

BUILDING BRIDGES TO SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT

STAFF & EMPLOYER HANDBOOK

The EMPLOY project: towards enhancing transitions to meaningful and sustainable graduate careers for non-traditional students



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EMPLOY project website: employ.dsw.edu.pl
EMPLOY on Twitter: [@EMPLOY2016](https://twitter.com/EMPLOY2016)

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1. INTRODUCTION

About this Handbook

This handbook has been produced as part of an Erasmus + EU funded project entitled *Enhancing the Employability of Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education (EMPLOY)* - 2014-1-UKO1-KA203-001842. The handbook is aimed at:

- ▶ Employers in the private, public and third sectors as well as trade unions
- ▶ Higher education staff such as those working in careers, support services, officers, widening participation and equality issues and lecturers.

The focus of the handbook is on a particular group of students – non-traditional students. By non-traditional we mean students and graduates who are from communities and groups who, in some way, are under-represented in university and often also face obstacles in the job market. This includes quite a diverse range of groups such as mature students, working class students, students from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities.

Why non-traditional undergraduate students?

Over the past few decades, universities across Europe have increasingly welcomed non-traditional students into their ranks. Nevertheless, research shows that non-traditional students are particularly affected in terms of graduateness and finding graduate employment. For non-traditional students the transition into employment often takes longer than ‘traditional students’ and there is the likelihood of entering employment which is below degree level and, therefore, less meaningful. There is also sometimes a mismatch between graduate credentials and employers’ expectations.

What is the project about?

EMPLOY promotes the enhancement of the employability of students in higher education from a non-traditional background (both younger and adult) through improving the efficiency of transitions into the graduate labour market. With the development of a mass higher education system across Europe the student population has become more diverse by age, gender, class, ethnicity and disability. The issue of employability is a central policy concern of the EU, national governments and a key goal of the Bologna Process (The European Higher Education in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report) and there is also emerging evidence that graduate employability is a problem across Europe.

EMPLOY centrally aims to improve the efficiency of transition into the graduate labour market of those who enter higher education from non-traditional backgrounds, by developing two European handbooks that present best practice by higher educational institutions and employers and offers guidance to students on improving their employability. While one handbook is designed to inform students and aid their path into employment, this handbook is designed to inform employers and staff about the challenges they face. To achieve this the voices, experiences and perceptions of participants (students, university staff and employers) have been used through interviews to identify best practices and policies. Importantly, this project aims to work for a more inclusive graduate labour market for non-traditional students across Europe.

The key aims and objectives of the project were to:

- ▶ Understand employability from the student and graduate perspective
- ▶ Identify the strategies students and graduates are currently utilising to enter the labour market
- ▶ Explore the impact of age, gender, class, ethnicity and disability on students’ employment prospects
- ▶ Explore the approaches, attitudes and needs of employers and other stakeholders
- ▶ Examine employer perspectives on non-traditional graduate employability in relation to the public, private and third sectors
- ▶ Increase knowledge and understanding of what promotes or limits employability
- ▶ To develop best practice and policy across Europe in improving the employability of non-traditional students

The partners involved are:

- ▶ University of Warwick (co-ordinator)
- ▶ University of the Algarve, Portugal
- ▶ Maynooth University, Ireland
- ▶ University of Seville, Spain
- ▶ University of Lower Silesia, Poland
- ▶ Stockholm University, Sweden

Guide to Using this Handbook

The aim of this handbook is to provide a resource for employers and university staff to engage with issues pertaining to the transition of non-traditional students into the labour market.

The material presented here is drawn from 360 interviews carried out across Europe with employers, staff and students. These interviews provide a rich source of information to explore and provide a greater awareness of both best practices by employers and staff as well as the continuing challenges faced by non-traditional students going through the transition process and striving to enter into employment.

This report aims to be a tool for raising awareness and creating conversation, one that is concerned to promote critical reflection, facilitate discussion and produce greater understanding for supporting and advancing transition into employment for non-traditional students. The aims are to:

- ▶ Identify good practice amongst both employers and staff within and outside of the academic environment
- ▶ Highlight challenges to supporting non-traditional students
- ▶ Identify support strategies and opportunities for partnership
- ▶ Promote a more fluent transition for non-traditional students into the labour market
- ▶ Be guided by the voices of the participants of this study, thereby offering an opportunity for those using this handbook to directly encounter the issues that confront those seeking and providing employment

Resource for Critical Reflection

One feature of this handbook is as a resource for critical reflection. With this in mind, questions are provided at various stages to encourage you, whether as an employer or member of university staff, to reflect on the ways in which to promote best practices in co-ordinating student transition into the labour market as well as to join the conversation on this topic by contributing your thoughts and accessing the resources we have collated online on our Twitter page *@Employ2016* (see below).

The commitment to best practice includes managing expectations, but also apprehending the perceived and actual challenges that non-traditional students face in the transition into employment. With respect to these challenges, research indicates that discrimination, injustice and inequality continue to feature across Europe in both the hiring process and the chances for further career development. By drawing light on such issues we wish within this report to encourage debate, and facilitate enterprising and effective solutions in overcoming these barriers.

Structurally, the intention of the layout of the chapters is to provide immediately accessible sections that are independently appropriate to employers and academic staff while also having other sections to pool resources and offer discussion points that will be relevant to all.

Join the Conversation!

We encourage you to contribute your responses and continue the conversation on Twitter...@Employ2016

2. EMPLOYERS

Introduction

A recurring theme expressed by both younger and older non-traditional students is that they face different challenges to traditional students and can experience waiting longer than their traditional counterparts to find their way into employment. But what then are the barriers that they experience in their endeavour to successfully enter into employment?

In the following sections we will firstly, with reference to employers, highlight examples of best practices relating to successful employment. Secondly, we will refer back to student testimonies to clarify many of the challenges that non-traditional students have faced to underscore the value and importance of promoting broader understanding and greater opportunities for effective transition into the labour market for non-traditional students.

Points for Reflection 2.1

Questions to reflect on in this context include:

- ▶ *What does 'non-traditional student' mean to you?*
- ▶ *In what ways might non-traditional students face different challenges to traditional students in achieving employment?*
- ▶ *What are the assets that employers might positively identify with non-traditional graduates?*
- ▶ *How might employers most effectively promote opportunities for non-traditional learners?*
- ▶ *From your experience, can you identify an example of best practice when it comes to promoting opportunities for non-traditional graduates?*

Bridging the Divide: Good Practice and Effective Transition

In the following section we invite you to look at testimonies from employers of both successful transition and good practice from our interviews with employers across Europe. Please read through and consider in the light of your responses to questions in the previous section.

““ The non-traditional graduates have been an added value to our institution. All of our graduates' workers are non-traditional, except one (this institution has 17 graduate workers). All of them arrived here through a non-traditional way: age above expected, bachelor's degree late and many women. They have work and life experience, good-sense, they are very determined and motivated to overcome obstacles. This was the value they brought to our institution” (Diana, Director of a third sector institution, Portugal).

Identified according to recurring themes, further testimonies highlighting good practice are related below:

FLEXIBILITY

In the following case, employers alert to issues with non-traditional students offer flexibility with respect to their employment practices:

““ In our company we do this by allowing a flexible schedule that allows the worker to organise their working time in the way that best suits them. In the case of parents with children it is possible to group the weekly hours so that they can work only in the morning time. (Rafael, regional director of a private enterprise, Spain)

AGE AND EXPERIENCE

The assessment of age and experience in employment has been revealed within our study to be a complex issue, one that is addressed both positively and negatively in terms of attitudes and hiring practices. In Portugal, one employer remarked that employability is not a linear issue and that it is difficult to say whether non-traditional graduates are more employable than the traditional ones. In this sense, some features are associated with age and experience (a certain professional know-how, dedication, maturity, or responsibility), but in his opinion these traits are considered to be potential advantages. For him, they give more guarantees of stability, because they are looking for professional stability, as in the particular case of workers with families. On the contrary, younger graduates see working opportunities as a short-term challenge. He thinks that these graduates do not invest in the institution and are willing to change job when the opportunity appears. He further remarked,

“ I can give you a practical example. She [an employee] had a degree in Engineering from Eastern Europe and applied to be a chambermaid, but very soon she was already managing the floors. Because of her attitude, her decision-making abilities and a set of skills that today we call soft skills (a fashionable label), very rapidly she gained notoriety. And we are talking of someone who was a migrant that had just arrived to the Algarve with her family prior to her application’ (Júlio, Human Resources Manager from private sector, Portugal).

This interviewee also referred to other issues stating that it is the employers’ responsibility to manage gender equality. He also remembers that, especially for top positions, enterprises that are hiring look at the long-term, hence pregnancy or maternity is not an obstacle.

DISABILITIES

Employers with open-mindedness towards disabilities in their employment practices are an important concern in achieving equality as revealed in this case study in Sweden.

“ ... We have an open mind towards disabilities, depending on what it is of course but we have many people with physical disabilities, because of what they have experienced in work. We try to handle this as well as possible, it is quite normal for us, even if it could be problematic... it doesn’t however limit anyone from getting employment in our organisation... we have a man at our place that has a light autism but he has been in the organisation for a long time and we have found the right job for him, a job where he feels safe. (Torbjörn, Employer 2, public sector, Sweden)

MENTORSHIP

A valuable feature of promoting entry into the labour market and recognising the value of non-traditional students is to consider ways of extending the reach of employers and offering mentoring programmes to graduates. This could be addressed with reference to working with labour unions, as in the example below, as well as with higher educational institutions.

