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# **Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates**

**Research commissioned by the Edge  
Foundation**

**Kevin Lowden, Stuart Hall,  
Dr Dely Elliot and Jon Lewin**





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1. Fourth biennial Sodexo-Times Higher Education University Lifestyle Survey, [http://uk.sodexo.com/uken/Images/2010%20University%20Lifestyle%20Survey\\_tcm15-424866.pdf](http://uk.sodexo.com/uken/Images/2010%20University%20Lifestyle%20Survey_tcm15-424866.pdf)

2. See, for example, Shury, J., Winterbotham, M., Davies, B. and Oldfield K with Spilsbury, M. and Constable, S. (2010) National Employer Skills Survey for England 2009: Main report: Evidence Report 23. IFF Research and UK Commission for Employment and Skills

## Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates

### Foreword by Lord Baker of Dorking

There are many reasons for going to university, including – naturally – a love of the subject to be studied, and the opportunity to experience a different way of life. Higher education is much more than a production line for work-ready graduates.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that people see higher education as a stepping stone to a good job. In 2010, 73% of the students who took part in the Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey<sup>1</sup> said they went to university to improve their job opportunities.

The Edge Foundation exists to raise the status of practical and vocational learning. Some people assume that if we are *for* vocational education and training, we must be *opposed* to academic learning, including higher education.

Far from it. As we say in our strapline, there are many paths to success. We value higher education every bit as much as apprenticeships, further education and adult and community learning.

Of course, many higher education programmes are explicitly vocational, including medicine, engineering, accountancy and law. New qualifications such as Foundation Degrees have broadened the appeal of higher education, and made it easier to access through further education colleges as well as old and new universities.

Other courses are less directly vocational. Nevertheless, they help students develop analytical, synoptic and presentational skills which are highly valued in the modern economy.

But is that enough? Some graduates and their employers say more could be done to develop students' wider skills and attributes, including team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking and problem solving<sup>2</sup>. These are known collectively as *employability skills*.

We wanted to know what recent graduates, their employers and higher education institutions think about employability skills; what HEIs are already doing to help students develop these skills; and what could be done differently in the future.

We therefore commissioned the SCRE Centre at the University of Glasgow to explore these issues. To my mind, three findings stand out above all others.

First, everyone seems to agree that work placements and internships make a huge difference to employability skills. However, access to placements is patchy, to say the least. Some HEIs attach great importance to them; others do not. Some see them as relevant to all students; others seem to think they matter to engineers, but not to historians or social scientists.

Second, many HEIs have developed graduate employability programmes. This is very welcome. However, the programmes depend too heavily on hard-pressed careers service staff, and have too little support from academic staff. Furthermore, little is done to evaluate the effectiveness of most HEIs' employability programmes.

Third, employers feel ignored by HEIs. In many cases, they have few (if any) links with an HEI; and those employers – relatively few in number – who serve on university committees say their views on course design are disregarded.

The report sets out some very clear recommendations for action, including placing employability at the centre of HEIs' strategic planning, widening access to work placements, and promoting real and equal partnerships between employers and HEIs. I encourage principals and vice chancellors to respond positively. Equally, I urge the Government and the Higher Education Funding Council to consider very seriously the idea that future funding mechanisms should be used as a lever to encourage greater investment in students' employability skills.

I congratulate Kevin Lowden, Stuart Hall, Dely Elliot and Jon Lewin on their excellent report. I am very grateful to them and to *all* the people who willingly took part in this project.

**The Rt Hon Lord Baker of Dorking CH**  
Chair, Edge Foundation



## Executive summary

### The SCRE Centre and the research project

Since 1928 the SCRE centre has been conducting research and evaluation with an emphasis on informing policy and practice at local, national and international level. The SCRE Centre is now part of the School of Education within the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow.

### The research project

The SCRE Centre was commissioned by the Edge Foundation to explore employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. The research began main data collection in 2009 and was completed in October 2010.

### The main objectives of the research

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).

### Research approach

The research had two main phases:

#### Phase 1

- Scoping activity: a brief review of literature, taking as a starting point "The Employability Challenge" (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009) and encompassing relevant

literature on promoting employability skills and capacity among undergraduates.

- Interviews with 22 key informants from representative organisations for employers HEIs and other relevant groups (e.g. CBI, Association of Graduate Recruiters, Chambers of Commerce, Council for Industry and Higher Education etc) to explore issues pertinent to the research objectives and identify examples of good practice.

#### Phase 2

- a) Nine qualitative employer case studies based in Scotland but including UK and multinational organisations. Originally 10 employers were approached but one of these, a UK-based multinational financial service, did not participate. The research methods were intended to illuminate rather than provide generalisable findings. The selection of employer case studies, therefore, was purposive but aimed to reflect a range of employer types, sizes and sectors. The case studies focused on:
  - employers' views on graduate employability;
  - how they were addressing employability of graduate employees;
  - the extent and nature of their partnership with HEIs (in order to promote employability).

The types of employers selected were:

- Small voluntary carers' agency, west of Scotland
- Medium-sized food and associated products supplier, Scotland / Multinational
- Large local authority marketing department, Scotland
- Defence electronics, UK/ Multinational
- Construction company, UK wide
- Royal Navy, UK
- Aerospace engineering and manufacture, Multinational
- Bank, UK (with worldwide assets)
- Medium-sized manufacturing company, Scotland

In each employer case study in-depth, face to face and telephone interviews were used to gather information from those responsible for recruitment, training and support of graduates. Relevant recruitment-related documentation was analysed as well. Information was also gathered from graduate employees across the case studies using interviews and focus groups.

- b) A number of HEIs (26) were identified that had some link or relationship with the case study employers over the past 3 years. All 26 were approached to contribute to the research with 14 agreeing to participate (10 in England, 3 in Scotland and 1 in Northern Ireland). Telephone interviews were conducted with key personnel responsible for promoting graduate employability, course planning and liaison with employers. In addition, relevant documentation concerning the respective HEI graduate employability measures was consulted.

### **Key findings**

#### ***Definitions of graduate employability***

- While there are variations in the classification of employability, there is a broad understanding of what qualities, characteristics, skills and knowledge constitute employability both in general, and specifically for graduates. Employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates also to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities.
- It is arguable that specific definitions are less important than an agreed focus on approaches to promote such transferable skills and fostering attributes that will enable graduates to find appropriate employment, progress in their work and thus facilitate the success of their organisations and contribute to society and the economy.

#### ***The importance of placements, internships and work-based learning***

- Perhaps above all, the literature and our own findings have overwhelmingly highlighted that employers, students, graduates and HEI representatives value work-based learning (such as placements and internships) as particularly effective approaches to promote the employability of graduates.
- UKCES (2009a) state that opportunities such as placements and internships not only seem to offer an effective applied method of inculcating

appropriate awareness, skills and abilities in graduates but can also promote productive collaboration and partnerships between HEIs and employers, building greater understanding between these stakeholders. The importance of placements and internships has been recognised by policymakers and supported by funding and their value is also evidenced by longitudinal studies (e.g. Hall *et al* 2009). UKCES cite literature to support the usefulness of work placements and the fact that graduates who have done a placement or work-based learning have more success finding graduate-level jobs.

- HEI representatives believe that, where present, their graduate award programmes contribute to enhancing students' ability to secure employment and perform well in their jobs. These programmes are seen as valuable because they not only facilitate students' access to work-based learning and similar opportunities but also allow these experiences to be documented. This is then a source of evidence of skills and attributes that can be presented to employers. However, much of the HEIs' evidence for the longer-term impact of their employability programmes and measures was anecdotal rather than based on systematic evaluative research.

#### ***Variation in HEIs' response to promoting employability***

- The literature on graduate employability, and our research, shows that there has been a range of attempts by HEIs to address graduate employability (e.g. Allison *et al* 2002). However, the extent to which such developments are happening and the level to which they are embedded across the Higher Education sector is unknown but seems highly variable. This is despite key developments in government policy to encourage HEIs and employers to work together to develop approaches that contribute to graduate employability.
- There are numerous examples in the literature (including CBI website sources) and in our research of good practice concerning employers and HEIs working to promote graduate employability. However, there are still issues and barriers between employers and many of those responsible for policy in HEIs, particularly in terms of differences in mindset, expectations and priorities concerning employability.

#### **Recommendations and moving forward**

While a recent UKCES study (Shury *et al* 2010) has shown that the majority of employers are satisfied

with their graduate recruits there is a notable minority who are not. The economic context and labour market situation have seen an increase in graduate unemployment and these issues, along with the ever-present challenge of global economic competition, mean that we cannot be complacent about the capacity of graduates to secure and maintain employment, to develop within a particular job and have the ability to move on to new sustainable employment if required. With this in mind, the findings of this research give rise to a number of issues for consideration:

#### ***Embedding support for employability across the institution***

- It is recommended that HEIs and government explore how careers services can be enhanced and resourced to promote employability activities more effectively at faculty and departmental level. Our research indicates that strategy-led, rather than ad-hoc, project-led, employability measures are likely to have a greater and more sustained impact on graduate employability. Employability measures need to be systematic and embedded into departmental and faculty practice: otherwise they are vulnerable to changes in personnel.
- Government should consider ways of reflecting and promoting the employability skills and attributes in funding mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). To date funding systems have not placed employability at the centre of universities' vision and strategic planning, and this seems certain to have influenced their behaviour. Funding streams therefore need to encourage an institutional culture supportive of employability skills. It is anticipated that part of the profile for the REF in 2013 will be awarded on the basis of the demonstrable benefits (impact) of universities' research on the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life. This could, perhaps, be matched by a parallel measure of the demonstrable benefits of HEIs' efforts to develop and support students' employability.
- Developing graduate employability skills and attributes should be included in HEIs' strategic *and* faculty/departmental level planning. Universities need to reflect the promotion of employability skills and attributes in their mission statements, learning and teaching strategies, course frameworks, strategic documents and practical guidance.
- Employability also needs to be supported at senior management level in HEIs and reflected in policies that are translated into action across all levels. The research findings reveal that

while university careers services will typically seek to promote the employability of students, the scope and depth of such efforts varies greatly across faculties and departments. A factor in this is the attitude of some staff to explicitly addressing employability skills and attributes in their courses.

- Staff should be encouraged to recognise that these objectives are compatible with promoting academic capacity and wider life skills. Appropriate incentives for HEI staff should be used as a driver for change in promoting employability measures at faculty/departmental level.

