

QAA Viewpoint

How universities and employers can work together to improve graduate outcomes: evidence from QAA reviews

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Higher education in the UK has grown and developed in step with the needs of the economy and society.

Historically, our universities were developed to train medics, lawyers and theologians. Later came area studies courses and rare languages to train colonial administrators. The professions and needs of modernity resulted in engineering, science and technology, and today's world-leading research base. The public sector workforce is trained in universities: for example, social workers, nurses, midwives, environmental scientists and housing professionals. Creativity and technology come together in software development for animation and effects, and so on.

Growth and responsiveness has led to a diverse higher education system that reflects different types of institutions such as universities, colleges and a wide variety of charities and companies. It includes:

- a large university sector, including research-intensive universities that have their origins in the medieval period
- further education colleges delivering higher education
- alternative providers - diverse in character, these providers typically offer business qualifications or niche and specialist courses in art and theology, and span for (or not for) profit, charitable and private providers.

Where, however, is the evidence of universities and employers working together to improve graduate outcomes?

It is available from QAA. We are the independent body responsible for the quality of education received by around three million people studying for a UK higher education qualification.

Peer reviews conducted by QAA test and assess the quality of teaching at higher education providers and the standards students have to achieve. Our reviews tell us what's working well (and not so well) in the university sector. We also look in greater detail at issues that are important to the higher education sector, such as student engagement, digital literacy and employability.

A suite of QAA reference documents codifies what good education looks like. We check how well, and via what means, universities and employers work together to secure and improve their graduates' employability.

Employability - a strength of universities and the higher education sector

Because of the way the UK higher education system has developed, it should come as no surprise that our reviews have found that universities and employers work well together.

Universities and colleges have consistently shown a strategic commitment to (and investment in) students' employability. Around a fifth of the 225 features of good practice identified through our reviews in 2015-16 relate to developing students' employability, as well as relationships with employers and the world of work.

The good practice we find falls into two broad but complementary approaches.

- **Embedding employability in the curriculum** - universities develop courses that meet the needs of industry and ensure that skills to enhance employability, such as communication and critical thinking, are embedded in their courses.
- **Working with employers** - for example: work placements, paid internships, and alumni and other guest speakers. The majority of universities have employability strategies and/or employability features in their strategic planning.

Case study: Furness College

The College has a partnership arrangement with BAE Systems, a global defence and aerospace company. A Business and Employer Support Team handles the overall account management for BAE, including apprentices, higher education and commercial business. A member of College staff spends time on site at BAE, and BAE has also recruited a manager, permanently based at the College. This demonstrates the value each organisation places on the contract and the importance of supporting students' learning. The College has also used local, national and bespoke data to develop an economic growth plan in partnership with employers and the local council.

Case study: University of Essex

The University had successfully implemented a new Education Strategy across its departments and partners. This Strategy is embedded in planning and quality assurance, something that contributes to six features of good practice. Improvements to the student experience in general, and the implementation of a new employability strategy in particular (specifically, the University's commitment to embedding employer-focused learning in the curriculum), all contribute to a commendation for the enhancement of students' learning opportunities. An employability mentoring programme linking students directly with employers has provided an excellent opportunity for students to engage directly with employers and the world of work.

Case study: The Royal School of Needlework

Degree students learn in an environment that holds teaching and study at its heart, supported by resources that include a textile archive and handling collection. The School's Studio is a commercial space creating private commissioned works for external clients at an international level. Second-year degree students study on a live project with external collaborators. The study unit enables learning across a range of platforms and outcomes, with more than one client. Students develop their creative practice by engaging with leading-edge practitioners and working to real-time projects.

The Scottish experience: Graduates for the 21st Century

The Scottish quality framework is characterised by fewer reviews but a more in-depth consideration of themes and a focus on enhancement. The Graduates for the 21st Century¹ Enhancement Theme considered what the attributes of a graduate from Scottish higher education should be, and how those attributes should be supported and nurtured.

Supported by QAA Scotland from 2008 to 2011, a key outcome was a shared understanding of the graduate attributes that typify students at Scotland's 19 higher education institutions:

- **lifelong learning** that equips students with the ability and interest to increase their knowledge, understanding and skills throughout their working lives
- **research, scholarship and enquiry** – providing students with a systematic and critical assessment of complex problems and issues
- **developing students' knowledge, skills and qualities** to enable their success in a rapidly changing workplace
- **global citizenship** – the capacity to thrive in a globalised society and economy, and an awareness of cultures beyond and different from one's own.

The Enhancement-led Institutional Review process in Scotland has also identified many good examples of universities and employers working together. [The Thematic Report on Enhancement-led Institutional Review \(ELIR\) Reports 2013-16](#),² considering employability and graduate attributes, highlights specific examples of employer engagement, such as employer involvement in curriculum development and validation processes.

Case study: Glasgow School of Art

The Textiles Department at the Glasgow School of Art has been hosting an annual Fashion Show since 1947. Students are expected to take the design concept into set production. These students should be highly creative, with excellent problem-solving skills, and able to work with a variety of people to deliver an innovative show within budget. After the show, students are required to present their experiences, in groups, to staff. They speak about their individual contribution to the show and provide an explanation of how the group worked together.

The project is aimed at developing the professional skills students need to formulate and submit a CV. Students are encouraged to reflect upon their experience, attend workshops, and update their CV, which is handed in at the end of the project.

Our research and guidance helps to:

- illustrate and shape how enterprise and entrepreneurship can be, and is, embedded into courses
- set out what students can expect on a placement
- provide an evidence base that illustrates what works to improve graduate outcomes.

The data also support a positive picture. A survey of nearly 400,000 UK and EU students who completed their course in 2014-15 suggests that nine in 10 were in work or further study six months after they graduated. Additionally, around 70 per cent of qualifiers were in professional roles at an early stage in their careers.³

¹ *Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes*, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes/graduates-for-the-21st-century.

² *Thematic Report on Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) Reports 2013-16: Employability and Graduate Attributes*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2934.

³ Graduate destinations (HESA), available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/destinations.

Concluding remarks

Today's higher education sector spans: an Engineering student studying for a Higher National Diploma; an industry-funded DPhil in Biochemistry via a degree in the History of Art; and a mature student training to be a midwife. Each will transfer their knowledge and skills into the workplace, meeting the needs of a knowledge economy that demands innovation in services and products. These graduates are more likely to vote, be more tolerant towards minorities, and earn more than their peers.⁴

Our reviews illustrate the many ways that universities work with their students to improve their future: a future that may see periods of self-employment, portfolio working, further study, developing a social enterprise, and employment in the private and public sectors. In a world marked by uncertainty and change, QAA's guidance and reference points provide the regulatory underpinning for the success of today's and tomorrow's students.

⁴ The Benefits of Higher Education Participation for Individuals and Society (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills), available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254101/bis-13-1268-benefits-of-higher-education-participation-the-quadrants.pdf (PDF, 310KB).