

## **Notes of the Graduate recruiters' and employer representatives discussion**

### **14 April 2010**

**Focus: Perspectives on the Value, Opportunities and Challenges of life-wide learning and co-curricular, extra-curricular awards.**

*Chair Carl Gilleard CEO Association of Graduate Recruiters*

*John Morewood, Senior Graduate Recruitment & Development Manager, HSBC BANK PLC*

*Louise Punter, Chief Executive of the Surrey Chambers of Commerce*

*Bob Athwall, Head of Graduate Schemes at RWEnPower*

*Reporter: Alexandra Hemmingway University of Surrey Careers Department*

In introducing the session Carl Gilleard highlighted an extract from the conference flyer which he strongly endorsed.

'Many Universities and colleges are recognizing that a more complete higher education pays attention to students' development gained through informal learning in the many aspects of their lives that they choose to engage in outside their programme of study. We are calling this life-wide learning to symbolize the many parallel learning enterprises that exist in a learner's life at any point in time. This conference provides an opportunity to share thinking, practices, policies and research to gain deeper understandings of the ways in which higher education is already enabling students to benefit from and create for themselves a more complete educational experience that integrates formal learning within an academic programme and real world non-formal learning and experiences.'

But what are employers looking for in potential employees experiential learning profiles?  
AGR recruits approx 30,000 grads into graduate level jobs

#### **John Morewood, Senior Graduate Recruitment and Development Manager, HSBC**

Recruit 200-300 grads per year. What these awards give is arguably more important than their degrees. Not about degree class (which is contrary to normal distribution curves) - they just use that as a filter out not in. Also not about subject. Only 36% of his last cohort had a financial-related course. Not about the Uni too much. 43% of grads prev year from 'top 39' and 63% last year

Financial services is a people business

Looking for people with interpersonal skills, good with customers and clients, good leaders

No application form (except for investment bank) as found 'perfect' ones for sale online!

Skills he's testing on what people have been doing - how much experience outside academia.

Numerical reasoning (31% fail at this stage, roughly)

12% out at verbal reasoning

Criteria based interview - 28% fail. Evidencing how they work with others, what drive and personal dev they've undertaken, how they've worked with customers.

Then 14% get to assessment centre.

Work experience is important. Most successful candidates (75%) have it.

Any award encouraging students to develop in those key areas, it's well worthwhile from HSBCs perspective. They are directly involved in two schemes.

Having the award itself doesn't skip people through the process, obviously, the students need to evidence what they can offer. Having gone through the awards is likely to make it easier to give that evidence. Some students seem to expect it to speak for itself.

**Fail reasons - no drive and commitment, prioritising development, proactively overcoming challenges, customer drive and linking their experiences to show that (most awards don't have customer/client relationships section), lack of planning and prep for the interview, not understanding roles, skills, attributes, no rapport or communication skills, ran out of time, didn't read task instructions, nerves.**

Questions aren't superficial "tell us about commercial awareness" but tell us about a situation in which you have....

**KEY WISH Should include teaching on HOW to communicate, evidence, sell their experiences and achievements. Must tie things together**

**Louise Punter, Chief Executive of Surrey Chambers of Commerce**

Had thin sandwich in her own experience - saw a real difference between her and "straight" grads' readiness for work. The work experience element is really important

Agrees - it's rare that companies specifically want specific degrees or firsts. Key things are the interpersonal skills, namely: Communication, team work, initiative, solve problems, make things happen, able to use the telephone.

Basic phone skills frequently really lacking - grads want direction on 'what do I say?'  
Also many issues with interview skills and ability to sell themselves

Businesses DO want to engage with learning opportunities like interview skills and so on. Carl Gilleard also mentioned this - it won't be hard to get employers and their employees interested in contributing.

Grads may not immediately have opportunities to use their full range of skills - not instant top jobs - but they still need that kind of exposure ready for the future.

**What do I look for?**

**Commitment, self-awareness, drive to improve, resilience to learn from mistakes, enthusiasm**

SME sector likely to be growing in importance for graduate recruitment - especially as many are future focussed and technology based.

**Bob Athwall, Head of Graduate Schemes at RWE nPower**

50 grads a year, 100 also in-programme who he also supports to develop their careers  
AGR board of directors

These awards, there are loads and I've lost count now. However, I believe in what you're trying to achieve, but **what is the purpose of this?** nPower going to stop looking at qualifications and instead focus on their own determinations around emotional intelligence. **2:1s aren't comparable!!!** Not the same quality across the country, so pointless to use that.

Bob didn't work in first degree, but went through SU presidency twice. He wouldn't get into his own grad scheme so it was the SU work he did that allowed him to prove himself and get onto TESCO grad scheme - employable through skills more than quals.

Influencing, networking have been his key strengths and skills he uses up to today. Didn't come from his mathematical modelling degree.

In MBA, felt that he was seen as a hindrance to the academic staff whose time he was paying for.

WHY DO STUDENTS COME TO UNIVERSITY? What do they want or expect...and are we delivering it?

