Welcome to the Universities UK podcast on the future of skills. My name is Greg Wade and I'm a policy manager at Universities UK who leads on the skills policy area. This is our third podcast in the series. Joining me today is Bob Gilworth, President of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services and Director of The Careers Group at the University of London. Hi Bob.

Bob Gilworth
Hello.

Before we start on some of the future of skills' broader questions and employability, could you just tell me a little bit more about your role as president of AGCAS and also the work you do at The Careers Group?

Okay. So as president of AGCAS, I'm the chair of the board of AGCAS, which is the professional body for careers professionals in higher education in the UK and Ireland and it operates as a charity. So I'm a trustee and so are the other board members and the fellow board members have put various portfolios, mine previously I was the director of research before I became the president.

Okay, excellent.

And The Careers Group?

Yes, please.

So The Careers Group, University of London, is a federal organisation, like the University of London itself. So the Careers provision to the vast majority of the member institutions of the University of London is provided by The Careers Group, so UCL, Kings, Goldsmiths, Queen Mary and so on. All of those careers services, the heads, and directors of those services report to me, and that's the way the network goes.

Okay. Thank you for that. Just starting with quite a broad and general question. When we talk about careers services, some people might have a view that this is mainly about giving advice on CV writing in a student's third year and that students don't have to worry about or be involved with the careers service at all in their first or second years for those
that are doing a three-year course. Does this reflect, in your experience, what careers services do?

Bob Gilworth
02:15
No, not at all but it is a view that you hear and I think it is, if I can put it this way, it's a lazy stereotype that actually does poor service to institutions, Career Services, and students. If you look at the work that we've done in understanding students careers journeys, for example, let's take careers registration, which is something that goes on in about 60-odd institutions around the country where we understand where students are on a continuum from deciding to planning to competing. If we only did CVs we'd only focus on those people in the competing group and we'd be disenfranchising a massive group of students. And also, we can see that career choice and career plan are the things that really make a difference in terms of students futures. So, of course, that's where much of our core expertise lies and we need to work with the students and with their academic colleagues in engaging with students, ideally from day one and in some institutions, before they get there.

Greg Wade
03:29
Yes. Yes, and likewise, I mean, I've heard some examples of careers services maintaining a relationship with students after they graduate--

Bob Gilworth
03:37
Indeed.

Greg Wade
03:38
--and providing services. Is that a fairly common pattern?

Bob Gilworth
03:40
It is and I would say becoming more common. And so that means that for some institutions they may have a very local student body and they may be able to do some of those things in a face-to-face way. Others they have to find ways of delivering that sort of interaction through e-learning mechanisms and that sort of thing because the people are not physically present, or they might be in a job but wanting to move to a different one. So yes, it's becoming a more common thing.

Greg Wade
04:14
Yeah. Interesting. That's really interesting. So more general questions now touching on the theme of employability and the future of skills, a general question about what is the value of graduates to employers and what sort of things are employers looking for although it is obviously difficult to generalise?

Bob Gilworth
04:35
Yes, it is difficult to generalise. I sit on the research group of the ISE, The Institute of Student Employers. And so it's not that difficult to get a view for what the large graduate recruiters are thinking. That part is relatively easy. I would say something that tends to unify that group of employers is looking for potential future leaders and looking for people who can bring transformational thinking to the organisation. And that transformational thinking pace is I think one of the things that underpin why, in the UK, we have such a
relatively non-discipline specific graduate recruitment market because it is that broader sense of transformational thinking that employers are looking for, in addition, to certain subject-specific knowledge if that is directly relevant in that context.

Greg Wade 05:44 Yeah. And some of the things we're hearing about the future of the UK economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution would blend one to believe that transformation is going to be even more important skill. Do you pick that up as well?

