



Universities UK

Enhancing employability, recognising diversity

Making links between higher education and the world of work

This summary, the full report and supplementary material can be viewed and downloaded from the Universities UK and CSU websites at:

www.UniversitiesUK.ac.uk/employability

www.prospects.csu.ac.uk



Introduction

Universities are becoming increasingly responsive to what employers want. Employers are ever more interested in what higher education can do for them.

More businesses - small and large - are recruiting graduates. And more employers are beginning to look to universities as a source of part-time training and development for their existing employees.

Higher education is expanding and universities are welcoming students from a broader cross section of the population. Also, the labour market for graduates is changing rapidly and the economy is increasingly knowledge-based and competitive. As a result, the nature of graduates' work is being transformed and diversifying. Many students already work part-time throughout their courses, and are graduating into a wider range of jobs and career patterns than ever before.

A new report, 'Enhancing employability, recognising diversity', explores how universities are improving the work skills and knowledge of students from a wider range of backgrounds than ever before. It shows how employers are gaining from this and helping to make it a success, with payback to themselves, the students and universities. It explores the diversity of ways in which higher education institutions, employers, their representative organisations, careers services and others are working together to develop students' capabilities and capacity to manage their careers.



Sophia Plunkett (seated) on work experience.

The University of Glamorgan Experience Works

The University of Glamorgan identifies opportunities for students to undertake voluntary work experience that is relevant to their career aspirations. Participants are encouraged to reflect on, and learn from, their experiences. A Humanities student, for example, undertook a placement at the Cardiff Post, helped relieve the pressure in a busy office and was subsequently offered a half day a week paid position.

The report includes 16 case studies from across the UK, from universities and colleges of higher education working closely with businesses large and small and public services. The case studies illustrate the variety of ways of enhancing graduates' employability. These include new qualifications, existing courses enhanced by work-related activities, imaginative kinds of work experience and ways of learning from this, and ways for students to develop their personal skills and start to plan their careers.



Graduates for Growth
Graduates for Growth is a partnership project of the four Edinburgh HEI

careers services and the City's Chamber of Commerce and Council. It aims to attract the best graduates to work for SMEs, through placements, training and mentoring for students, sharing information and giving advice to SMEs on recruiting, training and retaining graduates.

The report also includes many other relevant examples of initiatives of this kind. Most of these have direct employer input and benefit, such as:

- opportunities to try out and recruit the best graduates;
- live projects commissioned by employers from students to help improve their business performance; and
- a chance to ensure that courses are up-to-date and meet the needs of an industry for particular high level skills and knowledge.

'Enhancing employability, recognising diversity' makes 26 recommendations to employers and their representative bodies, Government, universities and professional bodies. These recommendations are summarised overleaf.

Aims of the report

In publishing the report, Universities UK and the CSU seek to inform employers, prospective students and the public in general about graduate employment.

We aim to provide up-to-date information on the graduate labour market and universities' efforts to enhance students' employability. In particular, the report shows how efforts to enhance employability:

- involve a variety of employers and can show the gains to them of involvement;
- acknowledge the different types of employment (in the private, public and voluntary sectors; in small and medium size enterprises as well as large businesses; and self-employment);
- are based on close collaboration between universities and employers;
- show the impact for students, graduates and employees;

- arise from the varying roles universities play in their communities;
- are informed by the realities of widening participation in higher education and social inclusion;
- recognise the diversity of students, including those from low income, ethnic minority and non-traditional backgrounds.

The report contains three main sections, on:

- Employer and graduate needs;
- Employability, recruitment and performance; and
- Developing employability in higher education institutions.



IMPACT Programme

IMPACT is a joint programme of Leeds Metropolitan, Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield universities. It helps students from a minority ethnic background by assisting them to develop job application skills. This is achieved through one-to-one discussions, confidence building, mentoring and workshops.



Edge Hill College of HE

Edge Hill is developing progress files, and particularly the personal development planning element, as a means for students to become well-rounded professionals. The Geography department, for example, has introduced processes for recognising skills developed through studying the subject and forms of assessment that gives students academic credit for generic skills.

Employer and graduate needs

UK higher education has always been a blend of vocational and academic elements, but recently there has been increasing recognition of the need to enhance students' employability.

The importance of graduates to the economy and the responsiveness of higher education institutions means that there probably has not been a better time for employers, especially small and medium size enterprises (SMEs), to play a role in helping to enhance degree courses and making mutually beneficial links with universities. The world of work has changed, too, and graduates cannot expect a job for life or a traditional career path. Increasingly, graduates are joining SMEs, and entering into freelance work and self-employment.

Employers are looking for something more than a degree, and are becoming more sophisticated in identifying this in their recruitment procedures. An understanding of the world of work and awareness of business (public as well as private) is desirable. Ultimately, employers want graduates who can help them deal with change, and it is not sufficient for universities and graduate applicants to simply list the skills they have developed during study. Enhancing employability requires a holistic approach, integrating knowledge, work experience, and technical and interactive skills development and reflecting on how these can meet the needs of a flexible organisation. Increasingly, graduates need to continue learning throughout their working lives, and higher education can play its part at all stages.