Engineers, scientists and general management grads are part of nPower's schemes. The subject skill isn't enough on its own for those technical staff. They must be able to communicate and sell their ideas and to deliver results. Bob thinks that's universal too - all organisations need that. Academics/universities don't seem to focus on getting students to learn how to and see the importance of getting things right first time and making things happen at the right level and quality.

Awards (or rather their content, regardless of how delivered) need to be embedded and genuinely match in with studies.

### **Q&A to the panel**

Tony, Queensland uni of tech (40,000 students, 5,000 staff).

What are the important variables in sustainable partnerships between Universities and industry?

nPower's way includes running a student competition for teams which include an academic too.

The format of that has the communication elements that he sees as most important, so encourages students to develop the skills and strengths they're looking for.

CG - business/education partnerships need to identify a mutual agenda then develop mutual trust then create a mutual language. Communication needs to match!

Anne Lee, Uni of Surrey

Concerned about emphasis on interpersonal skills over the top of things like judgement. Hitler had excellent personal skills!

Bob - interspers is not just communication but his view is that the judgement will come when grads have the right opportunities and experience, which company is responsible to provide

Louise - judgement and analysis is crucial, but if you can't get the message across to persuade, then you've lost the impact of those other skills. That's why it's communication that usually comes to the top of the pile

John - what are we trying to do on our schemes? Our investment analyst schemes, for example, do need that judgement, but the bulk of ours are long term focussed and we plan 8 years ahead for that senior management. Grads need to engage and influence people, then we make sure to give them the technical skills through IFS degree (further study is integral

part). Judgement comes from experience and if I haven't got the ability to develop rapport I'm not going to get to that.

Anne disagrees - she thinks personal skills are/should be secondary and that judgement is what they should look for.

Bob - sees that many grads are above their stations, too cocky because they've never failed so far. They often come out of uni thinking that they know it all already but they don't. They're looking for the potential: independent work, motivation and commitment. They then can turn that potential into performance.

Louise - leadership and management skills always come up wanting. The 'make it happen' element is lacking but if they have sufficient communication skills they'll increase chances of success

Terry Dray - we're trying to help our students manage complexity and idiosyncrasies of recruitment processes and "weapons of mass rejection" like putting in EQ testing. How can we prepare them? Do we have enough dialogue with employers to achieve this?

John - we've seen a maturing of our relationships with Universities. We're putting into 17 universities and increasing our presence there in order to help improve that dialogue. Also more transparency about our process. Aiming now to dispel the mystique around it, keeping it plain and simple. There are no tricks in the process, but various ways of getting people to demonstrate those skills...and many students can't. For us, the next question is How do we

?? University of Bristol

Challenge the concept that the degree content is not important. I don't think it's a true reflection of industry's belief. 40% of our degrees are accredited BY industry and I really think we DO need subject-specific skills in many areas.

Bob - agree when you need a specialist, you need a particular degree. But actually, which are the students who are getting involved in these awards? Not the specialists!

Bristol is using this award for HEAR 6.1, so ALL their students will be going through this award

## **Graduate Recruiters' and Employer Representatives Perspectives - break-out session**

14 April 2010

Yvonne Tamblin, Loughborough

Thanks for a dose of realism! We often get too caught up in the academic process, lose sight of the end aim. It's the evidence that's important, rather than how it's gathered

CG - that's a really positive start. Anybody have an opposite view?

?? Not an opposite view, I do agree we need to incorporate more into HE, but the role of Uni is not solely to produce employees for employers, it's much bigger and broader purpose than that. The research is important for industry, we also have to create good citizens as part of our role. Judgement and leadership are important too and it could be dangerous to incorporate too much of your message.

Bob - for me, I think that's the challenge. That's how it used to be, but things are changing because students are paying for their degrees and not so many are aiming for that kind of high level research, most are going in order to get jobs. Unis need to change in the future, because it's coming and the reason people go to uni is changing. We'll be better placed if we all work together for this - and I put a lot into involvement with university and a lot of my time, so practising what I preach

John - it's a balancing act. Research in UK is strong and important but not everybody can go into it and there is this issue of jobs at the end of the day. It's reached the stage now with parents paying fees (in US?) that they now want to sit in on admissions and careers advice sessions and expect the careers service to take responsibility for finding a good job for their child.

Andy Howard - we've had parents wanting to go to the job interview, getting very heavily involved. And querying when their child doesn't get the job it's the parents seeking the feedback! The marketisation of HE is with us, it's just a fact.

Janette Hampson, Bournemouth. Come back to this notion of what universities are for, they do have an issue about explaining this to the public and employers, which is evermore critical coming up to an election- not saying we're about jobs or research, but to communicate that EVERYTHING is touched by university, the healthcare we get, the petrol we put in our cars, all daily things come from university training.

Bob - what these kind of awards can do is really help those people who don't necessarily have such a rich range of opportunities to have positive, useful, life-skills enhancing experiences. Many students don't get them automatically from friends or family, they have different pressures including financially.

CG - are the students who sign up for these awards the ones who didn't need the help anyway? Has anyone been successful in broadening the appeal and getting other students involved. He's heard directly from students that they don't think of going to careers until they ALREADY think they know what they want to do! How do we get them involved earlier?