#### ***The importance of placements and recognising experiential learning***

- HEIs and employers should continue to promote and expand opportunities for students to access work-based learning. One of the most crucial measures HEIs can adopt to promote employability is to include appropriate integrated placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities of significant duration into their courses. . Some of the more 'vocational' and business-orientated courses already make use of these approaches but humanities courses could also benefit from greater use of such measures.
- These experiential opportunities require careful planning and time for reflection must be built in if they are to be an effective way of providing university students with relevant employment skills, knowledge and awareness of employer culture. They also call for effective, sustained and equitable partnerships between HEIs and employers.
- Other systematic programmes to develop and accredit or recognise students' experiential and work-related learning are recommended. For example, the presence of graduate award programmes across many universities appears to be highly valued by graduates and employers. These programmes are seen as valuable because they facilitate students' access to work-related learning activities in universities and work-based opportunities such as placements. However, placements and work-related and work-based experiences need to be documented so that students can offer employers evidence of their capacities and skills.

#### ***Reflecting wider economic needs in HEI courses.***

- Those responsible for Higher Education provision should take into account students' employment needs including the generic

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skills and abilities needed in the workplace and reflect them in the curriculum and course design. The design of degree courses and student experience in general should articulate with the needs of business and emerge from a strong working partnership with employer organisations. At the same time academic quality, content, focus and the integrity of courses should not be compromised.

- A theme arising from employers' perceptions in the literature and our case studies is that HEIs, their representative bodies and policy makers should explore ways to ensure a better fit between the types of degree courses being provided and what is required to address the wider economic climate. However, an important caveat should be that Higher Education also needs to provide learning that addresses broader social issues and needs.

***Meaningful employer participation on HEI committees***

- HEIs and employer partnerships should be encouraged and strengthened with employers having a more active role in HEI employability strategies and policies. Research on employer involvement in government-funded work-related education and training indicates that it is difficult to secure employer engagement in education programmes. It is possible that HEIs will have to be the initiators of partnerships with employers. The literature and our research reveal that where partnerships are sustained employers can have an impact on employability approaches, particularly when involved in involved in course design.
- Employers' presence on HEI committees should not be a token measure but allowed to facilitate a meaningful contribution. Our study found that employers' views on course design were often disregarded.

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1. The SCRE Centre is part of the School of Education within the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. Since 1928 the SCRE centre has been conducting research and evaluation with an emphasis on informing policy and practice at local, national and international level.

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction

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This report provides the findings of a study of employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates conducted by the SCRE Centre<sup>1</sup>. The research was funded by the Edge Foundation. Main data collection began in 2009 and was completed in October 2010.

The report first highlights key themes in the literature on graduate employability with particular reference to understanding what graduate employability is and goes on to explore whether Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are addressing employability and the perceived needs of employers in their provision.

The report then draws on the qualitative strand of the research to explore the views of groups representing employers, HEIs and recruitment organisations, employers, graduates and students concerning graduate employability. In particular, the research highlights what they believe promotes graduate employability and their own experiences in this process. The final part of the qualitative findings considers the views of those HEI representatives associated with the case studies.

The report suggests that despite UK policy stressing HEIs' contribution to graduate employability and the existence of examples of good practice in employer-HEI partnerships, there are still considerable tensions and barriers facing this process. The report concludes by examining some of the ways employers and HEIs can better work together to promote graduate employability.

## Chapter 2

# The research project

The SCRE Centre in the Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow was commissioned by the Edge Foundation to explore employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. For the purpose of this study, the research team defined a new graduate as an individual who had been in full-time study at a HEI and obtained full-time employment after graduating.

The main objectives of the research 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).

### 2.1 Research approach

The research had two main phases:

**Phase 1:** this involved scoping activity including: a) a literature review, taking as a starting point "The Employability Challenge" (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, February 2009) and encompassing relevant published literature on good practice in promoting employability skills and capacity among undergraduates; b) Interviews with 22 key informants from UK bodies representing employers, HEIs and recruitment organisations to identify good practice candidates and issues pertinent to the research objectives.

**Phase 2:** this comprised 9 qualitative employer case-studies. Originally 10 employers were approached but one of these, a UK-based multinational financial service, did not participate. The case studies were intended to illuminate employer views on graduate employability; how they were addressing employability of graduate employees; and the extent of their partnership with HEIs in order to promote employability. The focus of the activity and selection of case studies was originally restricted to Scotland, given time and funding constraints and the relative lack of in-depth qualitative work on the research objectives in Scotland. However, the research has included employers that have UK and international divisions. The types of employers selected were:

- Small voluntary carers' agency, west of Scotland
- Medium-sized food and associated products supplier, Scotland/Multinational
- Large local authority marketing department, Scotland
- Defence electronics, UK/Multinational
- Construction company, UK wide
- Royal Navy, UK
- Aerospace engineering and manufacture, Multinational
- Bank, UK (with worldwide assets)
- Medium-sized manufacturing company, Scotland

It should be stressed that the research methods were intended to illuminate rather than provide generalisable findings. The selection of employer case studies, therefore, was purposive but aimed to reflect a range of employer types, sizes and sectors.

In each employer case study, in-depth, face-to-face and telephone interviews were used to gather information from those responsible for recruitment, training and support of graduates and analysis of relevant recruitment-related documentation. Information was also gathered from graduate employees across the case studies using interviews and focus groups.

A number of HEIs (26) that had some link or relationship with the case study employers were

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identified. All 26 were approached to contribute to the research with 14 agreeing to participate. Telephone interviews were conducted with key personnel responsible for promoting graduate employability, course planning and liaison with employers. In addition, relevant documentation concerning the respective HEI graduate employability measures was consulted.

2. <http://archive.niace.org.uk/Organisation/advocacy/Archive/Cbipaper.htm>

## Chapter 3

# Phase 1 findings: literature review and scoping interviews

Phase 1 of the study provided contextual information on issues and themes pertinent to the research. The main methods were a focussed literature review and scoping interviews with key representatives from employer and HEI representative bodies and graduate recruitment organisations.

### 3.1 Definitions of employability

The concept and definition of employability of employability has been discussed for a number of years but there has been a growing interest in graduate employability over the last decade. As the interest in promoting graduate employability has increased numerous studies have produced detailed breakdowns and taxonomies of particular skills and attributes required to promote graduate employability such as core skills; key skills; common skills; transferable skills; essential skills; functional skills; skills for life; generic skills and enterprise skills.

According to Harvey et al, (1997 cited in Holden and Jameson, 2002), most employers are looking for graduates who are proactive, can use higher level skills including 'analysis, critique, synthesis and multi layered communication to facilitate innovative teamwork in catalyzing the transformation of their organization'.

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in 1998<sup>2</sup> argued that employability is better understood as a social construct and stressed that to see it as only an individual issue was to miss important aspects of the concept. Therefore, NIACE believes that employability is a responsibility shared more equally between:

- individuals who must be responsible for accepting the consequences of choices they make;
- businesses which, in employing a workforce and serving customers, inculcate particular values and attitudes as well as shaping behaviours. (In many senses what makes "employability" is determined by employers). Employers have a particular responsibility to develop the employability of their staff – for business reasons more than altruistic ones;

- public bodies (schools, colleges, universities, the benefits agency, local and national government agencies) which have a duty to secure the employability of all citizens.

NIACE stressed the relative nature of the concept of employability and highlighted that particular attitudes and values may be highly contextual. For example 'what are appropriate values in foreign exchange dealing may be less so in healthcare'.

The literature indicates that employers want graduates who can adapt to the workplace culture, use their abilities and skills to evolve the organisation and participate in innovative teamwork. Employers also value critical thinking (reflection) as this is required for innovation and anticipating and leading change (Harvey *et al*, 1997; Little 2001 in Lees 2002).

In the research report 'How much does higher education enhance the employability of graduates?' (Mason *et al*, 2003), the concept of employability centred on the development of communication, numeracy, information technology, and learning how to learn.

More recently, authors have moved towards a more complex understanding of graduate employability and proposed a number of inter-related attributes, skills and competencies that help individuals to both secure and perform well in employment. Rothwell and & Arnold (2007) proposed an approach for understanding employability that was based on interrelated components which included wider contextual factors:

- The student's academic performance and engagement in his/her studies
- The student's confidence in his/ her skills and abilities
- The student's ambition
- The student's perception of the strength of the university's brand
- The reputation the student's university has within his/her field of study
- The status and credibility of the student's field of study
- The student's awareness of opportunities in the external labour market

- The student's perception of the state of the external labour market
  - The external labour market's demand for people in the student's subject field
- Rothwell and Arnold (2007)

Professor Mantz Yorke has led a number of studies that have contributed to the concept of graduate employability, refining definitions and influencing national organisations' thinking. The concept of graduate employability developed by Yorke in 2004 has been adopted by the UK's Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT, 2004):

*[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, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.*

Yorke (2004)

The view that employers particularly value generic skills and analytic and reflective abilities that promote flexibility and adaptation emerges in the literature, surveys and feedback from organisations representing employers and Higher Education, for example, the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) and CBI. A study by Kubler and Forbes (2005) suggested that employability comprised certain levels of cognitive skills, generic competencies, personal capabilities, technical ability, business/organisation awareness, and critical evaluation, reflection and review abilities.

Yorke and colleagues have gone on to develop their concept. In 2006 Yorke argued that "Employability derives from complex learning, and is a concept of wider range than those of 'core' and 'key' skills" and states that employability is as a collection of capacities or achievements which

*constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition for the gaining of employment (which is dependent, inter alia, on the contemporary state of the economy) and considerably more complex than some proponents of 'core', 'key' and 'transferable' skills have suggested, and is strongly aligned with the academic valuing of good learning.*

York (2006 p3)

The wider economic context and situation of the individual is acknowledged in the literature as being important to their employability. For example, Yorke (2006) notes that the balance between, and importance of, each employability element will

vary for groups of individuals, depending on their relationship to the labour market.

The CBI contributed to the discussion on employability in their report, 'Time well spent: Embedding employability in work experience', (CBI 2007). They define employability skills as:

- Positive attitude
- Self-management
- Team working
- Business and customer awareness
- Problem solving
- Communication and literacy
- Application of numeracy and
- Application of information technology.

The CBI place an emphasis on graduates possessing a positive attitude as a key factor underpinning their employability; whether the individual has "a 'can-do' approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen". They note that employers value graduates who can demonstrate an entrepreneurial and innovative approach, and creative thinking which brings fresh perspectives and challenges assumptions.