“ I was a mentor, SSR (a labour union) had a mentorship programme and I was called up and asked if I would like to join. A girl showed up and she had parents from Pakistan, she is the first generation in Sweden and her parents lacked HE. She was extremely ambitious, but what I could help her with was how she could approach the recruitment process, the meeting with managers ...so she could do the right things and she did, she has a damn good job today. I think that the small help I could bring was to bridge between the university and the labour market...if you have a disability that is visible so when someone talks to this person or someone from another country it is what the other person sees and perceives it that is important and that I have to help the interviewer with thinking that it is not so strange (Gunnar, Employer 6, Sweden)

INTERNSHIPS

The role of internships, by which we mean the offer provided by employers of periods of work experience, has proved to be an important issue with respect of our research. A key consideration in this regard is how the internship can be promoted in different ways to benefit both the employer and the internship employee as shown in this case study from Ireland:

“ In Ireland the NGO we talked to seemed to take a different approach to graduates than the private and even the public-sector employers. Instead of recruiting graduates for the benefit of the organisation, they were recruiting, and training, graduates for the benefit of their field. They recruited graduates onto their high-quality, yearly training programme as a way to both support graduates in the development of a career and as a service to the field rather than the organisation which didn’t have the capacity to employ graduates. Many of the graduates that they took on are keen to apply for highly sought after professional graduate programmes. This NGO’s graduate training programme provides graduates with valuable field experience that would positively support applications to such programmes (NGO case study, Ireland).

Another straightforward example of how valuable internships can be is evidenced in the following case in Portugal:

“ In a tourism enterprise, a 40 years old woman did an internship that has aided her transition into employment. She had just left from the University of Algarve where she finished the Hotel Management Course. The employers liked her and they made her a proposal to fill a vacancy in the purchasing sector. They valued her work experience, her maturity to talk to the suppliers and her ability to persuade and take a stand, compared to a 23 years old young person. She was working in this enterprise

for 4 months, she finished the internship and after 2 months the employers invited her to return. She is currently in this enterprise as a purchasing technician and according to her employers:

“ ‘It is a success story: we did not discriminate her for being a woman, we did not discriminate her for ending her degree at the age of 40. We integrated her’ (José, Human Resources Manager from Private Sector, Portugal).

RECRUITMENT STRATEGY/PRACTICES

Recruitment strategy amongst employers remains an important area of potential innovation. One way in which employers have promoted greater opportunity for non-traditional students is with respect to their recruitment strategy as evidenced for example in the recognition of experience outside university, emphasis on soft skills, as well as a concern to take into account students' backgrounds. A number of examples from our partners are offered below:

“ While analysing candidates' CVs (the employer) pays particular attention to the experience gained outside of the university... This recruitment strategy is characterised by the recognition of the capital brought by the graduate into the workplace. Importantly the person interviewed verifies not only the results of lifelong learning but also of wider learning, of various life activities of the candidate: not only formal but also informal, stemming from the candidate's biography and life experiences (Employer, Public Sector, Poland).

“ When people apply for the programme, when they join the programme there's like a survey that we ask them to fill out and we tend to see...and we look were you eligible for free school meals as a child or did you go to a school which was (reference to company) eligible, and then have a list of schools, and we saw that I think 30% of our cohort this year - I'm hoping I've got the right stats, I need to make sure I'm not misquoting it - but as far as I can recall, about a third of our cohort this year went to a (named Employer's) eligible school, which would include most of these will be schools in low income communities, which doesn't necessarily mean that they themselves come from a low income background but it means that they will be exposed to it and a large proportion of those will be first generation at University at the very least, and then also significantly, a lot of... I don't know what it is... a large minority of those will come from things like free school meal backgrounds as well, much more so than what we've seen in other recruiters (Employer, Private Sector, University of Warwick).

“ The analysis of the interviews with Polish employers confirms the trend to emphasise soft skills as a key competence in order to improve the rate of success in the job market. Formal qualifications, such as a degree, diploma which is adequate to a position one is applying for is a condition, of course, but it is not the ultimate factor when it comes to the decision who will get the job and who won't. Mainly, they are looking for an interesting personality, *passionate people*, and *open-mindedness*. (Poland)

“ I think everybody's a bit bolder at the moment, I mean I know especially in terms of our recruitment we're looking at what we can do on campus that they've not seen before, you know, I think we're a bit braver. There is obviously risk and it is all measures and you have to take into account, you know, is this going to work, are we going to suddenly not be in the top 100, let alone not the first! Yeah, I mean we're... I mean me personally I'm all for innovation and I want to do things differently. I think we have to be careful how we do it but I think we're much more open to it than we used to be. I think there's definitely a changing stance. I don't often now hear 'that's the way we've always done it', which I did when I first moved into the team so that's starting to go away. But I think we need to, I think you know, if we don't start being innovative and doing things differently and taking risks we'll get left behind because everybody else will be doing... they'll all be trying something new so want to be the first! (Employer, Private Sector, UK)

Points for Reflection 2.2

Consider the following:

- ▶ Are there many non-traditional students within your organisation?
- ▶ According to the above testimonies what benefits are there for employers in hiring non-traditional students?
- ▶ Have you encountered or participated in examples of good practice in the recruitment and promotion of opportunities for non-traditional students?
- ▶ Could recruitment be tailored more effectively to further target this sector?
- ▶ What provision could there be within your organisation to further promote opportunities for non-traditional students?
- ▶ Do you agree with the statement that job interviews should be based mostly on the analysis of their education history and the effects of informal and extra-curricular learning of the graduates/job candidates?

What do Non-Traditional Students offer Employers?

As stated previously, by non-traditional we mean students and graduates who are from communities and groups that, in some way, are under-represented in university and often also face obstacles in the job market. This includes mature students, working class students, students from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities. Nevertheless, as shown in the above case studies, employers have recognised their value and promoted opportunities for their path into sustainable employment.

In summary, in the course of our study an identification of the value of non-traditional students as employees highlighted the following:

- ▶ Dedication – highly committed in their approach
- ▶ ‘Work readiness’ – committed to entering into employment
- ▶ Prior knowledge – often having valuable prior work experience
- ▶ Life experience – the capacity to deal with complex social situations
- ▶ Dependable and reliable
- ▶ Extremely motivated with endeavour to succeed
- ▶ Loyalty – more likely to stay with the company/institution
- ▶ Diversity of perspectives – differing viewpoints and backgrounds that provide greater understanding and awareness which can enhance the culture and vision of an organisation



Student comment:

...I think a lot of employers must realise that non-traditional students bring something different to the table, so we've got life experience as well. (Fran, University of Warwick, UK)

Point for Reflection 2.3

What other qualities might non-traditional students provide for your organisation?

Examples from Case Studies: Challenges

In this section we will identify challenges that both non-traditional students and employers have reported as recognising in the transition into employment.

One issue that has been identified is a lack of awareness and attentiveness to non-traditional students as a distinguishable category from traditional students and thus a lack of investigation or targeting of this bracket of the potential workforce.

Points for Reflection 2.4

Consider the following questions:

- ▶ *What are the ways in which non-traditional students can be impeded in their passage into the labour market?*
- ▶ *What kinds of inequality remain factors in today's employment market?*

Examples:

Beginning with a quotation from a student, the following subsections provide examples of where challenges have been reported by students interviewed in this study with respect to employment.



...it was always my intention to try and get back into education, because during that time as well, I mean I had applied for all sort of jobs. I think at one stage I had, I remember the figure, applying for 303 jobs in a 12 month period. ... but I ended up at one stage working in a petrol station. And that was ... I don't say this in any way to sound conceited and I want to make the perfectly clear but for me, it was probably the worst period of my life. ... I mean I did it because we had to, I mean, we had no choice, you know. The mortgage was in arrears, you know, it was just horrific. But, but, I did feel demeaned, yeah. Like 10 years previous I had been you know, a senior executive in a, in [named multinational brand] and whatever. And you know, to sort of know that you are capable, like did you ever feel that, did you ever feel that ... you have the potential to achieve but there are also constraints around you? (Phoebe, student, Ireland)

Point for Reflection 2.5

For consideration and discussion: What do you think are the perceived 'constraints' that the above student might be concerned about?

AGE

The issue of age is perceived as a significant barrier amongst non-traditional students with respect of their future employment and is a source of anxiety with respect of the application process. However, has it also been acknowledged as a factor for employers? Some employers show awareness of this issue and acknowledge that it can be.

“ Mature students have the problem of age. To have a degree when you're 30 is of course good to people, but it is very complicated in terms of the labour market. A mature student runs against younger graduates and, for much knowledge or experience they have, they are out against younger graduates. The younger do not have vices, it is moldable, and they master ICTs. A person aged 44 years old is young with a lot to give, but it is a person with a different "head", a different vision of things due to experience. Enterprises look for younger persons with an open mind that can reason almost as machines. And older people have this difficulty (Anibal, Communication Services of the University of Algarve, Portugal).

