

# Exploring how student employability is understood from an institution's FE and HE cohorts

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## Executive Summary

There has been an increasing amount of research produced around H.E. employability and also around the careers work that happens for 12-18 year olds, with primary education careers work also starting to get attention nationally. The focus of the research done for these cohorts happens very much in parallel bubbles, without much produced across the pre-18 and HE educational sector divide.

This project is aimed at this 'bridge', to look at employability from both our FE and HE cohorts of students, taking into account both staff and student views. The research project was started in September 2017 and was finished a year later. During this time, a review of current employability research was undertaken to help 'narrow down' the research questions. This gave a good basis on which to then construct a survey for both students and staff. After these were completed, an analysis was undertaken of the survey results. The findings and subsequent recommendations were then written up as part of this research. As is probably fairly common in research like this, the wider research was often gone back to, to reread articles and to identify further research that would help 'contextualise' this project's outcomes.

There were several areas that presented themselves as interesting areas that would benefit from these student and staff surveys. These included collecting their views about what employability actually means. There are several definitions available, with neither sector having much 'crossover' in their conception about what employability is. Identity was also recognised in the research as an emerging issue within academic research. Part time work and work experience were also topics that seemed to fit in well with the research topic, and how or if they impact on students employability, especially as Writtle University College (WUC) has a 'vocational' feel to its curriculum offering. The issues combined, of what students and non careers staff define employability as, identity development and the role of part time work/work experience provided several questions and subsequently ample responses to evaluate. As with other research, there have been a series of other questions and research possibilities which have come out of undertaking this project.

The recommendations include several that as an institution, Writtle University College needs to consider, and which might be useful for others too. Our Higher Education students come to their learning having already had experiences that will influence their future career direction; some of these will have been really positive and 'outstanding', other experiences less so. These recommendations include;

Students need to do regular self audits of their skills/attributes, or at least at the start, middle point and end point of their studies,

Students need to evaluate their part time work/work experience further, to recognise the impact and transferability of what they have gained,

Students need to develop their 'working' identities better, or may need help with this as part of their courses

One of the recommendations is that this divide between school/college and HE careers work does not need to be as rigid as it can seem at the moment. The rigid 'divide' between the research, reports, careers materials and tools between FE and HE nationally is something that needs to be 'bridged' to benefit both the practitioners and students existing in these different education spheres.

The findings that support these recommendations were fascinating to discover. There is a genuine perception that both students and staff think that employability is a 'shared' endeavour and responsibility, and not something that should be 'done to' passive students. There are differences to be seen in how FE and HE staff sometimes view what employability is, perhaps more of a continuum rather than a binary issue or whether a student 'has' or 'has not' got employability. Perhaps tied to this was a view held more by the HE students that part time work or experience of the world of work developed their 'employability' further than some of the FE students thought.

This has been a both a challenging and interesting project to undertake. As mentioned already, I have been left with more questions than I have come up with answers for, but perhaps that is the nature of social research.

## Introduction

There is a growing body of research and ‘noise’ around employability, especially in the HE sphere. Improving employability within HE has been taken widely as shorthand for improving graduate outcomes, DHLE scores and more recently TEF status. There has been much debate about how to define employability, and how significant this should or should not be when looking at the ‘value’ a graduate gains from doing a certain degree with a specific university, or very narrowly, the starting salary a graduate gets upon completion. There is a wider debate, which will not be gone into here, about whether this ‘value’ should include social and cultural capital, and whether reducing it to a monetary figure is appropriate, or as Hooley et al (2017) quote Lauder in Career Guidance for Social Justice as suggesting it as ‘education... reduced to employability, self worth to market worth’ (p11 ).

Within the pre-university world of schools and colleges, ‘employability’ is a less used as a term (but interestingly it is starting to be creep in), but either way CEIAG is moving up the schools and colleges agenda due to a number of factors. These include the political acceptance and push of the Gatsby benchmarks, recently updated statutory guidance for schools and colleges (Feb and March 2018), the long awaited new Careers Strategy (Dec 2017), Ofsted’s increased awareness of CEIAG during inspections and the continued discussion nationally about the postcode patchiness of good quality CEIAG in the sector since the demise of Connexions in 2012.

There are several different definitions of employability that have been discussed in the research. It is worth just revisiting these now. Reading the literature, several issues have become apparent. There does not seem to be any definition that is aimed at both pre university students and university students. As a careers adviser working with FE and HE students in one organisation, it is noticeable that there has not been much ‘cross over’ in the definitions or debate between these two cohorts. Many of the more established definitions are worth mentioning here to give some background to the research undertaken. I have highlighted various reports and articles here which are definitely worth reading for a more in depth analysis of the debate.

HEPI produced a report called Employability: degrees of value (2015). Within this there is a good summary of various definitions and ideas around employability. One suggestion here is that employability contains three components: knowledge, skills and social capital and that a student’s ‘graduateness’ need to be useful to employers, society and themselves. These components help to move employability away from the view that it is ‘having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required’ (p9). This report also raises the possibility that employability is an intrinsic quality of a graduate, which also relates to the labour market conditions and the ability of an individual to demonstrate they are employable. These last two factors are very interlinked, and especially when graduate opportunities will rise and fall due to the economic outlook.

