Are graduate employability initiatives worth it?

Student Survey July 2004

Substantial government funds have flowed into higher education to support the systematic integration of employability skills and reflective learning logs into the academic curriculum. University careers services have been re-invented as the conduit through which skills development is channeled, and many employers have taken part in programmes designed to help students prepare for working life. As well as this, as of 2005 all universities should have some form of reflective learning logs in place. But is all this effort, time and money really worth it? What do the students themselves think? In the latest of its twice-yearly student surveys, doctorjob.com spoke to nearly 2,500 students and recent graduates, and asked them whether they felt that their university gave them the skills they need to succeed in the workplace.
Key findings

“Students feel that the best place for them to develop personal ‘employability’ skills is through work experience.”

- Despite the current scepticism surrounding the value of a degree, students and graduates feel that university does prepare them for work. Nearly 70 per cent said that university had provided them with the skills they needed for work. And the same percentage felt that their course in particular had given them the technical and personal skills they needed for work.

- Just 40 per cent of students felt that their careers service had helped them develop and understand the personal skills they need for work. This could be a matter of perception – that the majority of students feel they develop this understanding on their own – or merely down to the fact that most users of a careers service access it remotely, online.

- Very few of those surveyed have been involved in either personal development planning or skills training run by their careers service or department, indicating either a problem of communication, enthusiasm or lack of supply. Just over 30 per cent had taken part in skills development training, modules or courses, and a mere 20 per cent had used a personal development plan (PDP) or similar during their time at university.

- However, those that had participated in these employability initiatives had felt the benefit. Nearly 80 per cent of those that had received it felt that skills development training, modules or courses had been useful. By far the most popular of these initiatives, however, are employer-led skills sessions. Nearly 85 per cent said they found these useful.

- Overwhelmingly, those surveyed felt the best place for them to develop personal ‘employability’ skills was through work experience. Nearly 90 per cent said work experience was the best way to gain the skills they needed for work. Nearly 60 per cent felt that courses or skills training run by careers services or departments would be a good way of developing these skills too, which suggests that students are willing to give these things a go, if they are aware of them.

A student’s view

“I think university did provide me with some great ‘personality’ skills – not necessarily through my course but through sports and other social activities. However, I do feel that I lacked any commercial awareness and knowledge of the job market. I think I didn’t realise the importance of taking part in activities offered by the careers service.”
How well does university prepare you for work?

The findings

- Nearly 70 per cent said that university has provided them with the skills they need for work. A not insignificant 27 per cent said that university hadn’t prepared them for work ‘that well’.
- Nearly 70 per cent said that their course in particular had given them the technical and personal skills they needed for work.
- Just over 40 per cent said that their careers service had assisted them in understanding and developing the personal skills they needed for work.

Comment

It is encouraging that students and graduates still feel that university does prepare them for work. And, in view of on-going discussions about ‘Mickey Mouse degrees’, it is significant that the overwhelming majority of students and graduates feel that their course does provide them with the skills they need to succeed at work. For all this positivity, though, it is perhaps a worry that relatively few students said that their careers service has helped them develop and gain an understanding of these employability skills. This could reflect the way that many students get their careers information – the number of students who physically visit their careers service has been slowly declining in recent years.

Student views

“Many students don’t realise what their careers centre can do for them. It would have been good if my tutors had directed me to the careers office at the end of the second year.”

“I spent a lot of time in the careers service and went to employer skills workshops. It’s these extra things employers want, and these are the sort of things you can talk about in an interview.”

“I have developed most of my employability skills through getting involved in clubs and societies. It’s an easy way to develop skills in a friendly working environment.”

“The training and resources offered by universities should be more widely advertised within the university – often students aren’t even aware that these centres exist.”
How useful is skills development training?

The findings
• Nearly 70 per cent said they had not taken part in skills development training run by their careers service or department.
• However, of the 30 per cent who had taken part in this kind of training, a significant number – again, nearly 80 per cent – said they had found it useful to some degree.
• More than one in four said they were ‘surprised at how it helped them to develop personal skills’.

Comment
It is perhaps disappointing that the vast majority of students do not take part in skills development training. This may reflect apathy on the part of the student or the course tutors, or a general lack of awareness amongst students that this kind of training exists. It could also be that institutions have just not put these kind of personal development initiatives in place. Despite this, it is again encouraging that those who had taken part in this type of training found it useful, even if it wasn’t ground-breaking. And a significant number had been surprised at how helpful the training had been – indicating that, if students can be encouraged to take part, this training will definitely be of benefit to them.

Have you taken part in any skills development training, modules or courses run by your careers service or department?

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If so, how useful did you find it?

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Student views

“I feel that my department should have encouraged me to develop these skills. More of the work I carried out could have been more focused on skills development rather than purely academic stuff.”

“There should also be less emphasis on ‘how to get an interview’, which is usually painfully obvious stuff, and more attention on those things that can set you apart from other candidates.”

