CHAPTER 13

Finnish University Students Constructing Their Ideal Employable Identities: A Case Study of Top Performing Experts

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Introduction

Universities across Europe invest in graduates' employability due to the Bologna Process that aims to guarantee capable workforce for the needs of the economy (Puhakka et al., 2010). Governments aim to achieve full employment of the graduates, employers seek to find the best match between the needs of the company and available skills, and graduates are being insisted on optimising their career trajectories (Guilbert et al., 2016). Although universities cannot guarantee employment outcomes, they are expected to increase graduate employability (Holmes, 2013; Puhakka et al., 2010) by educating knowledge workers and maximising

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their economic potential before leaving formal education (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Tapanila et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2017b). In this turbulence of working life, a degree is not enough since the new ideal is that graduates are expected to be as employable as possible (Tomlinson, 2012).

It has been criticised that in previous research, much attention has been directed to graduate employment as a vital outcome of university education (see Holmes, 2013). Also, research has been criticised for focusing narrowly on skills and capitals that graduates possess and utilise after graduation (see Tomlinson, 2010, 2017a). Skills as an approach to describe postgraduation trajectories is a dull tool since it delivers the impression that the process of becoming employed is only about matching skills required and skills possessed (Holmes, 2001, 2013; Tomlinson, 2010). Research has paid minor attention to the temporality of employability (Guilbert et al., 2016) or employability as a process, applying an identity approach (Holmes, 2013).

In this research, we approach employability as a process where Finnish university students play out an identity project and construct their future-oriented employability. We examine the process of employability with the term employable identity that gives us an opportunity to inspect what kind of professional an individual desires to be or wants to avoid of becoming (e.g. Fugate et al., 2004; Räsänen & Trux, 2012). We understand that employability and identity construction is played out when people are sharing narratives in social interaction (see Greenbank, 2021). We tell narratives about ourselves and others, and through them we make sense of our experiences and our place in the social world (Greenbank & Marra, 2020; McAdams, 2011). Narratives involve retrospective meanings when people look back on past events and reform and rearrange them in the present moment in interaction with the audience (Chase, 2005). Prospective meanings appear in narratives that discuss the future. When examining the construction of an identity with these two, time dimensions can make themes and tendencies visible, for example (McLeod, 2003). We concentrate on university students' interviews about their educational and working-life trajectories, both in retrospective and prospective manners.

We approach employability not as a formal outcome of attaining employment but as a social, cultural, multidimensional, and life-long process that starts in youth and continues at university where university students create a relationship with the labour market (e.g. Tomlinson, 2010, 2017b). Employability is constantly developing, and it includes everything that an individual has experienced in the past, what is in the making in the

present, and what the intentions for the future are (see Komulainen et al., 2015; McAdams, 2011; Wenger, 2000). We see employability as an individual's relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment: being employable does not necessarily mean that one is in employment (Brown et al., 2003).

By investigating employability as a process, we can achieve a better understanding of the relationship between university students' concerns, desires, and expectations related to the world of work (Holmes, 2013). University graduates may be employable for many jobs, but they will not only tend to limit the range of jobs they apply to for the jobs they feel they have a chance of getting, but also to what they think is appropriate (Brown et al., 2003). The process approach gives us the opportunity to view employability like a movie instead of like a still frame and inspect how situations evolve (Holmes, 2013), before applying to university, during university education, and after graduation.

Our aim is to examine (I) how university students discern their employability in their educational and working-life trajectories and (II) what kind of ideal employable identity they construct in their narration. We applied narrative thematical analysis to analyse interview data and discovered that students constructed in their narration an ideal employable identity, which we designated a Top Performing Expert (TPE). Next, we will discuss previous research of ideal employable identity, and then we will introduce our interview data and thematic narrative method of analysis. Finally, in the conclusion, we will sum up the results, evaluate implementations and limitations of this paper, and make proposals about future research.

The Ideal Employable Identity

The society and culture that we are surrounded by has a great impact on defining what is a successful employable identity (see Chase, 2005; Filander et al., 2019; McAdams, 2011). Demands for graduate employability unquestionably have a lot of power to express normativeness about how employees should perform in the labour market (see Kohli, 2007). From a student's or graduate's perspective, this means that the reflection and the construction of employable identity have become crucial to pursuing opportunities in the competitive and crowded labour market (Siivonen et al., 2020). Much of the load has fallen on the graduate's shoulders since they have been responsibilised for their own employability (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Frayne, 2015; Laalo et al., 2019).