McQuaid and Lindsay in their *Concept of Employability* (2005, p199) quote the CBI definition as:

Employability is the possession by an individual of the qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby help to realise his or her aspirations and potential in work.

Artess, Hooley and Mellors Bourne (2017) produced a very valuable report entitled 'Employability: A review of literature 2012 to 2016' for the HEA (Higher Education Academy). This is a very thorough review of 187 pieces of research produced in this timeframe. They highlight Cole and Tibby's (2013) work that states:

Employability is about more than obtaining employment, and that HEPs should not focus simply on supporting students to get their first job but instead support them to building positive and meaningful careers and to participate meaningfully in society (p10).

Coincidentally, the recent AGCAS First Year career readiness survey, which WUC took part in, builds on this to look at what first year students social capital and engagement has been prior to starting university. This 'looking back' at a student's immediate past experience is an important reference point to recommendations suggested later on in this report, to help students recognise the skills, social capital and world of work learning they have achieved before enrolling at university. As with all universities, the challenge is not only to help students recognise this, but to 'add value' to their skills, social capital and world of work learning during their studies.

Two other notable points are made in the review by Artess et al, one being that,

One interesting approach has been to move away from the discussion of employability as a list of skills and attributes towards a more subtle discussion of 'identity'... helping students to transition from the identity of a student towards that of a graduate worker and citizen (p7).

Linked to the issue of identity, later in the review, Turner's view is presented that 'self belief is... a key aspect of employability development' (p20), and that curriculum areas are best placed to develop this.

The other notable definition being the widely acknowledged Yorke and Knight (2006, p8) employability definition, which is quoted on page 10 as,

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

Within the school and college sector, this is not much discussion about employability as such in these terms. One well recognised definition is from the CDI's careers, employability and enterprise framework, which goes from Key Stage 2-5, which in effect covering the end of primary through to level 3 qualifications. The CDI's framework aims are:

Developing yourself through careers, employability and enterprise education

Learning about careers and the world of work

Developing your career management and employability skills

The underpinning structure behind the framework is identified as,

at one level... a straightforward matching process: if individuals understand themselves and their opportunities, and have developed the right skill set, they will be able to take their next steps... the framework is also rooted in learning theory emphasising the development of autonomy, personal agency, self efficacy beliefs and cognitive understanding... It recognises the importance of enabling children and young people to create a personal narrative that locates their career wellbeing in the wider context of their personal, social, political, economic and environmental wellbeing. (p.5)

This 'underpinning structure' of the framework draws in both the element of having the right skills and attributes employers are looking for as referred to above, but also the 'identity' element of how the student views their own 'personal narrative... in the wider context'. This then does at least make some recognition of the wider and more in depth HE employability discussion.

One other important factor in all these is that these definitions are often used in relation to organisational 'standpoints', for instance around resource allocation within an institution or to help government departments develop policies, e.g. development of TEF. The mechanisms through which 'employability' is measured (e.g. DHLE/Graduate Outcomes/destinations measures/Ofsted grades) can be seen as rather blunt instruments to encourage the employability needs of students to be met, whose 'starting points' will be varied due to all manner of factors. Indeed, Harvey (Defining and measuring employability 2010) suggests that employability has been confused at times with DHLE outcomes. Regardless of this or the 'uniqueness' of the different employability/CEIAG definitions individually, the 'direction of travel' contained in them does point the way for individual schools, colleges and universities. There has been much done to enable students to develop the requisite skills, knowledge and identity; to have their own effective career management skills, whilst also negotiating their role in the wider community and society. How this is done is left to individual institutions, but reviewing the CDI and AGCAS annual awards (available

on their respective websites) over a number of years suggests that there are numerous 'good practise' examples happening in response to institutions addressing their students' employability needs. Indeed, on a wider scale than just awards lists, within schools and colleges, the Quality in Careers Standards have been met by a numerous schools and college, showcasing examples of good CEIAG programmes.

The role of employers in the employability agenda is of some relevance and importance too. As the 'recipients' of most of these students (due to self-employment being less popular as a 'destination' straight out of education), there have been several reports and surveys produced. Many identify skills gaps or skills that employers want to see more evidence of, the CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2016 and their 2017 Helping the UK Thrive being two examples.

Contemporary Transitions (p25, 2017) reports that students themselves want,

greater preparation for the working world from their schools and colleges... greater support in transitioning into the labour market... greater attention to recruitment skills... young people are both concerned by their capacity to compete in the struggle for work and... show a serious desire for information to make better strategic decisions to influence their long term working careers

Whilst reading around the employability debate, I came across several articles about part-time work and how students did not always make best use of their part-time work experience for their applications for full-time work. As part-time work and work experience are both experiences our students get, I felt this could be an interesting aspect to explore as part of this report. Bearing in mind that the ability of students to demonstrate the skills needed for 'good' jobs should be greatly enhanced by part-time work, this could be an important element to demonstrate better employability.

Evans and Richardson (2017<sup>1</sup>), 'Realising the latent potential in the part-time student workforce' suggest that 'nearly 80% of the UK's students work part time alongside their full time degree studies... the main motivation for undertaking this work is financial (p1). They identify a range of studies and other benefits to part time work, including the development of transferable skills.

