A GRADUATE'S PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

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Abstract

Research undertaken on students' transition from Higher Education (HE) to employment (Dawson, 2012) highlights the need for HE staff to step back from day-to-day concerns and rethink their approaches to students' preparation from undergraduate status to graduate 'work-ready'. It emphasises the importance of recognising that one's journey from student to graduate standing requires high intensity support from both academic and student-centred staff. It claims that stepping outside of our 'student-tutor' stereotype and being perceived as the facilitators, the mentors, who know their field well enough to help students deal with the challenges ahead, assists their development of critical instinct. It also urges members of staff to recognise that we are undoubtedly influential figures on the development of students and that sharing our experiences, whether good or bad, can be invaluable in shaping students own graduate identity.

The findings of this study were validated and evolved (Dawson, 2013 & 2014) into further investigations into students' development and transformation (in terms of ability and skills) whilst still in HE and in preparation for the 'world of work'. The study shows that reviewing, re-engineering and re-applying existing literature and approaches to suit the demand of a new generation of students increases their involvement and empowerment. It also evidenced how building on personal experiences reinforces their efficacy beliefs, improves their self-esteem, social skills and resilience and signposts the path for lifelong learning and a sustainable development.

As a result of these, both students and I have evidenced that the principles of sustainable development apply equally to all aspects of life, from personal, social to economic and professional. Thus, we claim that, through participation in challenging academic activities which provide students with the opportunity to design, deliver and assess their own learning, we gain knowledge which we can and will pass on to others, as a student quotes "…*I will never lose sight of the importance of adding value and ensuring my actions have a progressive impact on others.".*

In the academic year 2014/15, students embarked on a journey of deeper and more critical pathways. They explore personal and social identity, attitude, personality, values and principles which contribute to their transformation from students to graduates and from graduates to employees. Through active and collaborative learning, formative communication with staff and involvement in intellectually stimulating activities, students are seeking answers to questions, such as how to achieve transformation; how to keep a 'positive' attitude and generate a sense of belonging; how to pursue and find happiness in HE and beyond. The realities unveiled from such journeys are invaluable to both students and staff as they signpost the paths for an enriched educational experience for all.

Keywords: Employability, Curriculum, Personalised learning, Transferability of skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

Due to the growing pressure (since the late 1980s, [1], [2]) for Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) to produce individuals with the capacity to accelerate economic growth, prosperity and development, terms such as 'employability', 'transferable skills, 'graduateness' have become a norm in our everyday language. In a climate of globalisation, the initiative to develop and improve the employability of graduates has resulted in many countries prioritising higher education provision. In 2011, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [3], published a report exploring the development of employability skills in United Kingdom (UK) and in an international setting (insights from 414 career advisory staff from institutions in 25 countries).

Such is the magnitude of this phenomenon; which consequently resulted into an abundance of policies and strategies on employability skills [4], [5], [6] and [7]. It is no wonder there are numerous interpretations of what the term 'employability skills' means. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills suggests that there is agreement, "at a very general level, that employability relates to the ability to be in employment, and, in particular, the set of characteristics that increase the chances of an

individual being in work."[8] It also states that sometimes, "definitions go a step further than simply focusing on the ability to secure employment, and specifically include the ability to sustain employment and to progress within work too."

However, some commentators have argued that a more 'holistic' view should be adopted whilst examining the characteristics that increase the probability of an individual being in employment. For example, McQuaid et al [9] have set out a full range of factors (individual factors, personal circumstances and demand factors) which need to be considered when determining one's "ability to move into or within employment, or their employability". In 1998, another important point was made by the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) [10] stating that employability should be perceived as a 'dynamic process' not just as a 'set of characteristics or assets'. Being employable is not all about what an individual has to offer. It is equally important to be able to master the way these assets are organised and presented in job hunting and personal career development and management, just as the skill of "marketing and presenting one's self effectively through CVs, job interviews and appraisals"[10]. This also coincides with the view of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) [11] that employability is as a 'continual process' which indicates that an individual's employability skills will vary depending on the point they are at in their career.

Furthermore, it is essential, for the purpose of this paper, as it will unveil in the following pages, to note that the UK Commission for Employment and Skills [12] defines these evolving sets of 'assets' and skills as 'the skills almost everyone needs to do almost any job'. Fig. 1 [12] shows that 'functional skills' such as numeracy, literacy and IT can be exercised efficiently, competently and successfully if the foundation of such practice is based on a 'positive approach'. This means that individuals are willing to "participate, make suggestions, accept new ideas and constructive criticism, and take responsibility for outcomes" related to these three categories of skills.

