

# Up to the Job? Graduates' Perceptions of the UK Higher Education Careers Service

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## Abstract

*This article investigates graduates' perceptions of their careers guidance needs and the extent to which these are met by the higher education careers service. It reports the findings of a survey conducted by the Employment Studies Research Unit in support of the work of the recent Higher Education Careers Service Review Group chaired by Professor Sir Martin Harris. It places the findings in a context between recent and ongoing research on transitions from higher education to employment and considers the implications of these, and of wider changes in recruitment practices, for the role of the higher education careers service.*

## Background

In the last ten to fifteen years, the UK has moved from an élite to a mass system<sup>1</sup> of higher education. While in the 1960s there were around 200,000 full-time students in UK higher education (HEFCE, 1999), there are now over 1.2 million full-time equivalent students<sup>2</sup> (HEFCE, 2001). Over a third of young people now remain in full-time education after completing secondary education, and it is the Government's intention that, by 2010, 50 per cent of 30 year-olds will have received some form of higher education. Higher education is provided through a wide variety of institutions, typified mainly as universities, higher education colleges and further education colleges – some offering a comprehensive range of subject disciplines, others with a specialist focus, and with a diverse student population that today includes large numbers of mature<sup>3</sup> and part-time students. At the same time, the development of services designed to assist students to make the transition from higher education into work has until very recently been a matter left to the

discretion of individual institutions. As a result, there is a wide variety between institutions in the visibility of their careers advisory services, the extent of the information and guidance that they offer, and the professionalisation of their approach. Using the careers office of their university or college is a more popular method of job search for UK graduates than for other European graduates (Brennan *et al.*, 2001). One of the considerations in this paper, however, is the differential impact that the service has on *types* of students in the UK.

As higher education has expanded, so have recruitment practices in the graduate labour market changed. For example, while the supply of candidates for 'traditional' graduate jobs (such as the professions, senior administration, and traineeships in leading companies) has expanded radically, Government policies to increase participation in higher education have in effect depleted the supply of school-leaver candidates for jobs that did not formerly attract graduates. Increasingly now, graduates are entering new professions and associate professions (such as public relations, new management specialisms, and technical and design jobs in communications industries), new service industry sectors, the voluntary/charities sector, self-employment and a range of intermediate level jobs for which a degree would not formerly have been considered necessary (CSU, 2000; Purcell *et al.*, 1999a; Watts, 1997). The proportion of graduate employers who recruit through the milk-round<sup>4</sup> or operate graduate trainee schemes has steadily declined, and increasingly employers recruit to vacancy on a 'best fit for job' basis that (except where a degree-equivalent professional qualification is a requirement for the post) may or may not give a graduate leverage. Thus the graduate labour market has become increasingly segmented – and, arguably, fragmented (Purcell *et al.*, ongoing; Pearson *et al.*, 2000; Purcell and Pitcher, 1996). The encouragement of mature returners<sup>5</sup> to higher education has further shifted the balance between graduate and non-graduate job-seekers, so that the boundaries of the graduate labour market have become progressively fuzzier.

These changes have had considerable implications for employers, graduates and other stakeholders concerned with the placement of highly qualified job seekers, particularly higher education institutions (HEIs) and their careers services. More recently, in response to Government recommendations, UK funding bodies have turned their spotlight on employability and evidence of labour market integration, designing performance indicators in this respect and linking them to funding. Potential students and their parents increasingly use these data, in the form of league tables, in their selection of where to study.

In the earliest stages of their evolution, universities were essentially vocational. Although their primary emphasis was on scholarship, the undergraduate experience was ultimately seen as preparation for the traditional professions of the church, political administration and, later, medicine.<sup>6</sup> While it was not the responsibility of universities to find employment for their graduates, the influence of patronage and networks was an important part of the higher education experience and of its career outcomes then, as now. HEIs have no statutory duty to provide careers advice and guidance, although in practice almost all now have a dedicated careers service. The Quality Assurance Agency<sup>7</sup> for Higher Education has published a Code of Practice which specifies the quality of service that HEIs should aspire to meet (2001). The role of the service within institutions varies widely, however, reflecting its haphazard burgeoning since the post-war years and the diverse missions that have emerged during the evolution of today's HEIs. The allocation by institutions of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding for teaching to their careers services varies between 2.1 and 0 per cent (Harris Report, 2001, 2.4.1), and the ratio of students to careers staff ranges from 1,000:1 to 7,251:1<sup>8</sup> (Watts, *op. cit.*). Although in some institutions certain aspects of the service are delivered through academic departments, traditionally careers guidance has not been seen as an important element of graduates' education, and in most cases is not integrated into the curriculum (La Valle *et al.*, 2000). Nevertheless, 'the UK's Higher Education Careers Services are widely regarded overseas as a world leader' (Watts, 1997, p. 18).