“ Just an example, Infojob or any company that uses any sort of job portal, they put the filter in age. When they see age, they no longer look at the CV. That is, if you are making a job offer and it is for people under 30 years, the filter is on the date of birth and you cannot deceive there, so it doesn't matter if you are a recent graduate, you speak three languages, or you have an astonishing work experience, ... the filter is age and you cannot pass that filter (Lavalenciana, technical personnel of the local government dealing with paid internships in private sector, Spain).

“ ...I think it is very discriminating, in Sweden, I think the market place is extremely closed for people who, you know, first of all they need networks, despite that this course highlights, you know, competencies, it's not competencies, you know, there is the ages between 32 and 42, there is your employability that Sweden hires, employability, and I know that I passed that, and it is not that, I know that I have, that I can work and have more to give, there is somebody who is 32 and has less experiences than me, you just know you can be down the pail on the older side, you know, particularly trying to start a new career, and again it is contradictory information they can get, as I could see that one wants to encourage people to change careers (Clare, 47 years old, Sweden)

“ The situation then was that if there was a job advertisement and young girls applied for it and they were university graduates, there was no possibility for me to get this job - a mother of two children with only a secondary education. And when you talked to friends they had the same stories to tell. Those job interviews were also like: well, you have two children who are at the age when they get sick often, so who takes care of them when they get sick. It was so embarrassing for me. Was I to lie or to tell the truth? Also, to be honest, after a period of parental leave it was terribly sad to look for work. Very sad... (Lila, Student, Poland)

SOCIAL CLASS

Listening to the voices of students, our study reveals background and social class as factors that students perceive as barriers to achieving employment. As indicated in the cases below, this was particularly evident with respect to a concern with these issues affecting their career path and their ability to achieve work in higher sectors of employment.

“ I went to a state school in London, it was quite rough...the school serves two estates, predominantly two council estates, which I don't know, like the equivalent of an American housing project, and so those two areas were where most of the students came from were very run down areas, which is what I was explaining, like crime and poverty and all these things...So I think I'm in... the career path that I was wanted was a choice because of how I had lived up until this point and then how more specifically the job that I got had to do with the way that I was... because of my background but not something that I chose, it was more like 'you are suitable for this role because of all these characteristics', and this was without them knowing my entire background (Naomi, student, University of Warwick, UK).

“ I think living in a disadvantaged area ... is [a barrier in] for looking for work ... I think it's from where you come from - people look at you and, if your CV is there are looking at it, and say 'You have all these qualifications ... Oh she lives in X [social housing flats]' (Julia, final year student, Ireland)

GENDER

Our study reveals that gender remains a barrier to achieving success within employment. Women workers see the role of being a mother often associated with absenteeism and delays, leading management boards to choose men over women in some posts. It also seems that women in leading jobs often give-up their family life to be able to deal with their professional responsibilities. However, it is also a matter of significance that our study observed that there could be disparities in attitudes regarding gender and maternity depending on the sector of employment, with the public sector appearing to be more tolerant of these issues than the private sector.

“ ...it's a nice company but with the railways they have this, it's like, I don't know... the men are more masculine and they don't like women coming in so you find people, in terms of me, because I have children I'm accommodated so I get specific shifts and you find people complaining because you are excluded from working different shifts and that was the only problem (Jenny, student, University of Warwick, UK)

“ When I worked in the security business... we wanted to enhance diversity so we worked explicitly ... we wanted women and we explicitly worked with other ethnic groups and also with LGBTQ and homosexual people, when you start it goes quite fast. ... It was a self-defined quotation to the disappointment from our American owners which made the whole thing a short exception that makes me disenchanted. Now they are fired, I quit, our manager got fired and every female manager quit. (Eva, Employer 4, private sector, Sweden)

“ Unfortunately, I know many employers, many of them women, who do not want to hire young girls of childbearing age, as they can ask for maternity leaves for several months, before and after childbirth. Obviously, they do not say it openly in front of a large audience, but they do it in *petit comité*. I also know cases of distrust towards certain ethnic minorities, such as Roma, or migrants with low socio-economic background (Rafael, regional director of a private enterprise, Spain).

FAMILY CONTEXT

Family context is also a theme that appeared within our research as a potential barrier. Where students, as in the case below, experience a change in their family circumstances this can have an important effect on their progress in completing their studies and entering into the workplace.

“ I came back to continue my studies after a four year break. I took a break when I had a baby. Well, somehow it happened this way... first I wanted to reconcile all this, I thought that I would manage. (...) However, I didn't pass all the exams, I couldn't catch up and I stopped the studies. I didn't have time, it was tough for me (...) (Weronika, student, Poland)

ETHNICITY AND RACE

The issue of ethnic or racial discrimination has been reported by students in this study as a continuing feature of those applying for or already in work coming from a minority background.

In Spain for example it was observed that with respect to different minorities within society such as migrants and people from other ethnic groups, that there are clear examples of exclusion from white-collar work. Often the people coming from Africa, Eastern Europe or Roma are not included in this kind of recruitment process because *“they do not offer the image of the company. The Spanish employers class is very classist”* (Spain).

Other examples of experiences of students from our participants are highlighted below:

“ Because of being an immigrant ... in some way, you go to a firm and they say 'oh, not you!' (Gracia, student, Spain)

“ It (the recruitment process) was a bit discriminatory I can say because it wasn't very fair on everybody... One of the barriers is racism, that is something that is... it might sound a bit funny but racism still is very rife, even today in the 21st century because what most of my friends are telling me is that the more educated you are, the higher you get, the more you encounter racism out there. So if you are looking for say a managerial job, a top job, that's where the competition is quite high and you are most likely to be competing with the traditional British students or that kind of thing. They are facing still competition there and some of them, it is normally the handpicking is based on race and it can be difficult (Jenny, 2+2 Social Studies Student, University of Warwick, UK).

“ I applied to the bank and I wasn't enjoying it at the bank because there were a few issues with the management and everything. I wanted to feel comfortable. I think there was a lot of racism so I left... I think the only problem you also have in [travel company] now is the Union is saying there's not a lot of

ethnic minorities in the managerial position. To be honest I've never seen any, I think there's only one Asian manager and one black manager and that's in Bristol so it's very hard also because I am an undergraduate and I am expecting to get to the top but it's very difficult, they would rather take somebody who hasn't even finished a GCSE than consider me. So it's also very difficult to get into the managerial position... Like I said, we black people, we tend to have problems when it comes to getting into other sectors but with health it's so easy the government always needs nurses so it's very easy for us to get into that sector so that's the reason I've decided to go back into health (Jenny, Undergraduate student, University of Warwick, UK).

RECRUITMENT STRATEGY/PRACTICES

The recruitment strategies practiced by employers can also be a potential source of disadvantage for non-traditional students as revealed in the cases from Europe below:

“ All employers start their recruitment processes by a *curriculum vitae* (CV) analysis. All employers use interviews as the last phase of recruitment and claim it is a determinant. A minority of employers use two interviews: the first focused on soft skills, personal and behavioural features; the second on technical aspects. Although employers claim to evaluate job seekers profile as a whole, our results suggest that employers are focused in hiring graduates who show readiness to work, behave and to be exactly how the employers would need. This fact can bring disadvantages to the mature students who are less flexible and ready than younger graduates. Despite the fact that employers claim not to discriminate workers by their age, the examples of workers hired after 40 are not significant. (Portugal)

“ I do think this needs special considerations even if it is ethically complicated. I do think you could start a project with special regards to students with a non-traditional background, with ... preferable both employer and labour organisations and special organisations, in line with their diversity or inclusion strategies and thereby create certain internship places or real jobs as a way of getting experience... I think it is right to do that, I have been so embarrassedly conscious about how discriminating the labour market is towards people with disabilities and other ethnical backgrounds or maybe people that look different, so I do believe there is a need for special projects. I do also want to clear out that I think HR organisations and HR with its unique competence have a special responsibility to push for this issue otherwise nothing is going to happen. (Gunnar, Employer 6, third sector, Sweden).

Points for Reflection 2.6

Challenges faced by students remain an important consideration in developing an effective response to how best to support the transition process into employment and our study highlights that inequality is still a concern.

It may be observed that another interviewed student identified some of the tensions associated with the above issues when stating: 'I know that out there I'm a person who's at risk of exclusion... because I'm a woman, I'm over forty five and I'm middle class, though I'm educated the social class still counts' (Justa, student, Spain).

In the light of the challenges that are faced consider the following:

- ▶ *How do you think inequality can be most effectively tackled in the employment process?*
- ▶ *What could be done differently to overcome inequality?*

Summary

As highlighted in the above sections our research has indicated that there are many challenges that non-traditional students face both within their studies as well as when they are in the process of transitioning into the workforce.

Whether, for example, having to take time out from their studies due to family context or encountering issues as a result of their background or age, these can put them at a potential disadvantage with respect to traditional students when it comes to the transition into employment. However, it is important to recognise that these challenges do not fairly reflect their skills, experience and ambitions - what they can bring to employers and to society as a whole. In a society with increasing numbers of non-traditional students the challenge for employers and university staff is to be sufficiently aware of the issues surrounding non-traditional students, to promote relevant opportunities going forwards and to strive towards a fairer, more productive and successful society. In this research we have provided recommendations at the end of this handbook but we are also very keen to hear your contributions.

