University students' perceptions of their 'ability selves' and employability: a pilot study

Räty, Hannu

Informa UK Limited

Downloaded from University of Eastern Finland's eRepository
University students’ perceptions of their ‘ability selves’ and employability: a pilot study

Hannu Räty, Katri Komulainen, Carita Harvorsén, Anna Nieminen & Maija Korhonen

To cite this article: Hannu Räty, Katri Komulainen, Carita Harvorsén, Anna Nieminen & Maija Korhonen (2018): University students’ perceptions of their ‘ability selves’ and employability: a pilot study, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, DOI: 10.1080/20020317.2018.1453221

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2018.1453221

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 22 Mar 2018.

Article views: 113

View related articles

View Crossmark data
University students’ perceptions of their ‘ability selves’ and employability: a pilot study

Hannu Räty, Katri Komulainen, Carita Harvorsén, Anna Nieminen and Maija Korhonen

Department of Education and Psychology, University of Eastern Finland, P.O. Box 111, Joensuu, Finland

ABSTRACT

This study sets out to investigate the university students’ perceptions of their current and expected ‘ability selves’ and the contribution of such perceptions to students’ views of their own employability. The participants consisted of a group of male and female students (N = 104) who were asked to describe their present and anticipated abilities and to respond to a set of statements describing self-perceived employability. The students highlighted social aptness, extraversion and enterprise skills in particular as features related to ability selves in current discussions of working life. These interpretations were subsequently related to the optimism they had about their own employability. ‘Ability selves’ seem to play a role in the multifaceted process of subjective confidence formation regarding one’s employment prospects after graduation.

Introduction

Fluctuating academic unemployment has prompted and even compelled university students to re-examine their prospects in the labour market. This entails a comparison of an individual’s own abilities and other personal characteristics with the ability requirements expected of him/her in working life. Graduates have to perform such an appraisal in a context where the changing requirements of the labour market are often seen to be in conflict with the traditional academic ethos, including the value of formal and explicit ‘book knowledge’ and related cognitive-verbal abilities emphasized in university higher education.

Previous research in European countries has examined graduates’ labour market returns and outcomes and how they are positioned in working life, as well as the way in which graduates manage the transition into the labour market (e.g. Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Tomlinson, 2012). However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between the university students’ interpretations of their abilities and their perceptions of their own employability. Given that perceived employability involves students’ self-confidence and views of work-related relevance (or ‘fit’) with regard to perceived abilities, Rothwell, Herbert, and Rothwell (2008) suggested that particularly the concept of self-perceived ‘internal employability’ calls for further research.

Accordingly, the present exploratory study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by examining the relationships between Finnish university students’ self-perceived employability and perceptions of their own abilities. Operationally, we scrutinized the students’ views of their present abilities (‘current ability self’), the anticipated abilities required at work (‘expected ability self’) and the ways in which these perceptions relate to the students’ views of their employability. In this study, the concept of graduate student refers to university students doing their MA degree or comparable higher academic degree, which typically takes approximately 5 years to complete.

In Finland, the employment rate of the academically educated has varied over the years (Taulu, 2017). Thus, a great number of academically educated people are likely to be (re)evaluating their professional prospects, including the relevance of their academic competences. In the Finnish context, the interview findings show that some unemployed academics may question whether university education amounts to a personal merit they can genuinely be proud of or content with (Siivonen et al., 2016). However, many feel that the attainment of an academic degree demonstrates that they possess general, valuable (theoretical) abilities that can be applied in a variety of situations, including working life (Komulainen et al., 2015). Generally, a university degree and the related academic abilities still represent a significant part of their social identity (Räty, 2015).

Evidently, there are significant variations among the fields of study in terms of their actual employment prospects (Taulu, 2017). Usually, students in...
generalist fields (e.g. natural and social sciences or art) find it more difficult to find a job than students in professional fields (e.g. medicine and education) (e.g. Puhakka, Rautopuro, & Tuominen, 2010). In this pilot survey, two diverse fields of study were selected: business studies, representing a generalist domain, and teacher education, representing a professional domain.

**Employability skills in higher education**

The knowledge-based economy and the allied changes in labour markets are seen to entail significant challenges for individuals, including for those with a tertiary education. Thus, academically educated people also have to flexibly adapt to a job market by developing and maintaining their employability (Tomlinson, 2008, 2010, 2012). Preparing work-ready graduates is currently regarded as a major role of higher education (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Generally, the employment of new graduates has become more complicated, and not all graduates are able to find a job at the higher end of the occupational hierarchy. Moreover, specialized professional knowledge becomes obsolete more quickly than before and new occupations within enterprises and organizations are not tightly linked with specific disciplines. Accordingly, the usefulness of employability skills for students is to empower them to fully seize their opportunities in changing labour markets, to deploy suitable combinations of skills to deal with the specific professional circumstances and to enhance their ability to manage a career trajectory over time.