Evans and Richardson (2017<sup>2</sup>) in Enhancing Graduate Prospects by Recording and Reflecting on Part-Time Work also suggest that,

even employers who do not explicitly demand prior work experience for graduate posts believe that graduates with some form of work experience perform better throughout the recruitment and selection process.

They also go onto discuss students use of part time work experience and how whilst these jobs develop the skills graduate employers often want and that,

students often do not make the most of skills, capabilities and/or experience they have gained during their part-time work... a frequent inability to demonstrate their skills to best effect (IES and HESCU 2015 report)... students are failing to recognise and fully embrace, the skills derived from their part time jobs... students need a better appreciation of the skills they have developed through their part time work and should be able to describe... how these might apply to a particular graduate position.

As can be seen from all the above discussion, defining employability has a complexity to it, and several 'strands' to unpick. These include identity and transition, skills and knowledge acquisition, the role or impact of student's social capital, and how experience like part-time work has relevance for future careers. These various 'strands' informed the construction of the survey and analysis afterwards.

## **The research project**

### Rationale

The aim of the project was to critically evaluate how two distinct cohorts of both staff and students view the cross curricula issue of employability. Across both FE and HE sectors there are various definitions of employability, as highlighted above. Combined with this is the national impact of the imbalance and patchiness of careers services and support for school and FE students, with the demise of Connexions. It could be argued that nationally HE students now benefit more from a higher profile careers service within their university that is consistently better resourced and provided for than those in FE, with the increased importance of graduate outcomes and TEF within the HE sector. The FE counterbalance to this is that recently Ofsted have increased their 'awareness' of CEIAG, there has been new CEIAG statutory guidance for colleges, the Gatsby benchmarks and the requirement for establishments to have a Career Leader are getting considerable 'air time'. However, the careers teams in F.E. are not always as well staffed or 'high profile' as their H.E. counterparts. This research is very much aimed at looking at how within 1 institution, two distinct cohorts of HE and FE staff and students view employability, if there are any differences/similarities in views and if there are any recommendations about how these issues can be addressed 'across the divide'.

The AGCAS First-year Student Career Readiness Survey 2017/18, seems to support this discrepancy and 'patchwork' of IAG in that it 'reveals the different levels of students' career readiness, their engagement in career-related activities...', (P.6) with a crucial finding that 'fewer than one third of younger students had clear career ideas before they chose their university course, which is significantly lower than mature students' (P.6). It must be recognised that not having any 'clear career ideas' is not necessarily an issue, as long as engagement with employability and CEIAG processes occurs. It is also noted that 'a significantly higher proportion of students educated at private schools reported that careers support had been provided (than in the state sector)' (p.7).

### The research

At the start of the project, it was planned that a survey would be the starting point for both staff and students, with an aim of 20 staff and 30 students to complete the respective survey. There were going to be some semi-structured interviews/focus groups after this to pick up on any issues emerging from the surveys to further delve into these further.

Part way through the academic year, the research methods changed due to the response rates and time constraints. The numbers actually responding to the surveys were considerably higher than anticipated, (50 staff, 134 students), and included several qualitative responses. Rather than engage in more data collection through semi structured interviews, which would need further analysis time, it was felt that the amount of data

collected should be sufficient to generate some findings and recommendations. Therefore the decision was taken to solely use the data from the surveys instead, as there was enough of a mix of both quantitative and qualitative data.

There was also the production of the AGCAS First Year Career Readiness Survey, which WUC students took part in. This AGCAS research and its findings is of relevance to this project too. The WUC raw data, institutional report and overarching report summarising all 17 institutions who took part has been a parallel piece of research, which offers some usefulness here.

As a consequence of just using the survey data, there are issues identified that will need further future research.

The time and effort spent on the project have been predominately concentrated time wise in two 'patches' October to December 2017 and May to August. Finding the time to do a literature review during the autumn term was a 'balancing act' but gave a good foundation to constructing the survey. It was a pleasant surprise to see the response rates, as I had been expecting this would be one of the most challenging aspects of undertaking the research.

I have provided a breakdown of the tasks below. As with much other social science research, there was a certain amount of overlay between the timeframes and activities. Student survey responses were encouraged with the possibility of getting Amazon vouchers (3x£50, 4x£20). The biggest issue was the stop/start nature of the research, and having to 'refresh' my memory of what had happened so far. As mentioned, student engagement did not turn out to be an issue.

### **October – December 2017**

Identifying and reading research papers relating to topic

Starting to construct themes for survey

### **Dec 2017**

Creation of staff and student survey

### **Jan – end of Feb 2018**

Promotion and completion of the surveys

### **May – August 2018**

Review of responses

Re reading of literature in light of survey 'themes'

### **July/ August 2018**

Write up of report

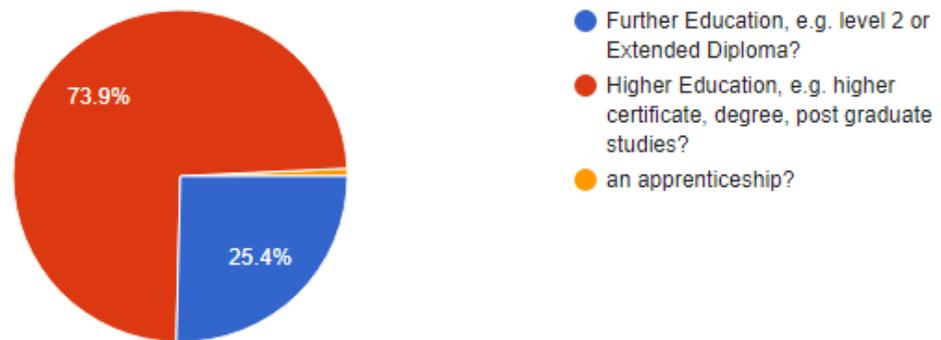
## The Findings

### DATA

With the numbers responding to the student and staff surveys, the breakdown of those responding was as follows. With the student responses, as highlighted below.