Join the Conversation!

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3. UNIVERSITY STAFF

The universities involved in this research offer an array of supports for non-traditional students seeking graduate employment and these are evidenced in the examples of good practice. These support services include:

- ▶ The Careers Office
- ▶ Placements and internships
- ▶ Student unions and societies
- ▶ Academic Departments/Faculties
- ▶ Counselling
- ▶ Curricular sensitivity to career aspirations of students

The availability of resources and form that these services take are variable across the universities in this study. For example, Portugal lacks a unified careers service, while Spain provides a network at a national and regional level. The latter service is however relatively under-developed in its visibility and attentiveness to non-traditional student needs compared to the UK.

Simply put, some universities are less geared to the needs of non-traditional students than others. The University of Warwick endeavours to promote a more targeted approach by promoting career campaigns for students with disability or with children.

But even at Warwick, challenges remain with a student reporting that he felt discouraged by his encounter with the Careers Service in spite of being in other respects highly academically motivated. This indicates a key concern whether such elite institutions are providing effective support mechanisms to tackle the social alienation that non-traditional students often experience and successfully encouraging them to use the support facilities available.

In recent times notable changes in the nature and focus of these services include:

- ▶ The shift to online information, advice and training
- ▶ The increasing emphasis on developing networks in developing graduate careers

However, non-traditional students often lack the opportunity to access the training and supports or to develop networks associated with higher echelon employment. They commonly report that they have little time or the sufficient finances to join societies or use the services available – issues that can impact on their future success.

Points for Reflection 3.1

- ▶ *What challenges do you think non-traditional students might face in entering into the employment market?*
- ▶ *What practices could be encouraged and implemented by staff to aid the process of transition into employment for students?*
- ▶ *What are the support systems that exist within your institution to aid the transition of non-traditional students into employment?*
- ▶ *In what ways can the university be more involved in the process of recruitment into employment?*

Examples of Good Practice

Beginning with a case study of a student's experience at a Careers Service, in the following sections we will highlight examples of good practice that have been identified during the course of this research.

STUDENT CASE STUDY

Anne's experience of careers supports at the University of Warwick



Anne found effective support from the Careers and Skills Office from which she received tailored advice on her discipline, Law, from a counsellor specialising in this area. The support provided her with helpful guidance on how to present her CV “because it's not the same as applying for a normal job” as well as with respect to which areas of Law to apply for in order to most successfully progress her career: The advisor “...said if you're going to go in, you need to go in the middle ground... the law centre is bottom

ground, and if you go in there, you're not going to move up. She's saying go in at a middle ground company and then you can go either way." Anne reported that further useful support towards her prospective career arose through participation in an evening dinner event with the Law Society where she met with and managed to establish a number of contacts with potential future employers. The event boosted her confidence by allowing her to ascertain, by meeting with members of solicitor firms in a relatively informal context, qualities that she felt they were looking for that could play to her advantage in a future interview – more precisely, career experiences that went beyond the university degree grade. In this regard, she identified that they were looking for recruits with an "all-round view," something that, given the strength of her past experience with various forms of employment, emboldened her to conclude, "Actually I can do this".

CAREERS SERVICE

The careers services within higher educational institutions across Europe, as referenced earlier, offer varying degrees of service. The following provide examples within our research of valuable provision for non-traditional students:

“ The Careers Office has initiated some activities for non-traditional students. One strategy was to contact non-traditional students and say to them ‘we recognise that you may not be as familiar with going to university as those whose parents have been to university and we would like to offer you more support’. This received a good response from students. Sessions on writing a CV have been held with adult students and they were able to bring their children with them. The aim was to point out that if they have been out of a traditional career for while raising children then ‘you can develop employability from that’ (UK).

“ At Stockholm University, career support is for all students, not only non-traditional students. The support is organised on two institutional levels within HE, but also from the student and labour unions and professional organisations outside HE. The staff and career counsellors, related to the educational programme, give courses and lectures related to the future labour market, and give a voluntary 15-credits course on Internship after graduation. They also provide individual counselling. On the University level there is a student and career center. It gives lectures and workshops in e.g. CV coaching, interviewing, and lectures by interesting persons on the labour market. The staff from the career centre also provides special activities for students with disabilities (Sweden).

“ One Careers Officer works with adult students to help them improve their CVs. Unlike younger traditional students most adults are not able to have a gap year nor undertake voluntarily work or unpaid internships which employers see as being essential on a CV. Instead the Careers Officer encourages them to turn their life experiences into positive ones for a CV by highlighting the skills they have gained from their experiences such as raising children (UK).

The mentoring programme was created recently, in the academic year of 2015/ 2016. It tries to involve the alumni association in the development of the academic path of students, and to support their transitions to employment. The central idea is not that the mentors find students a job; but that the mentors would help students to know working environments, the basic rules and cultures of work, thus increasing the possibilities that students make an easier transition and maybe find a job for themselves more quickly. Mentors are free to organise as they see fit with the students and to freely suggest a variety of activities to help students beginning to build their careers. As the programme is only in the beginning, there are currently only 50 mentors in the network. It is established that each mentor should accept no more than 5 students. However, in the moment there are only 103 students who joined the programme.

“ We ...hold meetings between our best students and some *alumni* who are employers now. These *alumni* act as mentors: they meet the students, guide and help them in their transition to the labour market. And it is with pride that our *alumni* who are employers nowadays are asking graduates to recruit’ (Lucas, Course Director, Portugal).

UNIVERSITY PROVISION, PROGRAMMES AND INITIATIVES

Further initiatives and programmes have been identified within our study that aided the path of transition into work. A number of examples are selected below, the first of which indicates how courses with academics that are in some way also linked to the sector or practical domain associated with what they teach potentially offer greater preparation for those students. The message here may be with respect to appreciating the importance of keeping up to date with the specific employment scenario for students as well as maintaining the link between careers services and academic departments in the university.

“ If a given programme is led by academics that are more theory than practice-focused, then after some time we're more likely to have our students saying that they felt less prepared than they initially thought they would be. The university provision offers this preparedness in as much as it engages practitioners, or if those practitioners who are employed by the university are at the same time

involved in some other practice-related activity, alongside their theoretical or research work carried out for the university. This certainly helps much more than it would have with programmes and specialisms where there is much less of the practical element or where professional world scenarios are used less frequently (...) (Female, vice dean for educational affairs, Poland)

“ A Widening Participation Officer in the Law Department initiated a project for non-traditional students to help them obtain a short internship in a local town rather than in London which is expensive. The companies paid the students and the University paid their transport and accommodation costs. The internships were in national retail companies with a legal department. One of the aims was to raise awareness that jobs requiring a law degree are not only available in law firms where you have to pay £12000 for a qualification to practice (UK).

“ Currently, one of the modelling agencies is organising sessions in our photographic studios and students cover various professional roles. Or, there is a company that produces animated TV series that have set up a project where a group of students on placement will be producing one of the series; this company will also be using one of our university's rooms to store its equipment. However, it's the students who will work on the series as part of their placement. These are forms of incubation but they should be reinforced by providing support for those students who would like to set up their own businesses. So it would be good to implement a formula like that, whether it's on a departmental or programme level, to develop such forms and this is a proposal we could consider (Male, placement specialist, Poland).

“ We never stop inviting companies to come here [to the university]. We have a set of Conferences going on and we bring the work experience of our lecturers and the work opportunities of their companies (Lucas, Course Director, Portugal).

PARTNERSHIPS

Another factor identified in this case from Poland was the role of partnerships between higher educational institutions and employers:

In Poland, specific programmes at the faculty of Journalism create strong ties with the market, which provide students with many opportunities to apply what they are studying. The faculty provides access to specialised equipment including working labs (sounds, radio and movie production, special effects and animation, photography etc.). Labs are also rented to the external companies, after teaching hours, and often students are involved as well in such initiatives or have a chance to observe professionals at work, to enhance their skills (Poland).

DISABILITY SERVICES

Attentiveness to disability is an important issue in achieving greater equality in the transition process into employment. The following case study in Spain is a particularly impressive exemplar of a service at the university catering for students with disabilities and providing support for them in the transition into employment.

In Spain there is a service for Students with Disabilities, which is concerned with the academic progress of this group of students but also promotes contact with companies to ensure their professional insertion. Their strength as a service lies in the personalised attention they provide for each student according to their circumstances. Additionally, they develop a progressive, continuous work, from the very moment the student with a disability enters the University.

“ We work with them so that they do internships during their academic stage, curricular internships, and make the most of them; and also extracurricular ones so that they begin to have links with different companies, because they will have options, because suddenly you finish your degree, and now, to employment; (...) Then the transition is a continuum and I think you need to work on it both from the access and the stay in the university, as well as in the work insertion, because this really is a professional qualification (...) Not only do we inform about the companies they might go to, but also we put in value our graduates in the companies”. (Cádiz, staff in the Student with Disability Service).

A role that is more and more important in this service is to act as a kind of intermediary agent with companies interested in students and graduates with disabilities, either to carry out their internships or to offer them work contracts.

“*We have contact with some entities, with some mediating companies, then we receive these offers, because of the data protection we can not give the data of the students to these companies, then we do it through our distribution list, seeing the profiles which are usually requested, we give them publicity, and we already give them the contact in case they are interested in contacting the company directly”* (Cádiz, staff in the Student with Disability Service).

