

FORUM

MEMBER
MAGAZINE

Discussing international education



EMPLOYABILITY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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JOBS AS IF THE 21ST CENTURY MATTERED



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER GRADUATION?

Whether graduates seek work in the host country or the sending country, it's in the best interest of both national governments and individual institutions to facilitate international students' transition into the workforce and accurately track employment trends.

Employability and graduate outcomes are now front and centre for governments and students alike. The address delivered at the Universities Australia conference in February by Dan Tehan, Minister for Education, recognised that “putting students at the heart of the system must also mean considering their needs [...] after they graduate.”¹

Meanwhile, the UK government’s 2019 international education strategy outlined a desire to “share good practice in how universities effectively support international students into employment and further study, both here in the UK and when they return to their home nation”; and to “enhance the evidence base on international graduate outcomes”.²

A focus on – and investment in – employability helps national higher education sectors to appeal to prospective international students, many of whom are seeking confirmation that their overseas study choice will deliver not only a rewarding study experience but also lifelong value.

WHY FOCUS ON EMPLOYABILITY?

There is a growing body of evidence from agent networks, pathway providers, rankings providers, research agencies and youth panels to suggest that career impact is the most important factor for international students when selecting their future institution.³

It is sometimes a student’s firm ambition to pursue post-study employment in their host country. In other cases, they are keen to return home once they graduate. Either way, they expect their overseas education to give them an ongoing advantage in the graduate jobs market. Many look to their university to provide proactive support.

Higher education institutions are starting to realise that helping their international graduates to achieve their career aspirations can have a positive impact on all concerned. Professionally fulfilled graduates are more likely to be loyal and supportive alumni, and employers value well-prepared employees and tend to rate highly the universities that they come from. Furthermore, insights into the

employment outcomes of international graduates, backed up by narratives of success, can be a great asset for marketing and international student recruitment efforts.

However, providing the employability support that is needed – and ensuring that false hopes are not raised – is easier said than done.

POST-STUDY WORK

What can institutions do to support international graduates who want to stay on and work in the host country? This is a hot topic in the UK. The announcement that a new post-study work route would shortly be introduced resulted in a surge of interest in the UK as a study destination, particularly in South Asia. Students from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are all focused on opportunities to work in their country of study following their degree. And UK universities are delighted at the prospect of diversifying source countries, given concerns about an over-reliance on China.

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However, there are also concerns about being able to meet the high expectations of international students when it comes to post-study work.

Some lessons can be learned from Australia’s experience with its temporary graduate visa, which was introduced in 2008 and updated in 2013. A recent study shows that “many graduates did not work full-time, and they did not necessarily work in their field of study. A considerable number [...] were employed in retail, hospitality or as cleaners.”⁴ The study also records a lack of understanding of the graduate visa among employers.

Universities in other countries should take note. Helping students to find graduate-level opportunities in their host country requires significant time and effort. A strategic approach should involve engaging with international students early in their studies to provide them with the tools they need to make them more attractive to potential employers. Institutions should also gather data on (and raise awareness of visa options among) those employers in the local region who are more likely to hire international graduates.

students with international ambitions, as well as for Chinese students due to return home. Collaborating via a consortium is a good way to make such events viable.

But what are the actual employment outcomes of international graduates? The picture is a very positive one. According to Asia Careers Group data collected on more than 50,000 internationally-educated Asian graduates since 2016, by far the majority go on to have successful careers, with higher than average earnings and an excellent career trajectory.⁷

connection between the educational experience they provide and their international graduates' subsequent career success.

If universities are perceived as 'ivory towers', disconnected from the world of work, they risk alienating both governments and young people. To combat this, they need to be able to provide evidence of the destinations of their international graduates and the lifetime value of a degree.

An active decision to make graduate outcomes and employability an institutional priority positions a university effectively for the future, while also showing that it recognises and respects its students' motivations for studying overseas.

— LOUISE NICOL & VICKY LEWIS

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EMPLOYMENT BACK HOME

Despite huge levels of interest in post-study work in the host country, it is usually only a small minority of international graduates who actually take the opportunity. The majority return home following their studies. Chinese graduates in particular are increasingly inclined to return to China soon after graduation.⁵

This is a challenge for university careers services, which tend to have modest budgets and have not historically had a remit to support international students with their job search back home.

However, UK universities are already taking steps in the right direction. The GW4 group of institutions⁶ has been providing opportunities for Chinese graduates to meet employers through graduate recruitment fairs held in China over the past three years. Other groups of institutions have organised UK-based recruitment fairs for students wishing to work in China. These are useful for domestic

OUTCOMES AND INSTITUTIONAL 'PERSONALITY'

Analysis of the data shows that the outcomes of a university's graduates reflect the personality and mission of the institution. The nature of the institution affects whether graduates are more likely to found their own companies, to work in small or medium-sized enterprises, to find success in the creative industries, to work in education *etc.*

Smart universities interrogate the data and use the findings to develop a strong narrative of employment outcomes, backed up by case studies. Highlighting the destinations of international graduates helps to differentiate an institution, reinforcing messages about its distinctive characteristics.

In the current period of global instability – characterised by the coronavirus, Brexit, rising student debt and youth unemployment – it is more important than ever for universities to prove the

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