



Colloquium

Rethinking Graduate Employability

Wednesday, 26 June 2002
9.30 am to 4.00 pm
New Connaught Rooms,
Great Queen Street, London WC2

BRIEFING PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to sketch out the current situation in the field of graduate employability. Inevitably it contains many generalizations – it is not a research paper – and we are offering it in the first instance for discussion, but we hope that everyone present will find it a good enough description for us to move on together to an examination of the issues and themes arising out of it.

As hosts of the Colloquium we feel that there are three areas that are in particular need of attention:

1. Prevailing concepts of 'employability' that focus on the supply side of the graduate labour market and implicitly if not explicitly treat graduates as products to be endowed with 'employer-appeal'. In our view there is an imbalance that needs to be addressed, by examining the demand side – the 'graduate-appeal' of the employment available. Hence our offer of a matching concept of 'employer-ability'.
2. The widespread and unquestioned assumption that student learning takes place solely through 'courses', 'modules' and the curriculum. In our experience much student learning, especially where interpersonal skills are concerned, comes about through the manner of their treatment by the institutions in which they are studying and the examples set by the behaviour of the academics with whom they come into contact.
3. The extent to which students are able to gauge realistically the practical and interpersonal expertise that they possess. We have found that many students find it very difficult to do this. Their ability to market themselves effectively is correspondingly inhibited.

Peter Levin
Ivan Kent

12 June 2002

Some salient features of the employment situation today

- ❑ Continuous change in the environment in which businesses are operating.
- ❑ State of flux. Recent fad for delayering, etc. Shedding of middle management. Loss of organizational memory. Now some backtracking.
- ❑ Taking out the 'slack' in organizations. Imposition of performance criteria. Increase in pressure on everybody.
- ❑ Fluidity of task specifications. Move towards teamworking, within and across functional units.
- ❑ No jobs for life.
- ❑ Firms abandoning pension schemes based on final salary.
- ❑ Huge surge in turnover. Average stay in jobs down to around 2 years. Loss of an experienced staff member costs firms £000s.
- ❑ Firms want access to an individual's skills without necessarily having them on the staff: hence out-sourcing, consultancy, temporary and part-time contracts, early retirement plus staying-on.

Recent trends among new graduates

- ❑ Leaving university with debts which will have to be repaid.
- ❑ Taking 'No jobs for life' at face value. Want immediate rewards, not the prospect of ascending up the hierarchy to a senior post in 10 years' time.
- ❑ Want interesting work.
- ❑ Want to be appreciated for what they do.
- ❑ Want opportunities to do other things besides work, and as much control as possible over their own lives, both in and out of work. 'Work-life balance' is important to them.
- ❑ Want a contract with their employer that gives as much as possible of the above; possibly geared to a specific project or task rather than 'a post'.

The recruitment situation

- ❑ 'War for talent' among milk-round firms. Hoover up as many promising graduates as they can accommodate. Of all UK-domiciled Imperial College graduates in Physics qualifying in 2000 and taking up employment, a total of 32% went into the banking, financial and accountancy sectors. <http://www.careers.ic.ac.uk/fds/physics.htm>
- ❑ Evidence of crude sifting at preliminary stages of recruitment. Structural discrimination against some groups and institutions.
- ❑ Firms want graduates who will 'fit' into their organizations socially (for an example see <http://www.pwcglobal.com/uk/eng/car-inexp/graduate/graduate.html>) and who can 'hit the ground running'.
- ❑ HESA 'first destination' statistics for 2000 show that many graduates entering employment (as opposed to undertaking further study) went into occupations that are not related to their degree subject. <http://www.prospects.csu.uk/student/cidd/wdgd/>
- ❑ HESA 'first destination' statistics for 2000 also show that six months after completing their courses a significant proportion of graduates entering employment (40% in the case of history graduates) were working as 'numerical clerks & cashiers', in 'other clerical and secretarial

occupations' or as 'retail assistants, catering, waiting & bar staff'.