The widened take-up of higher education in the UK, both in terms of the numbers and kinds of students, has drawn attention to the effectiveness of the service, emphasising the need for it to work increasingly with school and community careers staff to provide coherent and co-ordinated guidance and information to school students and mature individuals *before* participation in higher education. Students need help in identifying the full range of career options available to them; in assessing their own strengths and weaknesses and formulating realistic career aspirations in order to target potential employers effectively; in developing their competences in relation to the recruitment processes that they will face; and in acquiring the work-relevant skills that employers seek. As organisations have become progressively leaner, in response to the impact of technology and the downsizing and decentralisation characteristic of contemporary strategic and human resource management, it has become more difficult for new labour market entrants to develop careers *within* organisations than was the case in the past

(Grimshaw *et al.*, 2001). An effective service is needed to enable graduates to update their professional skills and acquire new ones throughout their (increasingly portfolio<sup>9</sup>) careers, requiring robust links with a wide range of employers. An effective service is needed to facilitate the operation of the graduate labour market so that higher education represents a good rate of return on investment for both the taxpayer and the student (and his or her parents, partners or dependants, who make often-unrecognised investments in tolerating the opportunity cost of the student's lack of financial contribution to the household economy and in sharing the burden of debt, as well as in directly contributing to the costs of the student's participation in higher education). Closing the circle, an effective service optimises the employability performance of HEIs, enhancing their success in a competitive student recruitment market.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Government has a close interest in the careers services;<sup>10</sup> and that in June 2000 the Minister for Higher Education invited Professor Sir Martin Harris to carry out a review of the higher education careers advisory service's role and activities.<sup>11</sup> The review group commissioned a number of studies and pieces of research to support its work. Among them was our brief to summarise existing findings on student use of and evaluation of the careers service and obtain access to a sample of recent graduates to explore the issue of guidance needs in greater detail. Our two reports to the student sub-group are available on [www.dfes.gov.uk/hecareersservicereview](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hecareersservicereview). This article summarises their findings and sets them in the context of the review and wider evidence relating to student and graduate career guidance needs.

### **Stage One: the literature**

Stage One of our investigation consisted of a summary of existing evidence on users' perceptions of the service, gathered from published research and some unpublished data, which did not have this concern as its primary focus, but that yielded, nevertheless, a consistent account of graduates' use of their careers services and their perceptions of how well they met their needs.

Perhaps the most important finding at this stage was the degree of apparent variation of students' experience of the service. The scope of provision differed widely between institutions not only during students' course of study, but also in the pre-entry phase and in the 'after sales' service offered to their own and other institutions' alumni. Many

students who were dissatisfied with their transition to work complained of a lack of guidance in the pre-entry phase – in relation to subject, location and mode of study. There appeared to be a need for a more proactive service during a student's course of study, that would, for example, publicise the services on offer, and arrange work placements. Students also suggested that there should be stronger provision after graduation: for example, employment broker services and graduate apprenticeships, and more widespread reciprocal services between institutions.

There was considerable variation in the amount of information available, for example in relation to the growing areas of non-traditional graduate employment (CSU, *op. cit.*; Purcell *et al.*, 1999a; Watts, *op. cit.*), and students commented that job market information was often out of date. Students at post-1992 universities, those following 'minority subjects' or highly specialised courses, and students over 25 were less likely to be satisfied with provision (Elias *et al.*, 2000) – although a third of students are now over 25 when they graduate (Pearson *et al.*, *op. cit.*). Students who had studied vocational subjects yet did not want to pursue the vocation for which their degree was intended to prepare them were least likely to find the service met their needs.

Perhaps the next most important finding was that in those groups of students that appeared to be most in need of the service, significantly lower proportions were likely to have used it. These included those who achieved poor degrees, mature students, students from lower socio-economic groups, and arts students. Students who felt they had made a mistake in their choice of course (who, with hindsight, would do something very different or not study for a degree at all) were less likely to have used the careers service than were the most satisfied consumers of higher education. Those who did not have a clear idea about which directions to pursue on leaving higher education were reticent about approaching the service (Elias *et al.*, *op. cit.*). Although the majority of students *had* used their careers services and rated the information and guidance as useful, it appeared that the majority of *those* did not visit until their final year, by which time it was often too late for those inadequately prepared for the labour market. In contrast, one of the most significant variables contributing to graduates' expectations and labour market behaviour and experience was the degree to which they had engaged in career planning – either prior to starting, or before completing, their course of study (Purcell *et al.*, 1999).