Being as employable as possible (Tomlinson, 2012) requires constant development in multiple areas. Forrier and Sels (2003) have argued that graduates should seek a successful career that involves being employable during their whole working career. This means that employees are also expected to make progress constantly in their career, either to upgrade the current position or to change to the organisation that offers better work opportunities (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Nilsson & Nyström, 2013). In the spirit of life-long learning, there is a demand to educate oneself and to be aware of the latest knowledge in the field. Graduates must constantly keep their finger on the pulse and be prepared for what may emerge in the future of world of work (Fugate et al., 2004). Development also includes the individual's values and expectations to be re-evaluated in relation to the change in the demands of the labour market.

Graduates are expected to already know how to operate in working life and possess skills and knowledge relevant to an employer (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). Employable individuals are educated, qualified, independent, self-imposed, initiative, flexible, adaptable, hardworking, committed, and loyal as well as having passion and dedication for work (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Nilsson & Nyström, 2013). Employable graduates are expected to possess ability to collaborate and communicate with others and have knowledge of languages and experience on internationalisation (e.g., Nilsson & Nyström, 2013; Plamper & Laalo, 2017). Besides skills, employable employees need to possess the right kind of personal qualities as a matter of 'what they are about' (Tomlinson, 2008). The ideal is that graduates are expected to be efficient and aim to achieve a top-performing activity (Filander et al., 2019). In the competitive labour market, there is no room for ordinary or average; one needs to display special qualities and be judged better than others by potential employers. This also entails that employable individuals are expected to dedicate their whole life to work, and the boundary between work and free time fades away (Frayne, 2015). During their studies, students are expected to strengthen their employability with extracurricular activities such as work experience, voluntary work, and internships (see Stevenson & Clegg, 2011; Tomlinson, 2008). The ideal employable identity also includes possessing entrepreneurial skills, behaviour, and mindset, such as being self-reliant, confident, motivated, autonomous, active, risk-taking, problem-solving, and creative (see Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial thinking is seen to protect an individual from unemployment and increase an individual's employability and career development (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen

et al., 2020). Entrepreneurship is said to be a career opportunity for all or at least an entrepreneurial way of working in wage work (see Laalo et al., 2019).

Tomlinson (2008) has pointed out that it is not only about what skills and knowledge is needed to do a job but also what kind of competences are needed to get a job. Boden and Nedeva (2010) state that in a competitive situation, an individual needs to stand out from other candidates and make her/him appealing for potential employers. An employable employee should be able to express her/his employability in a convincing manner (see Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). Presenting one's graduate identity in terms of competence, skills, and strengths has become vital towards the aim to achieve positive employment outcomes (see Keskitalo-Foley et al., 2010).

Data and Methods

The interview data analysed in this article were produced in a four-year research project (2016–2020) funded by Academy of Finland. In 2017, we conducted 30 university student's individual interviews, including 20 females and 10 males. Interviews covered topics such as educational path, working-life experience, studying in university, and academic entrepreneurship. The participant group was heterogeneous in terms of students' fields of study and how much they had completed their studies varying from first-year students to recently graduated students. Study fields were, for example, educational science, business studies, natural science, social science, forestry, and law. The interviewees were between 20 and 65 years old; a total of 18 participants were under 30 years old and 12 participants were 30 years old or older. The participants had differing situations in life, part of them were full-time students and part of them had a part-time or full-time job. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used throughout the reporting of the findings.

In the first stage of the analysis, we get to know the interview data consistently by reading and making highlights and notes. When we want to understand human behaviour and construction of an identity, it is convincing to approach narratives, since narratives are natural habit for individuals to construct, shape, and express their identity (see Bamberg, 2011; Linde, 1993; Riessman, 2008). We focused on the meaning-making, "what" is said, and the content of the interview data (see Riessman, 2008). We are interested in the "told" as what interviewees report about events

and experiences and minimal focus on how narrative is spoken (Riessman, 2008).