Sometimes, however, covering some of the employers' demands can be very difficult because students are not always open to these options, either because of their medical and health situation or because of a lack of self-confidence. For this reason, a great part of their work is to increase the confidence of the students and to work with them to improve their the personal autonomy.

Finally, the service tries to sensitise potential companies about the different types of disability, so that the lack of knowledge (eg, Asperger's Syndrome) does not negatively affect when the student joins the company.

INTERNSHIPS

An approach identified by all of the partners in this study in which universities can assist students in student transition into graduate employment is through work placements/internships connected to their academic courses.

Internships provide students with valuable direct experience of the work environment. Advantages stemming from such opportunities include students gaining familiarity and confidence in a relevant work scenario, as well as potentially being able to start to develop a network.

Our study has however revealed that there are both advantages and hazards with respect to this work experience. Initially, we will detail examples of where the many advantages are identified by employers, staff and students below.

“One of the aspects we value positively is that of graduates who have combined their studies with work experience. We have found that this is often the case in mature, hard-working and responsible young people. This might be more frequent in some of the non-traditional employees. (Angel, general manager of an international enterprise, Spain).

“Integrated placement is often the first moment, when they (students) can be noticed by the employers, they can also experience themselves as an employee, see what kind of employee they are, what skills they still miss and whether they wish to continue this particular professional pathway. It often feels like the majority of our students think about the university today as of vocational school of tertiary level, preparing for the vocational, not academic life. They have a strong focus and a high demand of practical skills, 'marketable' skills... (Female, vice dean for educational affairs, Poland)

“For me the main strength of the internship programme was the fact that I could try my skills in an industry that was different to what I was studying - it was because the internship was not totally related to my discipline and I had the opportunity to see for myself if working in the economy sector, in sales and marketing, was something I could potentially do in the future, and if I could perhaps combine it with my work as a teacher, guidance tutor, therapist, to see if it's possible to combine these two worlds that are so different from each other in theory (Katarzyna, student, Poland).

“Maria, a mature, first-generation student from Eastern Europe, secured a highly sought after placement in the final year of her applied science degree. The work-placement aspect of this degree was central to its attraction and success with students. Maria, who was highly strategic in choosing this degree, explained that the work placement was one of the main reasons why she chose the degree. In fact, she said she couldn't imagine the degree without the work placement. The programme prepared students for the work placement from first year. Students were made aware the placements were highly competitive and that employers would be looking at module results across their degree. They also started working on CVs and applications in second year. In the follow-up interview with Maria it emerged that she now has a job, albeit a temporary contract, with her placement employer. Maria is very happy with this as it is a small science-based company with an international clientele. Its smallness means that she is involved in an array of activities beyond her science-based skills and enabling her to develop sophisticated administration and managerial skills (Ireland).

“I think (the internship course) is excellent, my daughter Emma should have had that instead of wasting her time in precarious positions (in the labour market)... it is good when it is part of the ordinary educational system... it could be longer though... We wanted (Kalle) to get a broad perspective of the HR work and from that we formed the internship period, he also wanted to learn some specific work tasks and maybe we haven't provided that perfectly, it has been stressful sometimes and I feel that I have not been enough, but he has had an excellent supervisor, she is very experienced and good so I think she has given

him very much, she is a generalist so he has been involved in our thinking in our different issues and in all our cases to get an understanding. He has also been working with different tasks, in a small HR department there is a lot of different things happening. I think that is good for learning... (Karin, Employer 8, Sweden)

“ One of the practices is a voluntary internship course that is provided after the HR-programme to the graduates. Its aim is to give graduates opportunities to find an employer and during ten weeks get practical experiences. Students get information about the course during their studies. For those who do not have practical experiences (part-time job during the study, and networks) this is a perfect opportunity to get a foot into the labour market. Many, after internship, get employment directly, or obtain recommendation and references to next job. The same problem as on the university level is visible here as well, i.e. low participation. About 70 students graduate from the programme each year, but about 10 students only apply for the internship course (Sweden).

“ ‘We receive 20 / 30 students from the University of Algarve per year to do an internship. So, as you see, the internship is a measure that works very well. And when I say internships I don’t mean unpaid internships, every student receives a scholarship equivalent to the minimum wage (550 € / month, plus food and transportation subsidies). Therefore, we have an agreement with University of Algarve in which we have a scholarship for the internships, starting in May and ending in July. But sometimes they get to September or we can hire them until November’ (Lúcia, Human Resources Manager from private sector, Portugal).

Points for Reflection 3.2

- ▶ *How are work placements identified as advantageous for students?*
- ▶ *With respect to your own knowledge, in what ways does work experience/internships form part of what students are offered in departments across the university? - Could this be improved?*
- ▶ *What other university provisions are made available for students in your institution? - Does it effectively differentiate or cater for non-traditional students?*
- ▶ *What do you think might be the challenges confronted in terms of running successful internships?*

Challenges

As stated above there are a number of challenges and hazards that our study has revealed that can accompany internships. Particular concerns relate to the quality of the internships and the danger that, due to limited time and other commitments for example due to work or family, that some non-traditional students would not be able to participate effectively.

Further examples of related concerns with internships are detailed below. Please note that, as detailed previously, these should not serve to thereby detract from the value of work placements but merely to alert staff to issues that have been raised that should be considered with respect to promoting their success. They are, after all, regarded as a potential asset by all of our partners. However, in the successful functioning of such initiatives we recommend that the following issues be taken into account.

INTERNSHIPS AND ACADEMIC CONSIDERATIONS

The relationship between the academic nature and work-experience aspects of the course or programme should be explored and balanced carefully:

“ If the placement is stripped of links with any subject-based classes then it may be that in reality a student would go the easy route to pass it for the sole purpose of passing. (Female, curriculum embedded placement specialist, Poland)

INTERNSHIPS AND ACCESSIBILITY

The difficulties in getting a placement, and the students’ responsibility in finding a place, is highlighted as problematic and can reproduce inequalities for non-traditional students. An example from our study is as follows:

“ Ronan, who is a working-class student with a disability, struggled to find a suitable placement in his second year and, eventually, when he did, found the experience to be extremely poor for him - something which he feels has marred, not only his time in university, but as he sees it, provides him with little hope of work in the future. Ronan’s disability means that he struggles with social interactions and, as he said, he finds interviews particularly difficult. The work placement for him was ‘a disaster’ (Ireland).

Clare is a mature student from one of the EU countries. She is highly experienced with a degree in Law and Psychology. She applied for an Internship Course after graduation from a HR programme. This 15 credits course is organised by HR-programme for the graduates. Clare really tried to attend the course but could not find an employer willing to accept her as an intern which limited her from getting a job within the HR sector.

“ ...I finished in the beginning of January, tried to apply for a placement for the (internship) course, ... I couldn't get the (internship) place because that was something that you had to find yourself ... I was surprised that it was so difficult ... they offered a course ...which seems to be highly relevant and I thought it would be an ideal way to get into this new profession.... Unfortunately, I didn't come to the field... the course leaders themselves could have done more to support students who were just looking for a (internship) place instead ... so I felt they should be more in contact with the employers and saying here are there the places that people are willing to take you in, rather than leaving this completely to the student. (Clare, 2nd interview, mature student, non-Swedish, HR programme, psychology, Sweden)

Clare was not accepted on a placement and believed it is because of her age and her qualifications and long experience in another profession.

In Poland, most of the interviewed staff were focused on how difficult it is to organise the educational process on a practical profiles for part-time, non-traditional students, because of the demand to engage in a very long period of mandatory integrated placement, while those students need to keep the existing jobs to support themselves and their families and to pay the fee. It was also a theme in students' stories - it was always a challenge in the past, but with new growing demands in that area, it is a big challenge for the University to arrange it and for the students to meet those demands. Very often they put their job at risk, to attend the mandatory placement and being absent at work, in order to get their degree (Poland).

INTERNSHIPS AND EXPLOITATION

In addition to the barriers to accessing these schemes for mature students, the negative dimension of internships/employment schemes lies in the misuse companies might make of them.

A trainee programme makes sense if a) the tasks assigned to the worker are congruent with their qualification profile; and b) there is a good percentage of hiring after the programme. Otherwise, these schemes could be regarded as misleading insofar as they may be ploys for hiring workers with cheaper salary conditions.

The following is an analysis of these programmes by the head of human resources of a multinational enterprise:

“ In my opinion I believe that the scholarship programme has been misunderstood and there are many organisations that are making a bad use of it. I cannot stop listening to people who have been in a scholarship programme for three years, who have gone through different types of contracts, contracts of internships, 'now I am with you six months, then continue another six months, then continue another six months ...', they are very well prepared people, people who finished the degree, who have done their final dissertation, or even have finished a Masters', who have spent their money and ... that today multinationals have misinterpreted this type of programme because they have thought that these people are going to do a job that no one likes within the organisation and that they really need someone to do that job, that it is really considered a bummer, a drag within what is the organisation, that is, the work that no one likes.

