

Edge There are many paths to success



Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates

Overview

The SCRE Centre (University of Glasgow) investigated employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates, and the steps which universities take to develop them.

Key findings

The majority of employers are satisfied with their graduate recruits - but there is a notable minority who are not.

Employers expect graduates to demonstrate a range of skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and often managerial abilities or potential.

Employers are frustrated that HE courses do not meet their needs. They say that even when they serve on HEI committees, their views on course design are often disregarded.

There is a lack of systematic practice to promote employability across HEIs (higher education institutions). Indeed, some HEIs do not see employability as an important part of their mission.

Placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities are an effective way of providing university students with relevant employment skills, knowledge and awareness of employer culture.

Graduate award programmes are offered by a growing number of HEIs and appear to be highly valued by graduates and employers. However, it is not clear how well these are embedded across the sector, and there seems to have been little systematic evaluation of them.

Some academics are concerned that employability measures diminish the academic integrity of higher education. However, there is no reason why this should be the case.

About the research

The Edge Foundation asked the SCRE Centre to explore employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. The research objectives were:

1. To explore the perceptions of employers and Higher Education Institution staff concerning the skills, knowledge and characteristics which help undergraduates /new graduates to be employable.
2. To ascertain whether perceptions vary by employment sector and employer size.
3. To assess whether such perceptions have influenced HEI strategies (informal and formal) to provide support, activities and learning opportunities to enhance students' employability skills.

4. To explore what formal or informal methods are used by employers to assess graduates' employability skills as part of their recruitment process.
5. To assess whether there are differences in desirable employability skill sets across those who have graduated from programmes of study that have included a greater or lesser amount of work-based and work-related learning (or learning approaches that inculcate such skills).

The research began in 2009 and was completed in October 2010.

The full report can be downloaded from www.edge.co.uk.

The research

This research project was a qualitative study drawing on a literature review and interviews with key stakeholders involved with graduate employability at national and local level. While generalisations should be made with care, the project has highlighted factors and processes that influence graduate employability.

There are several working definitions of “employability”. However, there is a broad understanding of the qualities, characteristics, skills and knowledge which make graduates attractive to employers. These include technical and discipline competences from their degrees, plus a range of broader skills such as team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and often managerial abilities or potential. Specific definitions are in any case less important than a consistent focus on developing employability skills.

SCRE's literature review and their own research overwhelmingly emphasised the importance of placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities as an effective way of providing university students with relevant employability skills.

There are concerns from some academics about employability measures diminishing the academic integrity of higher education provision. There is also frustration from employers about courses not meeting their needs. However, there appears to be no fundamental reason why HEIs and employers cannot reach a consensus on educational approaches that promote employability.

Recommendations

1. Employability should be at the centre of HEIs' strategic planning, both centrally and at the level of individual faculties and departments.
2. Funding mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework should be used as a lever to encourage HEIs to develop their students' employability skills and attributes.
3. One of the most crucial measures HEIs can adopt to promote employability is a structured approach to placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities of significant duration. Some of the more vocational and business-orientated courses already make good use of these approaches, but humanities and social science courses should also make greater use of placements and internships.
4. These experiential opportunities require careful planning, which means an investment of time and effort by HE staff. Careers services in HEIs should be given more responsibility (and resources) to develop employability activities at faculty and departmental level.
5. Partnerships between HEIs and employers need to be effective, sustained and equitable.
6. The design of degree courses (and student experience in general) should articulate with the needs of business and emerge from a strong partnership with employer organisations.
7. Employer membership of HEI committees should not be a token measure: academic staff should be prepared to listen and respond to employers' ideas about course design, content and delivery.