Rationalities that underpin employability provision in higher education across eight countries

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Rationalities that underpin employability provision in higher education across eight countries

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Abstract
This article explores the rationalities advanced by 18 higher education institutions, located across eight countries, for developing and delivering employability provision. The article uses Sultana's Habermasian-derived framework to categorise rationalities as either technocratic, humanistic or emancipatory. Based on a series of semi-structured dialogic interviews, the article explores how key strategic and operational personnel within higher education institutions articulate their rationality for engaging with employability. It finds that the rationalities advanced to support employability within different institutions vary through a conversation between institutional culture and priorities and the demands of different stakeholders who the institution seeks to engage. The technocratic and humanistic rationalities dominate, with the emancipatory rationality weakly represented in the data. However, in many cases, the different rationalities are woven together, often for tactical reasons, to create bespoke institutional rationalities.

Keywords Higher education · Employability · Ideology · Rationality

Introduction

The aim of the study reported here was to understand the rationalities that underpin employability strategy and practice as voiced by key strategic and operational personnel within higher education institutions globally. Although its meaning shifts across place and time and remains contested, the term 'employability' has entered the lexicon

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of higher education in many countries (Williams et al., 2015). Different actors ranging from government to employers and from university leaders to individual academics have sought to ascribe meanings to the term employability and turn it to their own ends.

Employability literally describes an individual's suitability for paid work, but it carries considerable ideological baggage and is suggestive of various conceptions of the purpose of higher education, its role within the economy and wider society, and the anticipated educational outcomes of a programme of higher education. Employability can be defined in narrowly economistic ways as the skills and knowledge that allow an individual to participate in the labour market or, more broadly, as preparation for a career and for citizenship. Both possibilities are inscribed in Yorke and Knight's (2006, p. 18) seminal definition, although the economistic definition is prioritised: 'A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'.

Contemporary definitions have shifted towards language that highlights the temporal nature and changing demands of employability alongside the desire for meaningful work: for example, 'the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan and in multiple contexts' (Bennett, 2020, p. i), or having the 'skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful' (Dacre-Pool & Sewell, 2007, p. 280). Importantly, the concept of employability has been mobilised not just as a way of understanding students' capacities and success in making transitions, but also to frame a range of educational interventions within higher education (Blackmore et al., 2016). Such interventions inevitably frame the purpose of higher education and develop a conception of an 'ideal' student journey through and beyond higher education in a variety of different and often fiercely contested ways (Dalrymple et al., 2021).

Critical voices raise concerns about the growth of employability as an agenda within higher education. For example, Boden and Nedeva (2010) argue that employability is discursively constructed and shifts the power balance in education to employers in ways that disrupt pedagogies and do not benefit students. Employability is also suggested by some to be a euphemism for cultural capital and a vehicle for social reproduction (Downs, 2015; Morley, 2007).

The concept of employability is therefore the site of a rich series of ideological debates, and this led us to want to dig deeper into how such concepts are enacted within different higher education contexts. In this article, we explore the rationalities that underpin employability strategy and practice in 18 institutions located in eight countries and examine the different institutional blends of rationality that exist across our sample.

The article begins with 'Literature review' in which we explore relevant recent research in the field and set out an analytical framework drawing on the work of Sultana (2014a, b, c, 2018) and Habermas (1971). We then describe how the data were collected using an innovative, three-way interview process, and explain our approach to analysis. This is followed by 'Findings' that sets out the evidence of technocratic, humanistic and emancipatory rationalities. In 'Discussion', we examine what these data say about how the idea of employability is reproduced in different institutions with a different mix of rationalities due to distinct internal and external drivers on the institutions. We conclude by arguing that Sultana's rationalities map well onto employability practice and note that it would be interesting to see more institutions adopt emancipatory rationalities.

Literature review

To provide context for our discussion of practices within the 18 institutions we engaged with, we present a brief review of the literature. We do not aim to provide a complete overview of the vast literature that addresses the subject of employability in higher education. This has been done comprehensively in Dalrymple et al. (2021) and Artess and Hooley. (2018) and more conceptually in Bennett (2018), and we direct readers to these papers for a broader overview. Rather, we highlight the literature that illustrates the key components of our analytical framework and findings. In particular, we highlight a typology of the rationalities that underpin employability provision, which we draw from Sultana (2014a, b, c, 2018) and which he drew from Habermas (1971).

Recent literature focussed on employability in higher education has addressed themes including the efficacy of different interventions (Irwin et al., 2019; Jackson & Brigstock, 2020), students' career planning and career aspirations (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020), equity and social justice (Harvey et al., 2017), the interface between employability and digital technologies (Barr, 2019), employability as a vehicle for university/enterprise co-operation (Arranz et al., 2022), and the ways in which employability interacts with processes of recruitment and student transition (Hora, 2020; Monteiro et al., 2020).

There is also recognition that employability discourses are constructed and reconstructed within disciplinary contexts just as much as they are within national and institutional contexts. Some accredited programs embed elements designed to develop the student as an emergent professional and include structured placements and employer engagement (Kaushal, 2011; Stubbs & Keeping, 2002). Within liberal arts programs, employability activities may be experienced as broader career ideation and exploration Nicholas, 2018). Although these disciplinary differences in the rationalities and practice of employability are important and worthy of further study, we focus on insights at an institutional level.