Then, no doubt, I would advocate for a scholarship plan as long as it was a short-term or medium-term plan and you could guarantee at least 80% of final incorporation to the position. Undoubtedly, if you are making these people have a background of 3 years without giving them such security, yours is an ineffective programme which demotivates young people. To date, in our organisation, since we can't guarantee that 80% of final incorporation, we have not started any scholarship contract...because we think that if we cannot afford a subsequent recruitment, the programme cannot be successful. (Álvaro, Human Resources Manager in a multinational enterprise, Spain).

PRECARITY

Another theme identified as a concern amongst students and academic staff is the problem of precarity. Precarity appears in many forms and to varying degrees across Europe but may be broadly defined as a social and economic condition of temporary intermittent, flexible and contingent employment brought about by neoliberal labour market reforms. These are evidenced amongst other things in casualisation of labour, low salaries, and the weakening bargaining power of employees.

In this context one example is the increasing phenomenon of 'zero hour contracts'. Our research has indicated

that such contracts, which limit the entitlement and rights of employees, have become more commonplace across parts of Europe, particularly in the UK and Ireland. This is significant in that they are notable for being prevalent amongst those who have to work while studying, and thus in particular non-traditional students, but also could be a concern regarding the amount of payment that is received for work during placements. Examples of the issues and the attitudes surrounding this is related below:

“ ... it just seems like ... and if I was able to socialise maybe I could build up social skills which might help me in an interview ... and that feels like one vicious cycle of loneliness and poverty ... well ... I wouldn't say poverty as in having to eat - more like I just suppose the term precarious might be more apt ... the precarious term that is being used nowadays for people in zero-hour contract and that kind of stuff... (Final year Science student, Ireland).

“ When I finished my degree I continued to be a trainer in many areas (e.g. gender equality, interpersonal skills, team building, customer service, first aid) and I continue with the same customers (private companies). Now I'm also working as a digital marketing consultant in a German company because I did training on Boot Camp Digital Consulting, where I gained a set of skills to work in this area. I also work as a clinical psychologist. I have a lot of work but I'm an independent worker and I don't have any kind of employment contract. In the months that I don't have work, such as December and August, I don't earn money. I'm living alone, I'm renting my house, but I don't have professional stability. I need to save some money to be able to survive in the three or four months in which I don't have work. I work for over than 10 years and although I pay for social security, I don't have the right to receive a salary if I'm ill, nor to receive some kind of sick-leave subsidy. (Neurosciences Graduate, Portugal).

“ Studying doesn't guarantee success. Nowadays everyone's got a degree and, still, they have no job after graduation. We have this awareness of studying but it's not certain whether we will be able to work in our industry. (...) Everyone wants an employee who's young, has a degree and professional experience. This is sick - where are we supposed to get this experience if we get unemployed after graduation (Sylwia, 24, student, first cohort, Poland).

Eve who returned to university as a young mature student after a period of ill-health realised that she would need to work very hard to make a career for herself in academia. She completed a Masters' and is now on a doctoral programme in the UK. Of course, for many students, the university itself becomes a potential employer and Eve makes a number of points about the nature of precarious work in universities that may be worth reflecting on:

“ And with the universities ... so commercialised now I feel like it's especially difficult for people to get fair employment you know ... I feel like it's just definitely something that I would be worried about so I would now be very conscious of kind of building my CV as carefully as I can and doing what I can to try and give myself some sort of edge over the numerous other people who want the same job and the same kind of work that I do. ... So it's a shame but it's like a reality to have to think like that. ... I suppose I'm thinking of like the zero hour contracts and that kind of thing ... I am not sure how this lies in Ireland but I think it's probably across the board, getting people in [but] not giving them a full time post but essentially working full time hours and doing a lot of work. ... There's no job security whatsoever ... I'll be teaching now and you know I think it's quite exploitative when it comes to PhD students and probably post-docs ... I feel like it's incredibly unfair, for the rate of pay and the amount of work expected and required you know it's just not reflected in the pay whatsoever but I feel like you just couldn't possibly get employment without this and the university is obviously acutely aware of this (Eve, mature graduate in humanities, Ireland)

An example of the attitudes currently surrounding zero hour contracts has been highlighted by our Spanish partners in a controversy levelled at the Spanish media led by an elite chef (recognised with two Michelin stars) who is also a jury in a prime-time television contest. In an interview, this owner of a luxury restaurant has justified that the scholars do not charge for their work in the restaurants of *haute cuisine*: “you are learning from the best chefs in a real environment, you are not paying for it and you are given accommodation and food. It's a privilege. Imagine how much money that would cost to you in a Masters' degree in another sector”.

It seems this is a common practice in the most famous restaurants in Spain whose prices and benefits are exorbitant. The case has generated a certain debate at national level, with proponents of these approaches led by the president of the Confederation of Employers and detractors led by trade union organisations that have brought the matter to the courts.

LACK OF PREPARATION AND LOW QUALITY OF THE INTEGRATED PLACEMENTS

In Poland, cases of students unprepared for professional involvement in the process of placement were reported. Furthermore, low quality placements with fewer opportunities for students' professional development also were highlighted - for example where the tasks assigned were simple, bureaucratic jobs of low significance (putting stamps, filling in paper work, making coffee). To reduce the level of unpreparedness of the students, some faculties

introduced special preparatory modules, 'pre-placements workshops' which turned out to give good results and increasing students' satisfaction of the placements. To increase the quality of the workplaces, students' feedback and evaluation can play a more important role. However, it is still difficult to find an employer who will accept students for long-term placement and in some cases university's ability to control it can be limited.

AGE

A further important issue commonly reported across Europe relates to the issue of age as a continuing barrier, particularly when it is associated with other responsibilities, for example family commitments.



As to the way in which these strategies can help or hinder the recruitment of non-traditional students, from my point of view, everything will depend on the age factor, if non-traditional is an adult with family burdens, age can hinder recruitment. Especially because the first work contract usually done is the internship contract and the age limit is 30 years. (Luis, business owner/developer of entrepreneurship projects, Spain).

Points for Reflection 3.3

- ▶ *With reference to the above, what initiatives could be applied to aid the transition from non-traditional students between university and employment?*
- ▶ *Can higher education challenge precarity? If so in what ways?*

Join the Conversation!

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Summary

Our research reveals that within higher educational institutions an attentiveness and engagement with the needs of non-traditional students differs across Europe. While evidence broadly shows appreciation of the value of developing relationships with employers, our research also highlights considerations relevant to non-traditional students for staff to be alert to in aiding the transition to work. For example, appreciating the precarity of the situations of many non-traditional students and promoting greater accessibility to resources for those who have other commitments, such as employed work, outside of their time at the university. Also for reflection, the practicality, accessibility, and value of internships for non-traditional students can be further addressed, as can, where available, the links between departments and careers services.

In the following sections we will address some of the recommendations that have been identified by the participants in this research as well as looking at case studies from each of the partners in this study.

4. GUIDANCE FROM EMPLOYERS TO UNIVERSITY & STAFF TO UNIVERSITY

Points for Reflection 4.1

- ▶ *Assess and evaluate: What are the ways in which the respective domains of employers and university can help each other in the promotion of opportunities for future graduates?*
- ▶ *Consider: How these ideas and recommendations can be extended to non-traditional students?*

Employers to University

New needs for professional profiles are emerging, others are disappearing and the necessary competences are being substantially modified in all existing profiles. This evolution has produced dynamic companies, and workers much more able to transform and evolve in order to remain in demand for the labour market. This also implies the need for permanent adaptation of the education system, which must become more dynamic in order to be able to prepare the professionals of the present and the future.

Social economy and, in general, social innovation linked to technological innovation is another trend in expansion as it is generating new fields of entrepreneurship and employment in which universities should play a leader role. Going forwards, employers have recommended engagement with the following issues amongst university staff and their respective institutions:

- ▶ Elaborating professional profiles catalogues for the different undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, so that the employers better identify what the university offer is. In this way they would be able to collaborate in order to make the offer fit better with the demands of the world of work.
- ▶ Creating experts' committees or panels composed of university professors and managers, careers staff and business executives. These committees would identify the needs of each professional sector in order to improve student training.
- ▶ Organising seminars and round tables with representatives of the labour market on a periodic basis. This would allow students to get to know the different labour organisations, and identify the profiles they are looking for. In addition, it would help them when facing personnel selection processes.
- ▶ Promoting self-employment as a way of insertion in the workplace and to improve employability.
- ▶ Including greater presence of emotional intelligence in the syllabuses. Social skills (especially the ability to get integrated and take part in work teams) and emotional education are key competences in the world of work.
- ▶ Higher education institutions have to communicate better with students who, after all, are key to their future attractiveness and success.

Staff to University

Further feedback provided by staff to university recommended the following:

- ▶ At the level of each centre or faculty, plans can be developed to foster employability; plans based on seminars that present both success and failure experiences.
- ▶ Provide individualised counseling to students with entrepreneurial initiatives.
- ▶ Since the curricular internships have a great relevance in employability and currently they are limited to the last two years of a diploma, the voluntary activities should be fostered so that the student can carry out professional activities from the very first year. These activities would enhance their network of contacts, in addition to improving their skills of employability and work experience.

Join the Conversation!