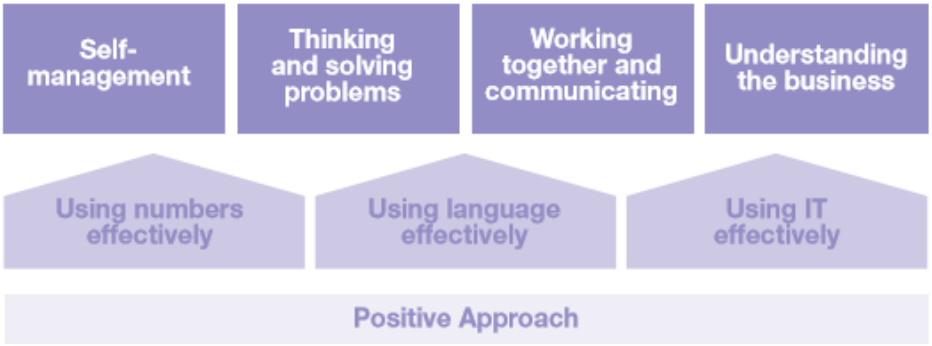

Figure 1: Definition of Employability Skills

Subsequently, individuals can thrive in the three categories of skills, as per Fig.1 above. If for instance, they exercise 'personal skills' such as punctuality and time management, appropriate presentation and behaviour ('self-management'), or demonstrate creativity, reflect upon and learn from own experience ('thinking and solving problems'). Likewise, being cooperative, assertive, persuasive or speaking clearly to individuals and groups will demonstrate excellency of skills in 'working together and communicating'. Whereas, skills which show 'understanding of the business' would typically involve "understanding how the individual job fits into the organisation as a whole; judging risks, and contributing to the whole organisation"[12].

Of course, not all jobs require individuals to demonstrate the same level of skills. However, substantial research [8] shows that 'functional skills' are crucial to gaining and maintaining employment in modern workplaces. This applies to both low and higher level jobs. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills report, *Ambition 2020* [13] notes that individuals with "a range of employability skills command higher wage premiums, and this applies at all skill levels". Furthermore, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills Working Futures 2014-2024 employment projections predict a significant employment growth for higher level occupations such as managerial, professional and technical posts [14].

Based on all the above points, it could be said that 'students' become 'graduates' when they develop a set of characteristics which increases their chances of gaining employment. Subsequently, 'graduates' become 'employees' when this set of characteristics evolves, via a dynamic process, which involves the individual's 'positive approach' towards the 'evolution of his/ her skills'. (The term 'employee', here,

is referring to an individual who has the ability to move into or within employment; sustain employment, not necessarily within the same organisation/ service). I have created a visual representation of this transformation below (see Fig. 2).

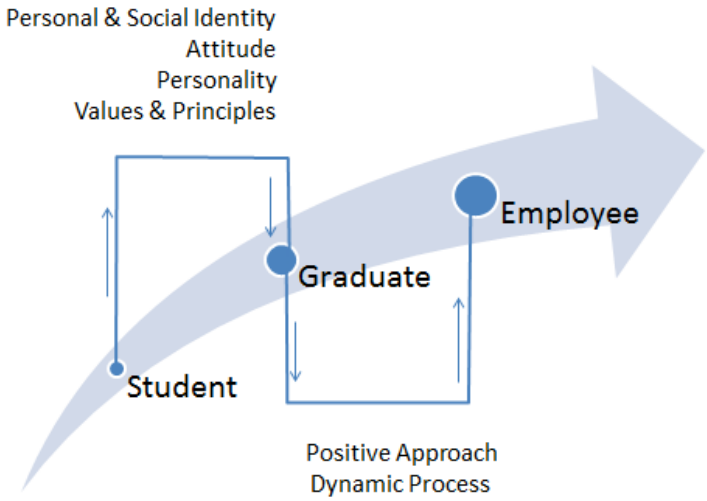

Figure 2: Representation of student transformation into a graduate and employee status

2 THE STUDY – SETTING THE SCENE

Fig. 2 sets the scene for this study which was initiated in 2011/12. I undertook research [15] on students' transition from Higher Education (HE) to employment to find out how they perceived this transition and most importantly how they understood the relationship between their study and their future career. The findings highlighted the importance of taking into account the individual's factors, personal circumstances and current demands (depending the market), as per the views of McQuaid et al [9]. Consequently, it emphasised the importance of recognising that one's journey from student to graduate standing requires high intensity support from both academic and student-centred staff. It proved that stepping outside of our 'student-tutor' stereotype and being perceived as the facilitators, the mentors, who know their field well enough to help students deal with the challenges ahead, assists their development of critical instinct. It also urges members of staff to recognise that we are undoubtedly influential figures in the development of students and that sharing our experiences, whether good or bad, can be invaluable in shaping students own graduate identity.