Andy - varies. Some are compulsory and credit is the carrot to draw the students in (it's very expensive and QA is an issue) the other end of the spectrum is the light touch and show how it's desirable and valuable in itself. Getting the word through with peers too. It's not about collecting badges for how many things you've done, but about finding the value in each thing.

?? Need buy in from the academic staff to make it work. Many of us are central services and have limited opportunities to get in direct touch with students.

?? London South Bank. Many students are non-trad and they really DO think that the degree in itself is or should be enough, it's a big deal to them and takes a lot to get it, so they expect it will be enough. It's really hard to get the message across and genuinely not everyone has sufficient time to achieve well on their degree as well as doing other things. That time management stays important throughout your career.

John - it would be great if we could achieve all we need in employability in year two, so in the final year they can just concentrate on their degree. Alexandra - but they aren't all ready for it at that point.

Bob - widening participation is great, but what are we going to do with them at the end? Where will they go and what kind of support and nurturing have they had in order to reach their potential. Is there enough to go around?

?? South Bank - some students might come out with a first, but if they haven't engaged with things that allow them to market themselves they can't achieve.

Cathryn Jobson - speaking as parent with kids in 20s, 30s, I think we've lost something with how we're treating them and now expecting them in early 20s to be these amazing rounded people while they've had an increasingly narrow educational experience. My own girls did gap years for that growing up experience but most people can't do that. Do we not need to start thinking about what we're doing with our teenagers?

Louise - yes, we've got too much about exam results and seeing that as success when really it's not, because even those high scorers don't have the life skills.

CJ - but aren't recruiters sometimes failing to look for potential and expecting too much?

CG - use alumni (i.e. Peers) use academics (i.e. Champions) but we have to understand that a lot of students think that if they haven't got a 2:1 they've failed. This lets them get away with not doing anything except getting that grade. Even QAA is saying the classification system is wrong, but still 66% of AGR employers do still use that 2:1 benchmark

Over half of the grads getting into schemes each year AREN'T fresh grads, they're one or two years in. The extras really are valued - as long as they can articulate what they've got. Also students tend to underestimate the level of difficulty and competition

Bob - I make no bones about it, doing our application is tough and it will take a day. I'm fine with that. But for us, we do still want the intelligence, the EQ, the skills, we're just switching away to other ways of measuring it rather than just the 2:1 filter. Getting rid of that's allowed us to get a better, wider pool of candidates. It works for us and it hasn't lowered the bar or made it easier to meet the criteria.

John - we're always desperate to see someone with a USP, an interesting story. A 'standard' experience or bar job etc can still be great IF articulated, but when looking for 'get up and go' the different experiences do make people stand out - getting sorted and organised to go and teach in China, for example, looks good.

?? Bournemouth - shouldn't we just be improving our degrees and making them more relevant and useful instead of adding on an award or something else? Benefits/differences between UK and German educational systems: minority go to Uni, if you're after other kinds of jobs you learn elsewhere/in another way. BUT WE'RE NOT IN GERMANY AND WE HAVE TO WORK WITH WHAT WE'VE GOT!

Bob - it's the bright but clueless who are benefitting from these awards. The trouble we have is distinguishing between all the candidates. It's not that degrees and the experiences they contain aren't relevant but just that they're all the same.

Louise - different requirements from SME employers. Key is the flexibility. Work experience is therefore more important, we need work-ready people who can do the job and all the other bits around it right now. Personality is still really important, but not likely to have a specific set of criteria developed over years and a sophisticated, comprehensive recruitment and selection process.

Let's remember that it's actually the same skills that you need to be a good student that you need to be a good worker. Our courses still need to help develop all of those, but fundamentally the same areas are important.

SMEs can really take advantage of this kind of awards, because it's a great way to find good people without huge complex investment in recruitment processes. Also, the students do need to look in these other directions to find opportunities as there's simply too much competition AND the corporate world of most grad recruiters isn't for everybody.

100,000 "graduate level" jobs (30,000 with AGR members): over 400,000 graduates.

Sue - are our awards trying to do too much? In this country as a whole we aren't great at giving emotion any value, or at communicating in a real sense. It's really hard to deliver this through work or through education. Bob - agrees. It's about personal journeys and everyone has a different moment where the penny drops and you can't make that happen. However, giving good advice and guidance and coaching will be a real contribution. We should also think about the SU and opportunities they can offer, should be included in partnerships about skills and awards ideally.

Andy - a lot of our discussion has focussed on these elite employers, but with the big number of grads we have and will have, shouldn't we look at definitions of success, look beyond £30k grad jobs. Perhaps more focus on being a good citizen. Can we teach individuals to develop their own definitions of success and their own philosophy about what's right for them.

US has a stronger culture of alumni involvement, that could be added in as well. Employers could support that, perhaps?

Let's remember that our grads coming out at 20, 21, will still be in the labour market in 2060!!! Many of them will have career changes by choice, many will be forced to do that during their lives. They need the skills to facilitate that so they can take control of their own destinies (career rainbow style - all the different strings to our bows)

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