After this we concentrated on sections that contained narration about forthcoming employment after graduation and future in the labour market. We discovered that students constructed their identity at least in three different ways as top performing in their field, traditional paid employees, and through entrepreneurship including entrepreneurial employees and self-employed persons. We continued our analysis by taking a closer look at the top-performing identity and broadened the analysis back to the whole interview, paying a close attention to narration about educational and working life trajectories, both in retrospective and prospective ways.

It is important to highlight that we are interested in what students narrate and what kind of identity they construct, and not in finding the truth or whether events described really even occurred. We also recognise that interview interaction may influence what and how interviewees narrate, and that they may leave something without mentioning it (see Josselson, 2013). Most often, individuals have a need to express themselves as a good person and to avoid or talk more briefly about events where they are shown in a less flattering light (Linde, 1993).

We applied narrative thematic analysis and made an empirical observation that top performance presents one ideal employable identity in our data which we named Top Performing Expert (TPE) (see Riessman, 2008). When analysing how interviewees constructed their identity both in the past and in the future, we identified three phases that we named as follows: 1. employability as a long-term goal, 2. constructing employability in a specific field, and 3. harnessing personality to strengthen employability. We also noticed that the process of gaining employability is a life-long process that began before applying to study in university and would continue all the way through the years in the world of work (e.g. Tomlinson, 2017b).

Based on some interview data that we have from our earlier study, we identified three narrative identity positions, namely academic experts (emphasised academic education and careers), multi-talents (focused on employability by developing varied skillsets), and entrepreneurs (considered entrepreneurship as a possible future career option) (Komulainen et al., 2019; Siivonen et al., 2021). However, the focus of this study is not on academic experts, multi-talents, or entrepreneurs, but on students' top-performing identities. Next, we will demonstrate the process of employable identity construction as TPE by interpreting our interview data.

Findings

Students create their own employable identity in order to get prepared for the graduate labour market and to become employed in the future. We discovered that the ideal identity of a TPE was common in our data. It was constructed by most of the students and was particularly emphasised by six of them. In this chapter, we will illustrate the identity of TPE with examples from their interviews. Students have in common that they all have begun their studies and move on to the labour market after graduation, but what happens before, during, or after their studies? Due to our analysis, the process of becoming TPE occurs in three phases (see Table 13.1). Although analytically relevant, the three phases are not separate or linear but instead intertwine. Next, we will illustrate the identity process with citations that are selected from rich interview data.

1. Employability as a Long-Term Goal

The narration of the first phase can be summarised as looking for and strengthening a working life direction. The interviewees talked about their dream jobs and how they had applied to study their chosen field at university. The narration emphasised the accumulation of work experience from one's own field during university studies and after graduation in order to construct employability.

Table 13.1 The process of employable identity construction as a Top Performing Expert

1. Employability as a long-term goal	1a. Early vision about future employment
	1b. Applying to study in university
	1c. Accumulating work experience during time spent in education
	1d. Gaining extensive work experience from the field after graduation
2. Constructing employability in a specific field	2a. University degree as a minimum demand
	2b. Available vacancies in the field
	2c. Developing one's competence continuously
	2d. Free time and hobbies
3. Harnessing personality to strengthen employability	3a. Maximising efficiency at work
	3b. Being passionate about work
	3c. Personality as an asset

1a. Early Vision About Future Employment

Many interviewees told us how they thought about studying at university already when they were young. They described issues related to education and career choice that related to, for example, their interests in childhood. Master's student in business science, Leila, 41, describes her path in this way:

> Interviewer: Could you tell us more about how you ended up as a university student, like in terms of the kinds of steps and choices did you make?
>
> Leila: Yeah. Well, yes, it's… mm… a longer story than I thought it was when I was 12. When I was 12 years old, I had announced that I was going to be a Master of Business Administration. (Leila)

Leila describes how her goal has been getting into higher education (HE) since childhood. She talks about herself as someone who has always had the potential to study, but reaching the goal has not been straightforward. Leila explains her winding path to becoming a master of business and administration with her own personal choices, not with external matters (see also Komulainen et al., 2015).

