

## Transition out to the world of work

The transition out to work is a critical moment in a student's life; it marks the end of the formal, structured education that they have been a part of since the age of 5 and the removal of the relative security of institutional support systems. As educators in universities our greatest hope is that we help our students negotiate successfully the transition into young adulthood, such that they are confident, independent, and critically engaged individuals ready to embrace the new challenges waiting in chosen careers. However, we know from student feedback and employability statistics that the transition out to work is rarely straightforward; when confronted with the reality of entering the world of work, students are excited yet anxious and often struggle to articulate the ways in which their degrees make them employable. As an institution we have tried hard to get students to understand their skills but the message is often unheard or forgotten. There is no doubt that a university education is extremely valuable – to students and employers alike – but it is valuable not for the final degree classification, but for the skills and knowledge it provides. We still need to understand not only how to communicate the value of a degree to students, but also how to offer them the more personal support they require when facing this pivotal moment of transition.

### Student View

How prepared do you feel for your transition out to work?

The majority of students felt quite or very prepared for the transition into the workplace. Only one student said that they did not feel at all prepared.

In what ways has your engagement with employability/careers activities changed in your final year?

The majority of students acknowledged that they were more engaged in careers activities in their final year. For some this was because “it's a more pressing issue”; one student commented that “it's real now and I actually have to make a plan”. Before it was more “hypothetical” and others spoke of the need to get a job and work out “what you want to do with your life”. Conversely, other students were clear that in previous years of study they were not sure about what their chosen career path would be and so were more likely to seek advice and information and now they have a clearer idea they did not need so much support.

What skills have you developed during your degree and what skills do you feel that you still need to develop?

Students were most confident that they had developed skills in critical thinking and communication and were in general agreement that their skills of time management, organisation and group work were well developed. However, there was an indication that students were unsure about their networking, problem-solving and business skills. Students described that they felt that they needed to develop further their levels of confidence and perseverance, their networking skills, the ability to work proactively and to handle stress. There was recognition of good subject-specific knowledge, although industry-specific knowledge was now needed.

What kinds of careers support have you engaged with previously and how helpful was it?

Students in this group had tended to either seek out more personal advice within their school or in the careers centre, or looked externally or online. It was important to these students that their particular skills/situation was understood so that the advice was meaningful – students wanted to understand how to forge their own career path. Several students said that large-scale events were less useful on a personal level, although they did raise awareness of potential opportunities. Students tended towards events that were accessible – online information and events in the school were particularly appealing. Students valued specialist advice from experts within the university and their target profession, particularly when they wanted guidance or to determine if their plans were achievable. One student spoke about how useful a careers module was for gaining insights into a particular industry and their suitability for that kind of work.

What kinds of careers support do you feel you need at the moment?

Students wanted more awareness of the range of potential careers options and wanted opportunities to meet with professionals working in those specific industries. They were aware that they needed help with practical aspects, such as developing CVs, applying for jobs, and mock interviews, but some also said that some awareness of how their personal traits suited particular career paths would have been useful as part of this process. Other students felt that alumni talks would help them to understand how their particular experiences and skills would benefit them in

the workplace. It was clear that students wanted tailored, specific and practical careers support that was directly related to the options open to students with their kind of degree.

What might have made you engage more with careers activities within the school/university?

A large number of students felt that they were more inclined to engage with activities once they had a better understanding of their potential career pathways. They also said that the opportunity to meet with previous graduates would be extremely valuable. Some said that timetabled sessions would motivate them to attend, although this might deter some students if the advice offered was too generalised.

What useful advice would you provide to students to prepare them for their move into second or final year of study?

“Don't bury your head in the sand”; “think ahead”; “think realistically about prospects and what you want from life”; “Do work experience, think about what you really want to do and what will make you happy”; “Get experience- intern, volunteer, try lots of different types of work”; “be independent and use initiative”; “Try not to panic. There is this idea that if you don't walk into a graduate job you've failed. Try not to worry if you don't know what to do”; “Talk to as many people in your industry outside the uni as possible. Networking is a horrible word and conjures up a concept of smarmy sucking-up to people when actually it is so useful for advice and provides specific links to what you need”; “speak to people. Do research. Gain experience. Don't leave it all till third year like me!”; “Get involved in as much as you can to gain as much experience you can. Every little helps and this is what employers will look for. Also, keep an open mind”.