### Are you studying

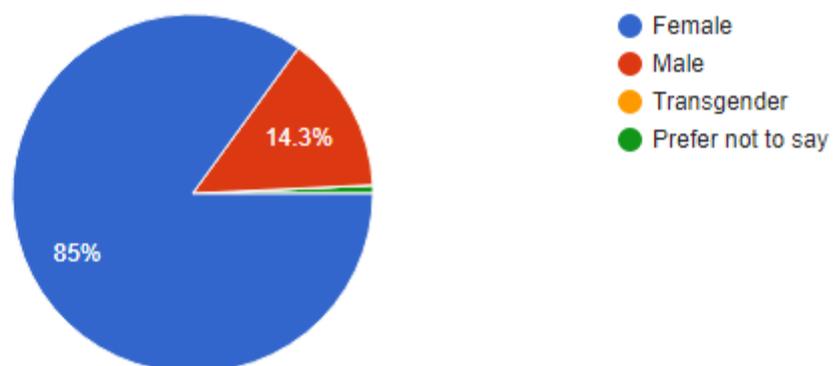
134 responses



There were a higher response from HE students (99) than FE (35) and Apprentices (1). For the purposes of the analysis, the one apprentice was 'counted' in with the FE numbers.

### Are you?

133 responses

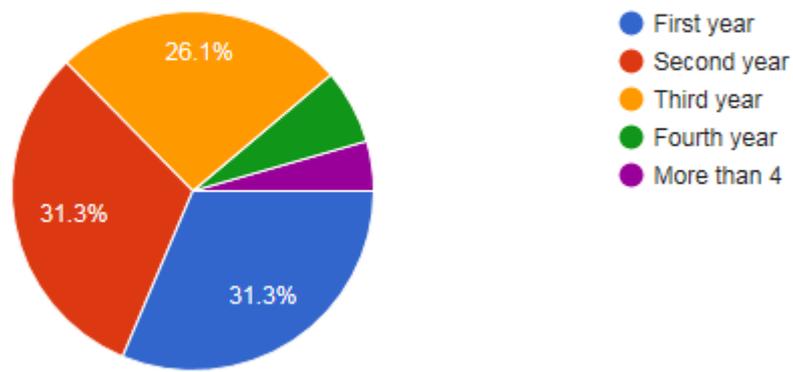


Further breakdown, for FE 24% were male, 76% female. HE 11% were male, 87% female and 3% chose not to declare.

Whilst these responses might look particularly HE and female dominated, there are factors to consider. Firstly I had anticipated that there would be a greater HE response due to factors like the HE students being more used to taking part in research (e.g. the AGCAS First year careers readiness) and fairly regularly being asked to fill in surveys for 3<sup>rd</sup> year dissertations. The higher ratio of female to male could also be partly explained by the curriculum areas that have bigger cohort sizes being more female-dominated, for instance equine, animal management and veterinary physiotherapy, and the response rates from curriculum areas were roughly in line with curriculum cohorts.

## How many years have you been studying at WUC?

134 responses

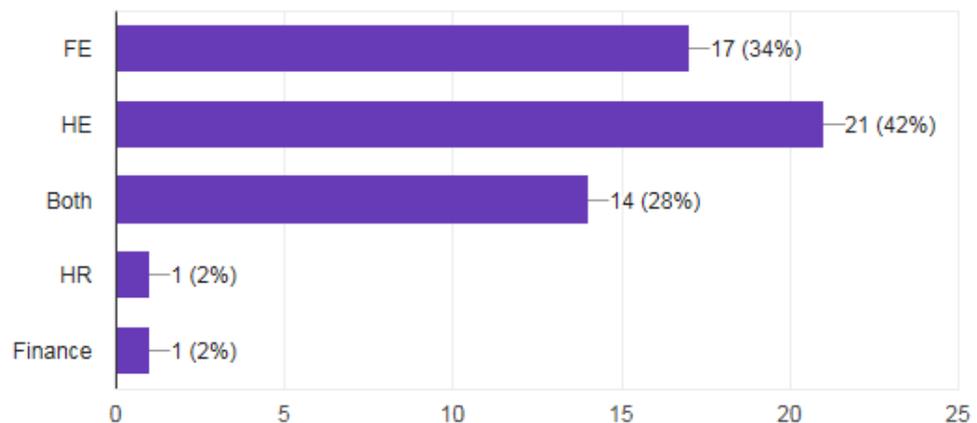


Interestingly, the spread of respondents shows the range of time spent studying at WUC. On reflection, if the question had delved into whether the study had started in FE or HE, this could have provided insight into 'crossing the divide' between FE and HE employability issues from a student's perspective.

