

Higher Education Careers Services And Diversity: How Careers Services Can Enhance The Employability Of Graduates From Non-Traditional Backgrounds

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Harris Report (2001) identified the relative under use of careers services by students from non-traditional backgrounds — mature students, those from lower-socio-economic backgrounds, first-generation undergraduates, students from ethnic minorities, students with disabilities.

Research has also shown that the jobs students get post-graduation are affected by age, ethnicity and socio-economic background even after taking into account status of university, subject studied and geographic region. The government's intention to improve careers services is part of a strategy to enhance the employability of students and the responsiveness of universities to the needs of the economy.

Increasingly, widening participation is embracing employability: getting non-traditional students in to higher education is not enough; particularly in an era of top-up fees, students need to complete and benefit from their studies.

As careers and widening participation are more explicitly linked, higher education careers services will have a role in encouraging fair recruitment practices and empowering students in the job market.

Student Services went further than Harris in linking support, academic study and retention:

Recognising and maximising the contribution of Student Services to retention throughout the student lifecycle, and to many aspects of the student experience, require their integration into institutional strategic planning (UUK/SCOP, 2002 b, p.13).

The core concern of the study is what can careers services do to enhance the employability of graduates who enter university from 'non-traditional' backgrounds?

However, this is against a background of government encouragement of employability, widening access and reduced public contribution to higher education based on the premise that graduates enjoy a labour market premium.

I think the myth that your degree is worth £400,000 over your working life...is going to be exploded and I think that some of the things on the current government's agenda about widening participation are a bit bogus. I think some of it is a bit of a con. (senior careers advisor, university, Midlands)

A key issue for many attempting to widen access to careers services is the inequality in the graduate premium: young, white, upper middle-class male Oxbridge graduates have a considerably higher premium than older, ethnic minority, female first-generation new university graduates.

International

Across the world, university careers services, prompted by legislation and pressure from students and lobby groups, are beginning to address the issues of disability, ethnicity and mature students in their provision of careers advice. Many of these initiatives are relatively small-scale and designed to recognise specific needs. Examples from the US, Australia and South Africa highlight the use mentoring, role models and workshops on *curriculum vitae* writing, interview techniques, generic life-skills training and advice on networking as well as the benefits of reflective work experience.

According to Dan Ryan (2003), one of the biggest barriers careers services face in encouraging students to use their facilities is that:

Too few students in general use the office and too many wait until late in their senior year. I use the analogy of the dentist office — everyone knows you should go, but there seems to be a fear to think about their future and so they put it off. Like the trip to the dentist, the longer you put it off the worse the visit will be.

One important lesson is the need for collaboration on campus between careers and other student services.

For Dan Ryan, Director of Career Services, University at Buffalo, the most successful initiatives are those where there is:

Collaboration on campus between the two main offices (careers and disabilities). I believe that exists here at Buffalo as well as UC Berkeley, Alabama, Florida, Nevada, Tennessee, and a handful of others. (Ryan, 2003)

Employers

Many employers are aware of issues surrounding diversity. The consensus amongst careers advisers was that large companies and public sector employers were leading the way on diversity. Often employers, particularly SMEs, want to broaden their profile but do not know how and mentoring schemes have been a useful two-way tool.

Discrimination on the part of employers is a contentious area but self-replicating recruitment seems to involve subconscious biases. Despite employers' willingness to broaden their staff profile, many 'non-traditional' recruits are still 'traditional' in many ways: they are the right age, or have the right sort of educational background. Many careers staff find it difficult to get employers to look beyond A-level grades or university reputation.

Targeting

Targeting students — directing activities or support to specific disadvantaged groups — is problematic. There were numerous opinions expressed on the appropriateness and utility of targeting, as well as conflicting thoughts on whether it could be done.

I suppose if you compare us with somewhere like [local traditional university] where students are from a different background and used to being house captains or that kind of stuff...I imagine that [their] students would probably trail in pro-actively and ask [for careers advice]. (CS staff, post-1992)

Opposition to targeting included resentment at being seen as different, problems in identifying specific groups (such as first-generation undergraduates) and that, in some institutions, non-traditional students are the norm.

They don't have time to (do) nice little fluffy diversity schemes that seem to happen in every university, and so because of that we work very hard to try and embed employability skills into the curriculum here, because it's the only thing our students can do... they're too busy running off to their paid jobs. Or they can't do groovy little workshops either [because] they've got to pick up their kids from school or whatever (CS staff, London)

Various schemes exist to target specific groups although these are mainly focused on disabilities and minority ethnic students and many use mentoring. Although minority ethnic students appear to overcome their concerns about 'special treatment', disabled students were often less enthusiastic about schemes. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds remain very difficult to target.

