

Briefings on Employability 1

Issues for employers

Hugh Smith and ESECT colleagues

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Employability – why is it an issue?

Graduates comprise a key source of talent that can bring a currency of knowledge and intellectual capacity to employers. The costs of recruiting and keeping them are relatively high. It is therefore vital that they are in a position to contribute positively to the organisation speedily and without major additional resource. Their readiness to do this is heavily influenced by the extent to which they have developed employability skills. One thing is certain – the need for a better-educated, more mature workforce in the increasingly knowledge-based economy is paramount and will not diminish.

Career entry – a key transition

A graduate recruit undertakes a major transition from the world of learning to the world of earning. There is much that is new to them, not least the nature of the new organisation, its culture and approach to work. These features can themselves vary widely from large employers with a structured programme of learning and skill development, to SMEs with a focus instead on the recruit taking more of a lead in structuring their early months with the organisation.

In virtually all situations, however, the clear desire is for the graduate to have a positive impact on the business through effective application of their abilities – specialist knowledge, personal and practical skills and aptitudes in varying combinations. The graduate seeks this because of the job-satisfaction and personal motivation that it engenders – the employer, for the benefit that it brings to the business.

Diversity and the transition to work

An important feature of the graduate recruitment pool is its increasing diversity. The growing minority of mature graduates who have taken a career break or have entered university part way through their career will increase.

The number of graduates from lower socio-economic groups is also likely to rise. The transition to work for these groups may be complicated if they do not learn how to make good claims to the skills, qualities and achievements that employers seek. Many universities and colleges are already targeting 'at risk' groups to help them present themselves to best advantage. Employers have their part to play as well, particularly by recruiting openly and fairly.

Employability skills – key to an effective transition

Employer groups contributing to this paper said that employability is based on 'skills beyond subject knowledge' – skills which enable the individual to secure a job and to be effective in it. This is the key to adapting quickly to working life. Emphasis is given particularly to

- Business awareness
- An understanding of the world of work and of the appropriate 'behavioural protocols', such as timekeeping, work ethic, dependability, integrity, etc
- Team-working, especially when solving problems
- Mixing this with independent working – often on the same project
- Communication, including marshalling an argument and persuading others.

Smaller organisations in particular also place importance on

- Planning one's own development
- Working without direct supervision
- Job-search skills, without which the graduate may not find the SME.

Small businesses are seeing a gradual growth in the employment of graduates. This supports the SMEs' role as an engine for economic growth and as a development base for graduates becoming small-business entrepreneurs in the future. An understanding of the psychological contract typical of smaller organisations – as distinct from that set by the marketing campaigns of the larger 'milk-round' recruiters – can be a real asset to employability within this sector.

Higher education programmes that take employability seriously can strengthen graduates' 'work-readiness' by ensuring they have the ability to apply theory and knowledge in practical ways in the workplace. But employers, too, generally expect to develop new recruits' knowledge, skills and qualities. They see graduate employability as a state of readiness rather than a finished article.

Important issues for employers

Employers consistently say that there are still too many people emerging from education who lack the 'can do' attitude and the interpersonal and customer-related abilities that enable them to become quickly effective at work. They ask why, in spite of the effort and resources expended in this field over many years, the change has not been greater. They consider that:

1. Graduates should be aware of employability skills and of those which they hold.
2. Graduates should understand how such skills relate to the world of work and how they are transferred to the work context in practice.
3. New graduates should - particularly in smaller businesses – be able to apply and develop these skills themselves.
4. Graduates should appreciate that employers want them to apply their intellect to the workplace.
5. Students require support in improving, refining and better articulating their achievements in ways that are intelligible to an average employer.
6. Academics, and the regime which governs their funding, can see employability as an 'intrusion'. In such cases, students may be deprived of opportunities to develop the range of skills and other achievements which employers value.
7. The increasing number of contact hours within degree courses can lead to less individually managed study and the abilities which can accrue. This results in the need for unexpected remedial actions by employers, who can find that graduates are not as self-sufficient as they should be.

This fits with ESECT's view that employability is a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.



Enhancing graduate employability – the employer’s role

Employers should recognise that the task of enhancing employability is a collective one which benefits greatly from a good level of ‘interconnection’ between the players.