Bob Gilworth 05:59 Yes, absolutely. And whilst it is easy in some instances to connect with the large employers because they are organised through the ISE, etc. On the ground, of course, our AGCAS member services, their employer interaction in sheer numerical terms is actually massively with SMEs, and startups, and other kinds of organisations many of which are actually at the forefront of transformation and new ideas that they’re the people that are coming up with them very often. And so from that point of view, yes we see that right across the board from the bigger organisations right through to startups and micro businesses.

Greg Wade 06:41 Yeah. So you mentioned the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Are there other changes that this implies for the future of graduate employment and demand for graduates that you're picking up?

Bob Gilworth 06:55 Well, yes in the sense that we quite often hear about particular professional functions that have either too been carried out by people that in the future may not be. They may be carried out through AI or robotics. And so it's not necessarily the case that the overall need for graduate-level talent would decline, and as your report suggests, but it would be more than-- it's distributed in a different way. And the future occupations that people will be in to use a cliche that's often [banded?] about is, graduating today will many of them will be in roles that didn't exist five years ago. And that's plainly true. So there will clearly be change. Some functions that have been done for graduates for a long time, they may decline. Other things will come up and replace them and we'll just see a different picture but it's hard to imagine that that sort of transformational thinking won't be required in relatively large numbers.

Greg Wade 08:15 Yes. Yes. And that leads us onto a question about transferable skills and their value to employers. And you've talked about the interesting labour market in the UK where the subject isn't sometimes as important as the abilities of graduates and the transferable skills. So they're obviously really important to employers. What is the role of Career Services and supporting the development of transferable skills?
Okay. Well, Career Services are usually part of an institutional community that is engaged with the development of those sort of skills in all kinds of different ways, whether it's through the formal curriculum, whether it's co-curricular, whether it's through particular forms of work experience, or volunteering, whatever it may be. So usually, Career Services are part of a bigger ecosystem that is delivering that. And I would say, generally speaking for our member services the things that they're engaged in around careers and employability, I think a lot of people think that careers and employability are sort of interchangeable terms and they just happen to be that you might call it this one day and the other thing the following day, or whatever it is. Whereas from our point of view, what we would see is that employability is the more sort of generic acquisition of staff, linear acquisition of staff in terms of skills and experiences. The accumulation of assets if you like and it's inevitable that really you should have more of them at the end than you did at the beginning. Whereas a career is more personal and more iterative. And it may be that that would be something that will perhaps be a little bit circular sometimes because, for example, not all work experience is confirmatory. Much work experience is exploratory. And you might do some work experience and you might decide that as a result of that, that's actually changed your perspective on that particular sector or that particular area of activity. You're still wiser in other ways. You've probably gained some more commercial awareness. You probably know more about yourself but you aren't necessarily following that linear path. You might be looking at something else. And I think it's that doing both bits, making sure that we do both bits, the careers, and the employability, is the crucial thing. If we think it's just about the linear acquisition of staff and then people have no clear idea what to do with it, that's when we got a problem, I think.

Yeah. So one of your aims is to ensure that students will take an active role in managing their careers and fitting the transferable skills into that?

Yeah. Because one of the key pieces of knowledge that people need is they need knowledge about themselves and their skills, motivations, values, those kinds of things as well as the understanding of what's out there in the opportunity structure and how those two things might fit together. But if you've only got one you're not as well off as if you've got both, clearly.

Yeah. Yeah. Do employers have a role in the delivery of transferable skills?

Yes, in different ways. One through the medium of the provision of work experience, internships, placements, that kind of thing. And two through graduate development. And through the ISE, for example, employer colleagues are very
open about skills that they hope that students will have at
the point to which they arrive. But equally, those things
which actually wouldn't be that reasonable to expect
somebody of that age and that experience to have, and
therefore they as employers need to develop that with those
people and they're very open about that. So I suppose a
good example would be in the most recent ISE survey,
commercial awareness was an important thing. There is an
expectation to some degree that graduates would arrive
with that but also an expectation that employers would need
to develop it. And I think that relationship with graduate
developers and not only graduate recruiters is a crucial
thing that we need to pay attention to.