There were higher levels of satisfaction with the quality of careers information than with careers advice and guidance (Purcell *et al.*, 1999). 'Many graduates are taken by surprise at the extent to which

they need to promote themselves' (Harvey and Blackwell, 1999, p. 4), and it was felt that the development of the skills, capabilities and experiences needed for obtaining employment was inadequate. Graduates in many disciplines, awakening late to the realities of the labour market, relied on job agencies to teach them presentation skills, provide help with CVs, and give them interview training (Purcell *et al.*, 1999). The key to employment – particularly for those with non-vocational degrees, but also for those whose vocational course did not include a work placement – was perceived to be work experience (Simm, 1999; RCU, 1993).

There was evidence of low awareness of the full range of services that were on offer and of how to make use of them. More men than women appeared to get jobs as a result of using the service, as did those from old rather than post-1992 universities. In short, there was a clear message that most individuals were not informed customers, implying that the service should be less responsive and more proactive.

A gap existed between the expectations and experience of graduates both in relation to levels of pay and quality of employment. Some had over-inflated expectations; while women, and students from post-1992 universities, often set their sights too low: for some, this became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This preliminary work allowed us subsequently to hold a magnifying glass to particular issues and to note at the same time the impact on careers service provision of more recent changes in the transition to work.

### **Stage Two: the survey undertaken**

The timescale for the survey was very tight, our brief being to report to the student sub-group prior to the production of its own report to the review group in mid-November 2000. Recently appointed graduates at over 30 member organisations of the Council for Industry and Higher Education were approached through their company personnel departments and invited to complete questionnaires about their experiences and views of the careers service. This elicited 146 responses from roughly equal numbers of men and women. These were not, of course, representative of the recent graduate population as a whole, but of graduates who had obtained employment in large traditional graduate recruitment organisations.

The sample's characteristics reflect the recruitment customs, practices and preferences known to be used by such organisations. Four

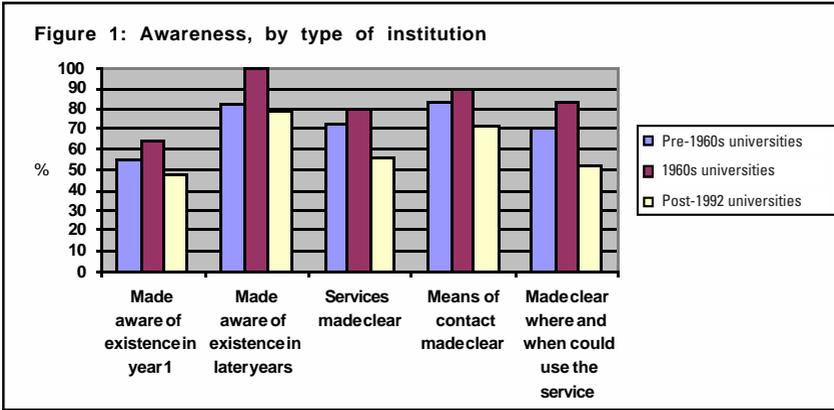
fifths were from longer-established rather than post-1992 universities, and only 15 per cent had been mature students (with only one over the age of 30). Most respondents had numeracy-based subject backgrounds, and two thirds of the sample had entered occupations that required numerical competency – such as finance, information and communications technology (ICT) and engineering. One fifth of the sample did not say what their degree class was,<sup>12</sup> but nearly all the remainder had obtained firsts or upper seconds, which indicates that the sample was skewed towards relatively high achievers. Members of this sample might be expected to have made better use of the careers service than their less successful peers (Elias *et al.*, *op. cit.*; Purcell and Pitcher, *op. cit.*), and the analysis that follows needs to be read with these characteristics in mind.