Practical ways in which employers can help enhance employability include:

1. Awareness building

In order to start building employability skills a graduate requires a sound awareness of the world of work, a set of realistic expectations about it, and a good grasp of what will be required and expected of them. Options for involvement in this aspect of development include:

- Structured Open Days, which bring students on-site to give them an insight into the practical aspects of the workplace.
- Participation in HE outreach initiatives, or on boards or panels which seek employer membership, where the employability agenda can be emphasised.
- Setting up award schemes or prizes – in specific subject areas – for students who demonstrate specified aspects of employability.
- Offering presentations or ‘surgeries’ for interested students so that they learn more about the employer’s business sector.
- Cementing a regular dialogue with Careers Services to support them in providing current, real-world data to students about work, its demands and opportunities.

2. Work-experience placements

Practical workplace skills are developed most effectively through work placements. Their provision by employers either for a full year as part of a course of study or for a shorter period over a vacation is therefore vital. They can also be offered to students taking a ‘gap year’ prior to starting HE. Key aspects of effective work placements include:

- A focus on quality. Successful placements require planning and preparation. Students should be properly supported and, as far as possible, be treated like any other employee.
- Placements should be structured to deliver a meaningful and valued output for the organisation – matching the student to a current business project or to an issue which might otherwise remain ‘on the shelf’.
- Appropriate, simple terms of reference for the placement arrangement. The STEP organisation is an excellent example of the application of the appropriate disciplines to ensure positive results from a placement, both for the employers (in this case SMEs) and for the student.
- The placement should incorporate review and reflection when students can receive feedback on their performance, coaching to improve, and the opportunity to reflect on what they are learning.

3. Other work experience

A less structured approach to work experience, which can consist of temporary work, part-time employment or student volunteering, is also valuable for students. Organisations can usefully consider the scope for addressing employability issues when they employ students in such roles.

4. Involvement in courses and curriculum

Whilst employers place importance on employability skills in potential recruits, they do not appear fully to appreciate that the skills and other achievements that HE promotes can be developed through the study of specific subjects. The gap between the two consists more in awareness and understanding than in aspiration. There is significant scope for employers to address this by contributing to employability elements contained in the curriculum. For example:

- Keeping the curriculum current in terms of the practical needs of employers, both specific industrial practices and more general employer requirements.
- More structured involvement in curriculum development to embed employability skills within it, through, for example, a mix of technical, business and personal skills elements.
- Participation in the delivery of course material. Opportunities may exist to give lectures or to provide tutor support.
- Provision of case studies so that the employment experience can be worked into the curriculum. An example might be for students of English to undertake a case study of how a newspaper is assembled in terms both of editorial content and of practical delivery.
- Where HE is addressing the design of new programmes, particularly those with a vocational theme, employer input is clearly important, particularly on a business sector basis, collectively as well as individually.

5. Skills training and personal development

Opportunities for employers to contribute to students’ work-readiness in a range of formats and styles include:

