



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

Higher education (HE) and the labour market are changing rapidly. Higher education is expanding and widening participation. The economy is increasingly knowledge-based and competitive, and 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. Employers are increasingly interested in the outcomes of HE, for recruitment purposes and as a source of part-time training and development for their existing employees.

Universities UK and the Higher Education Careers Services Unit's (CSU) new report, 'Enhancing employability, recognising diversity' explores the impact of all these changes.

It explores the issues arising from enhancing employability for diversity among students, HE Institutions (HEIs) and employers and between types of employment. The report summarises the ways that higher education is addressing employability in this new context and highlights the role of UK higher education, in collaboration with employers, in enhancing graduate employability. It explores the diversity of ways in which HEIs, employers, their representative organisations, CSU and others are working together to develop students' capabilities and capacity to manage their careers.

Aims of the report

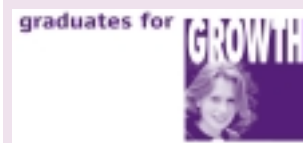
In publishing the report, Universities UK and CSU seek to move the public debate on from out of date ideas of graduate jobs and careers, to one informed by a broader and more sophisticated understanding of employability and the graduate labour market.

In particular, the authors aim to support the shift in thinking and action on employability away from bolt-on, marginal and optional activities; short-term, one-off and fragmented initiatives with limited impact; and a one-dimensional skills-only focus that ignores broader dimensions of employability in diverse contexts; towards efforts that:

- are informed by the realities of widening participation and social inclusion;
- recognise the diversity of students, HEIs, ways of enhancing employability, employers and types of employment (in the private, public and voluntary sectors, and self-employment);
- are holistic, strategic and based on close collaboration between HEIs and employers;
- can show impact for students and graduates and support from employers.

'Enhancing employability, recognising diversity' includes 16 case studies from across the UK, from universities and colleges of higher education and from institutions with very different missions. Some of them are summarised here.

'Enhancing employability, recognising diversity' - Universities UK and CSU



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 case studies illustrate the variety of ways in which the higher education sector is enhancing employability. These include new courses and qualifications, enhanced curricula, imaginative developments in work experience and its accreditation, and the development of progress files and personal career planning. The text of the report also includes many other relevant examples of initiatives of this kind.

Based on this evidence, the authors make 26 recommendations, to Government, funding councils, HE sector agencies, HE institutions, employers and their representative bodies and professional bodies. These recommendations are summarised overleaf.

The report contains three main sections, on:

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

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 prominence of the employability agenda 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 curricula and making mutually beneficial links with higher education institutions. 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 HEIs 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.



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.

Employability, recruitment and performance

Employability is, at heart, a process of learning.

It is a property of the individual, 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 and HE institutions cannot be measured or compared using crude performance indicators. Employability development has three aspects:

- the development of employability attributes;
- the development of self-promotional and career management skills; and
- a willingness to learn and reflect on learning. Employability is about how individuals engage with opportunities, and reflect and articulate their skills and experiences.

Recruitment practices are key to graduate employment but are not always transparent. There is evidence that mature graduates are disadvantaged on entry to the labour market and that graduates' socio-economic and ethnic background appears to influence recruitment decisions. Other research suggests that the level of earnings can also be affected by the perceived status of the higher education institution from which the recruit has graduated, as well as their age and family background. Paradoxically, those institutions at the forefront of employability development 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 residual biases.

Developing employability in higher education

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. The range of activities within UK institutions can be categorised as four broad areas:

- enhanced or reorganised central support (usually via the agency of careers services) for undergraduates and graduates in their search for work;
- embedded attribute development in the programme of study, often as the result of modifications to curricula to make attribute development explicit or to accommodate employer inputs;

- innovative provision of work experience opportunities within, or external to, programmes of study;
- enabling recording of and reflection on experience, attribute development and achievement alongside academic abilities, increasingly by the use of progress files. This section of the report provides a wide variety of examples of these types of activities, and they are also illustrated by the case studies interspersed throughout the text.

The report concludes that higher education and its stakeholders need to engage in a wider debate about employability and the respective roles of higher education institutions, employers, the Government and other parties in enhancing graduate employability among an increasingly diverse student population.



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.

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.

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.



Sophia Plunkett (seated) on work experience.

Recommendations

To Government, funding and policy agencies

- Where developments occur, as a result of fixed-term initiatives, continuity of funding should be provided to ensure that employability continues to be a priority.
- The combination of short-term funding and marginal projects and initiatives for employability should be avoided.
- Funding councils and education departments should adopt a holistic approach to employability based on a sophisticated understanding of employment and career management needs. They should avoid simplistic indicators of employability, such as those based on first destination returns.
- Funding councils and education departments should encourage and facilitate a strategic approach, as is the practice in Wales.
- Funding councils and their agencies (including the LTSN and HEFCE Employability National Co-ordinating Team) should enable and encourage the sharing of resources for employability development between institutions (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 aid the sector through appropriate 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.
- CSU's website www.prospects.ac.uk should continue to be the established and well-publicised central portal for the growing numbers of institutional and national websites for both students and employers.
- NUS, AIESEC and other agencies should explore how their established skills trackers can be made compatible with the development of progress files.

- Higher education funding councils, education departments and research programmes should support research into the impact of established initiatives and into the importance attached to elements of employability by students, graduates and employers.

To institutions

- Institutions must develop a strategic, institution-wide approach to employability, ensuring that a very senior manager has overall responsibility.
- Institutions should develop a holistic approach, facilitating the linking together of different aspects of employability.
- The excellent work to embed employability enhancement in curricula should be continued. This might be facilitated through revising course structures, curricula content and teaching methods, and ensuring staff are supported through this process.
- If students are to take employability in the curriculum seriously, institutions should consider including it in the assessment and grading process.
- Work experience, either as part of a programme of study, or as an external extracurricular activity, should be recognised in some way and formally accredited where possible. The National Council for Work Experience is a major source of expertise in this area.
- It is essential to give students structured support to learn from experience and to record their learning, preferably through integrated personal development planning processes: for example, within a progress file.
- Institutions are encouraged to identify ways of maximising the effectiveness of links with employers.
- Institutions should collect evidence of the impact of efforts to enhance employability. This needs to be ongoing, rather than the one-off evaluation of a specific project. Impact assessment might involve consultation with employers and alumni, and analysis of take-up and employment. It should be noted, though, that some developments drip-feed employability rather than deliver an immediate and dramatic effect.
- Institutions should exchange information about, and their experiences of, employability development initiatives to avoid duplication of effort, including through agencies such as the LTSN and other networks.

Recommendations

To employers and their representative bodies

- Employers, employer representative bodies, professional bodies and alumni should participate in efforts to enhance the employability of higher education students.
- Employers should participate in ongoing evaluations of the impact of efforts to enhance employability.
- Employers 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 public debates 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.

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