<http://www.prospects.csu.uk/student/cidd/wdgd/>

- A recent report, *Employability: Employer Perceptions of Subject Benchmark Statements*, by Peter Forbes and Bianca Kubler on a pilot project carried out for CIHE has suggested that there is a gap of awareness and understanding between academics and employers.
<http://www.cihe-uk.com/employability.htm>
- A May 2002 report, *Employers in the New Graduate Labour Market: recruiting from a wider spectrum of graduates*, by Kate Purcell, Marie Morley and Gill Rowley at the Employment Studies Research Unit (UWE) in partnership with CIHE, identifies 'two main "clusters" of graduate vacancies: those requiring mainly generalist "soft" skills and those requiring specialist (particularly quantitative) "hard" skills'. The first is a buyers' market, where the problem for employers is to target effectively in order to restrict applications to those from the best-qualified candidates for particular vacancies. The second is a sellers' market, where employers are forced to look beyond traditional recruitment sources and methods and to be proactive in developing and identifying an appropriate labour supply.' Obtainable via: <http://www.cihe-uk.com/publications.htm>

The national policy context

- *The Learning Age* (Green Paper Cm3790, Feb 1998): 'We propose that HE should play an even bigger part in future by ... ensuring high standards so as to enhance the employability of graduates; ... contributing to the economy and being more responsive to the needs of business ...' (p.50)
- HEFCE on the Higher Education Reach-Out to Business and the Community Fund: 'An important strand in the HEFCE's aims and objectives is to ensure that higher education is responsive to the needs of business, including the wider community, where this will lead to wealth creation. We are concerned to encourage and reward partnerships between HEIs and business, the transfer of knowledge and expertise, and the development of employment skills.'
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Reachout/herobc.htm>
- The Government's target of increasing participation in HE towards 50% of those aged 18-30 by the end of the decade
- The Harris report (HE Careers Service review) and follow-up.
- QAA benchmarks. Note references to 'teamwork' and 'interpersonal skills' in the subject benchmark statements prepared by subject specialists for the Quality Assurance Agency. In **Chemistry**, graduates 'are expected to have developed ... interpersonal skills, relating to the ability to interact with other people and to engage in team-working'. Graduates in **Social Policy** 'will have developed interpersonal and teamwork skills that
- allow them to collaborate with others in research and problem solving'. 'The generic skills acquired through the study of **History** [include the] ability to work with others ...' In **Law**, 'a student should demonstrate a basic ability to work in groups as a participant who contributes effectively to the group's task'. 'Graduates in **Politics and International Relations** will be able to collaborate with others to achieve common goals.' **Sociology** students should have access to the opportunity to develop ... group work skills.' **English** graduates should possess 'the ability to work with and in relation to others through the presentation of ideas and information and the collective negotiation of solutions'.

Current employability-related activities in individual HEIs

- ❑ Organized work experience, required or optional.
- ❑ Free-standing skills development modules.
- ❑ Skills development 'embedded' in the curriculum.
- ❑ The activities of careers services.
- ❑ Recording of achievement.

The concepts of 'employability' and 'employer-ability'

- ❑ Different people mean different things by 'employability'. Our preferred meaning is an adaptation of the definition put forward by Hillage & Pollard of the Institute for Employment Studies. (*Employability: Developing a framework for policy analysis* by J Hillage & E Pollard. DfEE Research Report 85, December 1998. ISBN 0 85522 889 X) In essence, by 'employability' we mean the capacity, or potential, of an individual to attract offers of new or continued employment, and – loosely following Hillage & Pollard – we identify three factors on which one's employability depends: one's assets (knowledge, skills and other attributes); one's career planning and management skills; and presentation/'self-selling' skills that come into play in any interaction that one has with a potential employer. Whether this potential is actually realized in a particular situation will depend on other factors, such as the existence of vacancies and the competition for them.
- ❑ Analogously, by 'employer-ability' we mean the capacity, or potential, of an employer to attract applicants for employment and to retain them in their employ. Factors contributing to employer-ability might include the rewards offered (material, intellectual, social and psychological); the skill of planning the use of human resources in the enterprise in a way that is intelligent, appropriate and respectful of those resources; and the skill of presenting employment opportunities in a way that honestly depicts the reality of the work offered.
- ❑ It follows that just as a recruiting employer will wish to be assured as to a candidate's assets and other skills, so the candidate should be enabled to assure himself or herself as to the 'counterpart' or matching skills of the employer.

Rethinking graduate employability: what is the way forward?

We take the view that to puzzle out a way forward on graduate employability requires a collective effort. We should *all* be rethinking graduate employability. The Colloquium will bring together people with, between us, a wide variety of experiences and perspectives. We hope to tap our collective energy by focusing on the two topics – one at the institutional level, one at the level of individuals within HEIs – that we have picked for today's workshops:

- ❑ How can HEIs help students to seek and prepare themselves for employment while maintaining intellectual rigour in teaching and learning?
- ❑ Rethinking the roles of academics, students, educational and skills developers, and careers advisors: what should we all be doing, and how can we work together?