Greg Wade
12:52
Yeah. Yeah. We've talked about work experience. Do you
think work experience is valued by employers? Should all
employers offer it and did Career Services have a role to
play in relation to developing and supporting work
experience?

Bob
Gilworth
13:09
Yes. I mean, work experience is a hugely valuable thing
and, of course, there are occasionally, times when there is a
something of a crushing irony when an employer, who might
say that how much they value work experience, doesn't
[touch?] the offer very much of it. And so from that point of
view, I guess, our view would be yes, it's very important.
Employers clearly value it and it would be great if more of
them offered more of it. But, of course, I can understand
that as the types, and varieties, and scale of work
experience particularly, if you think back to schools, as well
universities, as that whole picture mushrooms, then I can
also understand how managing that from an employer's
point of view is a challenge.

Greg Wade
14:01
Yes. Yes. And do Career Services get involved in
supporting and developing work [crosstalk]?

Bob
Gilworth
14:08
Yes. Yes, they do. So the most recent market survey that
we did through AGCAS, which we do one annually, it
showed that we're now at a point where over three-quarters
of the UK and Irish Career Services have a role in
managing work experience programs. And that's a big
change over the last maybe 10 to 15 years. So yes, Career
Services are heavily involved. Quite often, there's a quality
assurance issue in the sense that for the purposes of things
like duty of care, and health and safety, and those sorts of
issues, then a university is seen as a single entity by the
world outside and therefore, we can't really afford to have
many different approaches to those kinds of crucial issues
within a single institution, particularly, if some of them aren't
at the level that's required. So there's that QA bit to it and
then there's also crucially the learning from work experience
parts of it.

Greg Wade
15:21
Yeah. If I may, I wanted to ask you a London focus question
drawing upon your experience in The Careers Group. Quite
often, London is acknowledged as a world-leading higher
education city yet, quite of concerns are raised by employers about graduate schools, and I think there's a view that higher education has a relatively low profile in relation to skills discussions in London. Do you agree with this view and why do you think this might be?

**Bob Gilworth** 15:52

Okay. Well, I suppose I can only speak from my own personal experience having moved to London about four years ago, four and a half years ago. Previously, I was at the University of Leeds and in a city region like Leeds, the university and [inaudible] the universities are huge civic players in the local economy. My experience of having moved to London is in the networks that I've been involved with around London, that isn't quite the same. And I guess that that's because the London economy is bigger and more diverse, and there are so many other players. But nonetheless, I haven't got, in my experience, that same sense of the university or universities being that kind of keystone civic player that you would find the city like Leeds, or Manchester, or someone like that. And certainly, in discussions I've been involved in there has been quite a heavy emphasis on in some cases more basic skills and technician level skills. And I can understand that issues of making sure that London is in [inaudible] when you got a city that has some incredibly wealthy people in it and also some of the most deprived boroughs in the country, I can understand why that would be a priority. And I would think that the technician level thing is probably reflective of the drive towards [apprentices?] that's happening around the country.

**Greg Wade** 17:37

Yeah. Yeah. No. I totally agree with the importance of addressing that and I think from my understanding, there are challenges in London that I think, in that respect, in providing opportunities and progression for people in London with such a vibrant economy. But I think there’s a question about what higher education can add to that as part of a whole scales approach, which is what we mentioned in our most recent report.

**Bob Gilworth** 18:04

Yes. And I think that's true and I think from the point of view of talent in the local economy, I suppose one of the things that we need to get used to is the ideas that you hear from say, [inaudible] prospects where the notion that a graduate is somebody who grows up in one city, goes to university in a second city, and then gets a graduate job in a third city like I did, that actually they're a tiny minority of the graduate population now. So if we think of some of the institutions in our group, in The Careers Group, some of those institutions are institutions which serve London, that students come predominantly from London and will predominantly stay in London, and that's as a source of talent for the London economy then I think that is worthy of some attention.

**Greg Wade** 19:01

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. We talked generally about some of the issues about the Fourth Industrial Revolution. We have
a Post-18 Review of higher education going at the moment as a particular focus on developing skills to meet employers needs. Are there any particular issues or things that you think that Post-18 Review should say or come out with?