Reviewing the material discussed above alongside reviews of the field (Artess and Hooley 2018; Dalrymple et al., 2021; Osmani et al., 2015; Römgens et al., 2020), it is notable that while the employability literature is strongly international, demonstrating that the employability discourse is indeed global, there are few comparative studies or international surveys that compare approaches to employability between different countries. Much of the extant work that has explored employability through an international lens has sought to synthesise and minimise differences rather than explore the interplay between ideology, practice and context (see Blackmore et al., 2016; Grotkowska et al., 2015; Rooney et al., 2006). Such literature had the laudable aim of establishing common practices and shared approaches around the globe, but in doing so sometimes misses the way in which the same or similar ideas can be operationalised in very different ways in different countries.

There is research that has examined how employability is a key concept in the internationalisation of higher education (see Coelen & Gribble, 2019). This literature recognises that the internationalisation of higher education has the potential to disrupt a range of assumptions about what students want and can expect following graduation as they move into the labour market. Following on from this is a body of research on how concepts of employability are experienced by international students (see Fakunle, 2021; Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020). The existing research demonstrates that employability is an international phenomenon but does not fully explore the way in which different national contexts act on this phenomenon.

Employability discourses are found in a diverse range of countries including the United Kingdom (UK) (Minocha et al., 2017), Europe (Pereira et al., 2019), North America (Chadha & Toner, 2017), Australia and New Zealand (Campbell et al., 2019), Asia (Mok et al., 2016) and the global south (McCowan et al., 2014), and in global trends relating to participation and graduate outcomes (Marginson, 2016). Inevitably, there are regional differences in what is described as employability and the actors involved in it. Chadha and Toner (2017) provide a good example of these variations in their analysis of employability discourse in the UK and United States (US), observing that in the UK, public policy plays a comparatively much bigger role in shaping the nature and definition of employability while in the US higher education institutions tend to define employability themselves as part of an institutional branding effort within a highly marketised higher education system. We believe that there is value in more comparative and cross-national work of this kind, and it is this aim that the current study addressed.

Rationalities underpinning employability

As we have begun to describe, employability is not one thing but many. It exists in different forms across different countries, is prompted by different drivers and is underpinned by different ideas and ideologies. It also encounters a range of challenges and critiques and seeks to respond to these challenges in a variety of ways. In this study, we explored the rationalities that underpinned the practice of employability in universities across the world.

There is a seam of research that has explored the rationalities underpinning institutional politics and processes that have shaped the employability practices of higher education institutions. This work has explored the ways in which academic staff are co-opted into practice and might seek to resist institutional employability discourses (Cotronei-Baird, 2020; Kalfa & Taksa, 2017). Indeed, much of the work examining the rationalities of employability has aligned itself with this critical lens, often highlighting and seeking to resist rationalities characterised as consumerist (Puaca et al., 2017) and neoliberal (Jones, 2017). In the context of institutional employability discourses as a site of contestation, Healy et al.'s (2021) work is interesting as it argues that employability has created a new space and field of professional practice within which professional services staff can expand their power and influence. A second point of interest concerns Farenga and Quinlan's (2015) exploration of how institutions enact employability strategies, mapping different models of practice within the UK and testing the boundaries of how employability settles into an institutional logic.

Although the critical tradition was useful in informing our thinking about rationalities in higher education, it seemed to us that it can portray employability discourses in too monolithic a way. There are many ways to think about, speak about and deliver employability and we sought a theoretical framework to help us identify and clarify the different approaches that we found. To this end, we drew on Sultana's (2014a, b, c, 2018) typology of rationalities that inform career education and guidance. Sultana builds on the work of Habermas (1971) who explores the way in which different rationalities underpin epistemic traditions. Sultana fuses this with Watts' (1996) work on the socio-political ideologies of career guidance to propose a framework that surfaces the rationalities that underpin interventions designed to influence participation in education and the labour market. He argues that such career development interventions, including what is described as 'employability' in the context of higher education, can adopt one of three main ideological stances or rationalities: technocratic, humanistic and emancipatory.

Technocratic rationalities focus on fitting the individual into the economy and improving the supply of skills and labour required by employers. Technocratic approaches within higher education are often influenced by national or international policy drivers, which seek to engage higher education in a broader economic strategy (Hou et al., 2021). In such a model, the purpose of employability interventions is to help individuals to 'identify their skills profile and to match this as closely as possible with the (presumed) needs of the labour market' (Sultana, 2018, p. 64). Such an approach is informed by human capital theory, positioning students as consumers who are making investment decisions about how to use their time and what skills and knowledge to develop. Human capital theory has been extensively critiqued as an economic theory with critics noting its failure to successfully predict individual career success or to function effectively as a pathway to development and economic growth (Hooley, 2021; Marginson, 2019), but it remains an influential theory that is used to justify investment in higher education (Paulsen, 2001). Technocratic employability provision accepts the framing of human capital theory, viewing the contribution that it makes as undergirding the functioning of the labour market and, as Watts and Sultana argue (2015), making Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' manifest as an educational practice designed to inform and stimulate wise market behaviour.