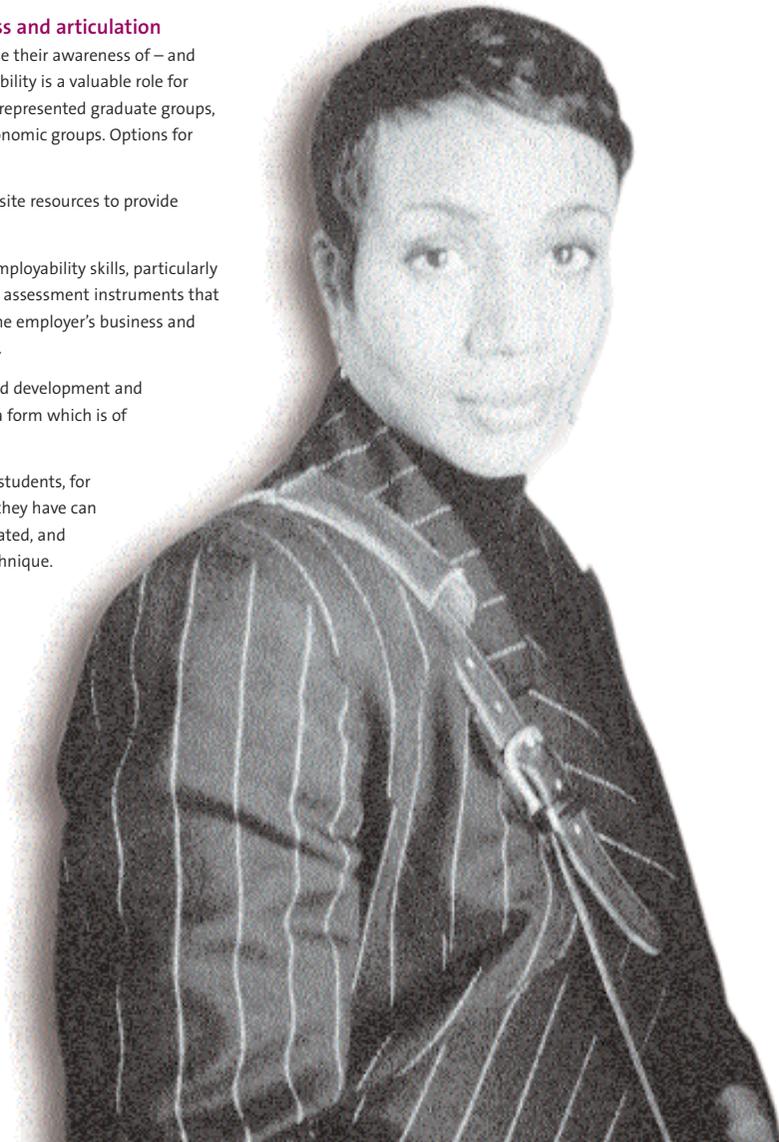
- Provision of training in entrepreneurship – spelling out the difference between working for a large employer in a departmental or functional role, and the ‘many hats’ that an employee must wear in an SME or when running their own business.
- Creation of awards which bring together and recognise, for example, the combination of sector-specific subject knowledge and skills together with the employability skills of most relevance to the employer.
- Participation in existing third-party programmes of student development. Notable here is the CRAC Insight series which brings together students, business tutors, and young graduate managers working as facilitators. Young managers provide a strong and specific demonstration to the students of ‘what makes employability’ having themselves recently made the ‘learning to earning’ transition.



6. Developing self-awareness and articulation

Encouraging students to maximise their awareness of – and to articulate – their own employability is a valuable role for employers, particularly for under-represented graduate groups, typically from the lower socio-economic groups. Options for employers to consider include:

- Supporting the creation of website resources to provide easy access for *all* students.
- Creating tools for developing employability skills, particularly outside the curriculum, such as assessment instruments that judge the skill-set relevant to the employer's business and appropriate learning objectives.
- Contributing to the co-ordinated development and application of progress files in a form which is of greatest value to the employer.
- Offering coaching resources to students, for example in how the skills that they have can best be recorded and substantiated, and in CV writing and interview technique.



HEFCE's Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) is a network of networks, bringing together a range of specialists and organisations committed to developing student employability. The AGR is a member, as are the National Union of Students, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, the Centre for Recording Achievement, the Generic Centre of the UK Learning and Teaching Support Network and experts in several English universities.

Costs and benefits of a win-win

Employers should recognise that there are many ways to engage with the issue of employability and to address it effectively.

Many already do so, but some are hesitant to become involved in a course of action that may be resource-hungry. Collaborative effort requires time and resources to be effective. However, active management can ensure that an organisation's commitment is always understood and controlled. Furthermore, significant commercial benefits can flow from this: promotion of the organisation by students who have found their experience positive, and an intake of increasingly effective recruits who deliver business goals and aspirations. These are major potential gains in what has to be a win-win activity.

Partnership roles in building employability

Whilst the focus of this briefing is primarily on what employers can do to help address the employability issues, some comments on the roles that HE should play are listed below:

Higher Education

- There should be a broad-based effort to maximise students' opportunities to develop employability skills within a learning environment.
- HE should challenge regimes which commonly regard research quality more highly than teaching quality so that the question of 'what happens to our students after they leave us?' has a higher profile.
- Careers Services have the expertise to inform, assess, develop and advise students in all aspects of employability. They should be well-supported and resourced.
- HE should include work-related learning in all programmes.
- Technical courses should contain business elements as a regular item. Where appropriate, project work should include a commercial evaluation element.
- The language of employability should become a standard feature of HE programmes, with web-based tools being promoted to assist in supporting the understanding of employability and to help students reflect on – and articulate – their relevant accomplishments.
- Vehicles which promote and open up access to part-time employment – such as student Job Shops – should be encouraged.