Since then, the findings of this study were validated and evolved into further investigations [16], [17] into students' development and transformation (in terms of ability and skills) whilst still in HE and in preparation for the 'world of work'. These investigations support the views described in the UK commission for Employment and Skills report [12] regarding building a foundation of 'positive approach' to functional and personal skills. However, it recognises that the responsibility for the creation of such 'positive approach' to skills does not only fall on our students but on us as academic tutors and developers of their curriculum. The study shows that reviewing, re-engineering and re-applying existing literature and approaches to suit the demand of a new generation of students increases their involvement and empowerment. It also evidenced how building on personal experiences reinforces their efficacy beliefs, improves their self-esteem, social skills and resilience and signposts the path for lifelong learning and a sustainable personal development (in all aspects of life, from personal, social to economic and professional).

As a result of these, both students and I have evidenced that employability is a 'dynamic process' [10] and our skills (or 'assets') grow as long as we adopt a 'positive attitude' which encourages us to engage and participate in challenging 'doings' throughout out life. For instance, as part of this evolving study, students throughout time took on opportunities to design, deliver and assess their own learning. They presented at conferences, organised fundraising events to support the cause of local charities, attended interviews and networking events with employers, embarked on training courses and shadowing at voluntary posts. According to student feedback, they gained knowledge which we can and will be passed on to others, as a student quotes "…*I will never lose sight of the importance of adding value and ensuring my actions have a progressive impact on others".*

As this study progressed, in the academic year 2014/15, students embarked on a journey of deeper and more critical pathways. They wished to explain 'employability' and 'graduateness' from their own perspective. Interestingly, despite the number of policies, strategies, definitions and interpretations around employability skills over the years, there is limited literature [18], [19] that states the views of undergraduates, who are undeniably the recipients of this employability agenda. Even the four elements of the USEM (Understanding, Skills, Efficacy, Metacognition) model [20], widely used to demonstrate the inter-related components of employability, suggests that we need to move the employability debate on to a different audience; the students/ graduates themselves. Dr Paul Cashian et al.[21] debate that the USEM model, in effect, breaks down into two broad areas: Knowledge (U – 'knowing how' and S – 'practising') and Self (E – 'self-belief that you can make an impact' and M – 'awareness of what you know, can do and how you can learn more'). The 'self' elements draw on the work of the psychologists Dweck [22] and Bandura [23]. Indeed, even a quick Google search shows that much research and literature exist on the employability perspectives from scholars, employers but not from a practice perspective; the student perspective.

Having students as audience and contributors to the debate on the employability agenda means that the recipients of our 'products' (e.g. frameworks, policies, course and modules) can express their views which can then be fed into our developments. We must not forget that the 21st century in UK has seen students as 'consumers' of higher education, rightly or wrongly (this is a different debate to unpick for a different paper, so I would encourage you to read the term 'customers', here, as 'collaborative learners' rather than conventional consumers). This means that students have the right to express their views on the educational services provided to them under Consumer Legislation [24]. It seems rather strange to me that legislation has to be put in place to reinforce the importance of involving our students in their education; especially when student engagement theories tell us that students' involvement in their curricula development increases their motivation and commitment to their studies leading to favourable and effective educational outcomes [25]. Moreover, research-based strategies such as thematic instruction [26] shows that people acquire and understand knowledge best when learning is in the context of a coherent "whole" and when they can relate to what they are learning.

Thus, students on this study (all on their last year at university) were encouraged to explore employability from their perspective, via the means provided within our module. It seemed appropriate, given the fact that they would soon be graduating to prepare for the next stage; the 'employee' status (see Fig.2). However, since, this cohort of students had never worked on a study like this before; our approach had to start from the point of exploration of their personal and social identity, attitude, personality, values and principles which contribute to their transformation from students to graduates and from graduates to employees. Students were assisted in their learning journey via a series of active and collaborative teaching and learning strategies, formative communication with staff and involvement in intellectually stimulating activities (see section 3, 'Method').