Perhaps the most striking argument for *not* targeting groups of students was made by a member of widening participation staff: ‘You’ve got to try and touch as many as possible. I’d rather have a one-day course for 500 than a ten week course for five’. (WP staff, NW)

If careers advice is to be targeted, then greater collaboration with other departments within the institution is necessary and information about students, which is held by institutions, needs to be used to target effectively.

General support and special initiatives

All universities included in the study offer a baseline of services designed to advise and guide students on their career planning. The most common services on offer are: workshops on *curriculum vitae* and interview skills; individual advice and guidance; careers adviser’s talks in taught modules; job shops, and careers fairs. Some departments offer a wider range of services depending on institutional priorities and resources available. Generally, core careers services are offered to all students and are designed to suit the needs of diverse profiles and backgrounds. The idea is to engage as many students as possible in their own career planning.

Staff are concerned about the lack of awareness of the range services available especially among non-traditional students. Although most students interviewed were aware of the core services provided, they expressed concern about the lack of awareness of activities designed to address their particular needs. Students felt the names of some initiatives were not adequate as they were not descriptive of the initiatives’ purpose and target student group.

Careers services need to determine their own balance between initiatives and more general support based on needs and resources. Institutions need to support successful pilot projects of special initiatives beyond the initial period of funding. Equally, though, those involved in initiatives need to provide evidence of the successes of the project including a cost-benefit analysis.

Collaboration

Both the QAA’s *Code of Conduct for Careers Services* and the Harris review emphasise collaboration, which is increasingly being built into institutional strategies. Careers services are increasingly becoming part of a wider student support network including links to external agencies. Sharing information between student support staff is an essential part of an increasingly effective co-ordinated student support network.

Careers Services should establish working arrangements with other

agencies to address the guidance needs of individual students and graduates who face particular barriers in the labour market e.g.: those with disabilities, those from certain ethnic minority backgrounds, older graduates and those who withdraw from Higher Education. Relevant documentary information needs to flow from Careers Services to those agencies to enable them to provide effective help to university and college leavers concerned. (Harris, 2001, Recommendation 28)

However, the most effective forms of collaboration that impact on all students and thus do not require specific targeting of non-traditional students is collaboration with academic departments. Embedding employability, including careers information and guidance, in the curriculum is at the core of holistic approaches. The development of virtual learning environments linked to personal development planning processes provide a vehicle for the embedding of reflection on employability attributes and career planning.

The Harris Review noted that

A growing number of Higher Education Careers Services are making substantial contributions to the academic curriculum, sometimes by directly designing and teaching modules, but also through establishing partnerships with academic departments. (Harris, 2001)

The University said we'll put some policy behind [embedding employability in the curriculum] and this will mean that all courses...when they go through their review and accreditation process they will have to show how they are making their students employable and careers will be one of the themes within that. (Senior careers adviser, south)

The most widely expressed objection to incorporating careers modules or careers advice into existing courses is the understandable problem of finding space in the curriculum.

Well, we talk to the staff within departments and ask them if we could come in to timetabled lectures and try and persuade them of the importance of the sort of skills development sessions that we do. But sometimes they — you know some lecturers are very willing to let us have part of a lecture slot, others will say I haven't got enough time to teach what I've got to teach anyway. So, there is a tension there. (Senior careers advisor, London)

[Academics] don't really respond. ... A lot of the time they are more interested in the teaching of the subject rather than getting [their students] onto the jobs. Which is a bit unfortunate really because I think if they were

more career minded it would work to the students' advantage a lot more.
(Senior careers advisor, North East)

Although some academics are resistant to linking careers support and study, this is not as widespread as it is sometimes thought to be.

Alternatively, there is reluctance on the part of academics to take on responsibilities for activities beyond their expertise:

The majority of our academic colleagues, if they actually had time to sit down and think about it, would say 'Oh no, careers is a good thing, a good idea, but ideally can someone else please do it, because really its not my forté, you know, that is not what I am professionally trained and qualified for, so you know, I can't'. (CS, Scotland)

As the above interviewee correctly identifies, careers services on their own cannot dictate to departments how they should address employability issues. However, an institutional strategy, such as those described above, coupled with the ongoing efforts of careers staff to demonstrate to academic staff the benefits of an integrated approach to employability is the most likely strategy for enhancing students' career prospects.

Recommendations

The report concludes with a set of recommendations about awareness, targeting, empowerment, monitoring, collaboration and networking, recruitment, institutional support and resources and possible future developments.