The benefits are unquestioned, and to address the issues of employability in ways such as these constitutes a sound investment in the future for all players.

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Consultation

ESECT is grateful to the organisations that contributed to the consultation which formed the basis of this briefing:

AGR
ASET
Business Link Solutions
Business in the Community
Confederation of British Industry
Council for Industry and Higher Education
CRAC
Engineering Employers Federation
Engineering & Technology Board
e-skillsUK, with Catalyst
Federation of Small Businesses
STEP Enterprise

Author

This ESECT briefing was prepared by Hugh Smith of TetragonHR, which specialises in strategic human resources projects and interim management for a range of clients, with a primary focus on recruitment, development and training.

Hugh Smith's career has encompassed the food manufacturing and telecommunications sectors in both UK and global operations, including 15 years' HR experience and the management of major graduate recruitment programmes. He was chairman/vice-president of AGR – the Association of Graduate Recruiters – from 1996 to 2002 and an independent director of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education between 1997 and 2000.

Sponsors

Graduate Prospects

ESECT is grateful to Graduate Prospects for sponsoring the publication of this guide.

Formed by Universities UK (formerly CVCP) in 1972, Graduate Prospects is now a multimillion-pound turnover business in the graduate and postgraduate recruitment market. Each year its trading arm covenants its surplus to the charity (HECSU), which in turn redistributes around £1m of funds back into the HE sector in general and the careers services in particular.

Graduate Prospects not only supports financially the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) but works in partnership to produce careers information products for students and graduates, and engages in robust and relevant research, such as *Careers Services: Technology and the Future* (2001) and *Careers Services and Diversity* (2002-3).

Graduate Prospects produces the Prospects Series of commercial publications, and the sector's leading graduate employment website, www.prospects.ac.uk (3,727,060 page impressions, 227,637 unique visitors – March 2003 ABC-E audited). The website is also home to the UK's official postgraduate database of 17,500 taught courses and research programmes, as well as Careers Advice for Graduates, careers information, advice materials, and information about part-time and temporary vacancies.

Graduate Prospects also owns the National Council for Work Experience and its associated website, www.work-experience.org, the UK's official central source of information on work experience.

To find out more about Graduate Prospects, visit www.prospects.ac.uk

AGR

The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting employers in all aspects of graduate recruitment.

Founded in 1968, AGR represents over 600 organisations that, between them, offer a high proportion of graduate level opportunities across the UK. Membership is open to all organisations that recruit graduates or provide recruitment services. Our mission is to be the leading independent voice of UK-based graduate recruiters providing impartial, authoritative advice aimed at helping our members' businesses to excel. We do this through the delivery of a wide range of services, influencing policy, and challenging the status quo recognising that the graduate market place is global, diverse and dynamic. Our aim is to set the agenda for change in graduate recruitment.

Services include:

- benchmarking surveys
- research activities
- seminar programme
- bi-monthly magazine
- briefings
- e-bulletins
- annual conference
- helpline and information service
- training
- members-only website
- sector focus groups
- networking
- representation with government and higher education

You can find out more about AGR and the graduate recruitment market at www.agr.org.uk

LTSN Generic Centre

Assessment, widening participation, e-learning, employability – these are just some of the issues which concern everyone in higher education today. No one person or institution has all the answers, and yet plenty of answers are out there. Within the UK's higher education institutions, there are some excellent learning and teaching practices. Many of these practices are common to a number of subject disciplines and are easily transferable. The LTSN Generic Centre aims to broker this expertise and promote effective practices in learning and teaching across all disciplines.

The LTSN Generic Centre team is just one part of the much larger Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). This larger network includes 24 Subject Centres whose role it is to address learning and teaching issues specific to their subject areas.

To find out more visit our website at www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre

