

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Harris Report (2001) identified the relative under use of careers services by students from non-traditional backgrounds — mature students, those from lower-socio-economic backgrounds, first-generation undergraduates, students from ethnic minorities, students with disabilities. Research has also shown that the jobs students get post-graduation are affected by age, ethnicity and socio-economic background even after taking into account status of university, subject studied and geographic region. The government's intention to improve careers services is part of a strategy to enhance the employability of students and the responsiveness of universities to the needs of the economy.

Increasingly, widening participation is embracing employability: getting non-traditional students in to higher education is not enough; particularly in an era of top-up fees, students need to complete and benefit from their studies.

As careers and widening participation are more explicitly linked, higher education careers services will have a role in encouraging fair recruitment practices and empowering students in the job market. The core concern of the study is what can careers services do to enhance the employability of graduates who enter university from 'non-traditional' backgrounds?

International

Across the world, university careers services, prompted by legislation and pressure from students and lobby groups, are beginning to address the issues of disability, ethnicity and mature students in their provision of careers advice. Many of these initiatives are relatively small-scale and designed to recognise specific needs. Examples from the US, Australia and South Africa highlight the use of mentoring, role models and workshops on *curriculum vitae* writing, interview techniques, generic life-skills training and advice on networking as well as the benefits of reflective work experience. One important lesson is the need for collaboration on campus between careers and other student services.

Employers

Many employers are aware of issues surrounding diversity. The consensus amongst careers advisers was that large companies and public sector employers were leading the way on diversity. Often employers, particularly SMEs, want to broaden their profile but do not know how and mentoring schemes have been a useful two-way tool.

Discrimination on the part of employers is a contentious area but self-replicating recruitment seems to involve subconscious biases. Despite employers' willingness to broaden their staff profile, many 'non-traditional' recruits are still

'traditional' in many ways: they are the right age, or have the right sort of educational background. Many careers staff find it difficult to get employers to look beyond A-level grades or university reputation.

Targeting

Targeting students — directing activities or support to specific disadvantaged groups — is problematic. There were numerous opinions expressed on the appropriateness and utility of targeting, as well as conflicting thoughts on whether it could be done. Opposition to targeting included resentment at being seen as different, problems in identifying specific groups (such as first-generation undergraduates) and the fact that, in some institutions, non-traditional students are the norm.

Various schemes exist to target specific groups although these are mainly focused on disabilities and minority ethnic students and many use mentoring. Although minority ethnic students appeared to overcome their concerns about 'special treatment', disabled students were often less enthusiastic about schemes. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds remain very difficult to target. If careers advice is to be targeted, then greater collaboration with other departments within the institution is necessary and information about students, that is held by institutions, needs to be used to target effectively.

General support and special initiatives

All universities included in the study offer a baseline of services designed to advise and guide students on their career planning. The most common services on offer are: workshops on *curriculum vitae* and interview skills; individual advice and guidance; careers adviser's talks in taught modules; job shops, and careers fairs. Some departments offer a wider range of services depending on institutional priorities and resources available. Generally, core careers services are offered to all students and are designed to suit the needs of diverse profiles and backgrounds. The idea is to engage as many students as possible in their own career planning.

Staff are concerned about the lack of awareness of the range of services available, especially among non-traditional students. Although most students interviewed were aware of the core services provided, they expressed concern about the lack of awareness of activities designed to address their particular needs. Students felt the names of some initiatives were not adequate as they were not descriptive of the initiatives' purpose and target student group.

Careers services need to determine their own balance between initiatives and more general support based on needs and resources. Institutions need to support successful pilot projects of special initiatives beyond the initial period of

funding. Equally, though, those involved in initiatives need to provide evidence of the successes of the project including a cost-benefit analysis.

Collaboration

Both the QAA's *Code of Conduct for Careers Services* and the Harris review emphasise collaboration, which is increasingly being built into institutional strategies. Careers services are increasingly becoming part of a wider student support network including links to external agencies. Sharing information between student support staff is an essential part of an increasingly effective co-ordinated student support network.

However, the most effective form of collaboration that impacts on all students and thus does not require specific targeting of non-traditional students is collaboration with academic departments. Embedding employability, including careers information and guidance, in the curriculum is at the core of holistic approaches. The development of virtual learning environments linked to personal development planning processes provide a vehicle for the embedding of reflection on employability attributes and career planning.

The most widely expressed objection to incorporating careers modules or careers advice into existing courses is the understandable problem of finding space in the curriculum. Although some academics are resistant to linking careers support and study, this is not as widespread as it is sometimes thought to be.

Recommendations

The report concludes with a set of recommendations about awareness, targeting, empowerment, monitoring, collaboration and networking, recruitment, institutional support and resources and possible future developments.

Copies of the report are available from Graduate Prospects, Prospects House, Booth St. East, Manchester M13 9EP 0161 277 5200