These were largely graduates in unequivocally ‘graduate’ jobs, so it is not surprising that nearly all the respondents considered that it had been necessary for them to have a degree to secure their current job, and almost as many thought the class of degree was important. A majority thought the subject they had studied had been an advantage in getting their current job,<sup>13</sup> but only half believed their HEI was a variable in the process. Four fifths of respondents, regardless of type of institution, were satisfied with their career to that point, with a slightly higher proportion of women than men expressing satisfaction. Successive graduate surveys of gendered career outcomes suggests this is a reflection more of higher male expectations than relative female advantage. Older respondents were less likely than younger ones to be satisfied with their careers to date.

Nevertheless, graduates of 58 UK HEIs completed the questionnaires, and the responses therefore provide a wide-ranging if ‘skewed to success’ indication of recent student views of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and of the diversity of the users’ experiences across institutions.

#### *Awareness and use of the careers service*

The careers service aims to ensure that all students are aware of its existence and its provision, although this may amount in some cases to no more than the provision of an entry in a course guide. Figure 1 shows the extent to which respondents said their service had met these aims well. Around half said they were not made aware of the existence of the service in their first year of study, although this picture changed markedly in later years. Graduates of the 1960s universities were more



aware of the careers service throughout their years of study than were students at pre-1960s and post-1992 universities, and this may well reflect the central location of such services in purpose-built campuses.

Only 10 per cent of respondents said they had never used their careers service, and perhaps unsurprisingly in this sample group these were self-starters who had made their own arrangements, contacting employers directly, making use of the internet, using departmental sources, and exploiting contacts made during their gap year or placement periods. We asked graduates whether they had had a 'pretty good idea' of the kind of job they wanted after completing their degree, and the responses allowed multiple answers. One third said they'd had a good idea at the outset of their course, a third said they'd had a good idea before they first visited the careers service, and four fifths said this was the case before they graduated. This is likely to be an overestimate, reflecting both subject clustering and the likelihood that those not responding to the question (one fifth of the sample) may have been less clear about their career planning. Purcell and Pitcher (*op. cit.*) found that career planning and the extent to which graduates had taken an instrumental approach to choice of course were clearly correlated with the subject studied.

Student use of the careers service climbed steadily to a peak in the final year of study. Men were marginally more likely than women to visit in their first year, and students from post-1992 universities were more likely to delay visits until their final year. Students from 1960s universities were more likely than the other two groups to visit the service in their first year, perhaps reflecting their greater awareness of the exis-

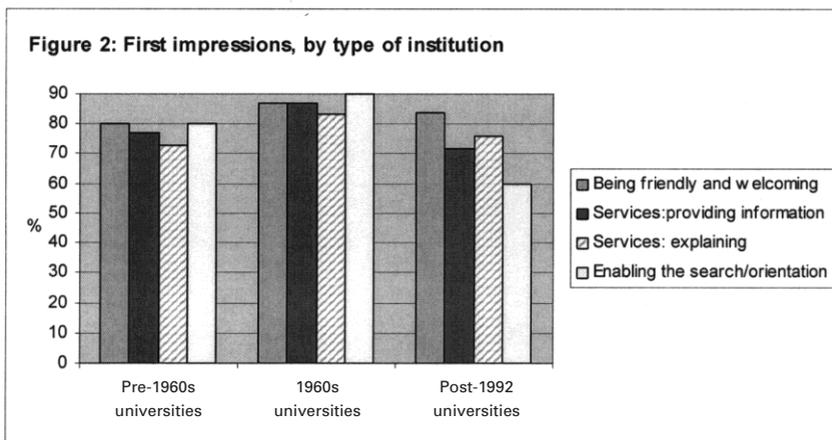
tence of the service; and they were also more likely to visit their careers service while studying, and least likely after graduation.

Unsurprisingly, as these were recently appointed graduates, three quarters of the sample had not used the service since graduating. Of those who had, very few had used the service at another institution. Of those who had used the service at their *own* institution, only half said they found it welcoming; although three quarters said they found it informative.

When asked to give their opinions on the stages at which students or graduates *need* careers guidance, graduates' responses overall mirrored the pattern of their own visits to the service, and there was little anticipation of the needs of alumni except among the older graduates.

We asked graduates how well, when they first had contact with it, their careers service met four aims: being friendly and welcoming, providing information, explaining the services on offer, and enabling students to find what they wanted. Figure 2 shows the proportions of students across the three types of institution who said their careers service met these aims well. The 1960s universities made the most favourable impression on their students across the range of aims.