A study by Archer and Davison (2008), considering the perspectives of employers on graduate employability, provides a contrast between what some universities are promoting and what is required by industry. Employers were in agreement about what were considered to be the most important skills that they look for in graduates. Archer and Davison (2008) found that regardless of the size of the company, 'soft skills' (eg communication skills and team-working) were perceived to have more weight than technical or 'hard skills' (eg a good degree qualification, IT skills). Indeed, Glass et al (2008) found that a minority of employers in their case studies recruit individuals from universities specifically for the technical skills that they hope they will bring to the organisation. Rather, most employers see a degree as a proxy for achieving a certain level of competence that represents the minimum standard that they are seeking in a new recruit. Archer and Davison (2008) stress that such findings convey a strong message to HEIs.

*The findings here illustrate that universities need to equip graduates with 'deep' intellectual capabilities and a battery of applied practical skills which make them more 'work-ready'.*

Archer & Davison (2008, p8)

On their website, the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), a strategic leadership network of blue-chip companies working with vice

chancellors and universities to develop the UK's knowledge-base economy, note that

*Different employers need graduates who have different capabilities. All value the analytical and reflective qualities that lie at the heart of a quality learning experience. But there is a growing emphasis by employers on the need for graduates to demonstrate a range of competences which will equip them to work in a global environment, in different countries, in multi-cultural teams, be innovative and enterprising and have strong language skills. ...Businesses have diverse and multiple needs for higher learning.*

<http://www.cihe-uk.com/category/skills/>

The UKCES report 'The Employability Challenge' (2009a) has drawn on the most commonly used definitions of employability:

*We take employability skills to be the skills almost everyone needs to do almost any job. They are the skills that must be present to enable an individual to use the more specific knowledge and technical skills that their particular workplaces will require. They are:*

- *a foundation of Positive Approach: being ready to participate, make suggestions, accept new ideas and constructive criticism, and take responsibility for outcomes This foundation supports three Functional Skills:*
- *using numbers effectively – measuring, recording measurements, calculating, estimating quantities, relating numbers to the job*
- *using language effectively – writing clearly and in a way appropriate to the context, ordering facts and concepts logically*
- *using IT effectively – operating a computer, both using basic systems and also*
- *learning other applications as necessary, and using telephones and other technology to communicate These functional skills are exercised in the context of four Personal Skills:*
- *self-management – punctuality and time management, fitting dress and behaviour to context, overcoming challenges and asking for help when necessary*
- *thinking and solving problems – creativity, reflecting on and learning from own actions, prioritising, analysing situations, and developing solutions*
- *working together and communicating – co-operating, being assertive, persuading, being responsible to others, speaking*

*clearly to individuals and groups and listening for a response*

- *understanding the business – understanding how the individual job fits into the organisation as a whole; recognising the needs of stakeholders (customers and service users, for example); judging risks, innovating, and contributing to the whole organisation*  
UKCES (2009a, pp10–11)

Universities UK/CBI (2009) adopt very similar definitions. Across the UKCES and Universities UK/CBI reports there is frequent reference to employability being enhanced by students who demonstrate entrepreneurship and enterprise, an innovative approach, creativity, collaboration and risk taking.

The UKCES report (2009a) states that the UKCES 'does not wish to be over-prescriptive about definitions. There are many good ones: they all overlap. Regardless of how employability skills are defined, the challenges in helping people develop these skills are the same'. Importantly, the UKCES states that while there are many definitions of employability, many are actually quite similar. The key issue, the authors of the UKCES report stress, is the development of effective approaches to foster and enhance employability skills in people.

The SCRE Centre research reported in this document takes the UKCES concept as its working definition of employability. The concept of graduate employability skills and attributes adopted by the UKCES and contemporary definitions emphasise the acquisition of skills that allow the individual to secure and maintain employment, to develop within a particular job and have the ability to move on to new sustainable employment if required. This involves possessing particular knowledge, skills and attitudes with an ability to deploy them and to market them to employers. This is borne out by the most recent surveys of employers' needs and practices.

### **3.2 Graduate employability in context**

Driven by the vagaries of the UK and global economy and periods of rising unemployment, the concept of employability and concerns over promoting it have been prominent in compulsory education for well over two decades, particularly in education for young people classified as *Not in Employment, Education or Training* (NEET) or, in Scotland, those requiring *More Choices and More Chances* (MCMC), and in post-16 training sectors.

3. <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/employers.pdf>

4. 16 year-olds from school, 17–18 year old school or college leavers, and under 24s entering employment straight from Higher Education

The report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Lord Dearing (NCIHE 1997), highlighted the importance of employability for higher education. In particular, it stressed a need for more systematic opportunities for students to undertake work-related learning opportunities (Harvey et al. 1997). Cranmer (2006:169) maintains that 'employability issues are at the very core of contemporary higher education in the UK'.

There has been an explicit emphasis on the expectations of employers and HEIs concerning enhancing employability in England and Wales as highlighted in the report 'Enhancing employability, recognising diversity' – Universities UK and CSU (Harvey et al 2002)<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Harvey et al (2002 p10) suggests that there has been a cultural shift in higher education concerning 'taking employability more seriously'.

Increasingly, the importance of promoting employability skills and attributes has also been directed at the Higher Education sector, often in response to concerns from employers and their representative organisations such as the CBI. In 2009 Richard Lambert, Director-General of the CBI highlighted that the recession and the resulting increase in competition would mean a greater emphasis on graduates having the attributes to succeed in the workplace (Universities UK/CBI 2009). The competition for graduate positions was highlighted by a Higher Education Careers Services study of the graduate class of 2009 (HECSU 2010) which found that 8.9% were out of work in January 2010, the highest level for 17 years.

Concerns about the need to promote graduate employability are voiced periodically and have been backed by surveys of employers to demonstrate the range of employability skills and attributes that employers require. While a recent UKCES study (Shury et al 2010) found that, as in 2007, recruits from HEIs were considered by employers to be the most work-ready of three job-seeking groups<sup>4</sup>, 16% of employers were dissatisfied with graduates' skills and competencies.

Indeed, the significance placed on graduate employability and its stated inherent link to economic progress (e.g. Archer and Davison, 2008) has raised the political profile of employability and put pressure on HEIs to play a greater role in addressing employability. Key stakeholders in Higher Education appear to recognise this priority:

*It's ... vital that our universities produce the graduates that our economy needs, with the skills that employers value.*

Prof Drummond Bone in Universities UK (2006)

*The global economy is rapidly evolving and if the UK is to retain its position as the fifth largest economy in the world we need highly-skilled graduates who are able to respond to these developments.*

Richard Lambert in Universities UK (2006)

*There is no debating that a major responsibility for the smooth integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, lies with Higher Education Institutions.*

Pukelis et al (2007)

Scottish and UK policy on employability and the role of HEIs have been following converging tracks over the last three years. In Scotland, The Joint Futures Thinking Taskforce on Universities (the Taskforce) was established in November 2007, with the remit of reviewing future challenges facing the Scottish university sector, and determining how its contribution to the economy and society can be optimised over the next 20 years. As part of this policy the Scottish Funding Council provided four years' funding to all Scottish universities to support the employability agenda. While the strategy in Scotland is for the Funding Council to adopt a 'lighter touch', which has been particularly welcomed by universities, it does broadly share the same focus as England and Wales in that universities are encouraged to include economic and skills strategies more explicitly in their learning, teaching and research activities.

### **3.3 Is Higher Education addressing employers' needs?**

In view of the apparent increase in policy efforts to embed employability priorities into Higher Education practice, it would be expected that HEIs would introduce more systematic learning and teaching methods, course content and other measures to address employability. Since the 1990s there have been increasing examples of HEIs working to address employability within their courses and systems. The literature includes examples and cases studies of HEIs working to promote employability, often working closely with employers to provide placements and work-based learning opportunities (for example, Allison et al 2002). The CBI has collated a number of examples and case studies and offers these as resources on its website and in a report (CBI 2009). The effectiveness of work-based learning and

placements as part of HEI employability measures is covered in Section 3.4.1,

The literature reveals that where employers and HEIs are working together to promote and sustain employability measures and other forms of collaboration, they are moving towards a strategy-led, rather than project-led, approach sustained by a central support service that supports educational developments in the whole curriculum. Studies on the impact of HEI programmes to improve employability have found a positive impact on employers and their employees which extends beyond enhancing an individual's skills to 'the exchange or generation of new knowledge' (Nixon 2008).

However, the research literature strongly indicates that, while progress has been made concerning HEI responses to employers' needs, there is still much to be done to foster a shared understanding across employers, HEI and other stakeholders of graduate employability and how to promote it. Indeed, our scoping study and literature review revealed that while there are examples of employers and HEIs working to promote graduate employability, there are still significant issues in terms of differences in mindset and expectations between some HEIs, employers and other stakeholders concerning who should be responsible for developing the skills of graduates. Examples of good practice also appear to be sporadic rather than being reflected across the Higher Education sector.

In a review of graduate employability, Dr Dawn Lees, Employability Co-ordinator at University of Exeter (2002), concluded that 'One of the major problems facing the employability agenda is the discrepancy between what academics view HE to be for, and what the government views HE to be for'.

Some, such as Lees (2002), suggest that there are fundamental differences in the understanding of employability between employers and HEIs which has impeded progress in promoting graduate employability measures. In her literature review, Lees highlights a number of studies (e.g. Dunne *et al*, 2000; Harvey, 2000) which suggest that there is little common understanding between employers and HEIs over the concept of relevant skills, and that increasingly, 'graduate attributes' are seen by employers as more important than the degree subject studied. Indeed, Lees states that Knight and Yorke (2000) have shown that for some employers, 'the degree subject studied is not as important as the graduates' ability to

handle complex information and communicate it effectively' and that 'Graduate recruiters want a variety of other skills, personal and intellectual attributes, rather than specialist subject knowledge'.

The literature suggests that academics can be sceptical of incorporating employability skills into their teaching and can see it as an attack on academic freedom in terms of content. Gunn *et al* (2010), states that while those responsible for Higher Education provision agree that universities should take into account students' employment needs 'including the generic skills and abilities needed in the workplace' and reflect this in the curriculum and course design, tensions remain because of academics' concerns that engaging with the employability agenda will lead to a diminution of academic standards and objectives (Gunn *et al* 2010).