In light of student feedback the **following recommendations** are suggested to enhance the support for transitioning out to work:

- Encourage students to gain extra-curricular or work experience opportunities.
- Involve employers and alumni in careers activities.
- Timetable some focused careers sessions. Level one could highlight possibilities and opportunities, level two the range of support available, focus

on Year in Industry opportunities, level three more tailored events/one-to-one sessions.

- Provide some online careers resources that are subject-specific.
- Identify key staff who have expertise and knowledge about particular career pathways.
- Remind students regularly (and before level three) to think about, and explore, possible career options. Encourage them to think about ways to gain related experience in order to try out different possibilities.

**Case Study: School of Biological Sciences.** *Contact: Claire Smith*

[\(c.i.smith@leeds.ac.uk\)](mailto:c.i.smith@leeds.ac.uk)

The School of Biological Sciences offers an integrated approach to their career and employability activities and the programme of activities includes academics, an employability officer, the careers centre and support staff. For undergraduate students activities range from modules embedded within the curriculum (for example a professional development module and a skills module), to events that are supplementary (such as careers seminars, employer events, employability newsletters, a faculty employability website and VLE employability website). All level two students also receive thorough mock interviews which require CVs and covering letters. Taught postgraduate students have a career development programme which also includes mock interviews with CVs and covering letters. They also invite employers to teach within the curriculum. These activities take place throughout the academic year, culminating with a large careers event in June.

On a more global level, the school has completed an audit of key skills within the curriculum to ensure that they are available across all programmes. These skills are those identified as a priority by their industrial advisory board, and include commercial awareness, teamwork, communication skills, self-awareness and adaptability. All students are invited to careers events and to join the elective professional development module.

Such initiatives have been received extremely positive in course feedback and through Student:Staff Forum meetings.

### **Student Voice: Lifelong Learning Centre**

“The course timetable for my studies fitted well around my work and family life. I gained knowledge from the course which helped to find better paid job which increased my confidence. I feel much happier and satisfied with my personal development. Better income has improved our standard of living. My children say they are proud of their mother. My eldest is in university and our relationship has been strengthened by our common interest in studying.” Tahena Ahmed

“I wanted to focus my career by working in a more specialist service, however prior to university I was not sure which area this would be. Throughout my studies and independent research at the University of Leeds I was given the flexibility to study areas of particular interest to me, thus I was able to enhance my knowledge on Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). I have no doubt in my mind that my self-confidence, improvement in public speaking and knowledge of CSE was all supported by the fantastic time I had while studying at The University of Leeds. In turn, I was offered a role with The Children’s Society and I am now a Child Sexual Exploitation Prevention Practitioner delivering awareness raising training to professionals in order to safeguard children and young people from CSE.” Stacey Maher

“I feel more confident in my workplace, the course has definitely given me a greater understanding of the job I do and has widened my knowledge.” Tanya Hartley

“The course has helped me get a better job, I already worked as a TA within a school and recently they were making many of the TAs redundant. Due to this course I was able to apply for a higher role job and was successful. I now am getting teaching experience on a daily basis. It has also provided me a better understanding into my children and how they develop.” Emma Binks

“The course has helped me approach situations in a different way, it has certainly made a better manager.” John Fielding

## **Resources**

Universities Scotland (2013) Taking Pride in the Job: University action on graduate employability

<http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/uploads/TakingPrideintheJobApril13.pdf>

Improving Student Employability: An e-book for academics to help their students get ready to enter the labour market

<http://www.jobs.ac.uk/media/pdf/careers/resources/improving-student-employability.pdf>

Hughes, P., Webb, M., Whitfield, R. (2010) Outduction: The Transition to Students' Futures. York: HE Academy

<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/outduction-transition-students-futures>