

## Report on EMPLOY round-table launch event on graduate transitions to employment.

Maynooth University, 03 Sep 2015

As part of the launch of the Irish strand of the Erasmus+ EMPLOY research, Fergal Finnegan and Jerry O'Neill from the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University, hosted and facilitated a discussion on graduate transitions to employment with a purposely-selected group of employers, recruiters and business representatives.



The round-table breakfast-discussion was attended by ten business representatives and graduate recruitment professionals from international and indigenous organisations across a variety of sectors and sizes: manufacturing; legal services; teacher recruitment; retail; drinks industry; public sector; executive recruitment; chamber of commerce; and local enterprise.

After a round of introductions and a brief overview of the EMPLOY project, Fergal and Jerry facilitated a rich and energetic plenary discussion on the attending employers' views and experiences of graduate transitions to employment.

### **What are employers looking for in graduates?**

Employers identified a variety of desirable graduate skills and attributes including: leadership, resilience, communication skills, independence, entrepreneurial knowledge and good attitude. There was a particularly strong emphasis on the value of work experience and voluntary experience for graduates who are making the transition to employment.

There was an interesting discussion around the value of academic achievement for employers - in particular, final degree classification. Some participants felt that this was becoming increasingly less relevant and examples were provided of organisations which seem to be moving away from such criteria. However, it was also pointed out that academic

results are still widely used as a screening instrument in highly-competitive recruitment contexts.

There was some discussion about the significance of age in terms of graduate employability. Although there was some feeling that there was a value for employers in recruiting younger graduates, there was less assurance about this within the wider group. One of the participants commented that they had started to focus on more mature graduates in particular recruiting contexts as they felt that older graduates' life experience was an asset in retail management.

Some posited whether employers should reflect on highly-competitive or aggressive



interview processes which may, it was suggested, not be the best way to identify suitable candidates. However, in response to this, and with a reiteration of the value of resilience as an attribute, it was also felt that graduates were entering a highly competitive job market which often favoured candidates who responded positively to such cultures and practices.

There were some thoughts expressed on the value and purpose of higher education for

students: for some university should be a time for students to pursue a subject that they are passionate about – and that the challenge, for students planning a transition to work, is to integrate that passion into a sustainable career path. For others, a higher education, doesn't provide anyone with the right to work, but opens up a wider and, possibly more rewarding, array of occupational possibilities that are not available to those who do not attend university.

### **Employer initiatives in supporting non-traditional students and graduates**

Evidence of some innovative examples of employers engaging with non-traditional students emerged from the discussion. The representative from the international retail company talked about their work-study scholarship programme which targeted people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Borrowing from the models practiced in the German domain of the company, the employer paid for the full-tuition fees on a designated degree programme with a private HEI in Dublin. Employees work and study in sequential periods.

Another participant talked about their close links with an access programme with a Dublin university. Many of the graduates from that programme had progressed to graduate

recruitment programmes with their large legal firm. There was an acknowledgement across a number of the participants that organisations had much to learn from a more diversified employee population.

### **Graduate motivations in career development**

The discussion, at one stage, moved on to employers' perceptions of graduates' motivation in the development of a career. Although income was not unimportant, some felt that many of their graduate entrants were driven by more of a sense of gaining responsibility and recognition for the work that they were moving into. Furthermore, there was a sense that occupational arcs were influenced by familial and social ties (such as sport), as much as individualised notions of career-enhancement. The reluctance, but necessity, of graduates to emigrate to find work relevant to their degree was also touched upon. This was particularly evident for graduates of teacher-training programmes.

### **The role of universities in facilitating transitions to appropriate employment**

There was a general consensus amongst the participants that the Careers department in universities are doing extremely valuable work in terms of facilitating transitions to employment for students. However, it was also felt that this work is undervalued by the broader, and particularly, academic community within higher education institutions.



There are, it was pointed out, many really useful and engaging employability initiatives available to students in university but they are currently positioned as additional rather than core aspects of students' educational experience. Most participants expressed a desire for such initiatives to become more central to a students' university education and that, for example, work-focussed modules should, if possible, be integrated into programmes of study.

There was a sense that employers are more than happy to get involved with universities in employability initiatives – even to the point of leading the development and delivery of training on campus. Some employers were quite honest in their admission that there is a reciprocal benefit to such engagement with HEIs as it enhances the visibility of the organisational brand amongst the university population.

There was a suggestion, at one point, about the value of a boarder liberal arts education on which more specific disciplines could then build upon.

### What can students do?

One of the interesting points raised was that students may very well have many of the non-academic attributes which employers value without being aware of it. It was suggested that students should be encouraged to make these skills, attributes and experiences visible to themselves firstly. In so doing, they can then start to weave these aspects into ways of



presenting occupational biographies or narratives which employers will find appealing.

There was also a very strong sense that students should be seeking out opportunities for work experience and paid-work while studying. This capacity to be working and studying at the same time, which might be a necessity for

many non-traditional students, can be regarded very favourably by employers.

### Going forward

The employer event was very useful for establishing interest in, and dialogue around, the EMPLOY project within a small, but significant body of employer stakeholders. It was also an important moment in the development of the Irish team's approach to the forthcoming engagement with employer participants.