



## EMPLOYABILITY: An AGCAS Position Statement

*"I have asked universities to provide public statements on what they do to promote employability, to encourage them to improve the job-readiness of their students and to do better at getting their students into internships, work experience and work."* David Willetts, UK Minister of State for Universities and Science, 8 July 2010

Employability is high on the agenda of governments across the UK, although there are many different definitions of the term, eg:

*"Having a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make a person more likely to secure, and be successful in their chosen occupation."* Sewell, P, in Hinchcliffe, R. (2001), "Nice work (if you can get it): graduate employability in the arts and humanities." The Developing Learning Organisations Project, Preston.

*"Employability skills have been defined after extensive collaboration with business by the CBI. They are a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy."* CBI website, 2010

A fuller definition which acknowledges what the individual can control, what educators and advisers can influence, and the importance of context is:

*"In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively, employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work."* Hillage, J and Pollard, E, Research Report RR85, Department for Education and Employment, November 1998.

The way in which higher education helps students become more employable varies from institution to institution, reflecting students' needs, type of institution, geographical location, local labour market needs, resources allocated etc. However, the core business of AGCAS services and members is to help students and graduates make effective transitions from higher education to the workplace and therefore they should be taking a lead on the development and delivery of institutions' employability strategies.

### **The contribution that HE careers services make to improving employability**

**Introducing students and graduates to the full range of employment opportunities** through on-line job boards and targeted vacancy notifications that advertise work experience and placement opportunities; part-time work opportunities; volunteering opportunities; support for business start-ups and self employment; and jobs.

**Facilitating effective communication between students, employers and academic staff** by organizing company presentations; recruitment fairs; alumni careers events; work shadowing and experience, and employer-delivered careers education sessions.

**Helping students to decide on appropriate career paths** through information, advice and guidance on career options; career planning and decision making; and labour market trends.

**Improving the way in which students market themselves to employers** by informing them of employer recruitment strategies and teaching them how to compile CVs and complete application forms; interview techniques; and how to succeed at assessment centres.

**Encouraging students' acquisition of transferable skills** such as team playing, effective communication etc through influencing the way in which HE courses are taught; through activities such as volunteering, business incubation and active participation in student societies etc; and through accredited co-curricular employability and graduate attribute programmes.

**Ensuring that employability support is delivered through multiple channels** including on line, in groups, and one to one according to need and that it is **tailored to meet the needs of students** based on their individual backgrounds and requirements.

## **The Institutional Context**

The impact of employability activities is dependent upon institutional support. Currently there is not universal agreement in the academic community about the place of employability within higher education. The government is keen to make graduates' success in the job market six months after graduation a key measure of the quality of courses and has proposed that this be included in the Key Information Set that will be published for all courses by 2012. It is expected that this will cause employability to rise further up the institutional agenda. AGCAS welcomes the publication of transparent employment information that supports student choice and will encourage active engagement by the sector in the employability agenda, whilst recognising that whether an individual gains graduate level employment or not depends on a number of factors; many can be related to institutional intervention and support but some are outside the influence of the institution, careers services and the individual.

## **AGCAS recommends**

### **Recommendations for AGCAS services**

- ✓ Make sure that your institutional management, academic staff and other appropriate colleagues understand what expertise and experience exists in your careers service and the impact that this can have
- ✓ Participate in the development, implementation and monitoring of your institutional employability strategy
- ✓ Consider how your resources can best be deployed to support your institution's employability strategy
- ✓ Build links and collaborate with anyone inside your institution who can contribute to the development and delivery of your institution's employability strategy
- ✓ Forge strategic links with a wide range of local, regional, national and international organisations which can support your institutional employability strategy or your broader service objectives
- ✓ Keep your institutional management, academic staff and other appropriate colleagues up to date with issues around employability and the graduate labour market
- ✓ Maximise the number of job and work experience opportunities that are available to your students and create effective employer engagement plans
- ✓ Take advantage of AGCAS resources and opportunities to ensure that your staff have the expertise to lead on and support the delivery of your institution's employability strategy.

## **Recommendations for higher education managers**

- ✓ Recognise and use the expertise, experience and strategic position of your careers service when developing, delivering and monitoring your employability strategy
- ✓ Involve a range of employers, large and small, local, regional, national and international, in the development of your employability strategy
- ✓ Involve as many academic and other staff as possible in the development and delivery of your employability strategy
- ✓ Ensure that the delivery of your employability strategy is adequately resourced, managed and monitored
- ✓ Ensure that careers service staff and others involved in the development and delivery of your employability strategy receive the training and support they need to keep their skills, knowledge and contacts up to date
- ✓ Take advantage of AGCAS services and resources to ensure that your staff have the expertise to lead on and support the delivery of your institution's employability strategy.

## **Recommendations for government**

- ✓ Use appropriate benchmarked and audited performance indicators to measure the success of institutions or individual courses and inform prospective students
- ✓ Take into account the varying pathways into different professions and sectors, and the preferences of and differences between individuals, when assessing the success of employability initiatives
- ✓ Carry out high quality research and wide ranging consultation to inform policy and monitor its impact
- ✓ Ensure that HE institutions are adequately resourced to implement policies supporting the employability of students and graduates.

## **Recommendations for employers**

- ✓ Liaise closely with individual university careers services and AGCAS to ensure that your needs and your segment(s) of the labour market are understood and that you keep abreast of changes in higher education
- ✓ Support student and graduate employability by contributing to the curriculum and engaging consistently with careers service and AGCAS activities
- ✓ Offer work experience and internships which provide genuine learning opportunities, are accessible to a diverse range of students and graduates, and which do not contravene current legislation.

## **Recommendations for students and graduates**

- ✓ Take responsibility for your own employability
- ✓ Gain as much useful work and related experience as possible while at university
- ✓ Begin careers planning as soon as possible, preferably before you start university, and continue to research the labour market and your potential within it throughout your working life
- ✓ Take full advantage of the services and resources offered by your university careers service.

## **Actions for AGCAS**

- ✓ Distribute this position paper as widely as possible
- ✓ Actively lobby government, employers and university managers' groups so that the complexity of the issues surrounding employability are more widely understood;
- ✓ Keep members informed about the graduate labour market, good practice in relation to employability and issues of professional interest
- ✓ Provide training and networking opportunities for careers service and other staff with an employability remit
- ✓ Provide products and services which support members in delivering effective employability programmes
- ✓ Liaise and collaborate with employers, education providers, professional bodies, government and the media on a national level
- ✓ Promote good practice and quality improvement through the matrix quality standard.

## **AGCAS contacts**

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