Although technocratic rationalities are often dominant, Sultana argues that humanistic rationalities focused on developing the individual more broadly within current societal structures have been extremely influential in shaping career development interventions such as those found within higher education employability practice. Such interventions emphasise 'personal growth and fulfilment of the individual', 'self-discovery and flourishing of capacities and aspirations' (Sultana, 2018, p. 64). Whilst the technocratic rationality is seeking to develop people for their potential economic value, the humanistic rationality sees inherent value in the development of the human subject. Although paid employment remains as an important context for humanistic employability programmes, it is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Other activities are also valued, prompting a need for individuals to be able to craft an appropriate work/life balance that can underpin self-actualisation.

Sultana's third (emancipatory) rationality resituates employability activities as a form of critical social engagement. Its 'key preoccupation is to develop the knowledge that leads to freedom' empowering students to 'decode the way in which the economy and labour market function' and challenge social structures 'in the hope that they are, ultimately, transformed' (2018, p. 65). Such perspectives view political participation as a legitimate way in which individuals and groups can advance their careers and enhance their chances of achieving sustainable decent work. Emancipatory rationalities draw on a tradition of critical pedagogy encompassing Freire (1970) and others including the emergent critical tradition in career guidance and employability (Precarious Workers Brigade, 2017; Rooney & Rawlinson, 2016; Sultana, 2014b, c).

We acknowledge that Sultana's typology is one of many ways to organise thinking, discourse and practice relating to employability. For example, we could have adopted Holmes' (2013) distinction between possessive', 'positioning' and 'processual' definitions of employability or Cranmer's (2006) typology which views approaches to employability primarily through the lens of curriculum, with the key distinction being the level of curriculum embeddedness of employability provision. Indeed, it would be possible to reinterrogate our data and to explore these alternative typologies or others.

We chose Sultana's typology because it provided us a useful analytical framework for the current study which emphasised the ideological rationalities which underpinned the different approaches that were adopted in the 18 higher education institutions that we

examine. We aimed to understand what, frequently implicit, political aspirations were guiding participants thinking about how to organise their institution's employability provision. Sultana's thinking on these issues has been influential with his typology also being used to guide analysis in other empirical inquiries (Toiviainen, 2022; Varjo et al., 2021). So far, the typology itself has not received much direct critique although there are those who have critiqued Sultana and his colleagues' argument that career guidance and employability provision can play a critical role in advancing social justice (McCarthy & Borbély-Pecze, 2021; Roberts, 2004). For such critics, the advancing of an emancipatory rationality for career guidance is hubristic, massively overstating the real potential for such activities to change the political economy. But, this is not the place to debate the efficacy of these different rationalities in bringing about the aims that they aspire towards, rather we were interested in describing and analysing the ideological nature of employability practice and highlighting the diverse possibilities that are opened up through an engagement with it.

In this article, we explore the ways in which 18 higher education institutions engage with these three rationalities in their thinking about and practice of employability. Through this enquiry, we hope to illustrate further the ideological nature of employability practice and highlight the diverse possibilities that are opened up through an engagement with it.

Methods

The study reported here involved secondary analysis based on a reflexive practitioner process. We begin by describing the original data collection and analysis process and then describe the secondary data analysis.

The original data resulted from an international conference convened in Australia by the National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services in 2014. At this event, university careers practitioners and academics explored the idea of employability as an institutional agenda. The discussion highlighted the need to create a deeper understanding of employability initiatives and their contexts across regions. Further discussions over the following 2 years led to agreement on a single research question: *How is employability termed, driven, and communicated by universities internationally?*

Recruitment and sample

Higher education careers networks were used to identify participants in careers services and related leadership roles in multiple countries. The team recruited strategic and operational personnel who could give a representative view through their broad expertise and/or their involvement in national and international careers associations. Once ethical approvals were obtained, invitations to participate were issued to the international community of practice comprised of national and regional higher education careers associations and peak bodies. Responses were received from North America (Canada, United States), Europe (Germany, The Netherlands, Ireland), the United Kingdom and South Africa. Participants were provided information about the study and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

In total, 30 people (12 women and 18 men) participated in interviews during 2017 and 2018. Twenty participants were careers services practitioners, and the remainder were in academic leadership roles with direct relevance to careers services. The separation between

these two groups is not clear-cut as several practitioners had published academically and several leaders had previously worked in careers services roles.

The final sample of 18 institutions was located in eight countries and geographically disbursed across states or counties. The institutions included public, private, established and new universities. They were all multi-disciplinary and they ranged from research-intensive (e.g. Russell Group and Ivy League) universities to newer universities with less emphasis on research. The universities are identified with a code comprised the first letters of the country and numerical order: for example, Aust1 was the first institution in Australia. Table 1 includes as much information as is possible without compromising anonymity.

