Investigating stakeholder perception of the term ‘employability’

Online questionnaire:

1. ‘Employability’ is the term that is used in HE in relation to preparing students for the world of work after HE.  What does the term ‘employability’ mean to you? (Open text responses)

1. The following are terms linked to employability.  Rank them in order of importance:

employment

1. being successful in your chosen occupation
2. that employment benefits you as an employee
3. that your employment will benefit the workplace
4. that your employment will benefit the community
5. that your employment benefits the economy
6. professional
7. managerial
8. graduate employment, i.e. requiring a degree in order to be able to undertake the role

1. Do you think a term other than ‘employability’ should be used? (Yes/ No)
2. If yes, which term would you prefer to use instead of employability? (Choose 1)
3. Early career development
4. Early professional development
5. Work readiness
6. Personal and professional development
7. Preparing for graduate employment
8. Other:

Semi-structured individual interviews: questions

1. ‘Employability’ is the term that is used in HE in relation to preparing students for the world of work after HE.
2. What does the term ‘employability’ mean to you?
3. Where does that understanding come from?

1. Do you think a term other than ‘employability’ should be used?
2. If so, what terms may be appropriate to reflect the current context of Higher Education

Thematic analysis from the interviews:

Research question 1: To explore and critically examine different stakeholders’ understanding of the term ‘employability’.

* Current understanding
* Previous understanding
* Where that understanding has come from: previous experiences – within and outside of education
* External influences on that understanding, e.g. government, other businesses/ other business experience/ external school sector (e.g. MATs)
* ‘Moral purpose’ - of education, leadership/ management influencing current understanding of the term

Research question 2: To determine whether an alternative term is required, i.e. one that is more accessible to different stakeholders, and/or better represents what HE practitioners are trying to achieve in preparing students for graduate employment.

* Reasons for decisions around the retention or change of the term: recognition of difficulties of everyone meaning the same thing by the term, and bouncing between different terms, staying with the current term but being more explicit, or accepting the ambiguity.

Other perspectives relating to employability but beyond the scope of the study, e.g. managing a team with specific learning needs, the education conveyer belt, education being focused on outputs over process etc.

Key themes arising from the analysis:

* The Office for Students language of ‘highly skilled, professional or managerial’ employment was most closely associated with employability by academic colleagues and students.
* All participants were influenced by their own experiences of employment.
* The understanding of the term changed over time according to roles and experiences.
* That creating an agreed definition of the term employability is unlikely to be achieved as individuals create their own understanding.
* That the employers, academics and professional support colleagues often bring an ethical or moral perspective to their interpretation of the term. This included benefits to the community or the individual as well as to the business.