

EMPLOYABILITY, POLICY AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

GRADUATE EMPLOYER POLICY ISSUES

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



EMPLOY



Erasmus+

All employers want a highly motivated workforce with the skills and aptitudes to do their job. They also generally want to treat people fairly. This should mean that they recruit the best people, regardless of background. Yet as our own research has confirmed, and previous studies have shown, graduates from some backgrounds fare worse in the labour market than similarly qualified applicants from more favoured backgrounds.

Universities have a key responsibility to help improve the career prospects of all their graduates. Students and graduates themselves have to ensure that they are well informed about the graduate labour market and well placed to find jobs appropriate to their skills and qualifications. But promoting the employability of non-traditional graduates is a collective responsibility, and employers' decisions and actions matter.

This leaflet complements other publications from our project by showing how employers can make a difference to the fortunes of non-traditional graduates. We draw 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 students¹.

Student voices

A recurring theme in interviews with many non-traditional students is that they face different challenges from traditional students. In particular, they face a longer wait before finding their way into a graduate career. They are aware of barriers that may prevent them making the most of their talents.

Employer perspectives

Employers who had taken non-traditional graduates spoke highly of the business benefits. The assets that they brought with them into the workplace included:

- ▶ previous work experience, which included a general readiness-to-work as well as specific competencies including communications skills
- ▶ life experience, which can produce greater understanding of clients' situations as well as qualities such as resilience
- ▶ diversity of backgrounds, helping ensure a graduate workforce that reflects the wider society
- ▶ diversity of experiences, enriching the organisational culture and understanding
- ▶ commitment and dedication arising from successful study despite the odds as well as often a conscious decision to pursue a particular path rather than 'drift' from school to university
- ▶ loyalty both to the area and the employer

Barriers to graduate careers

Different groups of non-traditional student may face quite different barriers to entering a graduate career. Some challenges may be shared by most if not all: for instance, a lack of role models, few contacts and social networks in the industry, unpaid internships and even outright prejudice based on age, class, gender, race and disability. But others are specific to a particular group, or to particular countries. For example, adults are less flexible and are often tied to a locality.

Some barriers can be tackled by students themselves preparing better for the graduate labour market, or by universities targeting support better, or by active engagement by student associations. However, employers' choices and actions are also decisive in

ensuring that they are making best use of all the talent available and have a smart, diverse and inclusive workforce.

Recommendations

- 1) Enhance awareness amongst recruiting staff regarding challenges facing non-traditional students in the employment process
- 2) Promote inclusion rather than exclusion through a commitment to equity goals in the employment process and in the workplace with the endeavour to promote opportunities for non-traditional students
- 3) Identify, promote and monitor targets for hiring graduates with a non-traditional background
- 4) Within the advertising of employment opportunities to encourage applications from students from non-traditional backgrounds
- 5) Build and further mobilise relationships with careers services and other departments within institutions to cultivate knowledge and understanding between academia and higher education with the endeavour to advance student transition into the labour market
- 6) Promote internships that attend to equity issues - e.g. they are monitored carefully to ensure they are not serving to increase the divide between traditional and non-traditional students
- 7) Promote flexible working practices that serve to get the best out of employees while also being responsive to e.g. their family obligations
- 8) Enhance relationships with clubs and societies at higher education institutions that are targeted towards minorities
- 9) Where relationships are made with specific traditional student societies and associations to investigate how these can be linked with minorities/non-traditional groups
- 10) Commitment to diversity and empowerment within recruitment and the workplace

¹ 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>



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EMPLOY project website: employ.dsw.edu.pl
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