct connection between their area of study and the industry where they would like to find employment (Walters, 2004b). As a result, liberal arts students and graduates are highly reliant on soft skills. Within the knowledge economy, soft skills are valued and sought after; therefore liberal arts graduates can utilize these skills to find

employment. However, the over reliance on soft skills in their job applications creates an opportunity for bias and discrimination based on the values and cultural beliefs influence employers' subjective assessment of soft skills. The social construction of skills and resulting bias and discrimination is often hidden in our understanding of employability. I support the suggestion from Moreau and Leathwood (2006) that students and graduates need an alternative critical framework to understand the concept of employability from a broader perspective. Students internalize societal messages echoed by the higher education institutions which can lead to the reproduction of inequities. Consequently, higher education institutions should provide students with a critical framework within which students and graduates can come to understand employability and skills as political issues.

Conclusion

This paper argues that employability is a complex and layered issue impacted by individual actions, social construction of skills and structural limitations. I have explained why and how students can be proactive about identifying and developing employability skills demanded by the market. However, I have also pointed out that the socially constructed nature of employability and the uneven distribution of social opportunities to develop such skills, as manifested in experiential learning programs, have created challenging circumstances for liberal arts students' transition from school to work.

Moreau and Leathwood (2006) found that "in a context where both the employability and equal opportunities discourses contribute to views of the labour market as meritocratic, the failure to attain appropriate employment becomes an individual failure" (p.320). The common understanding of employability focuses on it as an individual responsibility. Equal opportunity discourse can be found in the social justice reasoning for equal access to higher education, which

paradoxically subjects students to the opportunity trap (Boden & Nevada, 2010). Yet, what makes people employable is not solely based on their own achievements. Employability is also influenced by social processes and our interpretation and measurement of skills. Who gets access to elite employment has to do with social differences such as class, ethnicity, and gender biases. In addition, there is an expectation that graduates will find good jobs in the knowledge economy upon graduation from higher education. However, Brown's (2003) discussion of opportunity trap explains that due to increasing demand for higher education, it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain expected labour market outcomes due to an excess in supply of graduates. This argument summarizes how structural factors can also limit and shape employability for liberal arts graduates.

Employability discourse impacts liberal arts students and graduates in many ways. For instance, students and graduates construct their identities using ideas of employability and in some cases this can result in a reproduction of social inequities. For liberal arts students and graduates, their reliance on soft skills can allow them to pursue work in many different industries, but it also opens them up to possible discrimination. This is because soft skills are socially constructed and therefore interpretation and measurement by employers can be potentially biased. "Delayed integration and professional recognition" in the labour market may be a reality for many liberal arts graduates (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2006, p.67). This is because most graduates enter the workforce after graduation with few industry specific skills and must take additional time to establish themselves within a career. For some graduates, they may choose to "recycle" themselves back into the education system to acquire technical skills to fit themselves into specific industries. However, this strategy is not always successful for graduates and it serves to perpetuate the problem of credentialism and opportunity trap. Furthermore,

employers expect graduates to be able to step into jobs with little learning curve. This is an unrealistic expectation for liberal arts graduates who often do not have a direct connection between their area of study and employment prospects.

In response to the issue of liberal arts student under-employment, higher education institutions are adopting experiential learning programs, such as cooperative education and internships to help their students transition from school to work. These programs bring students into the community in order to gain new skills and experience. However, some of these programs have processes which limit participation to students based on academic achievement and socioeconomic status. Given the significant role transition programs can play in improving the employment outcomes of liberal arts students, higher education institutions should expand opportunities so that more students can participate in these programs. This would involve a critical review of how the structure of these programs, including eligibility criteria, have created opportunities for some and barriers for others. For example, screening for high academic achievement for admission to these types of transition programs might unintentionally exclude low socioeconomic status students. Some students with fewer economic resources face barriers to achieving high academic standing and are thus further penalized by their exclusion from these transition programs.

Finally, I discussed implications for practice for students, higher education institutions and employers. While liberal arts students face significant systemic challenges entering the labour market, they still need to be proactive about building work experience through participation in transition programs and by learning employability skills. Institutions need to support programs which connect students with valuable paid transition learning. Education institutions need to be responsible for giving students a critical framework through which they

can view employability and skills as political issues. These actions will help students to become more resilient and combat the systemic social and structural challenges which exist through skillful navigation and use of job search practices. Finally, employers need to accept their shared responsibility as active contributors to graduate employability. Hiring entry level workers, either independently or as part of experiential learning programs and providing training and mentorship helps to foster student employability and in turn helps to build a base of potential employees. Higher education institutions can aid employers to act as active contributors to graduate employability by building and strengthening partnerships with industry.

In the process of conducting the literature review for this paper, I have developed a much deeper understanding of how the skills, competency and knowledge economy discourse are interwoven with contingent culture and student employability. This new perspective influences my practice as a student service professional because it makes me more critical of unintentional exclusion and inequity which exists within university programming. In addition, the knowledge I have gained will assist me by providing language and theoretical support to hopefully make programs more inclusive for all students.

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