Their perspectives on employability presented in this paper, are expressed in the form of questions and attempt to find answer them. Questions such as how to achieve transformation from graduate level to work-ready status; how to keep a 'positive attitude' and generate a sense of belonging; how to pursue and find happiness in HE and beyond. The realities unveiled from such journeys are invaluable to both students and staff as they signpost the paths for an enriched educational experience for all.

3 METHOD

The methodology for this stage of the study build upon tested techniques and strategies from previous publications such as the development of the Personal Employability Skills Portfolios (PESP) [15] which are all customised to the needs of the individuals, personal reflections upon my own employability journey and valuable lessons learnt [16]. However, it mostly focuses on the outcomes of my latest study on the use of PESP for sustainable personal development [17]. Its results along with the students' comments presented there indicate that PESP played a vital role in their transformation into empowered independent learners. They had reported that they felt ready to undertake new challenges and put themselves in unfamiliar situations as their attitude towards them was characterised by optimism and excitement.

The 2014/15 cohort of students consisted of individuals between 20 to 40 years of age. Some of them were single, others were married with families and some were single parents. The majority of them never had a job before, whereas some were in part time employment and others had been in employment for many years but were unsatisfied with their career (hence they had returned to HE to

explore their alternative options). All of them had different educational backgrounds (e.g. they were studying on different degree courses), whereas some of them had recently changed/ transferred from one degree course to another.

By carrying out the interview process, (outlined in my publication "*Student voice: Personalise my learning*" [15]), I quickly found out that the delivery structure I had prepared for this year's cohort would not work due to its diversity in many different levels (factors: age, marital status, professional status, educational background, expectations of current study, aspirations for the future). Thus, I decided to adopt characteristics of a 'flipped classroom' [27] and 'peer instruction' (PI) [28], [29], [30] in my approach. The material for my lectures was stored in an online repository which could be accessed by students from home. I introduced them to the structure I had planned earlier and I informed them that this would only act as a guideline and that we (together) would 'dip in and out' as appropriate and necessary and alter it based on the cohort needs.

The class time was structured around alternating mini-lectures and 'debatable' questions posed by the students and discussed by the students in the first instance, whilst I was promoting productive discussion whenever needed. This allowed us to maximize individual face-to-face time by either collaborating with peers on projects, engaging more deeply with content, practicing skills, and receiving feedback on progress made. This approach enabled me to devote more time on coaching individuals to work on their PESP, inspiring and assisting them with their individual or group challenging projects which gave them greater control over their own learning.

Ultimately, students designed their own module and became co-creators of knowledge. By 'treating' students as peers they felt that their perspectives were valued [31] and a stronger relationship was formed between myself, as their tutor, and them which consequently and through time improved our classroom practice (approach also supported by published research [32], [33], [34]).

In my publication "*Personal Employability Skills Portfolios for sustainable development*" [17], I created my interpretation of sustainability of individuals and their impact within the social capital. I used this representation with this cohort of students to inspire and energised them to embark their journey of exploration and achievement of their individual goals. It was anticipated (as per previous year's outcome) that this technique would have assisted them in strengthening their 'positive approach' towards their abilities and capabilities ('skills and assets').

To take full advantage, I also introduced a list of ideas ('challenging activities') which I referred to as 'Ideas Factory' (term inspired by a business enterprise workshop I had attended the year before). These challenging activities aimed at the behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement of students [35]. They varied from organising a 'dance flash-mob' event to raise funds for a local charity to organising collections and deliveries of donations to homeless, from organising and running academic workshops for staff and students to attending and presenting at an academic conference, from attending training courses and gaining certificates to applying and submitting evidence reports for the acquisition of professional awards. Students were also informed that their input to this study would have contributed to the development of a new module for the university.

As Coates states student engagement should be "a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience" [36]. Hence, the themes behind these activities were chosen to encourage active and collaborative learning, participation to challenging academic and non-academic activities, formative communication with academic staff and members from the local community. They also aimed to enrich the students' educational experience and create a feeling of belonging in their university learning community.

By doing so, students' "social consciousness" [37] also grew as they felt that they had ownership in the educational process. They felt that the educational system valued their views and if challenged by them it could change or developed; which is a feeling that empowered them, motivated and in some cases filled them with passion.

