



Colloquium

Rethinking Graduate Employability

Wednesday, 26 June 2002

9.30 am to 4.00 pm

New Connaught Rooms,
Great Queen Street, London WC2

DISCUSSIONS WRITE-UP

The Colloquium brought together people from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a correspondingly wide variety of experience and perspectives. Not surprisingly, the workshops generated a large number of observations and thoughts, and as many questions as had been posed in the presentations. When we reflected on the event and considered how best to write it up, we could think of no better approach than to be true to our initial aim of learning from the contributions that were made. Accordingly, this write-up is unashamedly subjective: it highlights the contributions that have begun to make a mark on our thinking and incorporates [in square brackets] some of our own thoughts that those contributions have 'sparked'.

What follows is perhaps best viewed as a position paper, a staging post in a continuing process of thought and conversation. We hope it will provoke further contributions to this important debate, and shall be glad to circulate these to participants. It falls into four sections: the graduate labour market; how HEIs might help students; understanding the worlds of students; some wider issues.

The graduate labour market

There was wide agreement that a better understanding was needed of the graduate labour market and of graduates' career trajectories. Some scepticism was expressed about the accuracy of the existing 'first destination' data and the validity of inferences drawn from them. How can the large numbers who are apparently in low-level, 'McDonalds' jobs six months after graduating be reconciled with the so-called 'graduate premium', the higher earnings that a degree supposedly confers? [A recent paper by Conlon and Chevalier emphasizes that the returns associated with undergraduate degree level qualifications vary substantially according to the type of institution attended, the subject studied and the socio-economic background of the graduate.¹ The CIHE notes that there is some evidence that the graduate market is currently becoming saturated.²] A number of questions and issues were raised:

- (1) Do we think about 'employment' in too restricted a way? Where does self-employment come in? Many art and design graduates do freelance work, don't take up full-time employment.
- (2) Are current conceptions of career planning and management too deterministic? [Could we ourselves have predicted what jobs we would be in today?] Does it make better sense to view jobs as constituting traps or opportunities, or career paths as sequences of trajectories from one 'platform' or 'launching pad' to another?
- (3) Skills that are regarded as important today may not be tomorrow: someone needs to be keeping a watching brief.
- (4) What are the implications likely to be of graduates leaving university with five-figure debts?

(5) Are there some graduates who go from one low-level, unskilled job to another? How are they affected psychologically by this?

How HEIs might help students

Arguably the issue of how HEIs might best help students cannot be adequately addressed in the absence of a clear sense of what HE is for, and the Colloquium did not get to grips with this. However, six main approaches - complementary rather than contradictory - emerged:

(1) Employment skills should be 'embedded' in the curriculum as a key theme, rather than bolted on. 'Don't put employability outside the learning process.' Make explicit the relevance to employability of their academic work. But there is a financial issue here: where will the money for 'employability inputs' come from?

(2) More should be done to promote reflection and self-awareness (e.g. of key skills acquired). Progress files offered one means of doing this. Accelerated learning techniques might offer another. The aim should be to help students gain an appreciation sooner rather than later of 'how much you get out of your course'. Students should gain in confidence from this, obviating the need for HEIs to take on confidence-building directly as a task on its own.

(3) HEIs should aim to create an environment in which students can manage their own learning and life, and 'reflective practice' will assist this. To be effective, reflective practice must permeate the whole institution, including relationships with colleagues. The present situation, in which academics are under pressure and pushed to the limit to cope with teaching large numbers of students in addition to carrying out their other duties, is an obstacle to achieving this.

(4) Wider and stronger links with employers should be established: a two-way understanding is needed. (The danger of generalizing about 'employers' must be borne in mind: NHS Trusts are very different from small businesses.) Such links could enable teaching to become more relevant to employability. But there is currently a lack of self-confidence within universities, and this could lead to over-much attention being paid to what employers say they want. [Although physics graduates are being recruited by accountancy firms, should those firms be given a say in designing the curriculum for physics degrees?] Perhaps stronger links with employers would also enable HEIs to 'sell' their graduates and the benefits of HE more effectively. [One way of establishing such links would be to send academics on work experience. A model already exists in the Industrial Secondment Scheme run by the Royal Academy of Engineering. Secondments to a workplace are usually for 3-6 months, and funding is provided to pay for someone else to do the secondee's teaching for that period.]

(5) The value of work experience to graduates seeking employment was undisputed. With more and more students now working while studying to earn money, there is scope for doing more to ensure that they appreciate the skills that they are developing. [But is part of the attraction of work experience to some/many academics that they can send students off the premises for the duration? Will they really want to spend time with individual students when they return discussing what they have learned?]

(6) There is a role for LTSN in publicizing innovation and spreading good practice - or 'good enough' practice - among HEIs. However, it is important to respect the individuality of particular HEIs and the niches that they occupy in the HE market, e.g. those which specialize in research-led teaching. Could the LTSN do more to ensure that we don't spend time 'reinventing the wheel', e.g. by spreading the lessons already gained from the Enterprise in Higher Education programme?

Understanding the students' world

The point was made that it is helpful to think not only of the 'academic world' and the 'world of work', but also of the 'students' world': their environment as they perceive it. It is essential to understand the students' world if HEIs are to adopt a more student-centred approach. The following questions and issues were raised:

(1) Do we fully understand the motives - or conditioning, or assumptions - of people who decide (despite the debt that most nowadays are likely to incur) to become students in HE? [Do we appreciate the pressures they are under (e.g. from family) and possibly their *reluctance* to enter HE?] Do we have unrealistic expectations that they see themselves as scholars? [Do we appreciate the attitudes that their previous experience of the education system, in schools or further education colleges, has given rise to?]

(2) Do we disparage those who take an instrumental approach to their studies ('Will this count towards my mark? Will this help me to get a job?') without understanding what has led them to do so? Do we treat differently students on vocational and non-vocational degree programmes?

(3) Do we understand what it is like to be an 18- or 19-year-old - a teenager - as one of a mass of students in an institution struggling to cope with large numbers? Do they feel processed, with their individuality not recognised? How does their situation affect the decisions they take, e.g. their choice of courses?

(4) Do students see academics as living in a different world, or as different kinds of being, from themselves? And do academics lack appreciation of what they're asking students to do, e.g. when they set them tasks to undertake in groups?

Some wider issues

(1) There is a resource/funding issue around employability: how will 'employability work' be supported and paid for?

(2) In Scotland there are already 50% of young people entering HE. What lessons are there here for the rest of the UK?

(3) What are the implications for HEIs of the emerging alternative routes to a degree (apprenticeships of various kinds)?

(4) Is there scope for supporting university-leavers in the way that school-leavers are supported?

(5) Finally, but perhaps most fundamentally, the question 'What are universities for?' needs to be reformulated to recognise that the answers given will be necessarily subjective. We should be asking: 'Exactly what do the different stakeholders - institutions, academics, students, employers, the "middle-men" in the graduate labour market, politicians and officials - see as the purpose of universities?'

We also need to ask how these various stake-holders see HEIs fitting in with the rest of the education system. As one participant Colloquium pointed out, universities aren't self-contained and free-floating.

Peter Levin
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10 July 2002

Notes

1 G. Conlon & A. Chevalier, *Financial Returns to Undergraduates: A Summary of Recent Evidence*, CIHE, May 2002, pp.1-2

2 *Ibid*, p.25