A student is seen as a ‘work in progress’ and as a potential worker (Daniels & Brooker, 2014; Prokou, 2008). Potential worker status is expressed through attributes associated with the graduate’s future identity: employability is not just about getting a job, but about learning, having and developing general work-related abilities, the so-called ‘core’ or ‘enterprise’ skills, such as creativity, problem-solving skills, innovativeness, flexibility, communication, emotional intelligence, teamwork and the ability to take risks (Bridgstock, 2009; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). These skills represent ‘soft currencies’ (Tomlinson, 2012), which are transferable to a wide range of employment contexts, i.e. can be carried luggage-like from job to job (Payne, 2000), and which help graduates become effective navigators and successful competitors in unstable labour markets.

Interestingly, the topical discourse on employability is apt to challenge the value of traditional academic credentials – ‘hard currencies’ that occur in the form of academic qualifications – by placing emphasis on technical, social and personal abilities that are not based on formal expertise or university degrees as such (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003; Prokou, 2008) and have previously been undervalued in formal education. In fact, the whole notion of ability has been extended to include a set of skills frequently indistinguishable from personal characteristics, behaviours and attitudes, which in the past would rarely have been conceived of as abilities at all (Payne, 2000).

For instance, Potgieter (2012) describes a collection of ‘meta competences’, which are viewed as vital psychological resources in an individual’s career advancement, including self-esteem, sense of purpose and emotional literacy. In addition, extroversion, social orientation and closely associated skills such as ‘networking’, keenness to work in rapidly changing situations, lead teams and function in tasks requiring entrepreneurial attitudes and skills are considered central mindsets in today’s working life. Accordingly, the concept of ability is used as a generic notion in the present study, too, referring both to capabilities (e.g. intelligence and innovativeness), personality characteristics (e.g. extroversion and honesty) and attitudes (e.g. competitiveness and risk-taking).

In the British context, Rothwell et al. (2008) and Rothwell, Jewell, and Hardie (2009) have studied the university students’ self-perceived employability, i.e. the students’ appraisals of their prospects of getting a job after graduation. They constructed a questionnaire to examine these perceptions. Based on factor analysis, self-perceived employability was divided into four components: the student’s commitment to his/her university, perceived external employability (e.g. the availability of jobs in the labour market), ambition and perceived internal employability, including confidence in the pertinence of his/her abilities, expressed in statements such as ‘I feel I could get any job as long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant’. All the four components contributed to the overall self-perceived employability. The present pilot study set out to test how well a slightly modified version of Rothwell’s scale would function in relation to Finnish university students and whether self-perceived employability bears a relationship to the students’ perceptions of their ‘ability selves’.

**‘Ability self’**

The concept of ‘ability self’ is a novel characterization of a person’s self-concept in terms of his or her perceived abilities (Komulainen et al., 2012). Theoretically, the concept derives mainly from social psychological research on the common-sense conceptions of intelligence and abilities (e.g. Furnham, 2001; Mugny & Carugati, 1989; Räty, Kasanen, & Kärkkäinen, 2006). Accordingly, ‘ability self’ can be
defined as that part of an individual’s self-concept which relates to the individual’s perception of his/her abilities and other characteristics, understood as more or less internal and constant personal features, which orientate an individual towards education, work and career.

The notions of ‘ability self’ and self-efficacy are somewhat similar when they both refer to an individual’s perception of his/her competences. However, while self-efficacy comprises belief in one’s personal ability to perform specific actions such as succeeding in particular school subjects (e.g. Spinath, Spinath, Harlaar, & Plomin, 2006), the ‘ability self’ refers to a broader evaluation of one’s capabilities, e.g. one’s ability profile. The formation of an ‘ability self’ is connected with an individual’s narratively constructed life history within social-positional and institutional contexts (Komulainen et al., 2012), including ‘a community of significant others’ (Brookover, Thomas, & Paterson, 1964). As in the case of notions of intelligence, an individual’s ‘ability self’ includes an important evaluation of whether one’s abilities are regarded as incremental or static (Dweck, 1999).

The ‘ability self’ is formed in the course of an individual’s life history, especially in the context of formal and informal evaluations. While participating in the differential routines of a school, students tend to adopt the culturally predominant criteria used to evaluate their potential (educability), particularly the far-reaching distinction drawn between ‘hand’ and ‘head’ (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984), reflecting the status hierarchy of abilities and the related school subjects (Mugny & Carugati, 1989; Räty et al., 2006).

Once an individual’s ‘ability self’ becomes dependent on the frame of comparison, s/he has several ability selves. For instance, ‘possible selves’ refers to the sort of person an individual could become (potential self) or wants to become (ideal self) or is afraid of or does not want to become (undesired self) (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

One’s ‘ability self’ involves several modes of appraisal, such as interpersonal (or normative) and intrapersonal or temporal (Kärkkäinen, Räty, & Kasanen, 2009). In the present study, we were interested in comparing the students’ current selves – i.e. how they perceive their abilities at the moment – with their expected selves, i.e. an appraisal of the abilities they think working life will expect of them. One’s expected ability self stands for a normative self which presumably reflects the largely shared anticipations generated in public discussions and related activities (e.g. courses), through which universities help their students attain the professional and practical qualifications necessary for working life.

