QAA Research Project: Evaluating the impact of higher education providers' employability measures

Call for expressions of interest

QAA wish to commission, through a grant of maximum £50,000, an evaluation of measures and activities which higher education providers offer their students to facilitate and enhance graduate employability. The evaluation should focus on the perceived or, where possible, evidenced success and impact of such measures and activities on graduates' ability and success in securing graduate employment.[1]

The evaluation should commence in the academic year 2013-14 and be completed within the first half of academic year 2014-15. Expressions of interest are sought from individuals or organisations to undertake this work.

The outputs of this evaluation will be publicly available. They will be used to inform QAA's work and to contribute to the debate of policy and practice in the higher education (HE) sector. We would therefore particularly welcome applications from individuals or organisations with a demonstrable track-record of writing for a range of stakeholders (including private, public and third-sector employers, HE practitioners, and policy makers) and who have detailed knowledge and experience of issues relating to graduate employability.

Project outline

Rationale

There are a number of reasons why QAA wish to commission this evaluation project at this time, some of which are as follows.

- Recent QAA-funded research from King's College London identified that students' primary purpose for entering higher education was to improve their career prospects and as a pathway for career enhancement. Our own Student Advisory Board agreed with this and identified working to improve graduate employability as key priority for us.[2]
- Political, media and employer discourse often questions the effectiveness and effect of HE's provision for the employability of its graduates, and there is a lack of evidence and understanding of the impact that providers' employability measures have on graduate employability.
- There is no comprehensive data, across UK HE, concerning the number of providers who engage with/implement employability measures, although there are surveys, reports and so on, about graduate employability measures and graduate employability which have subject-specific, national, regional or industry-specific focus.

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[1] Defined as employment at a level that is typically regarded as entry level graduate employment, and which is affiliate to the subject studied and/or utilises competencies, skills and knowledge acquired during studies.
[2] The Student Advisory Board is a committee of students and student representatives that is a formal advisory committee to our Board.

Project scope

The evaluation should be UK-wide and should encompass a broad range of UK HE providers, including universities, colleges with HE provision, and private/alternative providers. We are particularly conscious of the close links that colleges and private/alternative providers often have with employers, and so are keen to see these well represented in the work.

Measures to facilitate and enhance graduate employability are defined for the purposes of this study as any activity or opportunity put in place by a provider that is specifically and primarily intended to improve the employability of graduates. Such activity may or may not be credit bearing. Examples of activity in-scope include:

- embedding employability in the subject curriculum
- embedding enterprise and entrepreneurship education in the curriculum
- work-based and placement learning
- extra-curricular award and recognition schemes
- use of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

The scope of this work does not include measures that do not have employability as a primary intention, but that may have secondary benefits on graduate employability, such as volunteering or being involved in student union representative activity.

Project methodology

QAA expects the expressions of interest to include an appropriate and cost-effective methodology for the collection, presentation and analysis of data, the consideration of which will form part of the evaluation process. We envisage the work taking two broad stages. The first stage would focus on building the evidence base of what measures providers undertake and how they monitor and evaluate their success, together with an exploration of the related terminology, for example:

- employability
- employer engagement
- enterprise and entrepreneurship
- placements
- mentoring
- internship.

The second stage would focus on evaluating the impact of these measures on graduate employability.

We believe that a multi-method approach will need to be undertaken across both stages with review of literature and existing research, and some use of survey work, structured interview and focus group or equivalent.

We imagine that the first stage could make use of a quantitative survey, as comprehensive as possible, of UK providers of HE to establish the number and type of employability measures that are undertaken, and a review of existing relevant data and information. It will be vital to ensure that across the project, and in particular across any survey work, steps are taken to ensure that the sample properly reflects the diversity of the sector.

Possible data sources for the first stage might include the Destination of Leavers of HE survey, HECSU's Futuretrack research, and Unistats/KIS data. **Annex A** sets out some of the research in this area.

There are significant data challenges with tracking the specific success of specific measures on specific students and we would not expect the project to attempt to try and address or resolve these issues.

We would expect a large element of the evaluative work in the second stage to be dependent on qualitative research, taking and analysing 'expert views' from key groups and individuals. We would expect this to include different types of employer (large graduate recruiters, SMEs and so on); employer representative bodies; HE stakeholder groups and representative bodies; students; providers; and other 'experts in the field'. QAA would be keen to work with whoever is appointed to identify these groups.

We are keen that the evaluative work should explicitly not focus on, or be limited to, recording case studies. Rather, it should strive to achieve genuine evaluation, at a high level (as far as is possible and accepting all relevant limitations), of the effectiveness or impact of employability measures. We are particularly interested in the extent to which the success of these measures are dependent on the kinds of students that choose to take part in or make use of them, and for clear recommendations to be made as to how improvements can be made.

Expressions of interest should contain information addressing the following areas:

- background and contextual setting
- key research questions
- methodology and milestones
- methodology
- analytical framework
- possible sources of data
- ethical implications
- analysis, presentation and proposals for the dissemination of findings
- timescale for publication of report
- detailed breakdown of costs.

Criteria for selection:

- experience (of the individual or organisation) of undertaking similar research projects for the specified audiences
- subject knowledge and experience of graduate employability in UK HE
- qualifications and experience of the research team and project leader
- capacity to deliver within the specified timescale and project value (supporting organisational infrastructure, internal quality assurance and risk assessment processes).

Please submit to Jean McLaren, Development Officer, at j.mclaren@qaa.ac.uk by 17 April 2014, using the template for research contractors. Successful applicants for grants will be advised by 12 May 2014 following a selection process which will include a face-to-face interview.

Terms and Conditions of Research Grants from QAA will apply to any grants awarded.

Annex A: Cursory literature review

Some cursory surveying of existing literature has taken place. The below is in no regard exhaustive, but rather illustrates some of the aspects that have been explored relevant to this research proposal.

AGCAS (2011), *Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates*, available at: www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/365-Employers-perceptions-of-the-employability-skills-of-new-graduates

AGCAS (2013), *Great expectations. How good are universities at making their graduates employable?* Available at: www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/540-Great-expectations-How-good-are-universities-at-making-their-students-more-employable

The Council of Professors and Heads of Computing (2012), *Computer Science Graduate Unemployment report*, available at: http://cphc.ac.uk/members-area/reports

HECSU (2013), *What do graduates do?* Available at: www.hecsu.ac.uk/current_projects_what_do_graduates_do.htm

HECSU, *What do graduates do?* Landing page with access to further data and information available at: www.hecsu.ac.uk/current_projects_what_do_graduates_do.htm

HECSU, Futuretrack research reports, available at: www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_research_reports.htm

HECSU (2012), *Futuretrack Stage 4: transitions into employment, further study and other Outcomes*, available at: www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_research_reports.htm

HEFCE (2013), *Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education*, available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2013/wplitreview

QAA (2014), *Recognising achievement beyond the curriculum: Survey of sector practice - summary report*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognising-achievement-beyond-the-curriculum-survey-13.aspx

QAA (2014), *Recognising achievement beyond the curriculum: A toolkit for enhancing strategy and practice*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognising-achievement-beyond-the-curriculum-toolkit-13.aspx

Universities UK (forthcoming), *Postgraduate employability*, available at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/default.aspx?ex=&su=&sc=&pt=Work in Progress&ws=wspt&tog=false&

QAA (2012), *Enterprise and entrepreneurship education: Guidance for UK higher education providers*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/enterprise-entrepreneurship-guidance.aspx