From the staff survey, where there were 50 responses. The breakdown of which cohort staff work with (FE, HE or both) is below.

## Do you work in FE, HE or both?

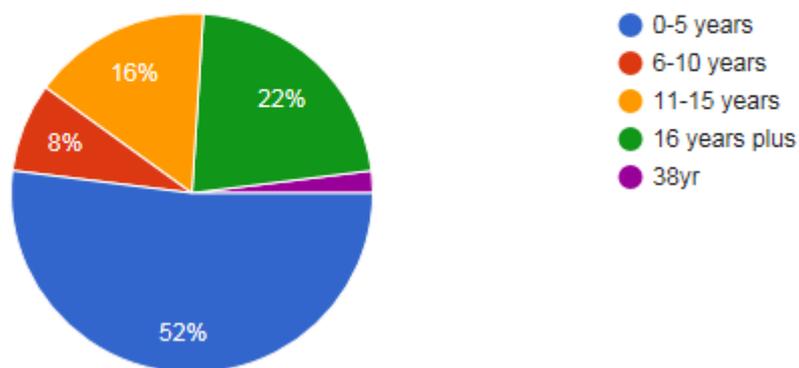
50 responses



With a good breakdown of length of time working for the university college,

## How long have you worked at WUC?

50 responses



### DEFINITIONS

Both students and staff were asked about their views about how to define employability. Having identified 4 main ones in the literature review, this was an ideal opportunity to see which definitions students and staff actually agreed with. They were asked to rank these definitions in order of preference.

The four definitions are I put forward were

- 1) It's about getting a job straight after finishing college.
- 2) It's about having a set of skills/attributes that employers want.

- 3) It's about individuals gaining certain skills, and developing the understanding and attributes that will lead to an effective move from studying to employment/self employment.
- 4) Its about developing a 'work' identity, rather than a 'student' identity.

As mentioned, these definitions relate to the employability debate discussed earlier. There is an overlap admittedly for the first three here, in that students will need to demonstrate skills/attributes to 'getting a job straight after finishing college', but this overlap reflects the academic research and debate. Having said that, the first two can loosely be 'tied' together as showing that students meet an LMI need, or are a good 'fit' for what employers want; the second pair can be seen as more focussed on individuals own self-development, transition and identity.

Having reviewed the responses for both HE and FE students, definition 3 (individuals having the skills to move from studying to employment) was the clear favourite for both cohorts, 72% FE, 64% HE put this as their first choice. Definition 2 (skills/attributes employers want) was the main second choice for both groups, with definition 4 of developing a 'work' identity 3<sup>rd</sup>. Looking at the breakdown of data between FE and HE for each definition, the main difference is between the FE and HE second and third choices. This is due FE students views being more evenly spread across the four definitions for these preferences, whereas for instance 64% of HE students second choices being split between definition 2 and 3. These two definitions being,

It's about having a set of skills/attributes that employers want

Its about gaining certain skills, and developing the understanding and attributes that will lead to an effective move from studying to employment/self employment.

These two different definitions can be seen as on a spectrum with both employers and students LMI and 'employability' needs on it. The requirement for skills/attributes that either employers want or students need to transition to their next stage is where FE and HE students differ in their employability thinking/planning, with HE students being more 'sure' that both are needed. This could also be presented as evidence that these HE students are viewing their graduate outcomes as a demonstration of Parson's trait and factor theory, which has both the individual's and employer's elements within a career matching approach. Both the FE and HE cohorts perceptions about these definitions would be an interesting area to get further qualitative evidence from to explore this further. Partly to see if any 'matching theory' thinking is occurring with older, more specialised HE students, or whether part of this difference is due to FE students less well developed career thinking.

The staff survey also produced some interesting data here. Definition 3 (gaining certain skills, and developing the understanding and attributes that will lead to an effective move from studying to employment/self employment) also overwhelmingly received the most

first preferences, with 66% (FE staff 69%, HE staff 59%), second choice being definition 2 (It's about having a set of skills/attributes that employers want), with an even split of staff, 3<sup>rd</sup> choice being focussed on moving from student identity to a 'work' one, with an even split between the different staff cohorts. The group who work in both FE and HE follow these trends too.

### **PRACTICAL OUTCOMES OF EMPLOYABILITY**

Building upon this question about definitions, a question was asked 'What do you think the practical outcomes of increased student employability should be?' The following answers are listed in order of how ranked by students by (the first two were clear favourites as answers)

A good CV

A successful transition to working

Getting a 'good' job after your studies

Better student outcomes for the college (e.g. students getting into jobs or courses)

A successful transition to further studies

A LinkedIn profile

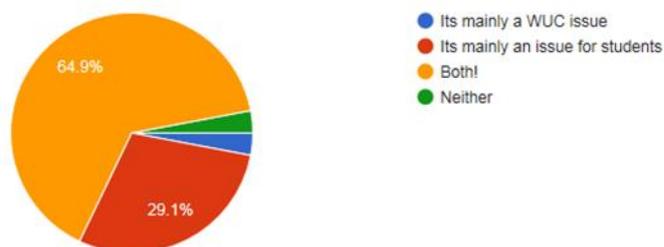
In the digital world that these students inhabit, it is surprising that 'A good CV' trumped 'A LinkedIn profile' so completely. Looking at the data though, only 22% of FE students thought a LinkedIn profile would be a practical outcome, as opposed to 54% of HE students who thought it should be. This could be down to different factors, such as HE students access to, and applying for, opportunities in the labour market taking place more online than FE students, although our FE students are just as capable using online resources to access opportunities, for instance in using the UCAS site.

### **WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS EMPLOYABILITY?**

Two questions were then asked around employability, one around whose responsibility employability is, and then one to test out opinions further about who within the organisation should have responsibility.

## Is student employability more of an issue for WUC as an organisation or for students themselves?

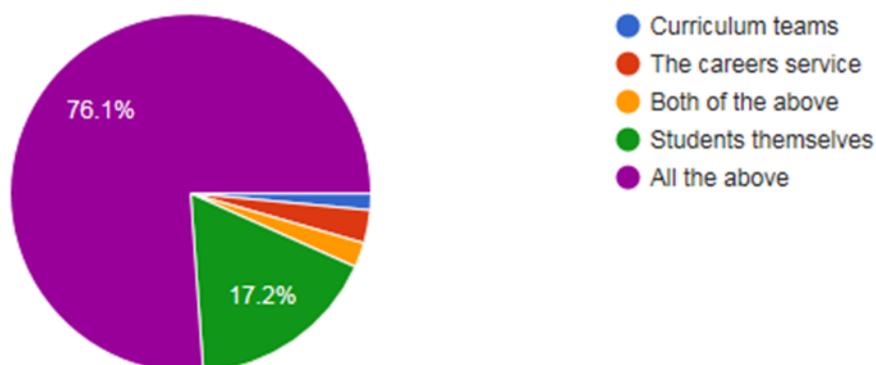
134 responses



The assumption that employability is mainly an organisational issue (due to TEF/DHLE, FE destinations measure/Ofsted) can be dismissed here by 64.9% students thinking it is both an organisational and student issue. Although FE students were not quite as positive, 44% thought it was 'both', with nearly 29.1% thinking it was more an issue for students themselves. This identification of 'both' having employability as an issue is good for the purpose of helping that students engage with progression/careers work, but there will need to be some work done with the 29.1% of students who think its just their responsibility. How to engage these students in services offered will need both a marketing effort to understand their views, as well as also ensuring that what is offered appeals enough to practically get their involvement.

## Who has the responsibility for developing student employability?

134 responses

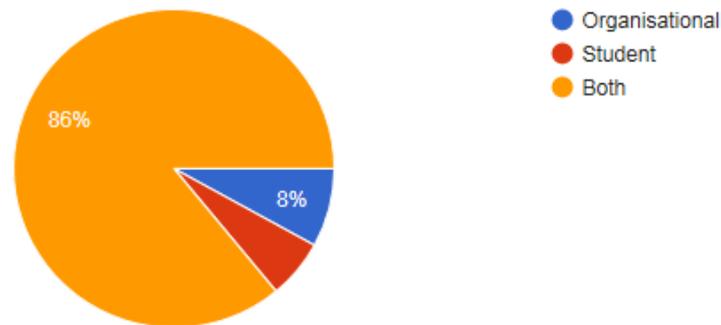


It is good to see that students tend to think that it is not just the careers service or curriculum teams' responsibility to develop student employability, with 76.1% agreeing (HE 83% FE 66%) that it is up to all those identified. Interestingly 17.2% overall thought it was their own responsibility, and 3% thought it was solely the careers service. This supports the approach for engaging all students in employability as an issue, and that it being a cross-curricular or embedded within the curriculum as an approach is accepted by students. But it does raise issues about ensuring all students actively engage with provision, rather than assume the provision is not aimed at them.

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, staff views were even more sure that it is a joint responsibility, as shown here. Again there was no real difference between different cohorts of staff, staff were overwhelmingly of the opinion that all responsible for developing employability, with 95% agreeing with this.

### Is student employability more of an organisational issue or a student issue?

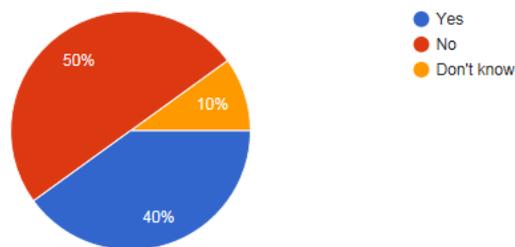
50 responses



Another of the staff questions is relevant here as to whether employability is different for FE or HE students.

### Do you think there is a difference between what employability should mean for FE and HE cohorts?

50 responses



There was a radical difference here between what the FE and HE staff said. A total of 64% of FE staff did not think there was any difference between what employability should mean for both cohorts, with 57% of HE staff thinking there was a difference. The Both category was evenly split between the two. This is perhaps the most noticeable difference in the staff answer from their survey, in that even within one institution there is a such a variance about how employability should mean 'across the divide' of FE and HE.

There was then a chance to offer some comments about this question. The more nuanced qualitative answers given might explain partly how the binary answers of yes/no above seem to contrast so much. Some of the answers given include (a full list of the comments are in the appendix 1)

They are simply different areas of economic activity. It is clear to me that some students are FE and others are HE.

I think it can do, it depends on what area of employment they are looking at.

There are some differences but the majority of attributes that make someone attractive to employ applies to all.

But don't feel there necessarily should be, however, HE may well be looking more toward management roles

It's all about the relevant skills

HE students should be better prepared for problem solving and therefore potential management roles

The skills set may be required at a different level, but fundamentally the same at whatever point of entry to the workplace.

HE students should at the point of leaving should be more mature, professional and qualified compared to FE students so their chosen careers and employability skill set should reflect this.

I think so, yes. Because graduate-level roles should include different requirements to those roles sought by FE-leavers. Many overlap, but some will be different (eg supervisory or research skills)

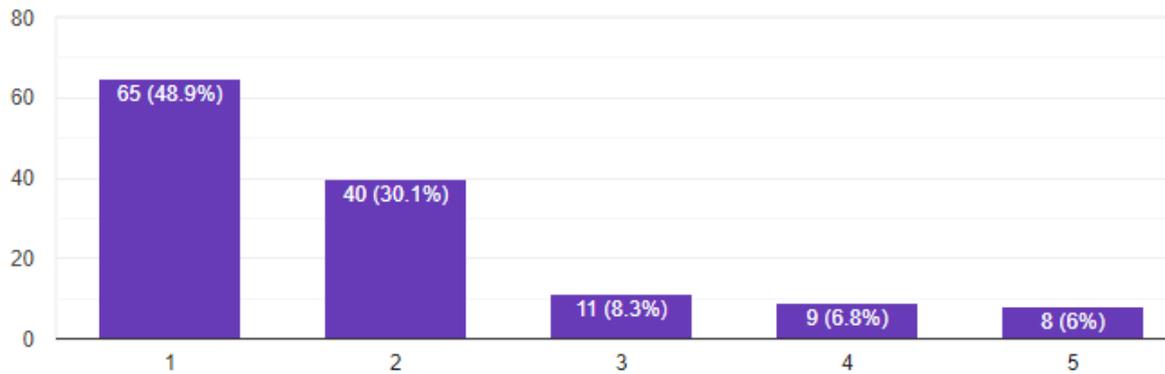
Not in terms of principles, but actual skill levels/ expectations will differ

Employability is about specific skills and transferable skills. FE and HE students have mix of both.

From a closer reading of the comments, and the numerical data offered above, there seems to be a view that there is both a similarity and difference with what employability should mean for FE and HE students. One view could be that there is more of a continuum of development of employability skills, attributes, etc. that further study and experience should develop. The comments about HE students aiming for more supervisory/managerial positions and about actual differing skills levels between the cohorts suggest that the degree 'experience' should be preparing students to target different labour market opportunities, perhaps different to those that FE students even with 3 years world of work experience might be aiming for. This viewpoint is more representative of the HE staff community. Further research into this question, with a wider number of staff would be needed to clarify why exactly there is such a difference in opinion. Other factors that might be at work here might be that FE staff do not think that level 4-8 study will 'produce' much more employability difference (e.g. in social or cultural capital, skill acquisition, identity development), just a different range of career opportunities to apply for; whereas HE staff

might be more influenced by the impact of Graduate Opportunities/DHLE definitions of 'graduate' outcomes being more desired outcomes for students.

It perhaps then comes as no surprise that students think that improving employability whilst studying is important. This chart shows how students rated this, with 1 being the top of the scale re importance.

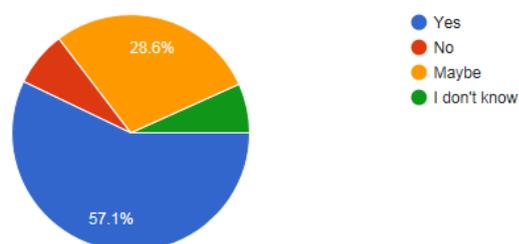


Improving employability whilst studying is obviously an important issue for students (55% HE, 31% FE thought it was very important, 24% HE, 39% FE thought it was important). How much this is due to students being on more vocationally natured courses may or may not be an influencing factor here, has not been measured. It is noticeable though that HE students view it as more important, one possible factor here might be due to increased fees and wanting to make sure their H.E. study has a positive impact on their job prospects.

## PART TIME WORK

If you have had a part time job, do you think this will improve your longer term career prospects?

133 responses



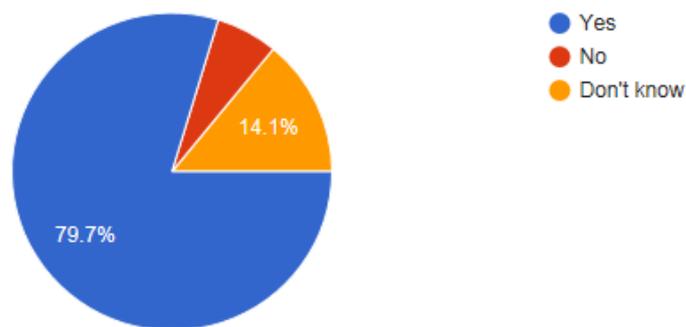
This is an interesting finding, with a large majority of students agreeing with the possibility that a part time job will improve longer-term career prospects, with 57.1% agreeing and 28.6% answering 'maybe'. On further analysis, 76% of HE students and 58% of FE students agreed. The differential between these percentages is relatively large though, and one that could be worth exploring in more detail. It could purely be an experience issue, of slightly older students studying HE having had more experience in the labour market upon which to

answer this question having had time in the world of work. Or there may be other factors involved here too.

