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Employ career strategies that really work

Connecting equity to employability is an urgent task.

- Andrew Harvey
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Ensuring the employability of graduates is fundamental to higher education. Universities prepare students for the workplace by offering industry placements, study abroad, mentoring and career services. Networking is encouraged and extra-curricular activities are rewarded. Despite these efforts, completion rates and graduate outcomes are variable and many students remain marginalised.

Connecting equity to employability is an urgent task. Employability is often defined as the skills and attributes that help graduates to gain employment relevant to their level of education and to succeed across time. Universities want their students not only to gain work when they graduate but to have lifelong skills that prepare them for multiple careers. Most universities now include employability in their strategic plan, about half have a senior officer responsible for it and all have a career department.

This action is being driven partly by policy changes. Universities are measured according to the satisfaction of employers, and prospective students can access data on completion rates and average graduate earnings at each institution. The government may well introduce

performance-based funding in which universities may be funded according to their graduate outcomes.

Employability strategies are growing, but student equity remains marginal to them. Such marginality is surprising given the lower completion rates of low socio-economic, regional, indigenous and other under-represented students. Yet few universities collect data on who is studying abroad, undertaking an internship, attending a workshop or using career services. There are few targeted funds to increase participation of under-represented groups. Students feel disconnected from the development of strategies, and student unions rarely know who is participating in university clubs, societies or employment.

Better data is important given the effect of extra-curricular expectations. Optional activities are becoming mandatory for employment. Employers want students who have travelled abroad, undertaken internships, volunteered, networked with industry and developed a professional resume brimming with extra-curricular activities.

Universities have adapted by rewarding these activities. Students can graduate with an academic transcript and a formal record of their career readiness, global citizenship and history of volunteering.

Broadening what is recognised carries merit but also risk. Relatively few regional and low socio-economic students are able to study abroad. Similarly, some students cannot afford to undertake an unpaid placement or a paid internship if they rely on part-time work elsewhere. Formal volunteering is typically rewarded by employers, but many students have family, work or community responsibilities that prohibit this activity.

Inadequate access can be exacerbated by different understandings of culture and language. Some students do not use university career services because they do not have time. Others are unaware of the existence of such services, while some students understand the language of jobs and work better than the language of careers. Many marginalised students focus on academic achievement to the exclusion of broader activities that may matter more to some employers.

Institutions need to know which students are under-represented in employability activities. Few of the institutions we surveyed monitored such data. Flexibility and support are also required to enable all students to access extra-curricular activities. Targeted bursaries can change patterns of study abroad, placements and internships. Flexible course provision can enable some students to access opportunities outside the classroom.

Where possible, though, employability needs to be mainstreamed. Career advice and education are best provided within existing course structures rather than relying on students to locate services after-hours. Placements and work-integrated learning also are best embedded within course structures, without relying on students to use their own networks to find opportunities.

Improving retention and completion rates is required, as some student groups remain relatively likely to withdraw from higher education. Financially, undertaking partial higher education is better than none, but graduates earn more than partial completers. Raising completion rates is important, including through mentoring, analytics, financial and other support.

Finally, universities will need to work with employers to address unconscious bias and discrimination in the workplace. Graduate outcomes are relatively poor for many students with a disability or from non-English-speaking backgrounds. These outcomes partly relate to employer bias. Yet it is not acceptable for the higher education sector simply to blame employers for poor outcomes. Universities are large employers and work closely with professional bodies and employer groups. More of this work could explicitly address workforce discrimination along lines of disability, gender and ethnicity.

Universities will need to improve access, opportunity and culture to ensure that all students benefit from their employability strategies.

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