However, this can be addressed by framing the issue in terms exploring how academics can teach their subject to promote employability skills and attributes rather than diminishing the academic content (Coopers & Lybrand, 1998; Harvey, 2000a). Knight and Yorke (2001) argue that curricula designed to enhance employability can also be of benefit in academic terms. For example, in addition to subject knowledge, course content can address specific and generic skills, self-efficacy and critical, reflective thinking (Knight & Yorke, 2001). As Lees (2002) states:

*These dimensions will be developed through the programme of study, the methods of learning, teaching and assessment that the student experiences, through any paid work that is undertaken whilst at university and through their social life and involvement with Guild activities.*

Lees (2002, p12)

While the concerns about employer and HEI differences in perspectives on employability raised by Dunne *et al*, (2000); Harvey, (2000) and Lees (2002) are based on research conducted about ten years ago, more recent research indicates that tensions remain. For example, Cranmer (2006) maintains that 'employability issues are at the very core of contemporary higher education in the UK', yet, in the midst of the commitment given by HEIs on employability issues some tensions have also been observed:

*There are difficulties inherent within the employability in the higher education agenda at every turn: from defining, to measuring, to developing, to transferring. The elusive quality*

5. This is to be replaced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

*of employability makes it a woolly concept to pin down.*

Cranmer (2006, p172)

Furthermore, Cranmer found that there are inherent barriers in HEIs that limit their ability to fully address the issue of graduate employability.

*...despite the best intentions of academics to enhance graduates' employability, the limitations inherent within the agenda will consistently produce mixed outcomes. Furthermore, it is argued that resources would be better utilised to increase employment-based training and experience, and/or employer involvement in courses, which were found to positively affect immediate graduate prospects in the labour market and, therefore, support graduates in the transitional stage into employment.*

Cranmer (2006)

Although there are universities that are committed to the promotion of the employability skills agenda at an institutional level, for example through the integration of generic skills courses into the mainstream curriculum, it is questionable whether there is a significant independent effect on graduate labour market outcomes. Instead, it has been suggested that the employability skills acquired at university may mismatch the skills that they need in employment (Mason *et al* 2006).

In their report 'Graduate Employability: what do employers think and want?' Archer and Davison state that 'both the reality and perception of the skills deficit in [UK] graduates' need addressing (Archer & Davison, 2008:5). They also found that there is a contrast between what some universities are promoting and what is required by industry.

In 2008, the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee carried out an inquiry into skills and training policy. Their report, "Re-skilling for recovery" (House of Commons, 2009) identified successful examples of HEIs collaborating with employers, but reported that employers were reluctant to fund collaboration with HEIs. This was because they preferred to train employees when they started work rather than provide universities with money to do this beforehand. Furthermore, it was felt that the current economic climate would not help employers view the need to fund training programmes any more favourably. This was described as a "major point of weakness" (pg 86) in the Leitch agenda, the risk being that the economy will not grow at the required rate if employers insist on training their

new employees themselves when this could be done during a period of non-paid employment.

If employability is to be tackled comprehensively, universities have to reflect it in their mission statements, learning and teaching strategies, course frameworks, strategic documents and practical guidance. Yet some concern has been raised with regard to how the development of such skills can be embedded into universities' practice, considering other priorities that influence their policies.

*One key driver of institutional behaviour in universities is the Research Assessment Exercise<sup>5</sup>, which does not place employability at the centre of the institution's vision. This is a challenge for funders: to provide funding streams that encourage an institutional culture supportive of employability skills.*

UKCES (2009, p31)

If the UKCES is correct, then as long as the key driver for universities' funding does not explicitly include a focus on promoting employability it is arguable that the majority of courses will struggle to produce graduates who possess the wider repertoire of skills and attributes required by employers.

"Re-skilling for recovery" listed 78 partnerships and organisations involved in the improvement of England's skill base. Although this number may highlight the importance of the government's agenda, it is possible that there is an amount of duplication and ambiguity over roles and responsibilities in improving employability skills. Of these, 20 directly support people in full-time Higher Education, of which three appeared to forge links between employers and universities. This list does not involve any bodies which operate in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland so the number may be higher for the whole of the United Kingdom.

In "Re-skilling for Recovery", it was also argued that while HEIs were beginning to work more closely with business to generate and exploit innovative ideas. There was a belief that the speed with which this was progressing needed to increase. However, it was argued by Universities UK that the role of HEIs was to develop skills of critical thinking and analysis and not to reflect current employment needs which would be subject to constant change. It was felt by the Higher Education Policy Institute that to change university courses to meet the needs of employers would reduce the demand for these courses because

they would no longer be teaching the skills that students were interested in learning. This apparent and persistent difference of perspectives would suggest that there is still some way to go before there is an increase in the employability skills of graduates in line with the aspirations and goals of the UKCES. Furthermore, there is evidence from our study to suggest that, given the economic climate, students are particularly interested in securing a degree that will enhance their employment prospects.

### **3.3.1 HEI measures to promote employability skills and attributes**

The research literature indicates that the development of employability skills and attributes in HEIs should be integrated within the curriculum (eg de la Harpe et al 2000, Knight and York (2002)). Knight and Yorke state that students should be entitled to experiences in HEI that develop understandings, skills, self-theories and reflection and that this good learning and education improves employability. In practice, HEI approaches to promote employability skills and attributes in graduates vary: they include support in career decision-making and job search, development of employability attributes as part of study programmes, placements/work experience and personal development planning.

The UKCES (2009a) and Universities UK/ CBI (2009) have produced reports that include numerous case studies of employability measures adopted by HEIs. Overall, the case studies illustrate how some universities are changing the way courses are taught to build employability skills into the curriculum, including providing work-based experience. These case studies are often descriptive but some do include assessments of impact such as obtaining a better degree and boosting confidence (for example, the University of Surrey and the University of Hertfordshire).

Many case studies lack evaluative evidence to show the longer-term impact on graduates' employability. This is often because universities have not conducted evaluations or have limited data on longer-term outcomes. However, some of the CBI case studies report impact on graduate destinations. For example, the University of Surrey demonstrates through HESA's destination statistics that they have the most consistent graduate employment record in the country and the university is consistently within the top three HEIs for getting its students into employment or further study within six months of completing their degree. The Harper Adams University College reported that 99% of their students who obtained

first degrees from full-time courses in 2006/2007 were employed or in further study within six months of completing their degrees and attributed this to their Advancing Skills for Professionals in the Rural Economy (ASPIRE) programme. Clearly, there is more to employability than securing a job, such as making a productive contribution to the organisation, economy and society, but these examples provide indications of the value added by their courses and initiatives.

While relatively few in number, research studies conducted on the longer-term value and impact of HEI employability measures indicate that work placements can be particularly effective. Hall *et al* (2009) report that

*Overall it appears that the placement year is equipping students well with opportunities for self-development and personal effectiveness in a dynamic teamwork environment, and that these qualities are key to employability.*

Hall et al (2009, p15)

Mason et al (2006) researched the impact of different kinds of HE employability skills initiatives in 34 departments in eight different universities on graduates' labour market performance. They found placements and employer involvement in course design and delivery to be the most effective.

*Structured work experience has clear positive effects on the ability of graduates, firstly, to find employment within six months of graduation and, secondly, to secure employment in graduate-level jobs. The latter job quality measure is also positively and significantly associated with employer involvement in degree course design and delivery... However, there is no evidence that the emphasis given by university departments to the teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills has a significant independent effect on either of the labour market outcomes considered here.*

Mason et al (2006, p24)

Mason et al note that this is consistent with findings of previous studies such as McKnight (2002), who found that the effects of structured work experience for students can be relatively long lasting, including a 4.6% salary premium attached to participation in work experience 3.5 years after graduation, after controlling for degree discipline and a range of personal and university characteristics.

Mason and colleagues' findings regarding the lack of impact of university teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills are interesting

6. [http://graduatetalentpool.bis.gov.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home\\_page/plckppgba](http://graduatetalentpool.bis.gov.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/plckppgba)

but they do add a caveat that their measures of labour market activity are relatively narrow. For example, it might be that promoting teamwork and communication skills will have an impact on graduates' later work performance.

UKCES (2009a) states that placements and internships not only seem to offer an effective applied method of developing appropriate awareness, skills and abilities in graduates, but can also promote productive collaboration and partnerships between HEIs and employers, building greater understanding between these stakeholders. The value of placements is also evidenced by longitudinal studies (e.g. Hall *et al* 2009). The UKCES and CBI have both produced reports that include case studies of employability measures, including work placements, adopted by HEIs (UKCES 2009a and CBI 2009). Overall, the case studies illustrate how some universities are changing the way courses are taught to build employability skills into the curriculum. The importance of placements and internships has been recognised by policymakers and supported by funding. For example, Issue 9 of Intelligence Magazine (UKCES, 2009b) reported that a £17million grant had been agreed by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales to enhance the employability skills of graduates. This will be done through work placements in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises and other organisations with higher-skilled workers. The necessary training will be provided by universities and colleges across Wales. In July 2009, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) recognised the value of experiential learning gained from placements when it launched an initiative to increase the number of internships available to UK graduates<sup>6</sup>.

## Chapter 4

# Qualitative insights from the employer case studies

Drawing on information gathered from the SCRE Centre's scoping interviews with key organisations and the employer cases studies, we find similar themes to those in the literature. In particular, employers value the generic, transferable skills, attributes and characteristics highlighted previously in this paper. In addition, employers are surprised and frustrated that HEIs appear relatively remote, in the sense that they show little desire to work in partnership to address graduate employability or to seek employers' input to courses.

### 4.1 Graduate skills and attributes that are valued by employers

The scoping interviews with employer and HEI organisations found that there are characteristics, skills and knowledge and intellectual capability elements that are required for specific roles. In addition, combinations of transferable skills were also deemed particularly relevant. These were:

- Team working
- Problem solving
- Self-management
- Knowledge of the business
- Literacy and numeracy relevant to the post
- ICT knowledge
- Good interpersonal and communication skills
- Ability to use own initiative but also to follow instructions
- Leadership skills where necessary

In addition to these skills, employers also highlighted the need for particular attitudes and outlooks including motivation, tenacity, and commitment. Overall, this is in line with the UKCES (2009a) findings.

A further similarity with the UKCES report was that employers and their representative organisations thought that specific definitions of employability were less important than an agreed focus on how to promote employability skills and attributes.

