PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: Embedding a culture of career learning in GeoSciences

Project type (delete as appropriate) :
A Research Project (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

Principal Investigator : Sarah Innes
Schools/department : Careers Service

Team members (including Schools and Departments) : Sarah Innes, Saran Sohi

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Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.
Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Report (maximum 1500 words)

What did you do?

We took a multi-stage approach to investigating graduate and employer attitudes to the concept of career learning in the GeoSciences, using online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. We added a short survey for employers to compare their views with those of graduates. Within our study we explored barriers to career learning for Widening Participation (WP) students, aiming to make specific recommendations that support their career development.

We conducted a background review of the national and local employability landscape, including the School responses to a recent employability mapping exercise.

We received 28 responses to our graduate survey, and from this group conducted seven semi-structured interviews. We selected a small group of employers who already recruit graduates from the School. Our questions to them focussed on what they observed when recruiting our students, and how they might be able to extend their reach and contribution to the career learning of our students. In particular, we were interested to hear more about the skills and attributes that they value in new recruits.

Five organisations were selected for their relevance to the School. They were drawn from the energy sector, engineering consultancy, regulatory sector, technical services and a placement agency operating in the environmental sector. A total of 6 staff involved in graduate recruitment (but not HR professionals), and who had a GeoSciences background completed a short online survey, and participated in semi-structured interviews.

What did you find out?

From analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the following themes emerged:

- Reasons why students fail to engage with career learning
- Skills and attributes that benefit our graduates in the transition from university
- The importance of work related learning
- Experiences of career learning
- How far, and how early, universities should prepare students for their future career
- Widening participation students may be disadvantaged in acquiring employability attributes and entering the graduate market
- Challenges faced during the transition from undergraduate study

Key findings

Graduates:
Edinburgh graduates told us that they place a high premium on the exposure they have with employers and alumni throughout their degree programme and on gaining relevant work experience. They would benefit from more support and structures in place to help them experience work related learning whilst at university. In addition, they advocated for more connection between their skills development on the degree and skills required in future career paths. The graduates we spoke to agreed that career learning should begin early on in their university degree.

Employers:
Employers of Edinburgh graduates value working with academic subject specialists - not only to support their recruitment efforts, but because this is an effective way to keep in touch with advances and trends in specialist areas. In addition, employers consider that they have a responsibility to share industry expertise and support students in developing their employability. Employer respondents provided valuable insights into the skills required of new recruits and the skills required for successful early career progression. The employers we interviewed told us they would welcome closer links with the University and School and are willing to contribute to student development and learning where appropriate and provide career development support.

Skills development:
Both employers and graduates acknowledged the importance of data skills for successful transition into employment and future progression. Both groups also ranked skills such as team working and project management as important. Graduates valued skills development that help them to interact with recruiters, whether this is practical skills development in making applications and managing the interview, or in developing their confidence and ability to network. They gave examples of approaches that had worked well and made a direct impact on their career progression, such as collaboration on dissertations and meeting alumni in to hear about their career paths.
Graduates also stressed that a clearer connection between the skills they developed at university and those valued in work would have been beneficial – both in articulating this to employers and to see the relevance of their studies to career paths that interested them.

Widening participation
The employers we spoke to agreed, in principle, the need to recognise the impact of social factors which may impact on an individual's ability to participate in career and experiential learning, (relevance of work experience, networking etc.) and the relationship with performance at recruitment and selection. However the organisations we spoke to do not have formal widening participation policies. To mitigate social disadvantage and the absence of clear and transparent

WP recruitment strategies, universities should aim to provide targeted schemes, funding to help access to beneficial experiences and encouragement to participate from the Careers Service, academic staff and peers.

Recommendations:
The reporting phase coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, with huge uncertainty around the future work and education landscape. In recognition that these recommendations are made in a context of altered priorities and possible funding restrictions, we focussed on developing recommendations that will have maximum impact but require minimum resource.

Detailed recommendations can be viewed in the full report. They include:

- Expanding provision of experiential learning, building on current initiatives and good practice from elsewhere in the university.
- Taking a more systematic and comprehensive approach to harnessing existing networks of employers and alumni, including online approaches (LinkedIn, Platform One), the Professional Advisory Board and offering informal networking events.
- Ensure all events are accessible to students including those who may find it difficult to engage because of socio-economic or other factors. Recommendations include making recordings of workshops and events available, suggesting a wide range of experiences beyond the 'formal internship' to build experience and actively encouraging all students to participate in work related learning.

How did you disseminate your findings?

This study will be shared with School colleagues at the School of GeoSciences Learning and Teaching Committee, and with Careers Service colleagues who work closely with academic colleagues. We would also suggest presenting the findings to the Professional Advisory Board and potentially at next year's University Learning & Teaching Conference.

What have been the benefits to student learning?

There are challenges in embedding employability and career learning in the curriculum, as detailed in the review of the employability landscape. As a result of the study, we have a clearer understanding of the types of career learning that students and employers value, and some of the reasons why some students do not engage with career development activity. The report focusses on practical recommendations that are straightforward to implement and may also have wider resonance.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

The survey can be adapted for comparison studies with other cohorts in the School of GeoSciences and other academic areas.

The final report will be shared with Careers Service and academic colleagues with a remit for careers education and employability.

Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):

Or
This project has remaining funds unused and we require details of how to return the balance. The Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:
Email: iad.teach@ed.ac.uk