We encourage you to contribute your responses and continue the conversation on Twitter...@Employ2016

5. STUDENT VOICES

Perceptions on Employment

Generally speaking, students mentioned two major points to enhance the relationship with employers and the transition into employment:

(1) to increase the involvement of employers with students through classes and mentoring programmes so that this relationship can be more continuous and strong. Beyond this, most of the students think the higher educational institutions should build bridges with employers to make internships, work-placements and future job opportunities easier;

(2) to improve the career services of the university to support students in the transition to employment. Although some students acknowledge that the university is not responsible for seeking employment for their students, they mentioned that they felt alone in the transition into employment.

In the following students provide personal accounts of their experience of higher education and the transfer to the labour market. Please read through and consider the perceptions that are revealed:

“ “ In my opinion the aim of the studies lies not in teaching the theory, which nowadays everyone can find on the Internet or in the library. The studies aim at preparing for the real work with others, in a given profession or specialisation that graduation guarantees. Higher education definitely lacks practical knowledge. Student practices are a mere “substitute” showing only a tiny part of the school work and the most typical situations at work. The university curriculum is overloaded with theoretical subjects that do not help in the teachers’ professional workshop. When it comes to working with special needs children, the early childhood education specialisation does not prepare you to such challenges. School head teachers hiring new teachers expect them to cope with the whole class as well as with education of a particular child. What would help the graduates to adapt more fluently to their future job and would give them more confidence is a greater involvement of academic staff in practice, not in theory (Kinga, a 27-years-old pedagogy student, first cohort, Poland).

“ “ ...But I’m so inexperienced, so it feels that one gets a lot of knowledge from the programme and as well much stuff with all critical perspectives on things, one knows actually what science should be, how to find things that you really have to get from the university, and it feels like this pure practical knowledge, the real one, you cannot get from here ... it feels, it feels like I’m ready though I do not really know, so you are not there ..., this we should hope anyway, but well I do not know, I hope you can feel that they have benefited from this education, and then I feel that the high demands from the jobs sound more fun than a requirement that one should have it too, otherwise it is not interesting selection, (Amanda, student, Sweden)

“ “ I have always enjoyed studying. We were so poor and my parents had no conditions to support my studies. So, I left school before ending high school and I have had to go to work and earn money to support myself. It is not easy to talk about it... But I wanted to go back to school because I always wanted to study Medicine or Psychology. I have always had the ambition to have a professional career. I left my parents’ house at 16/17 years old and I started to work in an animal farm. Then, I came to Faro and started to work at the Red Cross. A few years later, I applied to the National Institute of Medical Emergency and I’m working there until now. When I solved the financial issue, I decided to start to study again and I applied to HE through the special access programme for mature students (Female, 35, graduate from Clinical Psychology, Portugal).

“ “ I think that the lectures are very much rooted in, it’s hard to say, in the academic world, to listen to a lecture on phenomenology, I will not have so much advantage, I feel that, perhaps I could use it if I intend to study further, I like to continue with a Masters’ or anything (Marta, student, Sweden)

“ “ ...I want to better myself. I didn’t do it when I was younger, I want to do it so that I can be able to say to myself well I’ve got a degree now and now I’m going to get my job and, you know, I’ll be confident going into a job because I’ll know I’ll have that behind me [...] (Julia, final year Humanities student, Ireland)

“ “ You are asking me this in a moment so unmotivated of my life that I feel I am going to cry. I feel that the system to get employment is string-pulling... Even though I have more skills, more preparation, etc., they are going to take the one who is a friend of such and such, and my thinking about employability is

looking for someone, a colleague, that could open one door for me, presenting my CV for me in one place. I know that what works in employability is cronyism, contacts, and it frustrates you many times. (José Antonio, Graduate in Journalism, first generation student, Spain).

“ I think companies are definitely tailoring it like ‘this is our role, this is our company, this is who we want for the job’ and they’re making that public. So you can either choose to pretend to be that person or you can make yourself into that person and I think no matter what you do if you’re not the person the company wants you’re not going to get employed (Anne, University of Warwick, UK).

“ [During and after the degree] I applied for everything. I applied for every job on Activelink [social and community sector jobs portal]. And I wasn’t getting anywhere. It was very disheartening the whole thing. ... I got three interviews in a year and a half. Competency-based interviews. I didn’t know anything about that. I didn’t do any planning or anything. The first one - I did a terrible interview. ... And when I finished the Masters’ I was applying aggressively and not getting anywhere. Very disheartening. ... Maybe I could have gone to the careers department [at the university] and found out about competency-based interviews but I didn’t. My fault I suppose. But what I did was I got involved with a job club. ... I saw a notice in my local library about a jobs club and I went in and talked to them. They have different things - different levels. They had a programme for graduates. I applied for that and did that for two months on a Friday after my masters. Job Care. How to network. LinkedIn. Jobnet. How to do interviews. How to do CVs. How to do a pitch. How to sell yourself within three minute - all that stuff. ... It was all alien to me. All these buzz words. ... It was brilliant. I had to go in in a suit every week. It taught me how to network. And there were all these employers there. I was mentored by a guy from the Civil Service and he was brilliant - told me what they were looking for in interviews (Anthony, graduate, Ireland).

“ What is important is the ability to advance one’s personal development skills development, enlarging one’s knowledge by participation in various courses and training. This involves having control of what I have, what I can do, what I have achieved so far, but also being aware of what is happening on the labour market. I work while at the same time I continue my education. All the time I have in the back of my head that I can be fired but also that I can find a new, much better position. I wouldn’t say I regularly follow the job ads on the Internet, I rather check what the actual employers’ expectations are. The point is to be one step ahead, (Jakub, a 30-years-old graduate, Poland).

“ Last year I went to a Royal Bank of Scotland dinner. It wasn’t part of the application process - it was kind of discovering more about us but then from that they did invite me to apply to them. I think because it’s informal but formal but there are employees who have been with the company quite a while or sometimes graduates so you can talk to them. And because it’s dinner, it’s not an interview setting you can ask them any questions you want to, you can get tips. It does actually help (Anne, University of Warwick, UK).

Point for Reflection 5.1

For reflection and discussion: What issues are revealed by students with respect to their perceptions about the nature of the transitional move into employment?

Join the Conversation!

We encourage you to contribute your responses and continue the conversation on Twitter...@Employ2016

6. CASE STUDIES

Employer and Academic Support for Non-traditional students

In the following section we invite you to read through various case studies from across Europe to gain an insight into how employers and educational establishments have worked to produce successful transitions as well as, in some cases, the ongoing challenges.

CASE STUDY 1 - PORTUGAL

The Community Centre of Estói

The Community Centre of Estói has existed since 1998. It supports the local population in two different areas: providing services for children and for the elderly. Older citizens can find there a day centre, a home, and a home-care service. The institutions employ about 70 people. Among the various criteria used to select job seekers, the institution values most creativity, the ability to work in teams and, above all, the human profile of the candidates. Hence, they do two job interviews. In the first people looking for a job are usually nervous and behave more formally. Only in the second interview, they manage to create a more informal climate that allows evaluating people's human qualities. Contrarily to many institutions, they employ a significantly high number of non-traditional graduates. Regarding gender, for example, they do encourage maternity: "We never made a study on the issue, but I doubt that exists an institution with so many pregnant employees and this has to do with our philosophy. Some of our collaborators were recruited during pregnancy and the institution never, under any conditions, rejected someone only because she is pregnant" (Diana, Community Centre Director). Almost all of their workers followed a non-traditional path and begun to work at the institution as mature graduates.

These are people who have experience and not just professional experience, but a life experience that makes a difference. Usually they have a higher good-sense because they have had the opportunity, in the past, not to have good-sense. They have gone through a learning process and their good-sense is noticeable in their approach both to people and to problems. They are also very determined and have a great motivation to overcome obstacles. This is what these people have brought to our institution (Diana, Community Centre Director).

Therefore, in this community centre non-traditional graduates are not a problem. It can happen that younger graduates in their first job without any life experience have more troubles adapting. The institution also employs people with disabilities (although, in this moment, none of them is a graduate) and workers with a migrant background (as for example, the chief-cook). Finally, the institution believes that training is fundamental and therefore builds an annual plan of training for their workers.

CASE STUDY 2 - SPAIN

CMETT (Career Guidance, Mentoring, Training and Traineeship) Programme in the UNED (Open University)

Given its specific conditions, the Open University has the higher proportion of mature students, compared to any other university in the country. Its Center for Employ Guidance and Information (COIE-UNED) launched the CMETT Programme 'Professional Paid Internships' for students over 40 years with a desire to gain professional experience, employability skills and mentoring advice for job search. The selected students undertake a period of 4 months of paid internships in selected companies, receive training in employability skills and have a personal mentor to guide them in the search for employment after the internship.

The most positive aspect of the programme, in addition to being specifically aimed at mature students, is that companies are asked to host students with a commitment to recruitment, and hence the labour insertion index once the internships are completed is high.

There is another itinerary within the programme (CMETT Entrepreneurship) aimed at promoting entrepreneurship through specific training actions, individualised advice and financing aid for the development of entrepreneurial ideas in viable business projects.