Work experience, internships and extra-curricular activities while at university were seen by employers and graduates as particularly helpful in developing these transferable skills. Some of the employers and almost all graduates involved

in the study believed that a degree was required of candidates for certain jobs, but added little to a graduate's long-term employability:

*[The degree is] just a tick in a box and it gets you that initial stage and you can say yes, I've got one, but that's as far as it goes it seems.*

*There are people I work with, with 'less education' than me who are very good at the job. You come in from university with a bit of a cockiness, I would say: you know you've done a degree and then you're presented into these teams where you've got people who have been working much longer than you, didn't have the same grades as you, but they know a heck of a lot more... just because they haven't been to a higher education institution, it doesn't mean that they know less than you. They actually know a lot more because for the three years that you've been spending thinking of your mates and doing an exam every so often, they've been working and finding out exactly what's what ... I learnt more in that first six months than I did in three years at university.*

Bank graduates

*The sort of people that we're looking for are the people who will go out and find the opportunities. The opportunities are out there. You've got sports societies, the student union, the university squadron, voluntary work, paid employment: it's out there, it's just whether people can be bothered to go and do it... I think [it's] down to the individual and my personal opinion is you can point to this world out there and the cream will come to the top.*

*If you have those attributes, you can be trained to be a Royal Naval officer. The technical side of things invariably changes. We look at effective intelligence and candidates have to have a minimum of 100 UCAS points – which isn't a lot, but it shows they've got a brain up there, and can adapt to the changing technology...*

*While I was training the last boat I was on was built in the 60's. The next boat I'll go to will be more technical and I will probably gravitate towards that because of my technical background.*

*You turn your hand to it because you've got that aptitude ... A human being is a very adaptable person... and the type of person we're looking for is adaptable and that is shown by the fact that we are successful when operating submarines, ships, Royal Marines and Royal Navy all over the world.*

Area Recruitment Officer, Royal Navy

*One of the reasons why would I pick somebody with a bit of experience, it's not necessarily for the technical skills (unless they had done something very close), but it is that extra maturity – the life skills – and they've had at least some experience of working with somebody in a working environment rather than a university environment. They [students] tend to be used to having things set for them, prepared for them, not having to think for themselves... Again I'll look at a graduate and if they've done a number of placements, especially if they've been taken back by a placement, I try... to keep them on because I think it looks better on a CV that not only did they work here, but we took them back.*

Senior Engineer, food production

Employers also valued mature graduates because they often had a range of life skills that were valued.

*At the same time a mature student, somebody who's worked for a couple of years then done a degree, I would count the two years as experience... I think they're going to have more of those life skills and more of a standing in a manufacturing environment.*

Senior Engineer, food production

There was an argument that for some graduates (e.g. medical graduates), what is crucial is that they meet the requirements laid down by the professional bodies (e.g. General Medical Council). Also, those students and graduates who had done particularly relevant subjects at university (such as business and economics) believed that their degrees held more significance in terms of securing their post. For others, however, it was thought that the knowledge acquired in higher education degrees may be secondary to the range of other transferable skills they had acquired from work-related learning and team-based activities.

Larger employers were willing to provide extensive training to provide the specific knowledge and skills required by graduates upon entering the company. This often meant that graduate's degree subject was less important than other qualities and skills graduates could demonstrate. Employers stressed that the academic and technical skills of

graduates were usually very high. However, there were varied views concerning the wider attitudes, attributes and skills that graduates possessed.

Employers stressed that efforts put into creating a good first impression, CV preparation and self-presentation at interviews were also very important, but many graduates appeared to lack the skill and motivation to impress at this initial stage. For example, a common criticism was that graduates often do not take the time and care to craft CVs geared to a particular employer and some employers highlighted that candidates often had limited motivation to apply themselves to their interview and do background research on the employer; as a result, they had unrealistic expectations.

*They haven't actually got their head round the idea that 'I'm here to sell myself and people behind the table will be asking questions'... but I think there's this kind of expectation ... 'I have now got a degree', but it's not as simple as that. You have to have something different and it might still be a Class 1 Honours, but it's still got to be something different.*

National construction employer

*A lot of people have made absolutely no effort to find out about the Royal Navy or why they want to join or haven't really considered being an officer in the Royal Navy... It sounds like people think, 'I'll just join the navy'. It's almost their right – 'I pay taxes therefore I can join' – but I wouldn't have dared turn up at a job interview not knowing anything about the company. It is the case that 50% of their [graduates'] service knowledge is poor... the knowledge of what they're going to put themselves through for the next two years is pretty poor... A lot of people are being told that they need to go and find out about it to a greater degree before they can be what we call 'resifted'. Invariably they will come back at a good standard because it's a bit of "oh my word". It's surprising how much they didn't know and some people are turned off – but it's rare that someone decides not to bother coming back.*

Area Recruitment officer, Royal Navy

Larger employers placed importance on interviews and initial assessment centres to help highlight those candidates who possessed the motivation and range of skills required. In particular, the broader generic skills were assessed using role play, presentations and other interactive activities. Some of these employers used follow-up workshops and sessions with similar methods to

7. Work-related learning is planned activity which uses the context of work to develop skills, knowledge and understanding which will be useful in working life and indeed operating in wider society. It can include a range of activities, from better understanding of the labour market and economy, through work-related application of the curriculum or course to careers education.

maintain and build the capacity of newly-recruited graduates.

*We really want people who want to work for [this Bank] knowing a lot more about us rather than just applying for all of the banks. It's also the softer skills. I think it's the additional skills, really having that hunger, to be motivated to work, especially in global banking. It is very long hours and it is very hard work; so they really must want to put as much effort in as possible and be able to see the picture.*

Multinational bank recruitment

Some employers stressed the increasing importance of recruiting people who could demonstrate 'critical and evaluative skills', for example in engineering where incomplete sets of data meant that risks had to be assessed when safety was an issue. Again, assessment centre tests and activities were designed to cover these requirements.

#### **4.2 What do employers, students and graduates see as effective methods to promote graduate employability?**

The scoping interviews with employer and HEI organisations found that employers and HEIs were seen as having a complementary role to play in developing graduate employability. Whereas HEIs can organise high quality careers services and provide careers advice, employers can offer relevant work placements to students to provide valuable experience to pick up additional skills and awareness of that type of work.

Frequently, in the case studies, employers, students and graduates saw placements/ internships and work experience as particularly effective modes to enhance graduate employability. This was apparent across all sectors and sizes of employer. However, a key factor in the usefulness of work experience and placements was the duration of the experience. Employers stressed that for the students and employers to acquire the full benefits of this type of experience it had to be at least six months and preferably longer. This corresponds to the findings of the Pay and Progression for Graduates survey conducted in 2005, involving 96 employers from the Incomes Data Services (IDS 2005), which found that year-long sandwich placements and vacation work were valued by employers and were an important factor in gaining a graduate position.

*The best model experience we had was with [an English university] where in their final year they do a placement between the end of June and January the next year, when they go and finish off*

*the final year. They've got a choice between doing some university work for their autumn semester or taking a placement and working out in industry. They've got quite a good level of university knowledge at that time, followed by six months of work, and then they go and do five months of their final degree. That worked really well and we took a number through that.*

National Construction Company

*I would probably say that the fundamental reason why I got my role in the bank was having a placement or work experience. [It] allows you to get some practical skills that you wouldn't be able to have if you were just in a university environment...so having a placement is probably the number one reason why I got my role. It was definitely my university that felt it would be beneficial for people to either do a six-month or a year-long placement, so they actively encouraged and supported us to do that. I think if you go for a six-week or ten-week placement there's only a relatively minor amount you can actually do, but if you are there for a longer period you actually get tested much more heavily.*

Graduate bank employee

Where placements were offered, whether in the private, public or voluntary sectors, employers took their role seriously and made the experience as authentic as possible but with appropriate support to ensure the student benefited from the experience. Providing such opportunities benefited employers as well as students, but the cost of providing placements and internships was considerable, particularly when it involved supervision by senior staff.

Graduates tended to value the extra-curricular experiences at university and work experience more highly than their degree's content (except in specialist areas), seeing these as adding to their CVs and helping to secure employment.

Employers noted that where course work involved work-related learning<sup>7</sup> such as teamwork projects, there was more of an opportunity for the academic component of the degrees to provide generic skills.

*In fairness the universities do a lot of team projects which encourages team working and when we start touching on this, invariably the graduates refer to their team projects that they do on their degree.*

International aerospace company

### 4.3 Do employers believe HEIs are doing enough to address employability?

Overall, the employers in our study and their representative organisations thought that HEIs could do more to address employability across their courses. The scoping interviews and case studies highlighted that the employers generally believed that universities were less than responsive to the needs of employers and the wider economy. There was a perceived lack of systematic practice to promote employability across the HEIs and good practice was more evident at course, faculty or departmental level. This meant that these examples were vulnerable to changes in staff and resources. Often, it appeared that employer-HEI partnerships were people-dependant rather than system-dependant. This was highlighted by one large engineering employer:

*Unfortunately they kind of changed some of the ways of working at [the university] and the lecturer as well. We had a very good relationship with the lecturer. That was quite a good model because they had enough time in university to have actually added value and they had enough time then to come in to industry. I think it was very much like an extended interview.*

Engineering employer

A theme to emerge from the qualitative strand of our research was that the employers and their representative organisations generally thought there was a mismatch between the needs of the economy and the structure and focus of many of the degrees offered. As one employer stressed, there were many students 'seeking courses for which there were few current or future opportunities'.

Another suggested that –

*From an engineering point of view they [HEIs] need to be realistic about the qualifications they're [sending people] out with. What's the point of giving someone a B.Eng when it's not accredited? Nowadays it's a Masters, they need to be chartered... Someone came in the other day and talking about engineering, he had I think a Bachelor's degree in motor sport operations... it's not really an engineering degree, it's not really a science degree, it wasn't accredited or anything.*

Area Recruitment Officer, Royal Navy

As one might expect, where HEI courses were linked to particular professional qualifications such as medicine, there appeared to be a far closer association between relevant professional and employer bodies. For example, the General

Medical Council stressed that it is very much aware of the needs of the employers and has a clear picture of what is required of students. Therefore, the liaison between HEI courses and the NHS was not only 'continuous' but also 'interwoven'.

Employers frequently noted that other than at careers services level, there were rarely any approaches made to them from course leaders looking for partnerships and to reflect employers' needs in their courses.

*I would say that's one thing that's always peeved me. I've taken five, six, maybe more students [on placements]. The contacts have all been through [careers officer], but [there's been]...no contact whatsoever from anyone from the courses. No one from the chemistry or biology department has ever [approached me]. They seem completely unaware of what the careers service is doing... There's never, ever been any contact with the subject leaders and I find that a disappointment.*

Senior Engineer, food production

The need for imagination, initiative and flexibility concerning the design of more valuable and responsive higher education courses were themes that employers, students and graduates highlighted. Graduates and employers in general recognised that the universities were doing a very good job teaching theoretical content but actual experience was necessary across most courses to acquire a wider repertoire of employability skills and attributes.