“I have attended many personal development courses run by outside bodies (eg The Royal Academy of Engineering) but not ones run by the university. How are these advertised? I have seen the odd advert for the careers service, but where is the promotion of the actual courses on offer?”

“Special courses offering opportunities to develop your personal skills should be made part of all degrees. Teamworking, presentations and organisational skills aren’t necessarily included in a course but they are vital for future employment.”
How useful are personal development plans (PDPs)?

The findings
- Only 20 per cent of those surveyed said they had used a personal development plan to record and reflect on their development of key skills for work.
- Nearly 60 per cent of those that had used a personal development plan of some description said they had found it useful.

Comment
Again, it is disappointing but not surprising that hardly any students have filled in personal development plans (variously known as personal academic development plans (PADP), records of achievement, progress files or reflective learning logs). Given the importance attached to these in terms of students developing ‘employability skills’, it is perhaps worrying that so few students have experience of using them as records of achievement. Again, those that have used them have found them relatively useful, indicating a problem of communication within universities, departments and careers services. It also shows a lack of commitment to this kind of personal planning on the part of universities.

Student views
“I think a personal development plan is a good idea as long as it is closely monitored and students have to complete courses in order to gain some kind of end result or certificate.”

“I think PDPs are probably a good thing – I’ve just never had the opportunity proposed to me.”
How useful are employer-led skills sessions?

The findings

- Nearly 30 per cent of those surveyed said they had attended an employer-led skills session of some description.
- Employer skills sessions are by far the most well-received of all the different types of skills training – approximately 85 per cent of those that had attended said they found them useful to some degree.

Comment

Again, whilst the uptake of employer-led skills sessions amongst doctorjob users was low, those that had taken part were almost unanimous about their usefulness. Again, the low attendance could be a reflection of the different ways that students and graduates get their careers information. Those that get the majority of their information online are not necessarily the sort of people who will physically visit their careers service to see what skills and sessions are on offer. It is interesting that students feel that employer-led sessions are the most useful out of the three areas covered – reflecting the need for this kind of training on campus as a means of attracting student interest.

Student views

“Interaction between employers and higher education should allow students access to more realistic perceptions of employability skills. Universities need to form agreements with a wide range of industrial contacts so that employer-led skills sessions are not all provided by the big four accountancy firms. As an engineer, I feel that my careers service means well, but that much more could be done to support undergraduates at this crucial time in their personal development.”

“Short placements and talks by employers should be built into courses as spare time can be limited. There should be more interaction with business so that students know why they are studying a topic and how they will implement it.”
What's the best way to develop employability skills?

The findings
- Nearly 9 in 10 students said the best way to gain awareness of employability skills was through direct work experience, a fact supported by the majority of comments collected alongside the survey itself.
- Courses or skills training run by careers services and departments was the second most popular means to develop an awareness of these skills.
- The third most popular way to gain an understanding of these skills was through students’ own research.
- Only a tiny minority – 6 per cent – said that an awareness of these skills should be developed away from university altogether.

Comment
One of the main themes of this survey is that students feel work experience is the best way to develop skills for work. As one respondent put it, ‘Most employability skills come from being employed. The government should expend more effort encouraging companies to take on work experience students at all levels, not just for penultimate year students.’ Other popular ways to develop these skills included those courses run by departments or careers services – it seems that it’s just a matter of making sure the students know these events are taking place, and what they stand to gain from attending. Students also felt their own research was a way to develop an awareness of these skills – reflecting perhaps the preferences of a generation that would rather get its information from the internet. There was also big support for an approach that adapted a course to include specific employability skills training and development, as indicated by some of the quotes below.

Student views
“Non-vocational courses should place more emphasis on work experience and transferable skills. Universities should liaise with businesses in related fields in order to expose students to a cross-section of experiences.”

“Although we had personal skills as a module within my course at university, I found that I developed most of these skills during my placement year.”

“My course emphasised employability by placing most of the activities in a ‘real business environment’ context. Also, there was a lot of team-based coursework, which was a real chore at the time, but I think it has really paid off as it reflects real life.”
What skills are developed at university?

**Which skills do you feel are key to getting a job with a graduate employer?**

- Communication: 66% (1,610)
- Teamworking: 37% (906)
- Organisational/planning: 33% (802)
- Problem solving: 26% (637)
- Adaptability/flexibility: 17% (416)
- Commercial awareness: 13% (326)
- Leadership: 6% (116)
- Presentation: 6% (116)
- Negotiation: 5% (116)

**Which skills do you feel you have developed as a result of your course or contact with your careers service?**

- Communication: 76% (1,686)
- Teamworking: 66% (1,610)
- Problem solving: 69% (1,680)
- Adaptability/flexibility: 61% (1,588)
- Leadership: 60% (1,572)
- Organisational/planning: 57% (1,548)
- Presentation: 44% (904)
- Negotiation: 37% (742)
- Commercial awareness: 35% (706)

