Undergraduate ODL students' graduateness in relation to their employability attributes and examination preparation styles

Presenter/author (corresponding author)

Prof Melinde Coetzee (DLitt et Phil)

Department of Industrial & Organisational Psychology

PO Box 392

University of South Africa

0003

Tel : +27 12 429 8204

E-mail: coetzm1@unisa.ac.za

Co-presenter/co-author

Ms Ingrid Potgieter

Department of Human Resource Management

PO Box 392

University of South Africa

0003

Tel : +2712 429 3723

E-mail: visseil@unisa.ac.za 2

ABSTRACT

The open distance learning teaching context poses unique challenges and opportunities for cultivating students' graduateness. However, more research is needed on how students' graduateness relates to their examination preparation styles and employability attributes, and how these influence teaching practice in the open distance learning (ODL) context. These constructs are under-researched in the South African ODL higher education context. The objective of the study was to explore how undergraduate ODL students' graduateness is influenced by their examination preparation styles and employability attributes, and to determine the implications for teaching practice in the ODL higher education context. Significant relationships were observed between the variables of relevance to the study, pointing to the importance of developing the measured employability attributes and exam preparation styles in cultivating the graduateness of ODL students. New

knowledge was gained which can be used to inform ODL teaching and learning design. Recommendations for future research and teaching practice are made.

Key terms: graduateness, employability attributes, examination preparation styles, open distance learning and teaching

OVERVIEW

The objective of this paper was to explore how undergraduate ODL students' graduateness is influenced by their examination preparation styles and employability attributes, and to determine the implications for teaching practice in the ODL higher education context.

Higher education students' graduateness and employability have become important in a technology-driven knowledge economy (Coetzee 2012; Griesel & Parker 2009; Noe, Tews & Dachner 2010). Graduates who are entering the world of work today face a number of challenges, such as a decrease in employment opportunities, decrease in job security, fast-changing technology and an increasing personal responsibility to keep up with the changes in the body of knowledge, upskilling, employability and lifelong learning (Marock 2008; Pool & Sewell 2007). The skills and attributes that constitute the graduateness of a university graduate are therefore considered to be an important outcome of university-level learning experiences (Barrie 2004). Students' graduateness implies that apart from their degree-specific knowledge and technical skills, they are able to demonstrate a set of generic transferable metaskills and personal attributes which are generally regarded as indicators of their employability and work readiness (Clanchy & Ballard 1995; Coetzee 2012; Rigby, Wood, Clark-Murphy, Daly, Dixon, Kavanagh, Leveson, Petocz & Thomas 2009). These skills and attributes represent the essence of the personal growth and intellectual development cultivated by university education (Steur, Jansen & Hofman 2012).

University education has a formative function, cultivating the graduateness skills and attributes in three holistic, overarching attitudinal domains of personal and intellectual development (Barrie 2004; Coetzee 2012; Steur et al 2012): (1) *scholarship* (students' attitude or stance towards knowledge), (2) *global and moral citizenship* (students' attitude or stance towards the world and their communities), and (3) *lifelong learning* (students' attitude or stance towards themselves). As *scholars*, graduates should be leaders in the production and application of new knowledge and understanding through inquiry, critique and synthesis. They should be able to apply their knowledge to solve consequential and complex problems, and communicate their knowledge confidently and effectively. As *global and moral citizens*, graduates must aspire to contribute to global and local society in a full, meaningful, ethical and responsible way through their roles as members of local, national and global communities. As *lifelong learners*, graduates must be committed

to and capable of continuous learning in order to further their understanding of the world and their place in it.

Coetzee (2012) identifies eight core skills and attributes that constitute the graduateness of students. These graduateness skills and attributes are transformative in nature and assist in cultivating the three overarching attitudinal stances of personal and intellectual development: *scholarship* (problem-solving and decision-making, analytical thinking skills, enterprising skills), *global and moral citizenship* (ethical and responsible behaviour, presenting and applying information skills and interactive skills), and *lifelong learning* (goal-directed behaviour and continuous learning orientation).

Employability, as a sub-element of a student's graduateness (Coetzee 2012), constitutes a sense of self-directedness or personal agency in retaining or securing a job or form of employment based on a set of personal career-related attributes generally promoted by employers and researchers as an alternative to job security in an uncertain employment context (Rothwell, Jewell & Hardie 2009; Schreuder & Coetzee 2011). These include attributes such as career self-management, career resilience, proactivity, emotional literacy and cultural competence (Bezuidenhout 2010). A study conducted by Coetzee (2011; 2012) indicated that the generic skills and attributes that constitute students' graduateness are strongly predicted by their career-related employability attributes.

People determine their own future and thus manage their own careers. The challenge of sustaining one's employability and its continued management now appears to be informing graduates' understanding and approaches towards the labour market (Pool & Sewell 2007). Students need to learn to think for themselves and their sustained employability, either by means of self-employment or being employed (Clarke 2008; London & Smither 1995). Distance learning students tend to be either employed or unemployed adults, and need to be encouraged to embrace career development and self-management activities rather than relying on organisations and educational institutions to do it for them.

De la Harpe, Radloff and Wyber (2000) voice the concern that graduates who enter the workplace do not have the necessary employability skills and attributes to enter the contemporary world of work. Fallows and Steven (2000) note that higher education plays a key role in assisting graduates to gain the skills and attributes they require to be more employable. As a result, students' graduateness and their sustained employability have become a concern for both providers of educational services and for graduates who want to enter the contemporary world of work (Cox & King 2006; Griesel & Parker 2009).

Research further indicates that students' success and performance (and by implication their graduateness) are influenced by their study skills and learning styles (Felder & Brent 2005; Williams, Rudyk & Staley 2004). We propose that students'

graduateness will be influenced by their employability attributes and examination preparation styles. In the context of the present study, examination preparation style is viewed as the behavioural strategies preferred by students when preparing for examinations (Williams et al 2004). These include: (1) students' need to be energised by (or minimise) environmental stimuli, communicating and discussing exam material with students and lecturers; (2) the type of information (abstract theoretical or factual practical) that students prefer to focus on and how they approach learning and understanding information; (3) the processes for deciding how to order and organise course information (analytical logical or personally valued); and (4) students' approach to organise and manage their examination preparation time (organised planful or open-ended spontaneous).

Apart from these exam behavioural strategies, we propose that students' employability attributes (for example their career self-management and career resilience) will significantly influence their development of the skills and attributes underlying their graduateness.

Research design

A quantitative survey approach was followed. A stratified proportional random sample (N = 1 102) of undergraduate ODL adult students in the economic and management sciences field participated in the study.

Sample demographics: 88% were between 18 and 40 years (early career stage); 63% females; 92% blacks; 57% employed.

Measuring instruments

Students' graduateness was measured by the graduateness skills and attributes scale (Coetzee 2010). Students' employability attributes were measured by the employability attributes scale (Bezuidenhout & Coetzee 2010). Students' examination preparation styles were measured by the exam preparation style inventory (Williams et al 2004). All three measures have proven reliability and validity, which will be reported in the final version of the paper.

Results

Descriptive and canonical correlations and statistical analyses were performed. The results indicate significant associations between the variables. The results will be outlined in the final paper version. The significant relationships that were observed between the variables of relevance to the study point to the importance of developing the measured employability attributes and exam behavioural strategies in cultivating the graduateness of ODL students.

Conclusions

New knowledge was gained which can be used to inform ODL teaching and learning design. Recommendations for future research and teaching practice are made.

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