Some employers felt more could be done by universities to prepare students for interviews:

*The universities should be doing workshops on that. You rarely have to be interviewed to get into university now, therefore they're not probably doing a formal interview until their first job interview and they're falling flat on their face.*

Area Recruitment Officer, Royal Navy

Banks were particularly active in targeting universities to encourage recruitment and usually had relatively close links with careers services in a variety of UK and some international HEIs. This suggests that employers should also be more active in seeking partnerships with HEIs and exploring approaches to improve employability. For example, one of the employers stressed that they were looking to work more closely with universities to help introduce practice that promoted employability and skills relevant to their company and sector:

*[We don't shape the courses directly] No, not in the formal curricula and I would say one of the areas we were working in a lot more is with the universities and faculties and really trying to get across what we're looking for... One of the things we're going to do this year is to put in place three ... consultants who are tasked purely with interfacing with universities. Some of that will be at fairs and all that sort of thing, but more in depth ... they will go and talk to faculties, talk to people about what employability skills we need, [conduct] skills sessions etc.*

International bank employer

#### **4.4 Employers' views on factors limiting HEI engagement.**

Overall, there was surprise from employers that there were not more systematic approaches from universities to engage with employers. One employer suggested that there was more interest from HEIs concerning funding and collaboration for research and development:

*We get a lot of approaches around research funding and R&D Centres, but I would have expected more approaches from universities round industrial placements and that kind of thing. I would expect universities to have a kind of industrial placement liaison officer if they do sandwich [courses], who would be ringing up people like ourselves saying "Do you have places and could you guarantee a number of places?" and I'd be quite happy to discuss that ... We had a very good relationship with one lecturer and we built up that relationship, but he left and nobody actually came in and replaced him.*

International aerospace employer

Some employers suggested that academic performance and esteem indicators were operating against efforts to developing links with business to promote employability:

*One lecturer told me "I was being criticised for building links with industry rather than writing research papers"...he hadn't done enough research papers and he was being discriminated against for that, rather than recognising the links he was building up with industry.*

Engineering employer

Inter-university competition and academic rivalries were also believed to be factors in reducing partnership work across universities to promote employability and meet business needs. The result was that universities were seen to be duplicating effort.

When invited to advisory and steering boards, employers' experience could be disappointing and their impact limited. Employers highlighted the importance of building relationships with key people in HEIs in order to have an impact.

*[I'm on the University's] industrial steering board. There is a good mix from industry, but I got the impression that there wasn't much steering going on. It was very much [them] telling us what [they've] done and stuff like that and as soon as we [the employer representatives] challenged anything it was like "well that's how it is guys"... This happened about six/seven times: we were all on a common view from industry, but it was like I was out of line for talking about academic things.*

International aerospace employer

*They [HEIs] sort of feel that they can dictate to us how things should run, whereas sometimes we feel it should be more of a two-way process. I think once you've got the relationship with the institutions then it definitely works. Building up that relationship sometimes does take time, but I think from our perspective we usually start at the beginning of the year. We've just had our careers services date, so we invite all of the careers services in from our top tier schools and basically let them know our strategy and what's going to be happening and what our strategy is. I think the more open we are with them the better the relationship and I think the more open they are with us it's definitely the reverse. It's a growing relationship. It's not something you can really walk into and just to be able to get them on your side straight away.*

International financial employer

While our research focus was on graduate employability, it was also stressed by the employer and HEI organisations that the contribution of both primary and secondary education should not be underestimated in the development of employability skills:

*There is a big gap between the employer, further and higher education and schools. Job fairs are not the answer. It's more fundamental. There has to be an input and I lay the blame as much at employers' doors because they're only looking for what they need for that moment in time, not five/ten years down the road and in five/ten years there is going to be panic for certain job placements because people won't be there.*

National construction employer

## Chapter 5

### Themes arising from the HEI interviews

The final stage of Phase 2 of the research involved telephone interviews with key representatives of those 26 HEIs that employers reported having links with over the past three years. All 26 were approached to contribute to the research with 14 agreeing to participate (10 English, 3 Scottish and 1 Northern Ireland). The HEI representatives were usually senior careers service directors and personnel; in some cases, however, interviews were conducted with those responsible for dedicated employability programmes. The interviews explored HEI representatives' views on the themes and findings emerging from the employer case studies. In addition, the interviews sought to identify examples of how HEIs were working with employers to enhance their provision and measures to promote the employability of graduates.

#### 5.1 HEI representatives' perceptions of the qualities, skills, knowledge, attributes and characteristics that promotes the employability of graduates

Overall, there was consensus across the HEI representatives on the attributes and skills that promoted graduates' employability. An English Russell Group HEI representative stressed that their institution included the CBI's eight employability measures. One Scottish HEI representative emphasised the 'graduate mindset' which gave emphasis to the 4 E's:

- Enterprising
- Ethical
- Engaged (actively) or involved with learning and university life
- Enquiring

Another English Russell Group HEI careers service director drew on experience of discussion with a range of employers to stress that the main attributes and skills required:

- a) a good degree from a good university; this serves as a form of 'quality assurance'
- b) work-experience (e.g. knowing that they need to turn up on time, and 'been there a bit' experience, which also enables them to get used to the job quite quickly)
- c) participative (e.g. they've been part of a committee or other extra-curricular activities).

This is important as it implies that they are a 'doer' and a 'contributor' and are also likely to be active and to self-initiate and show that they are able to be a part of a working community

- d) ability to reflect on their experience, make connections and 'tell employers their story' – of how all their university experience has contributed to their overall learning and recognising/being aware of how this learning is transferable to other contexts.

Across the other HEIs a list of attributes, characteristics and skills for graduate employability emerged:

- strong communicators – both written and oral
- able to work using their own initiative
- capable of independent work
- demonstrating that they can take responsibility
- creative and able to solve problems
- time management
- presentation skills
- able to work as part of a team
- able to lead when appropriate (this requirement from employers led to one English HEI to providing a leadership programme called 'Leadership of Tomorrow')
- able to network: being able to form relationships and get to know people
- commercial awareness/awareness of the industry: for example, having a wider knowledge of finance and wider implications of how knowledge and is shaping the market; and knowing where the company sits in a particular industry
- willing to learn and taking responsibility for their own development
- reflective about themselves and what they want out of the job
- motivated and enthusiastic
- self confidence – but also confident that they are applying for work that matches their aspirations
- work-readiness, for example having an awareness of appropriate work behaviour. (This is something that HEI representatives thought employers were concerned about: one said, 'Nowadays, there is a lack of opportunity for many students to work in a work environment ... some students think that because they

have IT access, it is acceptable to have their Facebook account open at work'.)

### 5.2 Focussing on employability

The universities typically had some written commitment to employability in their policies. However, the extent to which these were operationalised and reflected across departments and faculties varied widely. The employer case studies highlighted variation in how universities organised their links and programmes with employers in order to help promote the employability of their students. For example, some had systematic approaches to build links with employers, whereas others reacted to employer approaches or relied on individual faculties and departments to develop links.

There was evidence that in some of the HEIs, employability was being given greater priority at central or strategic level, with respondents stating that this would help cascade good practice to different levels in their university. In some cases, this process was being enhanced by the creation of employability programmes and awards with designated personnel to coordinate and champion employability measures. The drivers underpinning efforts to promote employability were diverse, but one important factor appeared to be a desire to attract students, who were increasingly looking for degrees that would improve their likelihood of securing employment in a time where competition for vacancies was intensifying.

### 5.3 Partnerships with employers

There was variation in the extent to which the HEIs had active partnerships with employers in order to promote the employability of students. Some had very active, systematic and sophisticated employer partnerships that were centrally coordinated by a unit within the university's careers service and sometimes at faculty level.

Close and systematic links with employers were likely to be present where the institution had:

- a strong vocational remit or objectives that regarded employability as a compatible component of wider academic and educational capacities and attributes. For example, one director of a university careers services in the Midlands stated that 'Universities haven't made students into vocational graduates. University graduates are able to think critically. They are academically very bright and there is also an adaptability in them'.
- a focus on teacher training

- a focus on applied research, especially where such research was funded by industry and business.

Many of the links with employers have been with 'blue-chip' companies rather than small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Some HEI representatives suggested that large employers had sufficient manpower and resources to sustain links with universities and provide placements whereas SMEs lacked the necessary time and resources. However, there were exceptions. In one English university, the careers centre systematically worked with employers and actively sought links with local SMEs to develop policies on employability.

Careers services across the HEIs covered by the research were usually the main driver in their institution concerning efforts to liaise with employers. These links would often promote periodic input from employers and their graduate recruiters, particularly in providing careers information and advice on campus and at careers events. Some universities' careers services also held annual conferences with employers to encourage greater liaison and communication.

One central England HEI's careers service had been voted 'best career service' because of their strong relationships with a range of employers. This HEI forged relationships based on a recognition that 'each party needs to understand the other's needs'. This careers service assessed employers' needs and translated them into the skills that students need to meet employers' requirements.

Some of the other universities' careers services demonstrated a diverse range of efforts to actively engage employers to promote employability measures and inform students about opportunities:

*There is a team of 7 individuals who deal with employers – both large and small businesses. They have a link with 5,000 employers who advertise their vacancies and over 1,000 employers who come on campus. There are graduate recruiters who come to the university during career fairs, do presentations, career-related workshops and also provide mentoring.*

*It's very well established. The Careers Service plays a significant role as they seek to present the best opportunities for their students through their links with their employers. They identify what's required/important (from the employers' point of*

*view) and work to improve certain areas to help students meet employers' demands.*

*They work hard contacting various organisations in order to bring in as many employers as possible.*

Central England University

In another central English university, there were links with 5,500 employers and regular contact with 1,500 of these. Three hundred and twenty employers came to campus during employer events. These provided input to talks, careers fairs, development events and coaching workshops. Of these employers, there were 30 who were part of a Recruiters' Club that acted as critical friends and an advisory network for the university.

Interviews with HEI representatives showed that the importance of universities' careers services as a catalyst for employer engagement cannot be underestimated. One person suggested that 'without the careers service, partnerships simply wouldn't happen' because the 'academic and employer communities are separate'. The careers services acted as a conduit between these communities with academics and employers bringing their own complementary expertise.

Some careers services would meet with departmental/faculty staff to develop employability measures such as a careers module and embedding employability-related activities into workshops and seminars. For example, in one West of England university, the computer science lectures featured an accredited unit addressing employability.