Procedures

The study was organised into two distinct but overlapping phases, followed by the secondary analysis reported here as phase 3. Phase 1 involved a detailed literature review. This informed the initial interview instrument, which after discussion, trial and revision were confirmed for use. Interviews were conducted by conference call and involved three leaders and practitioners from each participating institution.

For phases 1 and 2, the team selected a semi-structured interview format to 'make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee' (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 437). The team acknowledged that researchers who conduct interviews are the main instruments in data collection and analysis and they inevitably bring bias based on their experience (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). To overcome bias, the team focussed on

Table 1 Participating universities

Country	Characteristics Public/private; location	Focus: Research/teaching	~Student population (2019 data, '000)	Code
Australia	Public, located in state 1	Research	58	Aust1
	Public, located in state 2	Research	52	Aust2
	Public, regional, located in state 3	Research	32	Aust3
Canada	Public, located in state 1	Research	25	Can1
	Public, located in state 2	Teaching	20	Can2
	Public, located in state 3	Research	30	Can3
	Public, located in state 1	Teaching	20	Can4
Germany	Public	Research	43	Ger1
Ireland	Public, located in county 1	Research	18	Ire1
	Public, located in county 2	Research	17	Ire2
Netherlands	Public	Research	30	Neth1
South Africa	Public, located in state 1	Research	28	SAf1
	Public, located in state 2	Teaching	32	SAf2
United Kingdom	Public, located in county 1	Research	30	UK1
	Public, located in county 2	Research	24	UK2
	Public, located in county 3	Research	17	UK3
United States	Private, located in state 1	Teaching	12	US1
	Private, located in state 2	Research	10	US2

dialogic knowledge production by using an innovative, three-way interview process in which every participant was variously interviewer and interviewee. Participants were interviewed by two other participants and then interviewed two other participants, in each case from different universities and countries. To ensure consistency, every interview was moderated by the same research assistant. The process was logistically difficult but resulted in rich data and the deep engagement of participants, who became invested as participant researchers.

Once the nine phase 1 interviews had been conducted, saturation was reached for a number of interview questions. This prompted member checking to ensure validity, for which purpose participants were asked to respond in writing to five reflective questions (Candela, 2019). Participants' responses confirmed that the team's understanding of the phase 1 data was consistent with that of the participants. For phase 2, the interview schedule was adjusted to pay greater attention to the emerging topics and issues and eliminate those for which saturation had been reached. The second phase involved interviews with representatives from the final ten institutions, using the same process.. In phase 3, reported here, the entire dataset was explored to investigate how the participants articulated their rationality for engaging with employability.

Analysis

Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed before being checked and cleaned. The team employed a naturalistic coding process that started with reading each transcript without applying codes. Analysis moved from basic coding through to the development of themes and conceptual categories. Following Glaser and Strauss (1967), the team employed a constant comparative analytical scheme to unitise and categorise the text. Analysis moved gradually to higher levels of abstraction, moving from a close association with individual cases towards a concern with broad analytic themes. To establish the credibility of the findings, participants responded to written reflective questions following phase 1 and commented on the team's initial interpretations and conclusions following phase 2 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Two researchers independently conducted initial coding, after which coding was compared and refinements applied. Content analysis and dual coding enabled the systematic, replicable compression of text into fewer content categories (Weber, 1990) and inspection of the data for recurrent instances (Wilkinson, 2011). Initial analysis and member checking were undertaken as described earlier and two coders independently read the phase 2 transcripts to identify new themes. After this, all interview data were coded and analysed for emergent themes with the assistance of NVivo analysis software.

Phase 3 featured detailed discussion of multiple emerging themes complete with subthemes, quotations and multiple perspectives, as well as discussion of inter- and intra-theme connections. Initial coding in phase 3 aligned with a number of themes highlighted in the literature. The team was particularly interested in the way that participants talked about their definitions of employability and how these related to the purpose(s) that they articulated for higher education. To support the analysis, the team drew on Sultana's (2014a, b, c) work described earlier. Sultana's distinction between technocratic, humanistic and emancipatory rationalities provided a framework to consider the ideological composition of the definitions and approaches to employability explored by the participants. In the

first level of analysis, the data were sorted into themes and coded by country/institution. The institutions were then analysed in relation to the three Habermasian rationalities.

Findings

The data were analysed by institution to explore how it related to the main categories set out in our analytical approach. Table 2 sets out the findings by institution.

Sultana's (2014a, b, c) typology helps us to consider the underlying rationalities that inform different institutions' conceptual understanding of employability. As Table 2 demonstrates, the institutions were split quite evenly between technocratic and humanistic rationalities, with some combining the two. Only one institution (in South Africa) engaged seriously with the idea of an emancipatory rationality and that institution was also influenced by technocratic rationalities. That both rationalities were perceptible in several of the countries indicates that this division in underpinning rationalities did not align neatly with national contexts or policies.

Technocratic rationalities

Technocratic rationalities are concerned with ensuring 'a smoother relationship between supply and demand of skills for the benefit of the economy' (Sultana, 2018, p. 64). In the context of the universities participating in this study, this is about ensuring that graduates have sufficient skills and knowledge to find jobs and that employers are satisfied with the students that they recruit from the institution.