CASE STUDY 3 - IRELAND

Access Office, Maynooth University

The Access Office (MAP) provides a range of services and supports for non-traditional students on entry to and during their time on at university. The Access Office at Maynooth works with a range of non-traditional students and perspective students including under-represented school leavers, students with disabilities, and students from ethnic minorities. The work of the Access Office is founded on four key principles of community outreach; pathways to university; transition to Maynooth; supports for students. The support for current students include: mature/disability/access student advisory service; academic departmental MAP advisors; needs assessment for students with disabilities; assistive technology; technology transition programme; student central for students with significant learning needs; examination accommodation; one-to-one learning support; extra academic tuition; support with accommodation for students with disabilities; dyslexia screening. Although the Access Office doesn't provide explicit careers support and advice, the work and ethos of the service is very aware that students are passing through Maynooth and as such the supports and advice that they offer in university are designed to facilitate students continued growth and independence after graduation. For example, the disability services has moved away from a model of support which offers a suite of high-end learning technology which students access, but rather they support students through a variety of personal, social and technological means to develop a personalised, portable and sustainable range of supports that students can use and adapt throughout college life and beyond. The disability services also work to localise supports within academic departments and increase awareness of ways in which inclusive educational practice benefit all students.

CASE STUDY 4 - POLAND

Project: "Practical Education for the Labour Market for students at the University of Lower Silesia" ("Praktyczne kształcenie dla rynku pracy dla studentów DSW")

The project was seen as innovative due to the introduction of a module into the curriculum - the aim of this module was to prepare students for the labour market through professional diagnostic of their competence potential, and through studying the organisational culture of the internship host organisation, as well as of the expectations of the intern and the employer. Key elements of the project are also an alternative way of managing the intern in the workplace ('reflection in practice') and the inclusion into the internship programme of a closing workshop which incorporated feedback from employers to students-interns. The impact of the project has been an increase in employability among students of the final year at the University of Lower Silesia (DSW).

The stages of the project were as follows: (i) preparing the student for the job/internship market - competence assessment survey and competence building sessions led by qualified trainers; (ii) internship with the employer - combined with ongoing reflection captured in a reflective learning diary; (iii) workshops reinforcing the results of the internship.

Before the start of the internship, the candidates took part in sessions delivered by trainers. These sessions addressed the competences that employers had identified as lacking in university graduates, i.e. social, entrepreneurial and analytical skills. Each session culminated in a self-diagnosis of student's competences, and as a result of this process an internship programme framework was created for each of the internship participants. During the competence development sessions which were delivered using the *action learning* method, students learned the extent of their existing knowledge, which competences they already had and which they were lacking in. This led to the creation of the individual internship programmes which, after consultations with employers, were then used and followed for the duration of the internship. The final stage of the internship project was reinforcement workshops whose aim is to reinforce the effect of the competence development sessions and of the internship as a whole. Lastly, the student-intern receives feedback from the trainers and the employers, combined with the self-knowledge gained of their own competences and behaviours in the workplace.

CASE STUDY 5 - SWEDEN

Careers Service Support

The career staff on the university level has several activities for getting in contact with the labour market as well as individual support service for career guidance and CV coaching. For students with disabilities there are special activities such as writing support workshops and individual coaching for coping with

the studies. On the programme level there are also both general activities and individual support from local counsellors. However, one obstacle seems to be the low activity from students. There are about 50.000 students at Stockholm University and the activities bring about 30 students each time. One of the practices is a voluntary internship course that is provided after the HR-programme to the graduates. Its aim is to give graduates opportunities to find an employer and during ten weeks get practical experiences. Students get information about the course during their studies. For those who do not have practical experiences (part-time job during the study, and networks) this is a perfect opportunity to get a foot into the labour market. Many, after internship, get employment directly, or obtain recommendation and references to next job. However there remain challenges with low participation. About 70 student graduates from the programme each year, but only about 10 students apply for the internship course.

CASE STUDY 6 - UK

Partnership between University and Public Sector Employers

Amongst state institutions an example of 'best practice' in terms of promoting an initiative towards building effective bridges into employment can be observed in the case of a working partnership having been set up between a government local authority and an established university that provides the opportunity for students to both train as practitioners within the relevant field, social work, as well as to gain an academic understanding of the theoretical background to the relevant terrain. The training balances the rigors of preparing for exams within an academic environment with the practical frontline challenges of working in the landscape of social work in the company of practitioners. The switch between the two environments serves as a platform for students to establish both the hard and soft skills that are a prerequisite of successfully becoming a social worker: the 'resilience' to encounter and deal with 'angry and disaffected' families as well as practicing the skills required to become 'exceptional communicators', the latter being reported as 'the fundamental skill, you need not only to be able to orally talk and be able to hold your own but you also need to be able to do that and to be able to do that in a written form as well because our audiences will be very varied so it will be from the, you know, the young child who needs to understand why they're being assessed and why they're having this work done with them to a judge reading a statement' (Jane, Public Sector, UK)

A bursary to help cover their costs is available to students on this course. Notably the students on this course are from all backgrounds but are very often non-traditional - "We...have more people in their 30s/40s" - who often have a wide array of experiences to draw upon. Indeed, "sometimes its their story that brings them here... encourages them... to want to be a social worker." The success of the course lies in providing a bridge between theory and practice, between the university environment and the world of work and provides students with a basis from which to move forward and potentially move into working as a social worker as a career.

Points for Reflection 6.1

Consider the following:

- ▶ How can aspects of the above examples be applied to your own academic or business practices?
- ▶ What initiatives or innovations could be promoted in your working environment to improve transition into employment?

7. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Points for Reflection 7.1

- ▶ *In the contemporary world, how best can we understand the relationship between academia and employers?*
- ▶ *What contributions and initiatives can employers and university staff make to promote the needs and aspirations of students?*
- ▶ *Given the challenges we have addressed in previous chapters, do these initiatives effectively extend to the needs of non-traditional students?*

Summary

For the contemporary educational institution, ensuring an effective transition into employment for students is paramount.

With access to information on performance outcomes becoming more accessible to prospective students, universities are increasingly being judged in terms of their completion rates and graduate outcomes. Furthermore, completion rates and graduate outcomes are increasingly monitored and rewarded by governments in the form of performance-based funding.

With this in mind, universities increasingly strive to improve outcomes through diverse initiatives including hosting courses with integrated work placements and enhancing their mentoring and career development services. However, our study has revealed that across Europe, with reference to our partner institutions, these developments have been unevenly supported or financed.

Furthermore, even as these services have developed there remains a question as to how far these advances have taken into account the needs of non-traditional students. The significance of this issue should not be underestimated. Where the challenges of particular minorities go unrecognised, they are often left out of the process, thereby further reinforcing social divides and inequalities.

Hence, the concern going forwards is to create a discourse around this issue and to develop methods for widening opportunity for non-traditional students to successfully enter into the workforce and achieve sustainable long-term, meaningful employment.

For employers, the advantages of promoting a beneficial relationship between themselves and higher education are evident not least in the promotion of relevant skill-sets and the smooth transition of graduates into productive employment roles. Such issues are valuable to public, private and third sectors. Encouraging skills, enterprise and seizing the potential of those entering into the labour market are essential in maintaining quality, promoting growth and delivering a successful future for business within a highly competitive marketplace.

We think the role employers' play in achieving a smooth transition into employment also entails promoting equality of opportunity, extending the net as widely as possible to capitalise on human potential. Significantly, this includes tapping the rich vein of abilities and skills that are possessed by non-traditional students.

With respect to these issues we venture to offer the following recommendations to university staff and employers.

Recommendations

FOR UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT/STAFF

1. Enhance awareness of challenges facing non-traditional students amongst staff
2. Embed employability initiatives within mainstream curricula where possible
3. Tailor employability initiatives to non-traditional groups
4. Establish and further develop relationships between university and different sectors of business and industry and seek opportunities to align these relationships with objectives within academic courses
5. Encourage opportunities for negotiation and evolution of relevant courses to attend to employer and market needs
6. Monitor student perceptions of the transition into employment and refine methods for aiding this process in an effective manner
7. Monitor the performance of non-traditional groups against strategic targets
8. Promote extra-curricular activities, including the use of careers services, that are sensitive to non-traditional students needs and availability; for example during weekends and family events
9. Provide specific training for staff on equity issues related to non-traditional students
10. Ensure that careers service uptake by non-traditional students is monitored and evaluated
11. For student unions - to promote clubs and societies that promote engagement for non-traditional students
12. Promote career development planning in mainstream university curricula

FOR EMPLOYERS

1. Enhance awareness amongst recruiting staff regarding challenges facing non-traditional students in the employment process
2. To promote inclusion rather than exclusion! - Commitment to equity goals in the employment process and in the workplace with the endeavour to promote opportunities for non-traditional students
3. Identify, promote and monitor targets for hiring students with a non-traditional background
4. Within the advertising of employment opportunities to encourage applications from students from non-traditional backgrounds
5. Build and further mobilise relationships with careers services and other departments within educational institutions to cultivate knowledge and understanding between academia and higher education with the endeavour to advance student transition into the labour market
6. Promote internships that are attentive to equity issues - e.g. they are monitored carefully to ensure they are not serving to increase the divide between traditional and non-traditional students
7. Promote flexible working practices that at once serve to get the best out of employees while also being responsive to their e.g. family obligations
8. Enhance relationships with clubs and societies at higher educational institutions that are targeted towards minorities
9. Where relationships are made with specific traditional student societies and associations to investigate how these can be linked with minority/non-traditional groups
10. Commitment to diversity and empowerment within recruitment and the workplace

Further Resources

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Have Your Say!

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