However, the scope for 'real' partnership was often limited and seen by some careers personnel as 'hard work'. Despite the efforts of universities' careers services and employability units, there were usually different levels of relationships with employers across the various academic departments in each institution. Even where a careers service or centre was quite systematic in its approach to promote links with employers and stressed the importance of employability in its policies, individual faculties and departments did not uniformly reflect this in their practice. Some HEI staff thought that this process required ongoing and active management that recognised the various agendas and sensitivities of academics and employers.

#### **5.4 Types of employability activities**

HEI representatives were asked what types of approaches and activities were used in their

institutions to help promote student employability. In particular, university contacts were asked about their provision for placements, internships and work-based learning, which were the approaches most valued by employers in our study and the wider literature.

##### **5.4.1 Use of internships, placements and work-based learning**

There was an indication that placements and internships were increasingly being used by the universities to provide students with valuable experience and skills. Internships were very popular with students. In one English university about 25% of the student population accessed internships, placements and other work-based opportunities. These varied in nature and duration and included 10 week international internships, gap year placements (which were also often abroad) and an eight-week programme of learning and development activities that links the students to local businesses and community organisations. This employability programme was aimed at providing employability skills training and work-based experiences to students and an opportunity for local SMEs, charities and community organisations to access expertise. Students from all disciplines and year levels participate in this programme and work in small teams to address a strategic issue or business problem affecting the placement organisation.

*Internships are very useful especially for graduates looking for their first opportunity in the world of work. There are those who would like to stay in [this city] so we link them with local employers to whom they can demonstrate their knowledge and skills.*

HEI Midlands

Careers services typically advertised internships, with students volunteering to pursue them. Internships were more likely to be used by management and business courses and those degrees that were accredited by professional bodies such as finance and accounting degrees, where practical skills and experience of a particular business were seen as key to achieving the required competences for the award and enhancing employment opportunities. Some highlighted that internships were not always available for those interested in working for charities or the public sector. However, there was an example where one Scottish University had managed to develop a strong voluntary sector internship/placement programme for its students.

Placements were more likely to be provided by engineering, science and teacher training departments. They were also more common for higher degree courses.

*There is a wide range of links/relationships. For example, 1,000 students have placements, academics have links with employers and [there is] research that focuses on business and employment.*

University. South of England

*We use placements a lot, about 50% for undergraduate students.*

University. West of England

One South of England university highlighted a placement partnership with a North of England University that had proved beneficial. Language degrees used foreign placements to enhance students' language skills and this experience was also seen as developing their broader abilities and capacities. Humanities and Social Sciences were less likely to provide placements for students: however, one HEI representative stressed that such courses would benefit from placements, given the range of employers that recruited students from these disciplines.

As noted already, in one of the universities in the study, about half of all undergraduates could access placements, including some lasting 12 months. In another university, placements lasted for 45 weeks with students being required to undertake various assessments and report on their achievements. This included receiving an award for their placements (Diploma in Professional Studies and Diploma in Industrial Studies). While employers usually did not give additional qualifications or awards, they did provide valuable feedback to students and universities and believed that the placements were valuable for their businesses as well as for the students.

Some careers representatives stressed that their services recognised that employers valued work experience when recruiting and that careers staff therefore sought to identify opportunities for placements and similar opportunities and to promote these across university departments.

While careers services and employability units had limited data available, HEI representatives believed that placements, internships, and work-based placements did enhance the employability of their graduates. There was anecdotal feedback to show that students' self confidence and skills were improved and that they were better able to

make informed career decisions. One English university had conducted research on the impact of their placements and found that they had increased students' chances of getting a graduate-level job.

#### **5.4.2 Employability awards and programmes**

Some of the universities highlighted their employability award. Typically, students could volunteer to choose from a range of activities that amounted to 100 hours of work experience, voluntary work, work placements, or other extra-curricular activities that enabled them to gain employability-related skills. One director of a Northern Ireland HEI Careers Service that organised an employability award programme believed that around 40 UK universities had a similar scheme. Some universities also included mentoring within their programmes to help students identify their strengths, develop their capacity and identify what career areas they wanted to work in and what they could offer to employers.

As with other HEI efforts to promote employability mentioned in Section 5.1.4, there was little systematic or evaluative evidence of the longer-term impact of employability awards and similar programmes. HEI representatives did, however, receive positive feedback from students, employers and other partners involved.

Some examples of HEI employability programmes and measures, including broader and academic skills, were highlighted by our research. Again, it is important to stress that while the existence of the employability programmes in these HEIs can be seen as a positive development offering opportunities to students to enhance and document their skills, there is a lack of clear evaluative evidence on the longer-term impact and value-added by these measures. The examples are summarised below.

#### *Russell Group Scottish University*

A sophisticated and extensive graduate employability programme has been established by a Russell Group Scottish University. The Graduate Skills Programme (GSP) is the College of Social Sciences' certificated employability award. It has been designed to help undergraduate students and postgraduate taught students in the College make the most of their time at university and enhance their transferable and employability skills.

The GSP is predicated on the belief that 'In an increasingly competitive job market leaving university with a good degree may not be enough on its own to land you that first graduate job'.

*Employers are not so much interested in your degree discipline, but in who you are, what experiences you have, what skills you can bring to their business.*

GSP Tutor

Therefore, the GSP is designed to help students develop the skills needed to succeed in their academic studies and their future career, as well as helping them to market themselves effectively to potential employers. It also allows students to reflect on their university experiences to consider how they contribute to the student's personal and professional development.

An undergraduate student in the College of Social Sciences can sign up to the GSP at any stage of their degree. Importantly the GSP gives students recognition for activities and experience not traditionally covered by their particular degree programme.

The GSP leaders believe that increasingly employers are looking for a broad range of skills and experience from their graduate employees. GSP therefore combines the following key skill areas:

- academic skills: e.g. research skills, academic writing, time management, exam preparation and academic skills development
- extra-curricular activities: e.g. joining clubs and societies; involvement in volunteering; reflecting on hobbies and interests, becoming a student representative
- work-related and work-based learning: e.g. undertaking work placements; meeting employers; reflecting on part-time work; receiving support to start own company
- jobs and careers: e.g. meeting employers, building CVs, practice interviews, career planning and developing the skills required to find a job at the end of the degree.

These four elements have been chosen to be representative of the broad range of activity and skills development opportunities that the University can provide. The programme leaders believe that engaging with all four elements will ensure that students promote their chances to succeed at university, develop both personally and professionally, and increase their attractiveness to future employers. The GSP is seen as helping students gain the employability skills they require to find a graduate job after their degree.

*Getting involved in GSP activities has allowed me to confidently and effectively convey my skills and experiences with relevance to graduate jobs. The*

*wealth of activities I have participated in has, I believe, given me the edge over competitors for graduate positions.*

GSP participant

Each GSP element is made up of a series of sessions (delivered by university staff and graduate employers), workshops (delivered by GSP tutors), and self-directed activities (planned by the student). As they complete each activity they are expected to complete a web page, or ePortfolio Supplement, on the University's ePortfolio platform. This web page records students' experiences of the activities, the skills it helps them to develop, and contributes to their ongoing personal and professional development.

If students complete all four elements they receive the GSP Award. By the end of GSP they will have completed an ePortfolio Supplement for each of the four elements detailing their skills development, achievements and experience. In addition, they will have created a full CV. The student can make parts of their ePortfolio accessible to employers, tutors or other students and it can be taken with the student when they complete their degree.

#### *Northern Ireland University*

In Northern Ireland, one university introduced the *Degree Plus* programme in October 2008. The programme is designed to provide 'full time and part time undergraduate, and post graduate taught students with a vehicle for accrediting learning and skills developed through extra curricular activities'.

The Award designers stress that employers are looking for graduates who can demonstrate that they have the skills needed for workplace success. Therefore, the Degree Plus Award has been designed to provide official recognition of extra-curricular activities and achievements. The Award is based on the rationale that students can acquire important employability skills such as teamwork, leadership, communication and commercial awareness from their extra-curricular activities such as a part-time job, voluntary work or acting as course rep. The Award allows these skills and this experience to be formally recognised with a Certificate or Diploma or a personalised Degree Plus Award. Students are encouraged to use a PDP e-portfolio to record their achievements, develop their action plan and reflect and assess their skills. This, and the online CV builder, provides them with basis of a comprehensive and evidence-based CV.

The Award is open to all full-time and part-time undergraduate, and postgraduate taught students. Participants receive the award along with their

degree. The Degree Plus Award is free; however, some of the qualifying courses do charge a small fee.

*What attracted me to Degree Plus was that you can personalise your own award and work at your own pace. I hope to acquire skills and knowledge that will stand me in good stead after life at university. I have combined a variety of extra-curricular experiences to gain the award. I have been elected to the Students Union Council this year, have become active in a number of university societies and am working towards gaining the EDCL qualification. The wide range of activities from which you can choose means that you are sure to be able to find a path where you can explore things that interest you, develop new skills and have fun all at the same time.*

Mathematics student

#### *South of England University*

A South of England university has a programme of employability and skills events, held from October to March each academic year. The programme is a joint initiative of the student careers service and student union, which provides students with advice and coaching from graduate recruiters in interactive sessions to help them develop skills needed in the work-place and life beyond university. Formats range from standard skills workshops to "speed-dating" style events, and from conferences to practice interviews. This programme has been praised by employers and Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR).

Each year more than 40 organisations are involved in the delivery of the programme. In addition to helping with students' employability and development, it offers a means of meeting employers and raising employers' profile.

#### *Other examples*

In another university, an employability officer was in post with a remit to ascertain what 'graduate competence' means, what employers want and to identify what was happening in relation to employment in general. Over 2,000 students take part in a volunteering scheme which involves a range of different projects (e.g. community projects, residential homes, activities to develop student leadership). There is also Personal Development Planning (PDP) for students, which encourages them to reflect on their experience in the university, both academic and extra-curricular, and how this experience can be applied in other contexts.

In a West of England university, there is an employers' consultation group and day Conference where employers participate in an information exchange to explore ideas to develop employability measures. This has led to the design of a programme that uses workshops to help students reflect on their work experience and extra-curricular activities. This was piloted in 2009 and found to be very popular with students.