Table 2 Analysis by institution

Institution	Rationalities
Aust1	Technocratic
Aust2	Technocratic
Aust3	Technocratic
Can1	Humanistic
Can2	Humanistic
Can3	Technocratic/humanistic
Can4	Technocratic
Ger1	Humanistic
Ire1	Technocratic
Ire2	Technocratic
Neth1	Humanistic
SAf1	Technocratic
SAf2	Emancipatory/technocratic
UK1	Humanistic/technocratic
UK2	Humanistic/technocratic
UK3	Technocratic
US1	Humanistic
US2	Humanistic

Several institutions articulated a technocratic rationality in their employability work, particularly highlighting the way in which employability activities help students to make the most of their qualifications and achieve a good outcome within the labour market. For example:

> [We] define the term employability as covering both qualifications required to obtain and maintain a good position in the labour market, and those required to grow further within the labour market. (Neth1)

As seen in the following quote, the technocratic rationality was often articulated in terms of serving employer need and ensuring that employers find it easy to recruit appropriate students.

> We're working very hard at getting there. In terms of having an employability culture. I think we in [Institution] put huge emphasis on having really good employer engagement and having employers choose [Institution] as a first point of contact when they are recruiting students. So, we work very closely with employers to get them on our campus. (SAf1)

The technocratic rationality can be framed either as being about achieving a short-term alignment between students and the needs of graduate employers or in a more long-term way in line with the temporal dimensions of employability. For example, one Canadian institution (Can1) argued that they were 'trying to get beyond the focus on the initial outcome' in favour of developing 'lifelong employability skills'. In other words, the purpose of higher education is not just to prepare students for their first job, but rather to develop the capacities needed for lifelong labour market participation. The adoption of such longer term perspectives sees some of the technocratic rationalities shade into more humanistic, lifelong and developmental perspectives, whilst still retaining the overarching focus on ensuring that graduates can be full, and indeed lifelong, participants in the labour market. Such findings raise important questions about the definition of employability and what is included within the framing of employability skills.

The participants from one Australian university acknowledged some of these tensions when discussing the way in which their institution presents itself as being aligned with the needs of employers and the labour market.

> [Our institution] has always sold itself as the university for the real world, but that often relates back to employment outcomes as opposed to employability. But that is where we get the messaging confused. (Aust2)

The distinction made here between employment outcomes and employability addresses a live debate articulated by several the institutions. 'Employment' speaks to the employment status of recent graduates, which is outside the direct control of institutions, while 'employability', as the development of student competencies and attributes, is often mobilised as something over which institutions have far more control. Evidenced by the following quote, many respondents were keen to focus on the development of the students' human capital as this was something they believed they could influence.

> … developing their ability and their capacities to create work, or to secure work but we are not about actually matching them to work and that to me is the difference between students having employability skills and employment outcomes. (Aust1)

Such visions of employability are motivated by technocratic rationalities but seek to carefully delimit institutions responsibility in this area. One way in which this is achieved

is by presenting the aims of employability activities in a more student-centred way; rather than describing the aims of employability activities as supporting employer needs, they are supporting students to successfully transition into the labour market.

> So, our working definition is that, very simply, we are graduating students from the university who are prepared to be successful individuals with an advanced understanding of their field of study. (US1)

In some ways, this is a subtle distinction, but it is an important one as it transfers some responsibility to the student and maintains a degree of distance between educational activities and economic outcomes. Once again it suggests that the distinction between technocratic and humanistic rationalities can become blurred in practice, as in the following example.

> We encourage students to take responsibility for their own careers or creating their own work for the future that we're about developing their ability and their capacities to create work, or to secure work but we are not about actually matching them to work and that to me is the difference between students having employability skills and employment outcomes. (Aust1)

Technocratic rationalities were often driven by external forces such as government policy. One South African respondent framed their institutions engagement with the employability agenda as meeting a national societal need and something they needed to do for their country.

> From our institution's perspective, employability is more than just an institutional issue - it's in fact a national issue. We have a very high youth unemployment rate in our country. We have a high education system that is increasingly under financial strain in terms of funding from our state to high education being cut. And the state and society [are] looking to universities and saying, 'Well, where's the return on investment as a society? We are spending such a large chunk of our national budget on higher education'. (SAf1)

For one UK institution, this external government pressure was not particularly welcome. One participant bemoaned that the way in which national and institutional policy framed the employability agenda was distorting and they were keen to hear about alternative perspectives:

> We have a real problem with the way of [framing] employability in the UK now, but it's got such traction, such resonance, it's owned so thoroughly by the government and senior managers and institutions, there's no getting away from it and we live with it. But it would be really interesting to hear a country that isn't as hung up on league tables and destinations describing what we call employability. (UK1)

In some countries, the pressure to engage with employability came less directly from the government and more from key market actors, notably students and their parents. Within the highly marketised higher education systems in the study, several institutions reported that their engagement with employability was part of an attempt to develop or maintain a reputation that allowed them to recruit students. Respondents reported that students and their parents prioritise employability, which here is often understood as the ability of graduates to secure an advantageous place within the labour market, and that the desire to meet customer demand drives the institution to engage in employability activities. In such cases, the employability approach of the institution (and the messaging that it took employment

and employability seriously) was actively used as part of the institution's marketing to prospective students.

This focus on reputation and on the possibility of increasing the institution's market appeal is often filtered through a desire to perform well in various university rankings. As many of the rankings utilise metrics such as student satisfaction and the first destinations of graduates, they can focus broader public and political attention on employability initiatives that hope to increase institutional performance in these areas.

> … we're working hard to bring up our own rankings in this area and have more types of partnerships with employers. I mean, we also work very closely on the first destination of our students so that the first destination [rankings] are quite high. So again, that's our whole employability, how we actually look visibly in all kinds of rankings and our first destination reports are very important. We put a lot of effort in to having a lot of fairs on campus. Bringing employers on campus, getting employers engaged with students in some way and enhancing the graduate outcome for our students. (Ire1)

This demonstrates a strong relationship between the desire of employers for certain types of graduates and the decision of student and parents to attend institutions that seem able to deliver these graduates. The reliability of these reputational claims and the various associated metrics and rankings is not clear, but many participants felt the external pressure to deliver a unique and highly employable graduate:

> That reputation is increasingly playing an important role in employability. I do hear people say that they look for [Can1] grads, they look to hire [Can1] grads. And I think increasingly in the future, that will probably be something that we actually do start to talk about in quantifiable terms - in terms of how we recruit students. It's currently I don't think so much [pressure] in terms of people actually having statistics around it, but I predict it will. (Can1)

Conversely, other institutions argue that they do not need to explicitly engage in employability, or at least that they do not need to signal their engagement in it, because students and potential students already believe that a degree from that institution will deliver success within the labour market. This finding aligned with Holmes' (2013) positional perspective on graduate employability, with these reputation-based positional perspectives voiced by participants at the elite institutions.

Humanistic

Humanistic rationalities are focused on the personal development of the individual rather than on the labour market outcome. For some, this kind of humanistic rationality is more in tune with the mission and ethos of universities than a more technocratic definition.

> I come to it from an academic perspective and was trying to sell this idea to academics to take it seriously. As soon as you start to talk to academics about helping people get a job, or this is about careers, a number of people just turn off automatically, they get quite antagonistic because that's not what universities are about. What I liked about the employability terminology and what it leads to is that it's much more about assisting students to recognize what is special about them, and especially from their degree, that might help them in their future careers as workers grow as members of society. So, it's really, actually, employability is also being about empowering stu-

> dents and graduates to recognise what their strengths are so they can articulate it to other people. Once you start talking in that sense then academics, in my experience, start to buy into it. (Aust3)

Commentators drawing on this kind of humanistic rationality actively reframe the focus away from employment per se and onto the students' development and personal capitals and capabilities. A participant from a German institution (Ger1) said 'we don't want to convert our university into a job/kind of education centre'. Such an approach connects employability with longstanding traditions of liberal education or Bildung, encouraging academics to focus on the development of the individual rather than to worry about their progress into the labour market. In some cases, the language of 'empowerment' is adopted, and academics are encouraged to see their activity as part of the self-actualisation of the individual.

> Our approach within the career service is that we're about facilitating and empowering individuals to achieve their aspirations. It's not our responsibility to make everything happen for them. So we're certainly about empowering students … They have to be a big part of it. (Aust3)

Such approaches sometimes included the involvement of students as partners in developing and delivering the provision. For example, in one German institution which sought to incorporate existing forms of student organisation and actively involve them in programme development, although this proved hard to actually deliver.

> So, what I did, I invited all our students - so there are students' associations who to a certain extent could be associated with career development. Social work, debate classes, economic circles, so things like that. And I try to involve them in kind of really working on programs and here I found that they, that that kind of expectation was a bit overstretching their ability. (Ger1)

The humanistic framing is sometimes advanced in opposition to a more technocratic framing. As a participant from a Canadian institution noted, the term employability is easily interpreted as denoting a technocratic rationality. Consequently, there is a desire to look for alternative terminology that fits more closely with a humanistic rationality.

> So while we're watching what's going on in those other countries, there's other things still leading on so I'm okay with it but the word employability, what I think our institution would interpret it as is 'the ability to kind of take the education that you're receiving, the degree that you're doing, the skills that you're gaining as a result of that, as well as the career knowledge that you're gaining from being here, so the reflection, the awareness of the competencies and skills that you're gaining', is taking all of those pieces and being able to kind of navigate your career throughout your lifetime and I think we still refer to it as 'career development' but it's very much, you know, your career path over your lifetime. (Can2)

Humanistic rationalities were less likely to be articulated as a response to external policy or market drivers than technocratic ones. Many of those articulating humanistic rationalities explicitly rejected the idea that their work on employability was based on market concern or government pressures and emphasised that the pursuit of their students' employability development was intrinsic to their own educational ethos and the vision and mission of their institutions. For example, a respondent from a German university highlighted that the German higher education system was not strongly marketised, 'it's still a

very egalitarian situation, so competition doesn't play a huge role' (Ger1). A university in the Netherlands also reported that employability was a key part of their education mission. Even in systems such as Australia which are said to be highly marketised, many respondents still articulated strongly developmental and humanistic perspectives, for example in Aust2's response which casts all students and staff at a university as co-producers of students' employability.

