

Understanding the Factors behind Graduate Employability in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract : Graduate employability is a well debated topic by governments, employers, and higher education institutes (HEI) across the world. Much of the focus of these debates have centred around the skills that graduates bring or should bring to the job market, a point echoed by United Arab Emirates (UAE) policy makers and employers. While some research has been carried out on graduates' employability skills, little or no attention has been paid to the forces at play in developing employability policy and its subsequent implementation. The focus of debate has been on a perceived skills gap rather than policy. Recognising a gap in the literature, this paper details a study of UAE employability policy development. Taking a social constructionist approach, this case study views policy as discursive and socially constructed through interactions with key stakeholders. It is within the myriad of interdependent socio-political factors and social practices, particularly power relationships, that this paper explores UAE policy on graduate employability. In doing so, this adds to the debate on graduate employability from the perspective of policy and explores its roots in the interaction between human activity and the 'system'. Data was collected from two main sources: documentary review and semi-structured interviews. Policies and publicly stated rhetoric on graduate employability were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis. Semi-structured interviews with representatives from policy makers, HEIs, and employers were reviewed through Thematic Analysis. The theoretical framework for the discussion of findings draws from social practice theories and highlights the factors at play in access to employment for UAE graduates. This case study presents a methodological approach to policy studies that can be applied beyond the context under investigation. Education policy researchers are provided with an opportunity to compare similarities and differences with their own specific contexts.

Keywords : critical discourse analysis, employability, methodology, policy, social constructionism

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