The CBI website includes a resource that documents a range of similar employability measures and employer engagement approaches adopted by HEIs ([http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/case\\_studies/](http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/case_studies/)). In rare cases, the employability measures are an integral part of every undergraduate degree course. While the evidence of the impact of these programmes is not always explicit the available summaries indicate that these HEIs achieve UK-leading graduate employment rates and are cited by students an important factor in attracting them to apply to the Institution measures (eg Leeds Trinity University College and Birmingham City University).

#### **5.4.3 Involving employers in the design and delivery of courses**

There was relatively little involvement from employers in the design and delivery of courses. Employers were more likely to be involved in providing guest lectures, workshops, seminars, skill sessions (including one-to-one tutorials and conducting interview simulations), case study material and data for use in courses. Employers, particularly larger and financial companies, were also sometimes involved in supporting and sponsoring extracurricular activities such as sporting clubs.

Part-time and foundation degrees, where there were access arrangements with local colleges, saw more employer input to the design of courses. In some courses, employers had a supervisory role for project work, making comments and giving feedback to students, but there was no evidence of them being involved in assessing students.

Not all HEI representatives saw the involvement of employers in course and curriculum design as desirable or appropriate.

*[This] University is an academic university focusing on teaching and research. It's not a training ground.*

Director of Careers Services, English university

However the director of careers services in another English university stressed that employers' views

and the wider economic context could help inform practice and policy, but did not have to dictate it. Their approach, therefore, was 'employer-informed' rather than 'employer-led', with the university taking on board the insights, comments and suggestions of the CBI and employer groups. Another director of a university careers service elaborated on this:

*There is space for having a particular relationship with employers. It should be acknowledged though that HEIs are different, they have different missions and they brand themselves differently. Some are more academic and some align themselves more to FE (more vocationally-based approach) to produce nurses and paramedics. Therefore, it is to be expected that HEIs focus and do things differently.*

*English University (Russell Group)*

#### **5.4.4 Involving employers in committees and policy on employability**

Employers, some of whom were alumni, did feature on advisory boards and committees that were convened to advise on courses, employability and university governance. For example, in one of the universities, an advisory committee comprising 30 to 35 academics, a senior management team, and 12 employers, considers the needs of the industries covered by courses and seeks advice, feedback and opinions from employers. It appeared more likely for advisory committees consisting of academics and employers to be convened in engineering and science areas.

However, some HEI representatives noted that some employers rarely attended meetings. Given the experiences of employers highlighted in the previous chapter, perhaps this was because of differences in views and employers' feeling that their views had limited impact on committees' decisions and policies.

#### **5.5 Has the current economic climate provided an impetus for universities to work more closely with employers?**

Overall, the HEI representatives reported that the economic climate has heightened awareness of the employability agenda. A minority stressed that the economic situation had provided an explicit impetus for senior managers to increase efforts to promote the employability of their students. One HEI's careers centre had had to think more imaginatively concerning their strategies, which was seen as challenging but exciting.

Some HEI representatives believed that they were already doing enough to address employability

before the economic recession. Others, however, suggested that the wider economic context was actually distracting from their focus on employability because financial challenges were driving institutional change and preoccupying policy.

#### **5.6 Concluding remarks on employability from HEI representatives**

While the research has highlighted much variation in the extent of employer engagement and measures adopted by HEIs to promote graduate employability, the representatives involved in this part of the research were usually strong advocates of continuing to work with employers to better support students' employment opportunities. Indeed, there were many positive comments across the HEI representatives involved in the research.

*Given their success [employability measures], it is important to reiterate the value of having a two-way relationship between HEIs and employers to meet the needs of students. We remain proactive in linking with all business types (e.g.. small, voluntary, public services) and theirs is an example of how such partnerships work in practice!*

*University English Midlands*

*Employer and HEI partnerships continue to be essential. A focus on employability skills is now more important than it has been. Employability has a profile [in the University] that is steadily growing.*

*West of Scotland HEI*

However, a minority did highlight that there were tensions between universities and employers because of conflicting agendas and priorities, a theme mirrored in the research literature. One HEI representative stressed that employers and universities had 'two different foci, i.e. teaching and research versus making money' which was why the universities were reluctant to focus on developing student employability; rather, universities seek to develop students' capacity to think and be independent. More typically, HEI representatives saw employability as one important dimension of universities' provision and objectives. Indeed, it is arguable that many of the criteria for employability identified by the HEI representatives are compatible with academic and wider abilities, capacities and advancement.

## Chapter 6

# Conclusions and moving forward

This research project was essentially a qualitative study drawing on different sources of evidence and while generalisations should be made with care, it has provided sufficiently detailed insights from the wider literature and from the views of key stakeholders involved with graduate employability at national and local level to highlight factors and processes that influence graduate employability. Drawing on these findings we can present a range of conclusions and recommendations for consideration.

### 6.1 Conclusions

While there are variations in the classification of employability, there is a broad understanding of what qualities, characteristics, skills and knowledge constitute employability in general and for graduates in particular. Employers expect graduates to have the technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and often managerial abilities or potential.

It is arguable that specific definitions are less important than an agreed focus on approaches which foster transferable skills and the attributes that will enable graduates to find appropriate employment, progress in their work and thus facilitate the success of their organisations and contribute to society and the economy.

Perhaps above all, the literature and our own findings have overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities as an effective way of providing university students with relevant employment skills, knowledge and awareness of employer culture.

The literature on graduate employability, and our research, both reveal that while there have been important developments in terms of activity across HEIs to address graduate employability, the extent to which this is happening and the level to which it is embedded across the sector is uncertain. This is despite developments in government policy to

encourage HEIs and employers to work together to develop approaches measures that contribute to graduate employability.

While there are numerous examples of employers and HEIs working to promote graduate employability in the literature and in our research, there are still issues and barriers between employers and many of those responsible for HEI policy, particularly in terms of differences in mindset, expectations and priorities.

There are concerns from some academics about employability measures in their universities 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.

Relatively little is known about the impact of HEI programmes and measures to promote graduates' employability skills and attributes. Systematic evaluations of such measures appear scarce. This is particularly true in understanding the longer-term benefits to graduates.

### 6.2 Recommendations and moving forward

While a recent UKCES study (Shury et al 2010) has shown that the majority of employers are satisfied with their graduate recruits there is a notable minority who are not. The economic context and labour market situation have seen an increase in graduate unemployment and these issues along with the ever-present challenge of global economic competition mean that we cannot be complacent about the capacity of graduates to secure and maintain employment, to develop within a particular job and have the ability to move on to new sustainable employment if required. With this in mind, the research suggests a number of issues for consideration, which are presented below.

#### *Embedding support for employability across the institution*

- It is recommended that HEIs and government explore how careers services can be enhanced

and resourced to promote employability activities more effectively at faculty and departmental level. Our research indicates that strategy-led, rather than ad-hoc, project-led, employability measures are likely to have a greater and sustained impact on graduate employability. Employability measures need to be systematic and embedded into departmental and faculty practice otherwise they are vulnerable to changes in personnel.

- Government should consider ways of reflecting and promoting employability skills and attributes in funding mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). To date funding systems have not placed employability at the centre of universities' vision and strategic planning, and this seems certain to have influenced their behaviour. Funding streams need to encourage an institutional culture supportive of employability skills. It is anticipated that part of the profile for the REF in 2013 will be awarded to reflect the demonstrable benefits (impact) of research on the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life. This could, perhaps, be matched by a parallel measure of the demonstrable benefits of HEIs' efforts to develop and support students' employability.
- Developing graduate employability skills and attributes should be included in HEIs' strategic *and* faculty/departmental level planning. Universities need to promote employability skills and attributes in their mission statements, learning and teaching strategies, course framework, strategic documents and practical guidance.
- Staff should be encouraged to recognise that these objectives are compatible with promoting academic capacity and wider life skills. Appropriate incentives for HEI staff should be used as a driver for change in promoting employability measures at faculty/departmental level. There is evidence from our case studies that while university policy might endorse the need to address employability, this does not necessarily manifest itself in practices that permeate the whole institution. Sometimes this is due to faculty and departmental leaders who are resistant to employability measures.

#### ***The importance of placements and recognising experiential learning***

- HEIs and employers should continue to promote and expand opportunities for students to access work-based learning. One of the most crucial measures HEIs can adopt to promote employability is the provision of integrated placements, internships and work-based

learning opportunities of significant duration. Some of the more 'vocational' and business orientated courses already make use of these approaches but humanities courses could also benefit from greater use of such measures.

- These experiential opportunities, however, require careful planning and reflection built in if they are to be an effective way of providing university students with relevant employment skills, knowledge and awareness of employer culture. They will also need effective, sustained and equitable partnerships between HEIs and employers.
- Other systematic programmes to develop and accredit or recognise students' experiential and work-related learning are recommended. For example, graduate award programmes appear to be highly valued by graduates and employers. These programmes are seen as valuable because they facilitate students' access to work-related learning activities in universities and work-based opportunities such as placements, but also allow these experiences and outcomes to be documented as a source of evidence to present to employers.
- Placements and work-related and work-based experiences need to produce evidenced outputs that students can use to demonstrate their capacities and skills to employers.

#### **Reflecting wider economic needs in HEI courses.**

- Those responsible for Higher Education provision should take into account students' employment needs including the generic skills and abilities needed in the workplace and reflect them in the curriculum and course design. The design of degree courses (and student experience in general) should articulate with the needs of business and emerge from a strong working partnership with employer organisations. At the same time academic quality, content, focus and the 'integrity' of courses should not be compromised.
- A theme arising from employers' perceptions in the literature and our case studies is that HEIs, their representative bodies and policy makers should explore ways to ensure a better fit between the types of degree courses being provided and what is required to address the wider economic climate. However, an important caveat should be that HE also needs to provide learning that addresses broader social issues and needs.

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***Meaningful employer participation on HEI committees***

- HEI and employer partnerships should be encouraged and strengthened with employers having a more active role in HEI employability strategies and policies. Research on employer involvement in government-funded work-related education and training indicates that partnerships are only rarely initiated by employers. It is therefore likely that HEIs will have to initiate partnerships with employers. The literature and our research reveals that where partnerships are sustained, employers can have an impact on employability approaches, particularly when they are involved in course design.
- Employers' presence on HEI committees should not be a token measure but allowed to facilitate a meaningful contribution. Our study found that employers' impact was limited because their views on course design were often disregarded.

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# Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates

Research commissioned by the Edge Foundation

## 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 teamworking, 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.

## Recommendations

Employability should be at the centre of HEIs' strategic planning, both centrally and at the level of individual faculties and departments.

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.

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.

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.

Partnerships between HEIs and employers need to be effective, sustained and equitable.

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.

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.



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