Bob Gilworth 19:28

I think two things really in relation to the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Post-18 Review. Firstly, in terms of the generality of the Fourth Industrial Revolution going back to something that I was saying earlier, which is there can sometimes be an overfocus I think on the transition point of recruitment from being a student to being a worker.

Greg Wade 19:56

The first job.

Bob Gilworth 19:58

Yeah. And that's important, nobody would say for a second that's not important but the whole issue of deeper understanding of career journey's beyond that and how one shapes those, I think is critical. Especially because that's the shape of what that might be is changing. And so that's why I think we need to have that deeper dialogue with our employer colleagues, which isn't just about how you get in it's about how you get on. And from that point of view, my colleague at Nottingham Dr. [inaudible], she wrote a terrific article in the NYSEC Journal called, The Robots are Coming, which is about this and sums it up very neatly, I think. In terms of the Post-18 Review industrial strategy, I think one of the things that can happen sometimes is an assumption that information about employees needs and the data derived from that is an end in itself. And, of course, it's not. It's what you do with it that matters. So if as an outcome of industrial strategy, Post-18 Review one of the things that might generate is more and better data on skill shortages, patterns for the future, that sort of thing. That would be great. But in order for it to make any difference, we have to enable that to be presented to the future workforce in a way that will make sense to them and they can internalize and do something with it. So from that point of view I would say on behalf of [inaudible] if there was some work that was to be done between government and ourselves about how we translate that stuff and how the careers professionals that are dealing with that stuff help students to understand it and do something with it, rather than for it to simply sit there, I think that would be a thing that would probably benefit a lot of people.

Greg Wade 22:02

Yeah. Absolutely. Thank you for that. The last question I have is a bit of crystal ball gazing in terms of your experience with The Careers Group, with AGCAS with your work on the research side. What are the future roles that The Careers Service can play? What are the areas in the future that you see being developed more by The Career Services?
Okay. Well, I think understanding of students starting points and journeys and meeting the students where they are, whatever that starting point is and getting across the message that any starting point is okay. I think our key to the future of how Career Services will evolve. So whether that's through more and better data, through things like Careers registration or whether it's through having very high levels of student engagement through the way that Career Services are designed and modeled. Like for example, the [inaudible] spot models at Nottingham or Birmingham that generate very high levels of student engagement. I think the key will be around high levels of student engagement and that being based on the understanding of where the students are coming from so that we can deploy our resources to help them in the most effective way. And therefore, in turn, help our institutions because one of the things that we all need to understand is that whilst institutions are under pressure to perform, as it were in relation to graduate outcomes which is entirely understandable, institutional performance is only ever the aggregate of individual student performance. So if we don't understand where they're coming from or where they're going, how are we going to help them to get there? So I think that part, I think is critical.

I think Career Services because of understanding journeys better, will also be key players in the Social Mobility Agenda. It seems to me entirely right that the Office of Students is saying that one of the key things they want to see is demonstrable impact on Social Mobility through graduate outcomes and I think Career Services play a key role in that. So I think that is important. And then in terms of things like that deeper understanding of journeys within employment and the points at which people may come back to education or may come in and out. I think it's important that that's understood and that Career Services find a way to support that because that's definitely going to be part of the future. So yes, I think those things are important and integration with the academic endeavor whether that's directly in the curriculum or alongside the curriculum. Clearly, that's happening into a massive degree and if you think about Social Mobility, what is the one bit of the experience that any student from any background can be guaranteed to interact with? It's the curriculum. So I see more of that developing. But alongside that services also have to become smarter at how we deliver things in a flexible way including to people who are not physically here. So it's the e-learning and underlying pedagogy and the use of the technology.

Thank you, Bob. That was a really interesting and fascinating insight into current career services, future career services and their link to employability. And you've given us some very clear pointers for future policy. So thank you again.
Bob Gilworth
25:54

Thank you.