4 RESULTS & GRADUATE VOICE

As a result, students and tutor were bonded in a learning community. A number of students demonstrated their empowerment by undertaking leading roles in some of the 'Idea Factory' projects. They formed groups based on the awareness of their strengths and weaknesses (known to them due to completing diagnostic skills tests as part of the self-awareness activity discussed in *Graduate Voice: My Personal Employability Skills Portfolio* [16]). In line with our approach to 'group dynamics' (based

on ‘family resemblance’, discussed in *Student Voice: “Personalise my Learning”* [15]) interpersonal issues were put aside and dominant students were very supportive of others to lead on particular projects.

Each group selected an ‘advocacy’ project based on their interests and a perceived need to make a change for something they felt passionate about. The projects fell into two categories; academic research and extra-curricular activities. The ‘academic research’ project focused on research workshops and academic conferences whereas the ‘extra-curricular’ focused on community engagement.

As part of the research workshops students invited staff and students to debate aspects of happiness in Higher Education (HE); how can it be achieved and what has got to do with education; how does it link to the employability agenda. The workshops’ intended outcomes were identified by the students as follows: exchange views with staff and fellow students on the role of HE in relation to graduate employability, ensure their views were heard and provide a learning opportunity for them to reflect upon and develop their own skills for future presentations later in the academic year.

For the purpose of this paper only the views of the students will be recorded below.

Students raised the following points at the workshops:

- they believed that they were undergoing significant changes in their life and that often during these changes their voices and their perspectives were lost or overlooked,
- they welcomed opportunities where they could meet with academics to discuss each other’s perspectives on current issues,
- they acknowledged that they were in HE to better their chances of employability but not all of them aimed to be employed in jobs which were necessarily paid positions or even posts with higher salaries,
- some recognised that there is no more such thing as a job for a lifetime and that modern living appears to require individuals who wish to get on to be continually upskilled,
- some voiced that they needed to ‘think big and hard’ on how to compete in the current job market and pointed out that coursework like PESP give them the opportunity to practise skills and attributes they possess and become confident individuals,
- unanimously suggested that positive attitude towards teaching and learning is a vital component,
- they also pointed out that at Secondary School level pupils were introduced to various life skills for the future, including empowering aspirations but questioned whether universities had a role to play in developing such skills and aspirations further,
- some students admitted that they start a degree with no clear idea of what or where their degree will take them (in terms of employment) once they graduate and that this uncertainty has a negative impact on their motivation and proactivity, e.g. they don’t engage with the career services in their institutions as they don’t really know what to look for or how to use the service,
- the majority of tutors focus their attention on the subject matter, content of their discipline (re: Graham Gibbs article on Students’ perception on the HE debate [38]) and never move beyond it. Employability in the curriculum is about focusing on the methodology and finding ways to make students understand how to achieve it. The student panel unanimously agreed that PESP offers a good example of such practice and its model should be used widely.

Within a five-month period, students had scheduled, prepared, organised, presented/ delivered, executed and processed/ reflected upon their work, which included: a) two academic workshops for staff and students, b) preparation of a poster entitled “A Graduate’s pursuit of Happiness” which was presented at an academic conference later that year, c) a ‘dance flash-mob’ event which raised £500 for a local charity, d) organisation and collection of donations to homeless. A number of individuals took on opportunities to attend training courses and gained certificates, whereas others succeeded in gaining professional awards. In addition, the whole study informed the development of a new module (‘Transition from HE to work’) which was proposed, approved and run the academic year 2015/16.

Since students made this study reality, I have chosen to include some of their reflections on a number of the activities undertaken as part of their PESP to reveal how they found ‘happiness’ in their learning environment and how this study made them feel as truly empowered graduates.

I will start by presenting the PESP with title: “Finding the New Me!” This is a portfolio title given by a student who was transferred from one study programme to another on the last year of his/ her degree, going through a transitional phase (factors: emotional, financial, administration, social, etc.). The student quoted: “*The proposed title ‘Finding the new me!’ demonstrates my transition through the past three years and that I am willing to work hard to gain my new goals. It also suggests a fresh start; which is important as the module has allowed me to see strengths I wasn’t aware I possessed. This has provided me with the confidence to continue my self-discovery… each activity focused on a different area and has allowed me to identify my best qualities and use these within everyday life…It is a very positive way to introduce my portfolio as it shows happiness in completing this module”.*