Individuals are invited, and even required, to connect themselves to particular normative standards or social representations related to abilities, whether such representations are introduced by educational organizations or working life. Even if the pressures generated by normative requests do not necessarily lead an individual to reconstruct his/her present self, they connect him or her to socially constructed frameworks and act as vantage points that an individual is both aware of and must take into account (cf. Clémence, 2001).

**Research questions**

Our study set out to scrutinize the university students’ perceptions of their ability selves and the contribution of these perceptions to students’ perceptions of their own employability. Furthermore, we wanted to test how well a modified version of Rothwell’s scale of self-perceived employability would function with Finnish university students.

The following research questions and related hypothesis were put forward. First, what sort of abilities do university students expect working life to eventually require of them? Based on widespread public and academic discussions around employability, we assumed that the attribution of ‘new’ transferable and enterprise skills, including social adeptness and extroversion, would be highlighted in the expected self. Second, in what ways do current and expected selves contribute to the students’ perceptions of their employability? Since the present self is formed during the course of an individual’s life history, it was plausible to presuppose that the current self would be more strongly connected to self-perceived employability than the expected self, derived from the normative and general demands of working life.

Third, what sort of abilities are most strongly related to the students’ perceptions of their employability? We assumed that apart from conventional generic skills, high scores in social adeptness, extroversion and transferable and enterprise skills would be associated with relatively high employment optimism. Fourth, although no specific hypothesis was formulated, we were also interested in determining whether self-perceived employability was connected to the differences between the two ability selves, e.g. whether a perceived lack or insufficiency of a particular ability would be linked with a relatively low perceived employability. Finally, we wanted to look at group differences in terms of gender and field of study.

**Methodology**

The participants comprised a sample of students, totalling 104, at the University of Eastern Finland. They represented a professional field (teacher education, n = 45) and a generalist field (business studies,
The age range varied between 19 and 54 years (mean age of 24; SD = 4.7). On average, the participants estimated that they would graduate in 2.5 years (SD = 1.3). The questionnaires were distributed before or after eight scheduled lectures, and practically all the students who were present participated. The participants do not represent all the students in their fields but those who were easily available in randomly selected courses. They were requested to complete the questionnaire on a voluntary basis and anonymously. The questionnaire took around 10 min to complete.

The questionnaire, entitled ‘Work life and I’, consisted of 26 attributes that were presented twice. The attributes of the current self were introduced first followed by the same attributes of the expected self. At the end of the questionnaire, seven statements related to self-perceived employability were presented.

### Current and expected self

The scale for the present self was entitled ‘What kind of person am I?’ The participants were asked to evaluate how well the listed attributes described them at that very moment, using a 5-point rating scale, anchored by ‘describes me very well’ (5) and ‘does not describe me at all’ (1). The scale for the expected self was entitled ‘What sort of person am I expected to be in working life?’ The participants were asked to evaluate the given attributes using a 5-point rating scale, anchored by ‘is expected very much’ (5) and ‘is not expected at all’ (1).

The attributes were derived from two sources. First, a well-established self-concept inventory used in Finnish vocational guidance was partly employed (Häyrynen, 1968). The inventory includes both personality traits (e.g., extroversion) and intellectual aptitudes (e.g., theoretical abilities) and has been used to explore relations between the multidimensional self-concept and occupational interests among vocationally and academically educated young people. Second, we reviewed the pertinent research literature and the related public and political discussions on the employability skills needed in the present-day labour markets (see Fejes, 2010; Komulainen et al., 2012). The final selection of attributes was based on the following provisional categorization: (1) social skills (cooperation, emotional intelligence, presentational skills and skilled at building contacts), (2) extroversion (prefers to work in teams, likes public speaking and is talkative), (3) introversion (dislikes public speaking and prefers to listen), (4) enterprising (competitive, innovative, likes to take risks and is ambitious), (5) academic abilities (intelligent, critical, broad-minded and theoretical) and (6) generic attributes of a good employee such as honesty, conscientiousness, persistence, being energetic, initiative, adaptiveness, high self-confidence and sense of purpose (see Table 1 for full description).

### Self-perceived employability

We chose six statements from the scale created by Rothwell and colleagues (2008) measuring self-perceived internal employability. These statements were translated into Finnish and one additional statement was included: ‘I believe that I will be able to get a job in my field when I graduate’. The participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements using a 5-point Likert scale anchored by ‘totally agree’ (5) and ‘totally disagree’ (1). A factor analysis, using the principal component method, yielded one factor including all statements and accounting for 40% of the total variance; the factor loadings of the statements varied between .79 and .36. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha) of the constructed mean scale was .74, which is in line with that obtained by Rothwell and colleagues (2008). Item-scale correlations varied between .25 and .62, with an average of .45.

We began our inspection of the data by looking at group differences according to the students’ gender and field of study. As the subgroups were relatively small and their representativeness thus slight, it seemed reasonable to examine other major research questions based on the entire sample only. In these analyses, we first compared the profiles of the current and expected selves. Next, we scrutinized the correlational relationships of both ability selves with the self-perceived employability scale. Finally, we calculated the difference scores between the current and expected abilities, to see what differences were associated with self-perception of employability.

