

# EMPLOYABILITY, POLICY AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

## HE STAFF POLICY ISSUES

The EMPLOY project: towards enhancing transitions  
to meaningful and sustainable graduate careers for  
non-traditional students



# EMPLOY



Erasmus+

Universities and their staff want their students to succeed. And this also meets public expectations: people expect universities to help students to acquire new knowledge and capabilities, which can then be put to use after they graduate. Yet our work shows that when some types of student graduate and enter the labour market, the odds are often stacked against them.

Once at university, non-traditional students tend to attain as well as or better than their less disadvantaged peers. But this academic performance is not matched by equal access to professional careers, while those non-traditional graduates who do enter professional careers generally earn significantly less than those from more conventional backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

On their own, universities do not hold the panacea for resolving these problems, but they can make a critical contribution. This leaflet draws on findings from the EMPLOY project, a cross-European study which set out to promote the employability of non-traditional students by investigating students' views and experiences, exploring the influence of factors such as age, class, ethnicity, gender and disability on graduate employment, and identifying policies and practices that support the employability of non-traditional students.

## Data

Much data is already collected on student outcomes, but few institutions use that data effectively to shape their policies and practices on improving the career outcomes of non-traditional students.

Where data are weak, academics should consider what they can do, supported by administrators, to collect and analyse evidence of career outcomes for non-traditional graduates. Senior administrators should support and seek to systematise such data collection and analysis.

Even where existing data are strong, they often rely on a single measure of success – employment – which does not take account of other post-graduation outcomes such as start-ups, self-employment, or portfolio activities. Institutions should consider supplementing existing data, and above all engage with non-traditional graduates directly.

## Academic curricula

Our findings suggest that employability initiatives work particularly well when embedded in the mainstream curriculum. Because this involves all students, it offers a good way of promoting employability among all student groups.

Academic curricula should particularly include support for career planning, geared towards the requirements of the discipline.

## Careers services

Careers services, where they exist, can contribute significantly to supporting non-traditional students in their search for employment. Interventions that are focussed upon particular groups – students with disability, parents – can make a measurable difference to their employability.

Universities with careers services normally collect and analyse data on their performance. This should include information on the uptake of careers services by non-traditional students, and the career destinations of non-traditional groups as compared with strategic targets.

Internships and other work placement schemes function differently for different groups of student. High quality internships provide students with valuable experience of life in the workplace, but they may pose unintended barriers to some. Academics should ensure that any such barriers

are minimised, and seek to support participation by non-traditional students who might otherwise be excluded.

## Student associations

Many students develop their employability through involvement in student associations. Yet participation in these activities is at present not evenly spread among all students. Student associations can help non-traditional students improve their employability by promoting engagement by all in their clubs and other activities, and by challenging those clubs that are socially exclusive.

## Partnerships with alumni

Alumni groups are a great way of engaging with your graduates. However, their membership is often self-selecting. Institutions should ensure that they speak

with the full range of their alumni, including those from non-traditional backgrounds, to explore ways of improving their employability.

Alumni groups are also a good way of building graduate networks. Institutions should actively promote the use of alumni networks to all graduates, and help ensure that the benefits particularly reach those whose professional connections are weakest, for example by supporting targeted mentoring schemes.

## Staff development

Academic staff should have access to, and be encouraged to take part in, training and development opportunities related to improving the employability attributes of non-traditional students, who may have few other reliable sources of information on the graduate labour market

## Recommendations

### FOR UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT/STAFF

- 1) Enhance awareness of challenges facing non-traditional students amongst staff
- 2) Embed employability initiatives within mainstream curricula where possible
- 3) Tailor employability initiatives to non-traditional groups
- 4) Establish and further develop relationships between university and different sectors of business and industry and seek opportunities to align these relationships with objectives within academic courses
- 5) Encourage opportunities for negotiation and evolution of relevant courses to attend to employer and market needs
- 6) Monitor student perceptions of the transition into employment and refine methods for aiding this process in an effective manner
- 7) Monitor the performance of non-traditional groups against strategic targets
- 8) Promote extra-curricular activities, including the use of careers services, that are sensitive to non-traditional students' needs and availability; for example during weekends and family events
- 9) Provide specific training for staff on equity issues related to non-traditional students
- 10) Ensure that careers service uptake by non-traditional students is monitored and evaluated
- 11) For student unions – to promote clubs and societies that promote engagement for non-traditional students
- 12) Promote career development planning in mainstream university curricula

<sup>1</sup> By 'non-traditional', we mean students and graduates from communities and groups who are, in some way, under-represented in university. This includes groups such as mature students, working class students, students from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities.

You can find further information about the project on our website:

<http://employ.dsw.edu.pl>



**EMPLOY**

EMPLOY project website: [employ.dsw.edu.pl](http://employ.dsw.edu.pl)  
EMPLOY on Twitter: [@EMPLOY2016](https://twitter.com/EMPLOY2016)