As part of the ‘academic research projects’, the following student researched literature on ‘student/ graduate happiness’ [39], [40], [41]. ‘Debatable questions’ from this literature were discussed in the classroom during our weekly sessions and assisted the delivery of the academic workshops. He quoted: *“I am not a typical undergraduate, and my age and life experiences, together with my values, gave me an understanding of where employment sat in my priorities at my stage of life… I was interested in the concept of happiness as a life outcome, and given my intended outcome, my response to the module was to ask the questions ‘Who am I? ‘What makes me happy?’ and ‘Where do I go now?’…I wanted to take the opportunity the module offered to give myself the space and time to reflect on…I have taken it and put it to good use. My self-awareness has been deepened and renewed. I know what happiness is for me, and I am so blessed to be as happy as I am. I know how to maintain this for the years to come”.*

Another testimony of a student who worked as a team member for both the ‘academic workshops and conference’ activities reveals that this process gave her…“*an excellent insight into my own professional development, my journey at university and everything I had achieved along with all the struggles and enjoyment faced on the way. Both activities also developed my skillset further, as when I attended a graduate interview it was expected of me to prepare a presentation and demonstrate my communication skills, which I did and passed to the next phase of the assessment cycle”.*

Similarly, a student stated that *“Completing this portfolio showed me how to research the employment market and find jobs that match my personality type, learning styles, personal values and principles. It helped me to evaluate my life objectives and determine the ones that really matter to me and make me happy. It taught me how to adapt my career aspirations to my lifestyle and not the other way around. I want to work to live not to live to work! Since then, I have been offered two jobs and I have also been in the position to turn down others!”*

5 CONCLUSION

Five years ago, my research started with the aim to encourage students to build the relationship between Higher Education (HE) and graduate employability in a way that makes sense to them. During this process, having to use my own personal reflections upon my employability journey and valuable lessons taught on the way, I too increasingly became self-aware of what I had to offer to the learning community and how this input shaped my students’ graduate identity.

Working closely with my students enabled me to observe the different phases of their development from their struggles, worries, fears, uncertainty to the development of self-awareness, self-confidence, self-presentation and self-achievements. It was the attention to the aspect of ‘self’, as an individual but also as a member of a learning community, which shaped our interaction and made the difference. It was the demonstration of empathy [42] and the positive, personalised, responsive and enthusiastic approach [43] reflected on my teaching that made students happy and encourage them to adapt a positive attitude towards the development of their knowledge and skills.

Embedding employability in the curriculum is undoubtedly a thought-provoking task for academics and a challenging mission for students. Both admit (as per the results of the research workshops carried out by the students on this study) that employability in reality means different things to different people, often even people in similar situations and circumstances. Hence, it is the focus on the impact of teaching on learning that develops ways of unfolding and revealing realities to both students and staff. It is this focus that is most likely to lead to favourable and effective educational outcomes.

The undertaking of the different activities by students bridged the gap between experiences inside and outside the classroom, theory and practice, manifested “a general awareness of knowledge beyond the students’ immediate degree discipline” [44], and made provision for them to go further and apply this knowledge in different life scenarios. Recognising students as collaborative learners and providing

them with opportunities to become co-creators of knowledge strengthens their relationship with education. By evidencing the changes they can make and the impact their actions have on others, on their learning community, their local community and on themselves, they become empowered, valued and content.

Making space in the curriculum for self-reflection allows students to witness their "developmental journey and processes of meaning-making across the undergraduate experience" [45]. It creates the necessary environment for them to review their beliefs and perceptions they might have about their future work and employment, their aspirations, the attitudes, identities and orientations they develop in relations to this. It also creates continuity between life skills taught at schools and the transferable skills embedded in the HE education environment.

In my previous publications, I had highlighted the importance of the development of a cluster of educational modules for the Undergraduate (UG) stages of HE courses. The outcomes of this study reinforce this decision as they show clearly that it is essential for such modules to be developed and offered as cores (compulsory) to UG Stages (Levels) students. I had also proposed that educators who teach on these modules should be offered training sessions. This is based on my belief (and outcomes of previous research [19] and current study presented in this paper) that an educator can 'shape' a student's 'identity' and build the foundations for a positive attitude towards learning and development of oneself.

There are valuable lessons to learn from students if we only choose to listen what they have to say and choose to act upon the insights we develop in the process. A student's pursuit of happiness in their studies is not something unreasonable or ludicrous; it is a necessity, a vital ingredient for achievements in their educational journey and the solid foundation of a positive attitude towards personal development and success in the future. Accompanying students in this search of happiness by taking on roles of a facilitator, mentor, coach, academic critical friend outside the tutor stereotype develops our own perspectives, our practices and enriches our educational experience which consequently makes us happy too!

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