### Results

#### Group differences

A set of analyses of variance was conducted with the perception of employability as the dependent variable and the students’ gender and field of study as independent variables. Only the main effects were calculated. It was found that gender had a significant effect, $F (1,101) = 5.98, p < .02$, indicating that the male students ($M = 3.71$) perceived their employability in a more positive light than the female students ($M = 3.39$). In addition, the field of study had a significant effect, $F (1,101) = 9.06, p < .01$, suggesting that the teacher education students ($M = 3.75$) perceived their employability prospects more positively than the students of business studies ($M = 3.35$).

In relation to current abilities, the male students scored significantly higher than the female students
in the following domains: innovative ($r < .001$), broad-minded ($r < .05$), likes risk-taking ($r < .05$) and high self-confidence ($r < .05$), while the female students scored higher in being talkative ($r < .05$) and conscientious ($r < .05$). Furthermore, the students of business studies scored significantly higher than the teacher education students in being ambitious ($r < .05$) and disliking public speaking ($r < .05$), whereas the students of teacher education scored higher in liking public speaking ($r < .01$).

In relation to the expected abilities, the female students scored significantly higher than the male students in the following domains: energetic ($r < .05$), broad-minded ($r < .05$) and initiative ($r < .01$). Furthermore, the students of business studies scored higher than the students of teacher education in being ambitious ($r < .001$), competitiveness ($r < .001$) and liking risk-taking ($r < .05$), whereas the students of teacher education scored higher in being honest ($r < .05$) and emotionally intelligent ($r < .001$), having presentation skills ($r < .01$), being broad-minded ($r < .01$), having high self-confidence ($r < .05$), liking public speaking ($r < .05$) and being theoretical ($r < .01$).

Profiles of current and expected ability selves

In the light of the ability ratings, the characteristics that the participants most strongly attributed to themselves were cooperative skills, honesty, adaptiveness, sense of purpose, conscientiousness, emotional intelligence, practical orientation and ambition (Table 1). The expected self was depicted in a similar fashion, given that the Spearman’s rank order correlation — the nonparametric version of the Pearson correlation coefficient — between the rated abilities of current and expected selves was fairly strong statistically, $r_{26} = .59$, $p < .001$. However, there were several major differences in the strength of attributions, as the participants were inclined to relate almost all abilities — particularly social skills and extroversion — more to their expected than their present selves. The only exceptions were liking risk-taking, being ambitious, and, notably, being competitive and disliking public speaking, which were connected more strongly with the present than the expected self.

Relationships of current and expected selves with self-perceived employability

According to the correlational analysis, the vast majority of the abilities (81%) included in the current ability self showed significant connections with self-perceived employability (Table 2). Participants who saw themselves as persistent, self-confident, ambitious, having initiative, being skilled at building contacts and liking public speaking and risk-taking had relatively optimistic expectations about their chances of finding employment after graduation. Conversely, the participants who regarded themselves as disliking public speaking and preferring to listen were inclined to be more pessimistic about their employment prospects.

As to the expected ability self, only a few abilities (19%) had significant correlations with self-perceived employability.

| Table 1. Means and standard deviations of abilities related to current and expected ability selves. |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Ability              | Current self         | Expected self        | Wilcoxon            |
|                      | Mean     | SD     | Mean     | SD     | p       |
| has cooperative skills | 4.19     | .67    | 3.79     | .41    | <.001   |
| honest               | 4.15     | .76    | 4.63     | .67    | <.001   |
| adaptable            | 4.09     | .66    | 4.44     | .65    | <.001   |
| goal oriented        | 3.85     | .86    | 4.26     | .78    | <.001   |
| conscientious        | 3.84     | .90    | 4.46     | .61    | <.001   |
| emotionally intelligent | 3.83   | .93    | 4.03     | .98    | <.06    |
| practical            | 3.77     | .83    | 4.05     | .77    | <.05    |
| ambitious            | 3.72     | 1.15   | 3.94     | .94    | <.01    |
| tenacious            | 3.70     | .93    | 4.04     | .72    | <.01    |
| intelligent          | 3.67     | .65    | 4.17     | .70    | <.001   |
| critical             | 3.60     | 1.31   | 3.91     | .95    | <.05    |
| talkative            | 3.56     | .80    | 3.80     | .60    | <.05    |
| has presentation skills | 3.50   | 1.04   | 4.06     | .87    | <.001   |
| energetic            | 3.49     | .75    | 4.12     | .73    | <.001   |
| broad-minded         | 3.41     | .77    | 4.10     | .87    | <.001   |
| competitive          | 3.40     | 1.04   | 2.86     | 1.22   | <.001   |
| strong self-confidence | 3.39    | .92    | 4.15     | .76    | <.05    |
| shows initiative     | 3.39     | .83    | 4.36     | .65    | <.001   |
| prefers to work in teams | 3.37   | 1.15   | 3.62     | .89    | <.05    |
| prefers to listen    | 3.22     | .92    | 2.83     | .81    | <.01    |
| skilled at building contacts | 3.20 | 1.15 | 4.21     | .90    | <.001   |
| innovative           | 3.19     | .90    | 4.15     | .88    | <.001   |
| likes public speaking | 3.18     | 1.09   | 3.92     | .90    | <.001   |
| likes risk-taking    | 3.07     | 1.06   | 2.76     | .89    | <.01    |
| theoretical          | 2.91     | .87    | 3.05     | 1.02    | <.05    |
| dislikes public speaking | 2.42   | 1.15   | 1.30     | .74    | <.001   |

| Table 2. Correlations (Spearman’s rho) of current and expected selves with self-perceived employability ($N = 104$). |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Ability              | Current self         | Expected self        |
|                      | Mean     | SD     | Mean     | SD     |
| has cooperative skills | .32***    | .10    |
| honest               | .07      | .14    |
| adaptable            | .17      | .01    |
| goal oriented        | .25***    | .15    |
| conscientious        | .20*      | .12    |
| emotionally intelligent | .29**    | .09    |
| practical            | .16      | .12    |
| ambitious            | .27**     | .06    |
| tenacious            | .44***    | .13    |
| intelligent          | .20*      | .19*   |
| critical             | -.05     | .28**  |
| talkative            | .32***    | .01    |
| has presentational skills | .33***    | .21*    |
| energetic            | .27***    | .01    |
| broad-minded         | .02      | .14    |
| competitive          | .23*      | .05    |
| strong self-confidence | .49***    | .19*    |
| shows initiative     | .38***    | .03    |
| prefers to work in teams | .19*      | .18    |
| prefers to listen    | -.30*     | .05    |
| skilled at building contacts | .38***    | .10    |
| innovative           | .19*      | .22*   |
| likes public speaking | .38***    | .18    |
| likes risk-taking    | .29**     | .07    |
| theoretical          | .21*      | .14    |
| dislikes public speaking | -.34***  | .09    |

$^*p < .05 \ ^{**}p < .01 \ ^{***}p < .001$. 
Associations of the differences between current and expected selves and self-perceived employability

To scrutinize relational connections between the two ability selves, we determined an index of difference for each ability by subtracting the score obtained in the rating of the current ability self from the respective score obtained in the rating of the expected self. Thus, the higher the index of difference, the more an individual’s rating of the current ability exceeded the corresponding rating in the expected ability; and conversely, the lower the index of difference, the more an individual’s current ability fell short of the expected ability.

The correlations of the indexes with the self-perceived employability indicated that the participants who rated higher their present ambition, tenacity, talkativeness, energy, self-confidence, initiative, skill at building contacts, innovativeness and like of taking risks than their respective expected abilities were inclined to view their employment prospects more positively than those whose ratings of their present abilities were lower than their respective ratings of their expected abilities (Table 3). On other hand, those participants who rated their current selves higher in terms of criticalness, preference to listen and dislike of public speaking than their corresponding expected abilities tended to indicate less optimism about employment than those who ascribed such abilities to their current selves to a lesser extent than to their expected selves.

Discussion

Our pilot study set out to scrutinize the Finnish university students’ perceptions of their current and expected ability selves and the contribution of these perceptions to students’ self-perceptions of their own employability.

As to the first research question pertaining to the students’ expectations of the abilities required in working life, our presumption was only partly supported. It was found that the participants tended to attribute social skills and extroversion to the expected self. However, the profiles of the current and expected selves turned out to be relatively similar and the participants were prone to attribute almost all abilities more strongly to their expected selves than to their present selves. This difference in emphasis suggests that the contexts of the appraisals vary in terms of their normative power; e.g. when working life differs in many still unforeseen respects from student life, it is possibly regarded as more challenging in comparison to the participant’s current situation as a university student. At any rate, from an early stage in their studies, the students seem to be aware of the requirements of working life that feature in public discussions of the topic (e.g. Cranmer, 2006).

On the other hand, it was also found that enterprise skills such as a liking for risk-taking and competitiveness scored higher in the students’ descriptions of their current ability selves. The business studies students in particular were apt to highlight ambitiousness in their current self and a liking for risk-taking and competitiveness in their expected self. Thus, the construction of one’s ability self is related to contextual-positional factors (Komulainen et al., 2015). A complementary explanation would be that the students’ anticipations of working life-related requirements are already reflected in their self-descriptions as voiced in the predominant employment discourse (cf. Tomlinson, 2012).

The second research question dealt with the ways in which the current and expected self contributed to the students’ perceptions of their employability. Our hypothesis was supported once it was found that the current ability self was related to perceived employability on a broader and firmer basis than the expected ability self. This finding suggests that the expected ability self mainly derives from a general normative representation of work-related requirements, whereas the current ability self is a frame of reference for life-historical continuity that is actively used to interpret one’s life situation and even one’s future (Siivonen et al., 2016).

The third research question asked what sort of abilities would be most strongly linked with the students’ perceptions of their employability. In line with our assumption, it was found that the participants who viewed their employability in a relatively positive light characterized themselves particularly in terms of extroversion and social aptness and entrepreneur-like attributes. These features denote the skill set that is

Table 3. Correlations (Spearman’s rho) between difference scores and self-perceived employability (N = 104).

| Ability                          | rho  |
|---------------------------------|------|
| has cooperative skills          | .13  |
| honest                          | -.06 |
| adaptable                       | .13  |
| goal oriented                   | .13  |
| conscientious                   | .10  |
| emotionally intelligent         | .15  |
| practical                       | .03  |
| ambitious                       | .23* |
| tenacious                       | .31**|
| intelligent                     | .02  |
| critical                        | -.26**|
| talkative                       | .25**|
| has presentational skills        | .15  |
| energetic                       | .25**|
| broad-minded                    | -.09 |
| competitive                     | .15  |
| strong self-confidence           | .27**|
| shows initiative                | .32***|
| prefers to work in teams        | .01  |
| prefers to listen               | -.24**|
| skilled at building contacts    | .25**|
| innovative                      | .27**|
| likes public speaking           | .20* |
| likes theoretical               | .22**|
| dislikes public speaking        | -.01 |

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001.
highlighted in discussions on graduate employability (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Additionally, the generic attributes of a good employee were correlated with the optimistic perception of one’s employability.

The fourth research question addressed the issue of whether self-perceived employability is related to differences between the two ability selves. The examination of difference scores yielded similar findings to those obtained by examining the direct associations between the perceived current self and self-perceived employability. Accordingly, the participants who attributed more introversion-like attributes to themselves than they expected working life to require were relatively pessimistic in terms of their self-perceived employability, whereas those who perceived themselves as exceeding work requirements in terms of their generic positive abilities, entrepreneur-like abilities, extroversion and social skills felt relatively optimistic about their chances of finding employment. The former made up a group which seemed to view that it was over-endowed with the 'wrong' abilities and may thus have felt inadequate or even handicapped, whereas the latter group may have viewed themselves as possessing sufficient appropriate abilities and thus as being able to fit in well with working life.

The importance of social adeptness and extroversion shows up in our results and accords with the previous research (Tomlinson, 2012). As suggested in public discussions, including bestsellers on the subject (e.g. Kahnweiler, 2013), extroverted and socially oriented people are generally regarded as having more positive prospects in working life in comparison with, for example, those who dislike public speaking and prefer to listen. Also, our findings suggest that the socially orientated people have, as it were, a 'self-concept advantage'. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that this was not a group of participants that generally regarded themselves as very introverted.

At any rate, we can speculate on the extent to which the prevailing social representations of work requirements influence the people’s judgements about their work-related possibilities based on their personal characteristics. There is research evidence to show that graduates are increasingly adopting individualized employability discourses around their future employment; they are inclined to attribute their labour market outcomes and success to personal qualities and abilities (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2007). This has important policy implications, since the trait characterizations tend to individualize the responsibility for employability to the person (Fejes, 2010; Komulainen, Naskali, Korhonen, & Keskitalo-Foley, 2011).

Theoreticalness turned out to be the only traditional academic capability, held by the current ability self, which correlated positively with the self-perceived employability. It seems that theoreticalness may be viewed as an ability that is also appropriate in working life, probably based on the supposition that it still represents a valuable generic competence (Rätty, 2015; cf. Sennett, 2006). However, those students who viewed themselves as exhibiting more criticalness than required in working life were inclined to be pessimistic about their chances of gaining employment. We might ask whether students regard criticalness in particular as an academic characteristic that is not welcome in working life and that may even be a demerit. Do students tend to perceive working life as an arena in which conformity is required? Or do they associate criticalness with unwillingness to consent to the ‘new’ skills demand and make compromises in terms of the vague demands of working life? It is important to note that the effect pertaining to criticalness was revealed only during difference scores analysis, suggesting that it would also be useful to address the interrelationships between the present and expected selves.

Consequently, the ‘new’ ability requirements, particularly the social orientation and the related skills, presented by the current discussions of university education and working life are reflected in the interpretations that university students make of their own ability selves. Such interpretations tend to contribute to the optimism students feel about their own employability – which may turn may have an influence on the emotions, motivation and behaviour based on which students orientate towards life after graduation.

Our fifth research problem concerned differences in terms of the students’ gender and field of study. Given that our findings are based on a rather limited number of participants and only two fields of study, we should be very careful when drawing any conclusions. The findings obtained may suggest that students of professional disciplines are prone to have more optimistic working life prospects than students of generalist disciplines. This could particularly be the case in a Nordic country like Finland, which has so far provided relatively good employment opportunities for professionals in the public sector (i.e. education, welfare and health). According to a Finnish survey, the generalists come across more difficulties in their transition to working life than the professionals (Puhakka et al., 2010). On other hand, the situation in Finland has been relative good once the length of the job search has been the shortest in Finland, Norway, the UK, and the Netherlands (Lindberg, 2007).

The students’ field of study was also evident in their ability selves. For instance, in their ability expectations the students of business studies emphasized
‘attitudinal’ abilities such as ambitiousness, competitiveness and risk-taking, while the students of teacher education highlighted ‘socio-psychological’ abilities such as emotional intelligence, presentational skills, high self-confidence, broad-mindedness and even theoreticalness. It seems that the differences between the fields of study tended to be more numerous in relation to the expected ability self than the current ability self, possibly indicating that the students’ anticipation of the required abilities was more field based (cf. Puhakka et al., 2010).

In addition, gender differences were noted independent of the students’ field of study. For instance, the male students showed more positive employability and self-confidence than the females. This pattern accords with the usual findings whereby men tend to rate themselves higher on the self-concept measures of power, intelligence and self-reliance (e.g. Stake, 1992). Other differences were also noted in order to justify the need to include an examination of gender variation in further research on ability self.

Our study has several limitations. First, the small number and restricted representativeness of the participants do not allow for any major generalizations to be made. Further studies based on larger samples would enable the appropriate examination of differences related to gender and field of study. As has been shown in previous research, the students’ emerging labour market identities are linked to other forms of identity, such as gender and social background (Archer, Hutchens, & Ross, 2003; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Second, cross-national comparisons are needed to establish the cultural generalizability of the present findings. For instance, we may ask whether social orientation and adeptness would be particularly relevant to the Finnish context; in any case, these features run counter to the cultural representation of ‘typical’ Finns as introverted and closed to experience (Raelo et al., 2009). Moreover, different national economies have different ways of regulating the relationship between their higher education system and new skills strategies, and national variations shape how the students perceive the connection between higher educational qualifications and their future returns (Tomlinson, 2012).

Third, the list of abilities should also be reconsidered, i.e. the group of academic abilities should be enlarged and a set of topical digital skills as well as metacognitive and reflective skills included (cf. Allen, Ramaekers, & van der Velden, 2005). Fourth, given that the ability self is formed in the course of an individual’s life history, especially in relation to formal and informal evaluations, further research is needed to explore the students’ educational biographies and the related learner identities, which presumably orientate their expected ability selves and self-perceived employability. Finally, it would be interesting to compare the students’ ability expectations with the criteria applied by employers making hiring decisions. This kind of information would give a more focused and lifelike picture of the labour markets than can be provided by a general discussion.

Our findings have some policy implications. In terms of ascribed abilities, the category of entrepreneurship seems quite a restricted one, to which perhaps only a few students feel they have access. Accordingly, there are social-psychological factors that may well set limits on entrepreneurship education in an academic context, something which educators should be aware of.

In sum, we found that the questionnaire created by Rothwell and colleagues (2008) on the self-perceived employability functioned relatively well in the Finnish context. Furthermore, our results suggest that ability selves play a role in the process involved in the formation of subjective confidence regarding one’s chances of finding employment after graduation. Thus, the concept of the ability self seems to be fruitful in the analysis of the social-psychological conditions of employability.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Allen, J., Ramaekers, G., & van der Velden, R. (2005). Measuring competencies of higher education graduates. New Directions for Institutional Research, 126, 49–59.
Archer, L., Hutchens, M., & Ross, A. (Eds.). (2003). Higher education and social class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion. London: Routledge.
Boden, R., & Nedeva, M. (2010). Employing discourse: Universities and graduate ‘employability’. Journal of Education Policy, 25, 37–54.
Bridgstock, R. (2009). The graduate attributes we’ve overlooked: Enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. Higher Education Research & Development, 28, 31–44.
Brookover, W., Thomas, S., & Paterson, A. (1964). Self-concept of ability and school achievement. Sociology of Education, 37, 271–278.
Brown, P., Hesketh, A., & Williams, S. (2003). Employability in knowledge-driven society. Journal of Education and Work, 16, 107–126.
Clémence, A. (2001). Social positioning and social representation. In K. Deaux & G. Philogéna (Eds.), Representing the social (pp. 83–97). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
Crammer, S. (2006). Enhancing graduate employability: Best intentions and mixed outcomes. Studies in Higher Education, 31, 169–184.
Daniels, J., & Brooker, J. (2014). Student identity development in higher education: Implications for graduate attributes and work-readiness. Educational Research, 56, 65–76.
Dweck, C. (1999). Self theories. Their role in motivation, personality, and development. Essays in Social Psychology. Howe: Taylor & Francis.

Fallow, S., & Steven, C. (2000). Building employability skills into the higher education curriculum: A university-wide initiative. Education + Training, 42, 75–82.

Fejes, A. (2010). Discourses on employability: Constituting the responsible citizen. Studies in Continuing Education, 32, 89–102.

Furnham, A. (2001). Self-estimates of intelligence: Culture and gender differences in self and other estimates of both general and multiple intelligences. Personality and Individual Differences, 31, 1381–1405. doi:10.1016/S0191-8869(00)00232-4

Häyrynen, Y.-P. (1968). Ammatillisten intressien ja minäkuvan tutkimus [A study of vocational interests and self-concept]. Helsinki: Kukulautaisten ja yleisten töiden ministeriön ammattivalinnanohjaustoimisto.

Kahweiler, J. (2013). Quiet influence: The introvert’s guide to making the difference. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publisher.