1b. Applying to Study in University

In students' narration, choosing the field of study and plans for applying for university were strengthened during upper secondary school. They told us, for example, how they could not find a desired field of study from the university of applied sciences and how at home their parents encouraged them to apply to university. Previous research presents that, in Finland, employers have greater hierarchical value on traditional science-oriented university degrees than degrees from universities of applied sciences (Ojala & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015).[1] Bachelor-level student in applied physics, Dani, 22, describes his decision to apply to university this way:

> Well, I've always been, from a very young age, I've always liked to study. I was the guy, at school who was one of the few who liked to do assignments. (…) And then I've always liked science so much, especially physics, so then I started to study it more and then in high school, I really started to like it and then, with the help of my high school physics teacher, I ended up here, in this university city, to study applied physics. (Dani)

Dani has constructed continuity in his interest in learning and studying since he was a child. He has always enjoyed studying and doing exercises unlike many of his peers. His long-term interest in physics increased in upper secondary school, and Dani presents himself as a student whose innate talent was also noticed by others. Dani told us that he ended up studying applied physics with the help of his teacher. Becoming a university student in physics is constructed as a long-term and carefully thought-out process. He explains being good at natural sciences as an innate and natural talent (see also Siivonen, 2013).

1c. Accumulating Work Experience During Time Spent in Education

Students emphasised how important it is to accumulate work experience related to one's own field of study while at university. Employability was strengthened, for example, through placements, summer jobs, and other types of work experience, which were also constructed as advantageous in terms of employability in the future. A recent graduate with a master's degree in geography, Jasper, 26, described how he got his foot in the door in working life:

> For a couple of summers, like, I was back home in the city for an internship (…), through contacts, then I found out that I'd got, like, this thesis topic, which then (…) Research Centre carried out this way. So, I was involved in it, and then I got there again through them, going there for the internship and now I'm there now, again now at least for four months on the job, that it has, like, always, conveniently always led from one place to another, like…it is now, I've gotten into the swing of things, the experience that, they have always taken it forward. (Jasper)

Jasper constructs employability while studying by accumulating work experience. He brings forth how social networks created during a placement opened up a possibility to do his master's thesis at a research centre. He presents himself as a promising and active employee in his field, someone who has created continuity for his work career and "one thing has always led to another". The extract shows how the degree is not enough to guarantee employment, but a student must strengthen his employability through extracurricular activities (Tomlinson, 2008).

1d. Gaining Extensive Work Experience from the Field After Graduation

Interviewees described their future plans after graduation and accumulation of work experience in the labour market. Strengthening one's own employability was constructed as a process that was presented to proceed in a determined manner one phase at a time. Bachelor-level student in law, Alisa, 24, described her future in the following way:

> Well, my first plan is of course to graduate. At this point, I'll be able to graduate on time, and, I would still like to do a couple of internships during my studies. Then, if I want to work in the private sector, I would apply and then go to some international job or to some legal or accounting service, or then to some larger organisation. Then, do that and try a few different jobs, because I wouldn't want to be in the same job all the time. I'd like to try something a little different, but preferably in the areas of law that I'm interested in, for example, commercial law, contract law, intellectual property law and then, maybe, in the future, if it feels right at the time, start my own firm, but if it doesn't, I don't think about it too much at the moment, so, for now, I'm just concentrating on my studies. (Alisa)

Alisa presents herself as an active agent who constructs her employability purposefully in the desired direction. Her goal is to participate in placements and to graduate on time. She plans a smooth transition from HE to the labour market and an upward career with interesting work tasks. An ideal employable employee must continuously progress in her career by changing jobs and work tasks. As Alisa states: "I don't want to just stay at the one job forever". The ultimate career goal for Alisa is to start her own business. These visions are brought to the present moment by stating, "Now I will concentrate on my studies", implying determination to achieve her set goals.

2. Constructing Employability in a Specific Field

In addition to constructing their employability as life-long learning, the interviewees also considered their employability as construction of competence and expertise related to their own field. They describe demands related to their expertise and present themselves in relation to these ideals.

