

Higher Education
Dialogues – Deep Dive

The fundamentals of employability: ‘What can universities do to help graduates find employment this year?’

Spotlight report
October 2020

‘Employability’ is something of a buzzword in Higher Education but what exactly does it mean and what can universities do to enhance the employability of their graduates? These central issues were addressed in the first session of the British Council’s Higher Education Dialogue Series for 2020-21.

Over 70 participants from 13 countries participated in this online event, which started with focused inputs by three speakers with extensive experience of employability in UK Higher Education: Martin Edmondson, CEO of [Gradcore](#), Karen Bryan, Vice-Chancellor of [York St. John University](#), and Adele Brown, Head of Graduate Success at [De Montfort University](#). Key ideas from these inputs were then explored further, first through discussions in break-out rooms then in a final Q&A session. The aims of the session were to outline current models of graduate employability that are utilised in the UK and to provide practical examples of how employability can be enhanced and which participants can consider applying in their own contexts.

The core messages emerging from the session in relation to employability can be summarised under five headings: the importance of employability, competences for employability, curricular integration, partnership and targeted initiatives. These are summarised in turn below.

The importance of employability

In defining employability, it is important to distinguish it from employment. Whereas the latter refers to the state of having a job, employability describes a range of competences (including personal attributes) that increase the likelihood that graduates will gain employment. It has been argued that employability provides the basis of meaningful life and work and is, therefore, a key purpose of education. The value attached to employability is also reflected in the view that ‘to be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure’¹. Given such contemporary views of employability, it has in the last 20 years become a key focus of Higher Education in the UK. For example, whereas previously career services were seen as an additional form of generic job-related advice, today a focus on employability is a central, fully integrated and personalised facet of what universities offer students. In Eastern Europe, Central Asia and South Caucasus, one initial step universities can take in making graduates more employable is to ensure that a contemporary understanding of the meaning and value of employability is embraced.

Competences for employability

Efforts to enhance the employability of graduates must be based on an understanding of the competences — the range of knowledge, skills and personal attributes — that increase the likelihood of finding a job. A number of these competences have long been recognised, such as team-working skills, self-belief, communication, adaptability, resilience and commercial awareness. New employment conditions created in 2020 by COVID-19, though, have highlighted a range of additional skills that graduates require. Working from home, for example, calls for high levels of discipline and self-motivation; working in isolation of colleagues also makes new demands on employees’ mental and

¹ Hawkins, P. (1999). The art of building windmills: Career tactics for the 21st century.

physical well-being. Recruitment processes — such as interviews — have been increasingly moved online, meaning that graduates require a whole new set of skills for performing professionally in a digital environment. It is important for universities to recognise the range of competences that enhance employability and to address these as part of their employability strategy.

Curricular integration

Employability is often mistakenly seen as an issue that is only relevant to students approaching the end of their studies. All three speakers at this event, though, emphasised how important it was to ensure that a concern for employability was integrated throughout the undergraduate curriculum. For example, attributes such as team-working, self-awareness, autonomy, initiative, communication and professionalism can be built into coursework from the outset. The integration of employability into the curriculum can also be greatly enhanced when academics seek input from the industry; for example, employers can be invited to advise on the kinds of competences they seek in graduates and this can shape the outcomes of courses and programmes, leading to graduates who are more employable. Additionally, diagnostic student assessments can be used to identify at entry point the employability competences students need to develop; these competences can then be addressed in the curriculum. An approach to employability which integrates it with the curriculum makes it more likely that students will not only develop the attributes they need but keep these alive throughout and beyond their studies.

Partnership

Another key theme running through many of the practical strategies for promoting employability highlighted during the event was *partnership*. Universities need to develop relationships with and among key stakeholders in relation to employability and to collaborate with them in order to maximise the employability of graduates. As already suggested, employers themselves should be seen as a critical partner for universities, not just for the design of curricula but also through, for example, collaborative fairs and training events. Students are, of course, also central players in the process of their own development and it is important for universities to work in close partnership with them; this includes alumni, who often require ongoing support, but who can also act as a source of real-life experience that universities can draw on to prepare graduates for the world of work. Universities can also benefit from partnerships with organisations such as [Gradcore](#), which provide specialised support designed to give graduates a better chance of finding employment.

Targeted initiatives

The event highlighted the very wide range of initiatives that exist within Higher Education in the UK to enhance graduate employability. Further details are available in the Resources listed below, but some examples discussed during the event which have been implemented in 2020 can be noted:

- virtual internships, which give students real experience of the workplace
- webinars and showcase events (live and asynchronous) with a focus on employability

- employer-led online networking events
- virtual coaching sessions, including between current students and alumni who have made the transition into the world of work
- ‘Masterclasses’ and ‘summer schools’ which address key areas of employability such as resilience and professional etiquette
- access to mental health and well-being support (for example, through [TogetherAll](#))
- online surveys to track graduates when they move into the world of work
- exit interviews with graduates to help them articulate what they are taking away from their studies into the world of work.

Key take-away questions

Here are some key take-away questions from this event for universities who would like to review and enhance their approach to employability:

1. What is the profile of ‘employability’ within the university (i.e. is it an important strategic issue?)
2. To what extent is there an awareness within the university of the notions of employability that are established in UK Higher Education?
3. What employability competences are seen to be important by the university?
4. To what extent do university programmes address the development of these competences in an integrated manner?
5. Do academic departments work collaboratively and for reciprocal benefit with employers?
6. What kinds of external organisations does the university consult for advice on its employability strategy?
7. To what extent is employability addressed as a personal journey for individual students?
8. Are alumni engaged by the university as a source of employability support for current students?
9. What mechanisms currently exist to enhance the employability of graduates?
10. Overall, what kinds of steps could be feasibly taken to improve the university’s employability strategy?

Resources



Session recording



Speakers' slides

- Adapting an in-person assessment event to a virtual experience during a global pandemic: <https://gradcore.co.uk/case-studies/virtual-assessment-centre-manchester-metropolitan-university>
- AGCAS Phoenix magazine October 2020 – Careers services responding to Covid-19: https://issuu.com/agcas_00/docs/phoenix_issue_161_october_2020/68
- Institute of Student Employers. (2020). Covid-19. The impact of the crisis on student recruitment and development: <https://www.agcas.org.uk/Latest/ise-and-agcas-report-what-is-the-impact-of-the-crisis-on-student-recruitment-and-development>
- National Centre for Universities and Business. A source of research and resources on university-business collaborations: <https://www.ncub.co.uk/>
- NERUPI Network: Evaluating and researching university participation interventions: http://www.nerupi.co.uk/public/assets/files/NERUPI-A5-Booklet-Aug_2020.pdf
- Patton W. and McMahon M. (2014), Career development and systems theory: Connecting Theory and Practice (3rd ed.). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Prospects Luminate: Student and graduate labour market information, research and reports: <https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/>
- QS (2018). The global skills gap in the 21st Century. <https://www.qs.com/portfolio-items/the-global-skills-gap-in-the-21st-century/>
- Shepherd, E. (2019). Higher education and employability: UK policy and practice (British Council report): <https://1drv.ms/b/s!AkjC79GI2Na8gcQOA4cadWcNHEqZbQ?e=VxaZYx>