Kärkkäinen, R., Rätty, R., & Kasanen, K. (2009). Children’s notions of the malleability of their academic abilities. Social Psychology of Education, 11, 445–458.

Komulainen, K., Naskali, P., Korhonen, M., & Keski-Taloy-K-Foley, S. (2011). Internal entrepreneurialism – A trojan horse of the neoliberal governance of education? Journal of Critical Educational Policy Studies, 9, 342–374.

Komulainen, K., Rätty, H., Korhonen, M., Siivonen, P., Kärkkäinen, R., & Kasanen, K. (2012). Changing discourses of employability: From the meritocratic to the enterprise discourse of abilities? A review of the current and emerging research on abilities. In T. Tolonen, T. Palmu, S. Lappalainen, & T. Kurki (Eds.), Cultural practices and transitions in education (pp. 82–94). London: The Tufnell Press.

Komulainen, K., Rätty, H., Korhonen, M., Siivonen, P., Kasanen, K., Rautiainen, R., & Kärkkäinen, M. (2015). Kun mikään ei riitä: Akateeminen kykyminä puntarissa [‘While nothing is enough’: Academic ability self in test]. In K. Brunila, J. Onnismaa, & H. Pasanen (Eds.), Koko elämä töihin: Koulutus tietokykykapitalismissa [Whole life at work: Education in present-day capitalism] (pp. 145–172). Tampere: Vastapaino.

Lindberg, M. (2007). At the frontier of graduate surveys: Assessing participation and employability of graduates with master’s degree in nine European countries. Higher Education, 53, 623–644.

Markus, P., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. American Psychologist, 41, 954–969.

McQuaid, R. W., & Lindsay, C. (2005). The concept of employability. Urban Studies, 42, 197–219.

Moreau, M. P., & Leathwood, C. (2006). Graduates’ employment and discourse of employability: A critical analysis. Journal of Education and Work, 18, 305–324.

Mugny, G., & Carugati, F. (1989). Social representations of intelligence. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Payne, J. (2000). The unbearable lightness of skill: The changing meaning of skill in UK policy discourses and some implications for education and training. Journal of Education Policy, 15, 353–369.

Potgieter, I. (2012). The relationship between the self-esteem and employability attributes of postgraduate business management students. SA Journal of Human Resource Management, 10, 1–15.

Prokou, E. (2008). The emphasis on employability and the changing role of the university in Europe. Higher Education in Europe, 33, 387–394.

Puhakka, A., Rautopuro, J., & Tuominen, V. (2010). Employability and Finnish university graduates. European Educational Research Journal, 9, 45–65.

Raelo, A., Allik, J., Verkasalo, M., Lönnqvist, J., Kwiatkowska, A., Kööts, L., … Rence, V. (2009). Mechanism of national character stereotype: How people in six neighbouring countries of Russia describe themselves and the typical Russian. European Journal of Personality, 2, 229–249.

Rätty, H. (2015). Notions of intelligence and social-educational identity. Educational Studies, 41, 272–275.

Rätty, H., Kasanen, K., & Kärkkäinen, R. (2006). School subjects as social categorisations. Social Psychology of Education, 9, 5–25.

Rosenholtz, S., & Simpson, C. (1984). The formation of ability conceptions: Developmental trend or social constructions?. Review of Educational Research, 54, 31–63.

Rothwell, A., Herbert, I., & Rothwell, F. (2008). Self-perceived employability: Construction and initial validation of scale for university students. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 73, 1–12.

Rothwell, A., Jewell, S., & Hardie, M. (2009). Self-perceived employability: Investigating the responses of post-graduate students. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 75, 152–161.

Sennett, R. (2006). The culture of new capitalism. Yale: Yale University Press.

Siivonen, P., Komulainen, K., Rätty, H., Korhonen, M., Kasanen, K., & Rautiainen, R. (2016). Salvation or a broken promise? Two adult graduates’ social positioning in education and working life. Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 60, 110–125.

Spinath, B., Spinath, F. M., Harlaar, N., & Plomin, R. (2006). Predicting school achievement from general cognitive ability, self-perceived ability, and intrinsic value. Intelligence, 34, 363–374.

Stake, J. (1992). Gender differences and similarities in self-concept within everyday contexts. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 16, 349–363.

Taulu, H. (2017). Tilastointi korkeasti koulutetun työntömyydestä [Unemployment statistics among people with a tertiary education]. Retrieved from http://www. akava.fi/files/12516/01_Tilastoto_korkeasti_koulutettun tyontamyyDESTA_ylesiammat_asteet.pdf

Tomlinson, M. (2007). Graduate employability and student attitudes and orientations to the labour market. Journal of Education and Work, 20, 285–304.

Tomlinson, M. (2008). ‘The degree is not enough’: Students’ perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 29, 49–61.

Tomlinson, M. (2010). Investing in the self: Structure, agency and identity in graduates’ employability. Education, Knowledge and Economy, 4, 73–88.

Tomlinson, M. (2012). Graduate employability: A review of conceptual and empirical themes. Higher Education Policy, 25, 407–431.