Many respondents actively made the connection between employability and liberal education. This included UK1, who incorporated it as personal development, Can2 who saw the outcome of education as growth and Ger1 who aligned it to students' emotional growth.

Emancipatory

The position of emancipatory rationality was scarcer in the interviews. Only one South African institution was seriously engaging with an emancipatory rationality. In some ways, this institution was involved in reframing a technocratic rationality for a different kind of context. While the purpose of employability provision was still strongly linked to economistic rationalities, this was not well served by simply alerting students to opportunities and preparing them to take those opportunities up. In this case, the institution perceived its employability activity as part of a broader project of national renewal and economic development.

> We really have to move beyond the fact that it's just to help students find jobs. … we're a developing economy: we've got one of the highest *Gini* coefficients in the world, so the gap between our rich and our poor is mostly higher than any other nation. So, we don't only want to bridge students in terms of getting a job. We really would like to change their mindset in to being job creators. To fund innovative opportunities of applying the skill that they have learned in the classroom to generate economic value. (SAf2)

The disadvantaged nature of this institution's students gives employability activities a different context. Supporting these students to access the labour market and thrive within it is perceived as in and of itself as something that will drive wider structural change within South Africa.

> My students are sourced from typically black household from rural community, either economic or sub-economic family background. Eighty percent of them are there because of accessing student loans through the National Student Loan Agency. So, these students do not have access to best practice for employability to begin with … A child that comes from a background where your parents have never ever been to a university, who were working as either unskilled or semi-skilled labour force in the country. What employability mentor does this child have? What propensity for accessing meaningful employability prospect does this child have? (SAf2)

Participants also described how the nature of their employability provision was under pressure from student protests and a movement to decolonise the curriculum.

> Students at the moment in the country are leading a national revolution called the Decolonization of the Curriculum … And that is probably the most noticeable. And when we think about decolonizing the curriculum, decolonising the classroom, decolonising a system, decolonising access to opportunity. So, not only are students involved in this initiative; it is initiated by them. (SAf2)

Staff at this institution viewed their work on employability as part of an emancipatory project to transform South African society, but they were also starting to feel more pressure from students who were seeking to frame this still more radically and thinking about it in structural terms as part of the 'decolonisation of opportunity'.

While the South African institution was the only institution where a transformative and emancipatory rationality was at the heart of the institutions policy, there were other institutions that discussed the value of emancipatory perspectives. One of the most common ways that this was articulated was in viewing employability as a process of developing active citizens rather than just efficient labour market actors. Although the concept of active citizenship did not necessarily denote radicalism or an interest in social change.

> And I think the other piece of that culture is for some of our faculty is not necessarily making students employable, but they look at the skills and competency that we had listed, and they are things that is important for students to have. We have a strong liberal arts tradition here and so you know but a lot of times they're much more focused on being an engaged citizen and things like that and the skills of employers are looking for that make our students employable are also the same skills that help them being more engaged citizen. (US1)

Such a perspective moves beyond the individualistic focus of some versions of the humanistic rationality and links with broader conceptions of developing the individual within society. Such perspectives can be strongly politically engaged and involved in fostering social engagement, without being necessarily transformative, as can be seen from this example.

> I think it is one of the outcomes that we want our graduates to be aware of. I don't know what to say only thing that is important because I think there is lot of things around employability we do want to create: global citizens, we do want them to be contributing to society. In our career center, we do community service, learning, some are gaining skills, but they are also gaining citizenship and are gaining awareness of the variety of societal issues and things like that. (Can2)

Discussion

This study demonstrates the complex and ideological nature of employability discourses across the world. Employability is in many ways what Laclau (1996/2007) describes as an 'empty signifier', as noted by Morley (2007). That is, it is a concept which is difficult or impossible to define, but which gains an understood meaning by its position within a system of signification. During the discussions that took place between institutions in this project, participants were advancing a series of different chains of signification within which the concept of 'employability' could be located.

For some participants, employability was understood within the signifying system of human capital theory (Hooley, 2021). For these participants, higher education has a key role in developing individuals' human capital and aligning their capabilities with the needs of employers and the labour market. In many cases, there is recognition that this role sits uneasily within higher education and would not be spontaneously produced by institutional actors. However, respondents perceived their institutions to be under a range of external pressures from policy and the market. These external influences serve to drive institutions to engage more deeply with employability and the preparation of students for

the workplace, and in some cases for longer term careering. However, respondents were also aware of the limits of their sphere of influence. While policymakers and parents alike would like universities to guarantee students a successful transition into employment, participants are at pains to make a distinction between employability, which they view as endowing students with the human capital required to make a successful transition and actual employment outcomes. Ultimately, those operating within a technocratic rationality pass responsibility for actual labour market outcomes onto employers and students.

The second rationality articulated in these conversations seeks to locate employability within the signifying system of Humboltian higher education (Anderson, 2020). For these participants, employability was a part of a broader attempt to develop students as rounded individuals and support them to self-actualise. One of the attractions of this perspective was it was possible to align it with the dominant ideologies of academics and to actively engage students in it as co-producers. Many respondents described how this kind of humanistic framing helped to overcome hostility to employability activities that were articulated by many of the actors that they were engaging with within their institution.

Sultana's third rationality (emancipatory) was poorly represented within this data. Very few respondents drew on an emancipatory rationality when they discussed their employability provision. Those that did often blended it with technocratic rationalities, for example connecting the university to progressive social policies and aspirations for social mobility, or with humanistic rationalities, for example discussing active citizenship as a part of personal development. There was little indication of the kind of emancipatory rationality and associated forms of critical pedagogy advanced elsewhere by Sultana and his colleague (Hooley et al., 2018, 2019) and by other proponents of critical employability practice (Kelly & Graham, 2017; Rooney & Rawlinson, 2016).

In many ways, this study demonstrates that discussion about the nature of employability is conducted primarily between technocratic and humanistic rationalities. The emancipatory rationality offers useful critique, but it is not well realised in practice. However, the discussions reported here also show the permeability between all three rationalities. Those technocratic accounts which focus on the longer term development of career shade into humanistic perspectives, while many of the humanistic accounts recognise the way in which the process of student development is framed by the context of the economy and the post-graduation life that students will have to build. As Sultana (2018, p. 65) argues, both the technocratic and the humanistic rationalities are 'firmly embedded in liberal notions of the individual', who is seen to be a rational actor that makes choices in relation to economic or personal priorities. One of the questions this raises is whether the different rationalities actually result in qualitatively different provision, or whether such debates actually serve as ideological cover for similar practices, perhaps because the differences in the rhetoric used to articulate the different rationalities actually obscure a more fundamental level of agreement about the primacy of the individual and the legitimacy of the wider social and economic system.

The interweaving of different rationalities in thinking about employability is also shown in the way that multiple rationalities are found in different countries and institutions and even in the accounts given by individual participants. The patterns that emerged in terms of the rationalities did not map convincingly onto different countries or higher education traditions. While there is clearly a dialectic between context and the rationalities used to advance employability, with both government policy and marketised higher education systems exerting pressure, respondents and their institutions took alternative approaches to managing and responding to these pressures. In such an account, the ideological positioning of employability is at least partially explained by tactical considerations of which

stakeholder it is most important, or most difficult, to get on board. When employers and parents eager for reassurance about their children's financial security are prioritised, a more technocratic rationality dominates. When there is a need to engage academics in a new and seemingly alien agenda, there is a shift to more humanistic rationalities.

This suggests that institutions employability approaches and the rationalities that underlie them are produced through a multifarious interaction between the globally travelling idea of employability, the actions and engagement of internal stakeholders and external influences brought to bear through policy and market pressure. Within institutions, both strategic leaders and operational staff charged with delivering employability programmes weave together these strands to create a rationality and a form of practice that fit with their institution.

Conclusions

This article has explored the rationalities that inform and underpin employability provision in higher education. It has found that both the technocratic and humanistic strands are well represented in employability provision and that many institutions combine different rationalities, weaving them together to create a case for employability that can be made to all stakeholders.

The study focused on drawing out the ideological nature of institutional strategy and tactics. In such an exploration, employability is revealed as an important pressure point where higher education institutions are required to identify, reveal and articulate their underpinning educational philosophies and beliefs about the nature and purpose of higher education. Both Sultana (2014c) and other scholars addressing the specific context of higher education (e.g. Jones, 2017; Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020) note that the practice of employability provision exists within the context of a neoliberal higher education system and labour market. This context inevitably shapes the rationalities that can be imagined and implemented, but, as this study shows, it does not result in the complete dominance of technocratic perspectives. We are not surprised to see that the emancipatory rationality is poorly represented, but we would be interested to explore whether there is anywhere in the world that such perspectives have come more convincingly to the fore. Nonetheless, this article shows that it is possible to frame higher education employability work in a variety of different ways which open up possibilities for more humanistic and emancipatory approaches to come through.

What we have not been able to do and would be interested to see explored in further research is an examination of how institutional rationalities impact on and shape practice. Our suspicions are that technocratic and humanistic informed provision might look very similar on the ground, but it would be interesting to look more at the nature of the educational programmes created, the attitudes of employability practitioners and perhaps most importantly the experience of the students who engage with these programmes.

For any practitioners reading this article, we would hope that it offers cause for a moment of critical reflection on the rationalities that do, and perhaps more importantly could, underpin employability programmes. Consideration of underpinning rationalities is often implicit during the process of designing, developing and delivering employability within higher education institutions. The data presented here suggests that when the key actors involved in employability programmes are given the space to reflect on what they do, they analyse and at times challenge these implicit rationalities. We would argue that

such a process of critical reflection should be central to the work of employability practitioners and hope that such reflection may have an influence on the kinds of rationalities that ultimately dominate.

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