We asked respondents to select and prioritise five needs they may have had of their careers service when they were students – a question permitting multiple answers. Table I shows the proportion of respondents selecting the needs that had applied to them personally, and the proportion that identified a particular need as their first or second highest priority. The table shows the dominance of the immediate search for



information and the much lower priority given by students to the reflective and analytical skills that might underpin success in the labour market in the longer term. Yet a quarter of these respondents felt that self-assessment of skills and aptitudes had been a high priority guidance need for them, and nearly a third regarded practical preparation for getting a job as a high priority. It might be expected that development of such skills would have been given lower priority by those who already possessed them to a considerable degree, as did most of these students, who *had* obtained appropriate graduate employment. In addition, it might reasonably be assumed that the needs of those less successful in the graduate labour market are greater. This suggests that, as increasingly company research and job applications are carried out independently by students online, there will be increased demand for the resources of the careers services to be allocated to the development of analytical and career management skills to equip individuals for the initial transition from education to employment.

Only a fifth of respondents said they had more than one individual guidance interview, and around half said they had none at all, though the reasons for this may lie as much in student choice as in the scope of provision on offer or the marketing of services. Of those who had taken advantage of the guidance interview, most reported very positively that it had helped them to think about their abilities and strengths and to present these on paper. More worryingly, only half said the interview had helped them to understand employer expectations. Early indications

TABLE 1  
Guidance needs of respondents

	Applied to me (%)	High priority (%)
Information about particular jobs/careers	79	50
Help to analyse jobs and career options available	68	44
Practical preparation for getting a job (e.g. CV/interview skills)	60	31
Self-assessment of skills/aptitudes	51	25
Information about postgraduate study	24	11

from ongoing research amongst graduate recruiters (Purcell *et al.*, ongoing) are that young students in particular do not read job and person specifications carefully and critically. Careers advisors confirm that students are poorly motivated to tailor their CVs and applications for particular posts in ways that attract interest and signal good fit to employers. Moreover, there is evidence that the student scattergun approach to job application is often reinforced by the product-led approach to marketing adopted by some careers advisors, who encourage students to 'have a go anyway', believing this builds self-confidence.

We were interested also in the role played by the careers service in work experience, and asked graduates whether they had used the service for advice in this respect. A third said they had done so, with graduates of post-1992 universities more likely to have approached their careers service for this purpose (although the survey did not ask whether work experience was already an integral feature of the programme of study). Of those who had used their careers service for work experience advice, only half said the service had helped them to gain work experience, and a third that it had helped them to reflect upon the experience subsequently. They overwhelmingly considered that help in accessing work experience was part of the careers service's role, and three quarters of the sample responded positively to the suggestion that the service should establish self-help databases in support of work experience.

#### *Graduates' perceptions of current provision*

The strength of this exploratory survey was the qualitative data which it generated. We invited respondents to comment on the strengths and weaknesses that they had observed in their experience of the service, and most took the opportunity to do so.

The variability in the service between institutions was underlined by the fact that the number of respondents commenting favourably on the friendliness, approachability and helpfulness of staff and the range of resources available was balanced by the number of respondents complaining that staff were unfriendly, unhelpful or 'too busy' and that there were not enough computers for them to access recruitment networks and training programmes. For example:

The level of service/advice seemed to change from centre to centre. My university was adequate. However, I did experience excellent levels of help from nearby universities. (male, business studies, post-1992 university)

Many respondents commented on the low profile of the service:

Not well advertised or easy to find. (female, Hispanic studies, pre-1960s university)

Relatively a long way from the centre of things at the university, both geographically and philosophically. (male, English, pre-1960s university)

Respondents were very positive about the volume of information on careers and further study that had been available to them, and drew attention to the value of company presentations, company contact details, vacancy lists, and general good relations between the service and employers. But not all students found it easy to access information:

A visitor has to ask the right question of the right person in order to unlock the potential. (male, English language and literature, pre-1960s university)

It covered what I needed. Hard work though in a rather unsympathetic environment. (female, MBA, post-1992 university)

A common complaint was that labour market information was often out of date. And arts and humanities graduates in particular complained that information and presentations were focused too strongly on 'traditional' graduate jobs:

I found that my university service suggested as careers the mainstream options of banker/accountant/lawyer, et cetera. . .but did not provide a great deal of information on alternative career paths. This was highlighted by the firms that came to give presentations – all were large city firms or major multinationals, and it was easy to forget that these were not the only options. (male, business economics with European studies, pre-1960s university)

Respondents reported insufficient publicity for the *range* of services on offer, such as interview practice and psychometric testing, and this under-selling by the service of its provision could account for the conflicting views about it held by respondents from the same universities.