2a. University Degree as a Minimum Demand

Interviewees constructed university degree as "a passport" to the labour market. They emphasised that in addition to the degree, it is important to strengthen employability by carefully planning one's studies. This is how Jasper talks about employability in his field:

> Well, when I don't graduate, that is, if you don't study to be a teacher here, the others won't graduate into any profession. (…) if there were clear lines of what you would like to do in your working life, you should be able to take advantage of that, like pretty much independently, of the courses offered here at the university (…) I don't really know what the major subject studies are in geography (…) surely nothing that's very marketable, like it's that kind of special expertise, I should, well I had that geographic knowledge kind of thing (…) I mean it's pretty much that it requires that orientation, or something else that supports it (…) certainly for many students, it's a tricky situation (…) that, like you don't even know what you wanna do when you're leaving here. (Jasper)

In Jasper's field of study, it is possible to graduate as a subject teacher in geography or as a generalist. He constructs the difference between those who graduate into a profession and those who do not. According to Jasper, generalists must carefully plan what to study as one's competence determines employability and success in the labour market. He constructs himself as an active and capable student, who successfully constructs his employability by accumulating special competence. He constructs difference between himself and those students who have no plans related to their employability even after graduation. They are constructed to be in a weaker position compared to those who construct their employability in a purposeful manner. An ideal employable employee has a clear plan about future employment, and he/she strives towards this goal actively by developing her/his special competence. The degree is constructed as a passport that does not guarantee employability, but an individual must also accumulate currency, that is, study the right courses to prove her/his competence.

2b. Available Vacancies in the Field

The interviewees talked about the graduate labour market in their own field in relation to the employment situation and geographical location. Overall, they perceived their employability in a positive light. This is how

Amelia, 42, a master's student in health science, describes the labour market situation in her field:

> Yes, I trust that, at least the hype around health economics and the fact that, like, there are really no experts in this field (…) like pretty much all the big IT companies are now working on health data, the secondary use of health data, and other things, so that someone that, like, really understands the costs of it, well I want to be like that. (Amelia)

Amelia constructs her employability in relation to the supply and demand of the workforce. She talks about strengthening her own employability by constructing difference in relation to other employees in her field by developing her competence so that "she really understands the costs". Amelia aims for a top position, which would further enhance her employability in an already good labour market situation.

2c. Developing One's Competence Continuously

The interviewees emphasised that it is important to continually develop one's competence. Expertise was not constructed as static but as something that needs to be updated on a regular basis. A bachelor's student in social science, Lisa, 24, talked about continuing education:

> In a field like this, you really need to have the latest information, so that you can't really leave it to the previous educational background, and you've got to instead update the information, because there is so much research coming from that area and it is so central to our wellbeing that it has to be the latest information. (…) So that, in a way, you work to preserve that expertise and know-how. (Lisa)

Lisa talks about the demand for continuous development that experts in her field are faced with. Expertise is constructed as a process that needs to be upheld through continuing education and by following the latest research in the field. Lisa constructs it as her moral duty to promote people's well-being by offering them topical information. An ideal employee in her field, thus, needs to manage her professonial expertise and altruistically promote and become responsible for other people's well-being.

2d. Free Time and Hobbies

Besides formal education, the interviewees also brought up their interests in matters related to their own field/work in their free time as well. This blurred boundaries between work and free time. This is how Leila describes her hobbies:

> It's more that I'm genuinely and really interested in these things a lot. And, very broadly, like, I like the news a lot and I actively follow it so to speak, like international and national newspapers, and, well, professional writing and stuff like that. And then the situation has been improved by the fact that my husband has, he has two university degrees and, other things like that, and, then, we have a very similar, like, great interest in what happens, why it happens, what will happen in the future and, what leads to what. And then I've got three boys who are, like, cut from the same cloth that we have a lot of discussions at home about what's going on and why. (Leila)

Leila constructs herself as someone who is dedicated to her own field, that is business science, as she regularly follows news and professional literature related to her work in her free time as well. She emphasises her genuine interest in societal issues, thus constructing her interest as innate. She describes the situation as fortunate, as her family shares the same interests and they feed each other's curiosity and knowledge in their discussions.

3. Harnessing Personality to Strengthen Employability

In the third phase, employability is further strengthened in an optimal direction. This means that the basic level is not enough, but it is desirable to reach the top. The whole personality is harnessed to enhance employability so that it is not only the skills and attributes related to work that matter, but also personal characteristics become important.

