



CAREERS SERVICE BRIEFING

Graduate Employers: Future Needs and Current Perceptions

Inspiring futures

What question were we trying to answer?

Given the increasing significance of employability and skills development in HE, it was timely to explore current employer perspectives on this topic. We sought an overview of the **future** needs of graduate employers as well as the **current** picture from employers of the key attributes they look for in graduates and the value they place on a degree and extra-curricular activities. We also investigated employers' perceptions of graduates from research intensive universities in general and the University of Edinburgh in particular and their views on how the University could support students' employability.

How did we approach this?

To provide an insight into projections being made about occupations and skills in the workplace of the future, we reviewed a number of recent influential reports.

For the picture from employers actively recruiting at the University we studied the results of our biennial survey of employers as well as feedback from employers attending our careers fairs. We also interviewed 15 employers representing a variety of sectors and organisation sizes.

What did we find out?

- The future labour market will favour employees with advanced skills in creativity, innovation, imagination, design- and system-thinking.
- To thrive, graduates will need self-management skills, flexibility and resilience. They need to improve their international cultural awareness and understanding of business and customers.
- Employers are looking for technical skills, judgement, communication and interpersonal skills, analytical ability, problem-solving, depth of thinking, initiative, vision and leadership skills. In addition, attitude and mind-sets are important: drive, influence, confidence, collaboration, resilience, adaptability, strong work ethic, self-awareness and passion.
- Whilst discipline knowledge counts, employers place at least equal weight on long-term and varied extra-curricular activities.
- Work experience is one of the most important factors and relevant work experience is highly valued. For some organisations, it can mitigate lower academic attainment.
- **How** students learn is as important as **what** they learn – challenging environments, problem-solving, dealing with ambiguity and working in groups all develop employability skills.
- Graduates from research intensive universities are highly regarded, particularly for their technical skills, which can compensate for lack of polish at recruitment stage. Negative perceptions include a lack of business acumen, realism and understanding of the practical application of their degree knowledge.

- In the UK, UoE is the 11th most targeted institution by employers thanks to: the calibre of students and courses; the fit between some jobs and courses; our reputation; our location; the close relationships some employers have with the University and positive experiences of working with the Careers Service.
- Our graduates compare favourably with other graduates due to a good balance between intellectual rigour and technical skills and being able to apply this in practice, also their range of extra-curricular activities, their passion about making an impact and their confidence.
- Students are advised to enhance their transition skills, apply their knowledge, develop commercial awareness and acquire a breadth of experience, including in the workplace.

Why does this matter?

This has implications for the University in:

- Supporting a **broad learning environment** where students can develop their skills and attributes, through the curriculum and beyond. Curriculum design and assessment play an important role in supporting employability, particularly in relation to problem-solving, group work, creating a challenging learning environment where students deal with ambiguity, ask 'why?' and then 'so what?'. Creating space for work-related learning, for example, through placements or work-based projects, directly contributes to students' employability.
- Recognising the value that employers place on extra-curricular activities and work experience and supporting students, particularly those from a widening participation background, to dedicate time to this, identify their learning from it and achieve a healthy balance with their academic commitments.
- Enabling students to develop their self-awareness and reflective practice to identify and refine their skills, attributes and mind-sets and translate their diverse experiences into a work setting. The Careers Service has an important role to play here alongside Schools, in addition to supporting co-curricular initiatives such as the Edinburgh Award and SLICC's.
- Maintaining our reputation, including our place in rankings, as an important attraction tool for recruiters and to reinforce positive perceptions of the institution and our graduates.
- Continuing to ensure and enhance the quality of education we offer, with the acquisition of graduate attributes and the development of career management and transition skills as an important element of this.
- Supporting external inputs to the curriculum and offering opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in real world scenarios. Capitalising on offers, particularly from alumni, to deliver guest lectures, contribute to problem-solving workshops and skills sessions.

Interested in finding out more?

Email Ruth Donnelly (ruth.donnelly@ed.ac.uk) for a full copy of the report and to discuss further.

www.ed.ac.uk/careers