A number of graduates believed the service was helpful only for students who had already made career choices, saying that there was insufficient individual guidance, encouragement and help with practical skills:

For students who know what kind of business they want to join, the careers service provides good information of opportunities available. (female, chemical engineering, pre-1960s university)

If you know what you're looking for, or have a vague idea, it is useful. If not, it provides little constructive advice. (female, manufacturing systems engineering, post-1992 university)

It was definitely more of an information library than a personal service. (female, mechanical engineering, 1960s university)

Good if you knew what you wanted. More a place of reference than guidance. (pre-1960s university graduate)

A number of respondents commented that the service was preoccupied with degree relevance, leading staff to make assumptions about career choice and to foreclose on the range of options that students on both vocational and non-vocational courses might wish to consider:

Career advice offered to pharmacists is very limited, because of the assumption that there is only one option. (Pharmacy graduate, pre-1960s university)  
Particularly focused according to degree relevance. [My] job in retail, for example, is not at all related to my degree. (female, English and management studies, pre-1960s university)

Graduates perceived a bias towards undergraduate advice, and this may become more of an issue as the range of levels in higher education qualifications expands with the addition of foundation degrees, and given the current volatility of postgraduate qualifications provision. For example:

It was not much help for work after a postgrad course – so much geared up to undergrads that much was irrelevant and I ended up pitching myself at the wrong level to employers. (female, MBA, post-1992 university)

Overall in our survey, two thirds of graduates from both the pre-1960s and 1960s universities believed their careers service had helped them directly or indirectly to get their job; however, in the post-1992 universities the proportion fell to one third.

*Graduates' suggestions for how the service could better meet their needs*

Two fifths of respondents took up the invitation to make suggestions as to how the service could better meet their needs.

Most often, respondents called for greater publicity for the service, making better use of university email networks, and thought the service should target particular groups – particularly first-year students. Most of the proposals implied the need for increased investment in the service, because they would incur higher running costs – for example, improved access in the evenings, at weekends and through the summer vacation. Graduates called for more 'open door' policies, such as 'informal drop-in sessions. . .for bouncing ideas off advisers' (male, French and drama, pre-1960s university). They wanted more individual counselling and guidance ('a bespoke service'), encouragement and practical help with job application skills. Only a few respondents acknowledged *career planning* as a skill that had been nurtured by careers advisors and saw it as part of the remit of the service. More commonly, graduates called for help with opportunities for work experience, including job shops for placements that had financial support as their primary aim:

The importance of internships and vacation work experience was not explained to me until I walked through the doors in my final year, by which point it was too late for me. (female, Spanish and French, pre-1960s university)

**In contrast:**

The careers service at [my university] works closely with departments to design/offer courses with industrial placements. This was a main factor in my choice of career and my subsequent employment by my placement company. (male, mechanical engineering, 1960s university)

Many respondents wanted the careers services to widen their networks both inside and outside their institutions. They proposed that, internally, the service should aim more information at academic departments, and use personal tutor interviews to check on the take-up of careers advice and provide opportunities for students to explore potential changes in their academic programmes. They urged contact between the service and a wider range of organisations, with more information about non-traditional graduate careers. They emphasised the value of more presentations and on-site visits, and suggested a stronger role for recent graduates, and the professional and consultancy contacts of academic staff, to add diversity to the pool of employer links, and to provide specialist knowledge and occasional advice. Where partnership between the careers service and academic departments already existed, graduates regarded this very positively.

Finally, a small number of respondents called for an improved service for postgraduates, for unemployed graduates and those who moved away from their university town, and improved advice and encouragement for graduates in their continuing professional development, wherever that might be.

**Conclusions**

Spontaneous graduate comments in the survey leave us with the picture of a service that has much to offer those who already know how to help themselves:

If they could see you were trying to help yourself get ahead, they would give you as much time as they could to help you further. (female, environmental conservation management and microbiology, post-1992 university)

This illustrates the primary need for careers services to give more attention to the development of career management competences in all students, and to refocus resources in order to target those groups of

students that have been consistently identified as failing to receive an acceptable threshold quality of careers advice and guidance.

Recent incremental changes in the recruitment environment signal the need for students to hone their jobseeking and career management skills. As web advertising has the potential to widen the pool of applicants far beyond the workload capacity of recruitment officers, so employers will increasingly be selective in their targeting of the labour market and/or build 'warning messages' and sifting mechanisms into the online application process in the expectation that inappropriate candidates will de-select themselves.