**Which skills have you not developed at all?**

- Commercial awareness: 28% (572)
- Negotiation: 25% (500)
- Leadership: 21% (428)
- Problem solving: 7% (136)
- Adaptability/flexibility: 6% (116)
- Teamworking: 6% (116)
- Communication: 5% (100)
- Organisational/planning: 4% (79)

**Which skills have you developed away from university?**

- Leadership: 44% (880)
- Adaptability/flexibility: 43% (860)
- Negotiation: 38% (776)
- Commercial awareness: 37% (744)
- Teamworking: 34% (688)
- Communication: 33% (660)
- Problem solving: 25% (496)
- Organisational/planning: 22% (432)
- Presentation: 25% (496)

See overleaf for the findings and comment.
What skills are developed at university?

The findings

- The top two skills that students feel employers want them to exhibit above all others are communication skills and teamwork.
- The main personal skills that those surveyed feel they have developed as a result of their course or contact with their careers service are presentation skills, organisation and planning, and problem solving. Approximately 70 per cent of users said they had developed these skills whilst at university.
- The key skills that students feel they haven’t developed at all, either from their time at university or through experiences away from university, are commercial awareness and negotiation. Around one in four said they hadn’t developed these skills.
- The main skills that those surveyed feel they have developed away from university are leadership, adaptability, negotiation and commercial awareness. Approximately 40 per cent said that they had developed these skills through activities not related to university.

Comment

It’s encouraging that three of the top four skills that students feel are key to getting a job with a graduate employer – communication, problem solving, and organisation and planning – are also three of the top four skills they feel they have developed as a direct result of their course or contact with their careers service. This goes some way to disproving the theory that university doesn’t give students the skills they need to be successful in work. However, the main skill they develop at university – presentation skills – is also one of the skills they feel is least vital in getting a job with a graduate employer.

It is perhaps slightly worrying that over one in four students feel they have not developed commercial awareness at all – often cited by employers as a key skill they want students to show evidence of. Commercial awareness is also the skill that students are least likely to develop as a result of their course or careers service – one in three said they had developed this at university, and the same number said they had developed this as a result of activity outside university. Most students believe the best way to develop all these employability skills, and especially commercial awareness, leadership and negotiation, is through work experience and internships.

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Student views

“Commercial experience should not be something universities have to cater to. If employers are so concerned that standards of these things are falling, then they should be making efforts themselves to open more internship/work experience/modern apprenticeship places.”

“University-led development is generally just theory. Most of anything that I have needed for my current job has been developed through working part time during my studies.”

“As part of my course I was given the opportunity under the Young Enterprise Scheme to form and run my own business. This hands-on approach allows the theory I have learned to be put into practice – I feel it has taught me so much more about organisation than traditional teaching methods.”

“I feel courses that use essays as the core approach to assessment hinder the graduate’s ability to develop other skills such as communication and interpersonal skills. Courses where assessment is in the form of presentations or group work are more beneficial.”
How confident are students at the moment?

Every six months, we ask our doctorjob users how confident they feel about getting a job. The hope is that we can use the results to gauge how optimistic or pessimistic students feel over a period of time.

The findings
- Confidence about getting a job has fallen over the last year, though has risen slightly over the last six months.
- A year ago, over 60 per cent of respondents felt either ‘supremely confident’ or ‘quite confident’ about getting a job – this has fallen by over 10 per cent to just under half of respondents in the most recent survey.
- However, one in ten students now feel ‘supremely confident’ about getting a graduate a job, up four per cent in the last six months.

Comment
According to the responses received, there has been a fall in career confidence over the last 12 months. This may also be an indication that the cumulative effect of the state of the economy, increased graduate debt and the rising number of graduates entering the market is having an impact on the mood of today’s students.
Methodology

Why we carried out this survey
The twice-yearly doctorjob.com Student Survey looks at what is uppermost in the minds of graduates and students as they search for jobs. The theme of this survey was born out of recent comments on the message boards about the extent to which university prepares students for work, and recent debates in industry and national press.

How we carried out the survey
In May 2004, nearly 2,500 doctorjob users – primarily finalists and recent graduates – responded to an online survey asking them for their opinions on ‘employability’ skills initiatives.

About doctorjob.com
doctorjob.com is the No.1 graduate careers website, receiving over 50,000 visits every week and with over 65,000 registered users. It hosts over 400 graduate employers and over 22,000 graduate vacancies.

About GTI
doctorjob.com is published by GTI Specialist Publishers, which also publishes doctorjob magazine, doctorjob’s Little Black Book and the TARGET range of careers magazines. GTI also produces the annual Graduate Trends Survey, an in-depth look at recruitment trends in a number of key sectors. Details of this and other GTI surveys (including previous doctorjob.com Student Surveys) can be found at www.groupgti.com/press.

Contact us
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