3a. Maximising Efficiency at Work

The interviewees emphasised efficiency at work and discussed different means to increase it. These narratives described interviewees' knowledge about the contents of their work as well as the ways of working in an efficient manner. For example, a nine-to-five job was not considered an efficient way of working. This is how Amelia talks about efficiency:

> "I am not ready to work 24/7". Well, there's been enough of that going on in the last few years and, in my opinion, like, everything is fine when you're free to do it 24/7. Or at least I can do a lot of things when I have the freedom to do it and I'm fully prepared to do it, just to get a certain amount of sleep and, I mean, the basics are in order, and then organise all the studying, work, and children, into order, so, it's definitely doable (…) it's like the freedom is the main thing of everything, so that's the thing. And I get so much more out of it when I'm given that freedom. (Amelia)

Amelia presents herself as a top-performing achiever who is able to organise things efficiently if only she is given sufficient freedom to do her work independently. Freedom is constructed as a prerequisite for doing more things in a more efficient manner, "you get so much more out of me". An efficient human machine is able to combine work, family, and free time so that efficiency and the amount of work do not suffer.

3b. Being Passionate About Work

Interest in work was constructed so important that it became a prerequisite and a motivational factor for working. University education was seen as important in order to get interesting work. This is how Dani talked about meaningful work:

> It's that one, a good saying (…) "when you're doing a job you like, you don't have to work all day." It's like, for me, the goal is that at some point when you like work so much that it doesn't feel like work at all. (…) That's at least, at the moment, how it it's been when I've been working there during the summer, so, no, I've never been so happy in work as this before. Sometimes it's felt like, I'm just here doing a hobby and I'm getting paid for it, so that's really cool. (…) I don't think jobs should ever be such that you feel you've got to go there. It somehow feels, like, feels so wrong that you've got to go to work because…I go to work because I have to. (Dani)

Dani says that his goal is to get a job that would be so meaningful that it would not feel like work anymore. He talks about his former summer job as a 'hobby' that he was paid for. In the extract above, Dani constructs himself as a dedicated ideal employee, who is passionate about his work and does not separate between work and free time. The opposite of this ideal would be an employee who works as he is obliged to do so. Dani distances himself from such an employee as "it just feels so wrong".

3c. Personality as an Asset

The interviewees also construct their own personality as an asset in strengthening employability. Personality does not only increase a person's opportunities in the graduate labour market, but together with other assets and different forms of competence, it was seen as beneficial in working life.

> When I think about my husband, for example, then like he has a huge amount of expertise in his field, so of course experts like him get the jobs. I don't have really strong expertise yet, so uh, I only have strong life experience or something like that, well, I am damn good at leading projects and such, but it's not the kind of expertise that's needed here. So, when I'm a top expert in cost effects, I think I'll pass quite a few people at that point just with the expertise, but then if you combine my personality and expertise, then it would be good. (Amelia)

Amelia positions herself as a novice in relation to top expertise, as she does not yet have the competence that her husband has. Amelia constructs employability through life experience and her ability to manage projects but does not see these as essential in her field. Her goal is to become an expert in cost effects, which would strengthen her employability. She evaluates that she would succeed well compared to other candidates looking for work in the labour market. Amelia continues that her employability "would be good" if only she could combine her personality and expertise. Amelia presents her personality as an asset in the eyes of the employer. Amelia constructs herself as an ideal employee who has top-performing expertise and has a personality that is beneficial to work.

Discussion

In this article, our aim was to examine how university students discern their employability in their educational and working life trajectories and what kind of ideal employable identity they construct in their narration. We used narrative thematical analysis and focused on the meaning-making, "what" is said, in our interview data.

Based on our analysis, we made an empirical observation that Top Performing Expert (TPE) presents an ideal employable identity in our data. With further analysis, we were able to recognise that constructing TPE contained three phases which together create a complex and life-long

process (see Tomlinson, 2017b) that had started in youth before university, continued during time in university, and in the future after graduation. During first phase, employability as a long-term goal, TPE is presented as an active agent who takes responsibility for one's own employability and constructs her/his employability purposefully in a desired direction (see Boden & Nedeva, 2010). She/he expresses having early vision in childhood about future employment, and applying to study in university is one stage to achieve this goal. TPE is presented as a capapble student having innate talent that was noticed also by others, and she/him succesfully constructs her/his employability by accumulating work experience during studies and after graduation (see Tomlinson, 2008).