Employability, recruitment and performance

Employability is a process of learning.

It is about an individual's attitude and potential, and should not be confused with simply getting employment, which is subject to many external factors, such as recruitment practices and the state of the economy. So there is no simple solution to enhancing employability. Developing employability in higher education has three aspects:

- developing an individual student's skills, abilities and qualities;
- developing their self-promotional and career management skills; and
- a willingness to learn and reflect on learning.

Employability is about how individuals take advantage of opportunities, and reflect and articulate their skills and experiences.

Recruitment practices are key to graduate employment but are not always clear and obvious from the outside. For example, there is evidence that mature, working class or ethnic minority graduates appear to be disadvantaged when they apply for jobs. The level of earnings a graduate can expect can also be affected by the kind of university they came from, as well as their age and family background. Paradoxically, those universities and colleges that do most to enhance their students' employability may be ignored by the larger graduate employers. It is true that recruitment practices are beginning to change, but higher education and employers still need to work together to overcome artificial barriers to selection.



University of Central England

Jon Hickman's Media and Communications degree combined academic and practical elements, and included two compulsory four-week placements. Jon also found a relevant part-time job in marketing through the University's careers service. At 23, he now runs his own web page design company, High Tide Productions Ltd.



Liverpool John Moores University

Learning at Work Framework

Liverpool John Moores University has developed the Learning at

Work Framework to enable individuals to gain undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications through learning in and about the workplace. Employees can negotiate a programme of study with an academic tutor and their employer, which can include both taught and work-based modules.

Developing employability in higher education institutions

In the last five years, HE institutions have increasingly engaged in developing employability.

In Wales, for example, the HE funding council has led a system-wide approach to auditing and enhancing employability through institutions' Work Experience and Employability Plans (WEEPS). The range of activities within UK institutions can be categorised as four broad areas:

- increasing university support (eg careers information and advice) for undergraduates and graduates in their search for work;
- integrating the development of work-related skills, qualities and understanding in degree courses, often as a result of direct employer input;
- providing opportunities for work experience as part of degree courses, or along side them;

- encouraging students to record and reflect on their work-related experience, skills and achievements alongside academic abilities, so that they can target their applications to the needs of employers.

The report provides a wide variety of examples of these types of activities which are also illustrated by the case studies.

The report concludes that more can, and must be done. Higher education and its stakeholders need to engage in a wider debate about employability and the respective roles of universities and colleges, employers, the Government and other parties in enhancing graduate employability among an increasingly diverse student population.

Recommendations

To employers and their representative bodies

- Employers, employer representative bodies, professional bodies and alumni should seek to contribute to universities' efforts to enhance the employability of higher education students, eg by offering high quality work experience opportunities.
- Employers should be part of universities' ongoing evaluations of the impact of efforts to enhance employability to ensure they are delivering what businesses and public services need.
- Businesses should ensure that their recruitment practices and criteria reflect the immediate requirements of graduates' line managers and the longer-term strategic views of senior managers. Recruitment practices should also be compatible with the principle of equality of opportunity for all students, regardless of social or ethnic background, gender, age or disability. In particular, there should be general awareness of the needs of non-traditional students who may be disadvantaged in the labour market.
- Industry leaders should ensure that their comments on graduate employability are informed by up-to-date and accurate data both on the actual requirements of employers and on the attributes offered by graduates.
- Professional bodies should ensure that their membership requirements for students and graduates are compatible with the principles of social inclusion and the efforts to widen participation in higher education.

To Government, funding and policy agencies

- Funding for employability initiatives should be long-term to ensure that they are given priority and become part of mainstream university activity.
- Funding policies should be based on up-to-date information about employment and career management needs.
- They should also promote strategic approaches to developing employability and the sharing of experience between universities (to avoid re-inventing the wheel).

- Government, Regional Development Agencies and Sector Skills Councils should encourage employers to a) provide work experience for higher education students, b) provide other inputs to higher education provision, and c) enable their employees to engage in work-based learning on part-time higher education courses.

To CSU and other higher education sector agencies

- Agencies such as CSU should help universities by providing analyses of labour market information to identify business and public sector workforce needs.
- There is a need for more relevant, accessible and better-targeted career education, information and guidance, based on an appreciation of the diversity of graduate employment, self-employment and graduate business start-ups.
- There should be more research into the impact of established initiatives and into the importance attached to elements of employability by students, graduates and employers.

To universities

- Universities must develop a strategic, institution-wide approach to employability, ensuring that a very senior manager has overall responsibility.
- Efforts to enhance students' employability should be embedded in degree programmes.
- If students are to take employability in the curriculum seriously, institutions should consider including it in the assessment and grading process. For example, work experience could be recognised in some way and count towards students' final marks.
- Students need support to learn from their experience and to record their learning.
- Universities should maximise the effectiveness of their links with employers.
- Universities should collect evidence of the impact of their efforts to enhance employability and use this in planning future activities.
- Universities should share their experiences of employability development initiatives to avoid duplication of effort.

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