Graduate recruiters seek to maximise their rate of return by raising the take-up of their offers at the end of the selection process and by improving retention rates after the completion of the trainee period. In pursuit of this goal, many have re-thought the traditional competitive scramble for the 'top five' academic achievers in the 'top five' universities. Instead, they have reflected closely upon the particular characteristics in graduates that their organisational strategy requires (perhaps creativity, or the predisposition to challenge assumptions), and designed a recruitment programme attuned to their target market. Our current evidence is that this segmentation of the supply market is cost-effective for employers. All the more reason, therefore, for graduates to be critical consumers of recruitment material, of its overt messages and covert signals. They must be able to make informed choices about whether and how to respond to employer messages, knowing how to demonstrate the 'match' in their applications, or – if they choose – how to challenge the gaps.

However, the majority of graduates are destined to work in organisations that do not see themselves as 'graduate recruiters', even where in practice their workforces consist of significant numbers, or even a majority, of graduates. This holds true across all sectors of the economy – public, private and voluntary (Purcell *et al.*, ongoing). These employers do not target the graduate labour market externally or encourage graduates working in non-graduate jobs within their own workforce to make the transition into posts which make better use of their skills; they do not – except for some professional posts – specify a degree as a job requirement, and they have no trainee schemes beyond basic induction. For some recruiters, this recruitment environment is the result of a conscious interpretation of the ethics of equal opportunities; for others, it is a more pragmatic response to labour supply and demand – particularly within the financial constraints of the public sector. For whatever reason, the onus lies with the applicant to reflect upon and argue the

relevance of his or her experience and the value, if any, added by higher education.

Other factors are at work. For example, a few years ago, an increasing use of agencies by graduate employers began to change the dynamics of the transition into employment, and competition from the private recruitment sector has accelerated dramatically, both from the large general and specialist recruitment services agencies (for example, Reed Graduates) and specialist graduate and professional internet recruitment operators. Our current research suggests that it is too early to predict whether the growth of labour market intermediaries reflects a trend towards radically different labour market dynamics or a response to short-term uncertainties. It is certainly the case that the *mechanisms* of recruitment are in a process of revolution, in that recruitment via the internet is growing remarkably rapidly, particularly among traditional graduate recruiters. One of the survey respondents astutely observed:

[The careers service is] in danger of being left behind by internet recruitment agencies which very quickly (if not always rightly) match company profiles with graduate CVs. A paper and knowledge-based service has greater depth, but maybe a slower reaction time. (male, English language and literature, pre-1960s university)

The picture is complex and continuing research (Purcell *et al.*) shows that some major retailers have moved in the opposite direction, that is, away from the use of agency 'headhunters'<sup>14</sup>, and are observing as a result improved take-up of job offers and better retention at the end of their graduate training programme.

Where supply heavily exceeds demand, there is an increasing tendency for graduates to take up an unpaid first post, either to 'learn the business' or 'demonstrate commitment'. This tendency became visible first in over-subscribed areas of the voluntary/charities sector, the media and arts management – but more recently has become evident in the private sector, where potentially one person's apprenticeship may be another's exploitation. Work experience, when reflective learning has taken place, is nevertheless one of the variables which has been unequivocally associated with labour market success in all the recent graduate follow up studies and is regarded by employers as invaluable evidence of employability (Harvey *et al.*, 1998, 1997).

Outside the labour market, recent government policy in higher education has had strong implications for the role of the careers service. For example, changes in student funding have reinforced the need for career planning at the pre-entry phase. Average debt upon graduation has been calculated as between £6,000 and £14,000, forming a deterrent in

particular for students with dependants and those from lower socio-economic groups (who are known to be debt-averse). At the same time, the government's encouragement of returning to learning and continuous professional development – in short, the flood of part-time students – has caught most careers services ill-equipped to cope with the new and diverse requirements involved.

The main improvements to the service that our survey respondents proposed had resource implications – such as the demand for more and better trained staff, longer access hours, and more computers. The development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and the potential of collaboration between groupings of institutions, may offer a way through. The latter can add value and spread costs but may run counter to the competitive strategies of HEIs operating in a semi-market economy, and may consequently need encouragement and support from external agencies. In ICT, for example, the funding councils and regional development agencies have the opportunity to realise and rationalise the huge potential of the internet, at national and regional levels, to match up employers with students and graduates who are not only in pursuit of full and part-time job vacancies, but also of work experience, placement, sponsorship, apprenticeship and volunteering opportunities. The proliferation of separate, unlinked websites seems unlikely to effectively meet the needs of stakeholders.