During second phase, constructing employability in a spesific field, TPE is presented as a professional who is expected to strenghten her/his competence continously (see Forrier & Sels, 2003), for example, to achieve desired positions in the labour market. In addition to university degree, TPE is required to gain special knowledge and to upheld it through continuing education and by following the latest research in the field (see Fugate et al., 2004). In the third phase, harnessing personality to strenghten employability, TPE is presented as an ideal employee who has top-performing expertise and has a personality that is beneficial to work. An ideal employee has passion and dedication for work which fades the line between work and free time (see Frayne, 2015; Nilsson & Nyström, 2013). TPE is also presented as a top-performing achiever (see Filander et al., 2019) who is able to organise her/his different parts of life (e.g. family, free time, sleep, and work) efficiently if one is given sufficient freedom to do work independently.

Our findings support the idea that ideal employable identity is not something that one can find ready-made, but it requires individual's own activity and problem-solving in various situations (see Räsänen & Trux, 2012). Students take great responsibility about their employability and construct actively their employable identity as the three-phased process of employable identity construction this article has illustrated. Employable individuals are demanded to have it all: a degree, knowledge and skills, and certain kind of personality (see Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Tomlinson, 2008). It is obvious that the aim of being as employable as possible requires an enormous amount of goal-oriented commitment (see Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). Constructing employable identity is not a sprint—it is a life-long hike. We can conclude that when students' employability is being investigated, it is important to consider the presence of life

experiences and context, since they are involved in the construction of employability (see Greenbank, 2021).

In Finland, HE graduates have relatively smooth higher education-to-work transition and a low level of unemployment (Lindberg 2009; Merenluoto & Lindberg, 2012), but still students have doubts concerning their future employment (see Räty et al., 2019). As we have presented earlier, there are numerous demands falling upon students. Individuals are required to start constructing their employable identity constantly at younger and younger ages and youth is filled with consideration of future employment. Access to university has become increasingly competitive (see Ahola et al., 2018; Haltia et al., 2019; Nori, 2011), and individuals face the pressure to make the 'right' decisions concerning education and employment already in their youth. Both employment and education standards emphasise that students should have a direct and linear transition from education to work (Saloniemi et al., 2020). Students are facing pressure on producing enough credit points and to work alongside studying to gain work experience and to finance their studies (see Honkimäki, 2001; Siivonen & Filander, 2020). Nowadays, school and work are no longer separate phases of life, which means often simultaneous statuses, for example., being a student and an employee (Merenluoto & Lindberg, 2012; Saloniemi et al., 2020). Students are expected to graduate on time and to become employed in their own field (Siivonen & Filander, 2020). Students are not immune to the demands around them, but they recognise them, for example, when they are constructing their identity: what kind of employee should I become? Younger generations (Generation Y or the millennials) have appreciation for work and towards meaningful work even though there are occasionally differing suggestions hanging in the air such as work morale becoming deteriorated (Pyöriä et al., 2017). Does intensive focusing on employability leave room for anything else such as academic growth, and what effects does it have in the long term?

Tuominen-Soini (2014) has published an article, 'Is a young person doing well if she is doing well at school?', and reminds us that we do not get much understanding of adolescents and their lives by only focusing on grades and study motivation. It has been noticed that different achievements and competition at school can have poor side effects such as anxiety, preoccupation with failing, and school exhaustion, which can be a risk even for those who enjoy studying (see Tuominen-Soini, 2014). In the world of work, Kirpal (2004) has presented that increasing demands can cause employees stress, weakening ability to work, increasing personnel

turnover, decreasing work commitment, and even diminished work quality. Although demands and competition can have a positive influence on success in school and working life, we should also think about at what cost and how we define success. As Tuominen-Soini (2014) points out, success at school is not the same thing as learning. Is success having good grades and labour market positions, or is it overall managing in life and well-being? Unfortunately, employability asks us to focus less on experiencing and enjoying the present, and think more about how the present can be mobilised in order to meet goals in the future (Frayne, 2015, p. 76). As we can see, possible effects of increasing demands are not in line with ideal employable identity. This increases further pressure towards individuals and equality among employees.

In this article, our focus has been limited to one ideal employable identity and how it is being constructed. The future avenue of research has an opportunity to broaden the research focus on the ideal employable identities of traditional paid employees and entrepreneurship as entrepreneurial employees and self-employed persons. It would also be fruitful to inspect employable identities with longitudinal data, which could provide information about temporality of the process of constructing employable identity.

Notes

1. The dual Finnish higher education system includes both traditional science-oriented universities and Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), which concentrate on providing professional and vocational education.

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