

A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

Title: Employable Graduates for Responsible Employers

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AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone wishing to make an employability case for the inclusion of education for sustainable development (ESD) in the higher education curriculum.

SUMMARY

This Briefing is a summary of the full report (details below).

This research looks at the links between sustainability and employability in the graduate job market in relation to higher education teaching and learning. The researchers interviewed a wide range of students, graduates, employers, Sector Skills Councils, professional bodies, and careers staff to explore the rise of the ethical graduate jobseeker and recruiter. The research primarily focused on evidence for how the career choices of graduates and the recruitment of employers was being influenced by the sustainable development and CSR agenda of employers. The report identifies the mismatch between the needs of socially- and environmentally-responsible employers and the education and careers/employment services of universities. It also recommends how universities can change their culture, governance, career advice, teaching styles as well as employer links through work experience, volunteering and low-level research led by students with employers.

RATIONALE

Some people in HEIs would like to know if there is evidence for demand for sustainability literacy before a strategy is undertaken to redesign curriculum. The project partners sought to explore the links between sustainability and employability in the graduate job market in relation to higher education teaching and learning. The research attempted to answer the following questions:

- What is the evidence for any emerging demand from employers for environmentally-responsible graduate employees?
- What is the evidence that students and recent graduates are making career choices that are influenced by environmental and social responsibility and selecting employers who have adopted responsible practices as well as policies?
- Is the ethical stance of an employer a significant consideration for students and graduates when choosing potential employers?
- Are employers looking to recruit graduates that have either an awareness of sustainability issues or particular competencies that may help the employer to progress their environmental and social responsibility?
- Are there any gaps between the values, culture and competencies of new graduate recruits and the requirements of employers?
- How far should the employability agenda in universities be influenced by the sustainable development agenda of employers and what are the challenges for higher education teaching, learning and career advice?
- How can HEIs and their career services help match the supply of sustainably-literate graduates with any demand from employers?

THE APPROACH

Between June 2006 and February 2007, StudentForce researched, firstly, the potential supply of graduate employees committed to careers with environmentally- and socially-responsible employers by identifying the needs and expectations of students and recent graduates. Secondly, the needs and expectations of employers committed to environmental and social responsibility were identified by researching graduate recruitment demands. Information was gathered from three main stakeholders (students/graduates, university career staff, and employers) via online questionnaires, structured interviews, focus groups, and workshops.

FINDINGS

General

The trend to more responsible employers is affecting the graduate job market and the demand for more particular competencies from recent graduate recruits.

There are signs that the graduate employability agenda is now more closely linked to the employer sustainability agenda.

There is mounting evidence and media coverage that students want to work for ethical employers who are environmentally and socially responsible.

Many HEIs are responding to the challenges of education for sustainable development through institutional changes in terms of the Campus, Curriculum and Community, but not so much in terms of Competencies or Careers. Some:

Students/graduates:

- considered the social and environmental ethics of an employer before making a career choice.
- are concerned about the preparation for their employment provided by universities and believed that sustainable development and CSR should be taught more at universities.
- expected more of their future employers and their universities than of themselves, in terms of their social and environmental responsibility.
- said that the social and environmental responsibility of the employer was not the main deciding factor, but a differentiating one in their choice of job.

Employers:

- considered the social/environmental ethics, values and experience of university students as part of their graduate recruitment.
- said universities should do more to prepare students for working with employers who are socially and environmentally responsible.
- provided specialist induction and training for graduate recruits on their social and environmental responsibilities.
- needed graduate recruits with specific competencies to support their social and environmental responsibilities.
- wanted more interdisciplinarity in universities as a way of teaching about social and environmental responsibility.

University careers staff:

- requested information and guidance on the social and environmental reputation and performance of employers.
- confirmed a growing trend for students and employers to consider the employer's social and environmental responsibility.
- suggested that sustainability competencies should be more recognised in university teaching.
- are becoming cynical about university statements of responsibility.
- recognised the employer's needs for social and environmental responsibility.

TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Teaching

- Raise academic staff awareness about sustainable development and CSR
- Relate student and staff volunteering to academic learning
- Link universities and employers

- Link sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (CSR) on campus with teaching and learning
- Influence the educators for sustainable development
- Build on student behaviour

Advising Students

- Raise awareness of careers staff about sustainable development and CSR
- Guide students/graduates
- Educate about careers as part of courses

Teaching Competencies

- Match academic and work-related competencies
- Promote values education
- Promote citizenship alongside university teaching and learning as a key part of studentship

Comparing Students

- Replicate this research for specific subjects and employment sectors

Developing Curricula

- Raise awareness about funding streams to market research employer and student needs and interests and to develop new teaching and learning
- Explore new curriculum opportunities

Changing university culture

- All employment sectors are being encouraged to welcome culture change as a route to more sustainable behaviour change.
- HEIs need to enable students to clarify and express their own values, and match them with those of prospective employers.
- A move towards more transformative education will enable students, graduates, and the whole HEI community to adopt more socially- and environmentally-responsible behaviour.

Enabling Commitments

- Innovative ways in which employers and new graduates can make mutual ethical commitments to their social and environmental responsibilities could be explored.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full research report may be downloaded from

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/EmployableGraduates2008.pdf>.