In the current mixed-economy careers guidance and employment service industry, the higher education careers service has the potential to continue to be *the* main player in the graduate labour market, complementing and synthesising the opportunities that their commercial competitors can offer. An alternative prospect for the higher education careers service is that it will be sidelined, and increasingly left to specialise in problem cases – as in public sector employment services more broadly.

Months before the review group published its findings (DfEE, 2001), a letter of guidance to the Higher Education Funding Council for England recommended it to take action to assist HEIs to implement the recommendations of the Harris Report, and to encourage students to undertake work experience, volunteering and community outreach work (Blunkett, 2000). Consistent messages will have been sent to other stakeholders. It remains to be seen whether they are up to the job.

## Notes

1. The distinction between 'elite' and 'mass' higher education is generally linked to the

work of the American scholar, Martin Trow. Trow (1973) suggested that different kinds of HE systems tend to be associated with the enrolment in HE of particular proportions of the age group. He argued, for instance, that an enrolment of less than 15 per cent would be associated with an *elite* system; that a *mass* HE system would enrol between 15 and 40 per cent of the age group; and that above 40 per cent, the system could be considered *universal*.

2. A headcount in 1999/2000 of 1,856,330 (HESA free statistics [www.hesa.ac.uk]).
3. Defined as a student graduating with a first degree at the age of 25 or over.
4. The 'milkround' is an established seasonal procedure in the UK, in which employers make formal visits to selected universities annually or twice a year to market their organisations and interview potential job candidates.
5. The term refers both to adults who 'missed out' on higher education first time around, and to those updating and expanding their knowledge and skills later in their careers. However, in the UK, there is no automatic right of entry into higher education.
6. After the ancient universities, there followed in the UK three major phases of development. Firstly, the 'civic' universities were founded by Royal Charter in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Next came a major period of growth in the 1960s (Dearing Report, 1997, p. 17), which included the granting of university charters to the colleges of advanced technology and the founding of new 'greenfield' universities in the wake of the Robbins Report. (The Robbins Committee conducted a major review of the future of higher education, publishing its findings in November 1963.) A third major period of growth came in 1988–93 (Dearing Report, *op. cit.*, p. 17), a period in which the former polytechnics were given the status of universities under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. The latter group are commonly referred to as the 'new' universities.
7. A public body that assesses the quality of teaching and provision in higher education and promotes quality assurance systems within institutions.
8. Figures exclude full-time clinical and all part-time student numbers.
9. Charles Handy, in 1989, used the term 'portfolio' to describe the combination of forms of paid and free work that may be undertaken simultaneously or serially by an individual. Recent users (AGR, 1995; Harvey and Kamwal, 2000) have emphasised the term's connotations of career development through developing transferable skills by moving between organisations rather than developing a career within the internal labour market of one organisation.
10. In April 2001, the Minister of Lifelong Learning launched a new careers advice and youth support service ('Connexions'), with a budget of £420 million, designed to give 13–19 year-olds help and guidance in preparing for the transition to further education, work and adult life. The service replaces up to eight different careers, health, youth and other support services.
11. Although the remit was to review the 'Careers Services provided by universities and colleges of higher education in England', and recommendations with funding implications were directed only at the higher education funding body for England, it was clear that the review would be of interest throughout the UK.
12. Within the UK, the vast majority of bachelor's degrees are now 'degrees with honours' in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These degrees are generally classified as with first class honours, upper second, lower second and third. (Those who fail to achieve Third Class Honours standard but reach a minimum threshold may be awarded a non-honours degree sometimes called a 'pass' degree). The Scottish system is somewhat different. Scottish undergraduates have the option of completing Ordinary (unclassified) degrees in three years (and in some subject areas, a significant minority do so) or an Honours degree in four years. Slightly over a quarter of Scottish graduates leave HE with an Ordinary degree.
13. This is likely to be a product of the predominance in the sample of graduates of

numeracy-based subjects going into numeracy-related jobs. Recent research (Brennan *et al.*, *op. cit.*) found that only 37 per cent of UK graduates thought their field of study was the best or only possible one for their current job. In their study, answers varied from 79 per cent in the case of medical sciences to 19 per cent for social sciences.

14. Their experience was that agency account holders would target and compete for the same pool of academic high-fliers in prestigious universities. There was not necessarily a good match of interests or commitment between candidate and employer.

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