Intriguingly, the answers to the next question show students thinking that part-time work has already improved their employability skills. The disconnect here being that 79.7% thinking part time work has improved their skills, but that only 57.1% thought part-time would improve their longer term career prospects.

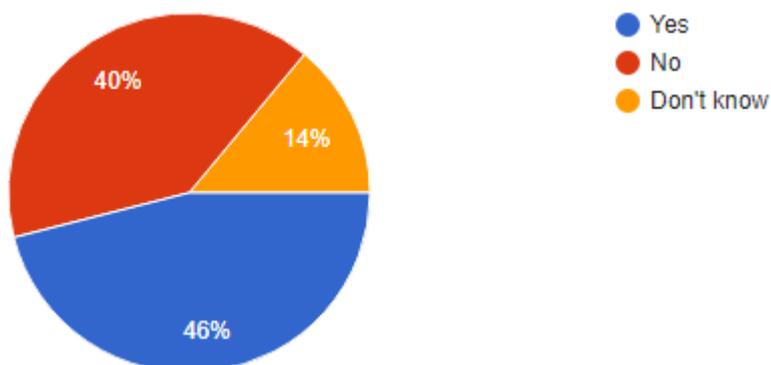
### If you have had a part time job, has this improved your employability skills?

128 responses



Overall, 79.7% agreed with this statement, 14.1% disagreed. The breakdown of cohort percentages are, FE 81% agreed with this statement, 19% did not know, HE 82% agreed, 11% disagreed and 6% did not know. Alongside this the AGCAS First year Student Career Readiness Survey found that with the first year HE students, 63.9% had had part time work in the previous 2 years, as opposed to 54.7% to others that completed the survey.

Staff were also asked about student part-time work, and whether they thought that students would make connections between their part-time work and if these jobs help prepare them for career destinations.



In response to the question, there was a seemingly even split with staff 46% thought yes, 40% thought no. Although breaking down the figures between cohorts, 61% HE staff and 44% FE staff were in agreement with this, again showing a significant difference of opinion here.

After this question, there was a chance for both staff and students to write further comments in a free text box, FE students made the following comments:

If within relevant industry. <b>Any job good for experience even in customer service</b>
A part time job in a pub will not necessarily help you get a job in an office, needs to be a position that leads to your chosen career ideally.
<b>Part time jobs can be helpful when thinking of a future career as you can often start to do things that future employers will look for.</b> As well as this you can start to develop key skills needed in a work place as well as showing that you have previous work experience and dedication to a job.
<b>I think it shows good skills to do with responsibility, independence, reliability, people skills, and organisation etc that would be wanted by a future employer,</b> but the job I had didn't actually give me any experience in the field I am studying so didn't really help me learn anything important, it was just to pay for college.
Employability increases with experience, as well as good references.
I have gained vital experience in the animal industry whilst working at a vets which could also be the difference between me or someone else getting the job I am applying for in the future.
Improve knowledge and skills required for better jobs
<b>Experience in any work place is a good thing.</b>
It has given me confidence at interview etc, and has helped with networking for future opportunities
having my part time job has made me think about my long term career goals and how I am going to achieve them.
I think it would help to give an idea of what employers look for in CVs, job interviews and overall work ethic
Show you've had experience
<b>Gives you an understanding in the work place and what's expected of you.</b>
<b>As it's given me more insight into working in a business</b>
Having a part time job, even if not to do with your current course, will give you experience with customers and the workplace in general. You can also reference the part time job in your cv which will show future employers that you're experienced and able to carry out a job for a long period of time.
More experience in line of work
Employers want people that have experience in a Work place. Catch 22.
You will have experience in that specific field of work.
The more work experience you have, the more employable you are.

There is a mix of ‘specific’ benefits offered here, as well as a recognition that any experience will give ‘an understanding in the work place and what’s expected of you’ as one of the students observed.

There were more comments made by the HE students. The comments from those saying that part time work would not help are clustered around the opinion that these students do not think there is any transferability from, say a retail job, to their intended future career.

There were far more comments from students thinking a part time job would help are more numerous (43 versus 25). These comments are in Appendices 2. The following highlight how students felt part time work has helped their employability.

There are some comments that are particularly worth highlighting:

Retail teaches you enormous amounts of patience! Even when people are rude or the job isn’t exactly what you want - but <b>any part time job gets you to understand working life and have a taste before doing it full time</b> - SO important
--

The real work place gives you a social and professional skill set that no one can teach you, you learn how to conduct yourself in the work place by being in the work place. <b>Within my friend groups (ages 19-22) it is very obvious who works and who doesn't when it comes to client communications and confidence.</b>
---

Having a part time job alongside university allows you to expand your knowledge on the real world and see how work is never as black and white as it looks on paper.
--

You learn so many skills even just working in retail etc and it is also something to add to your CV. <b>My confidence would be nowhere near it is now was I not working in a shop 2 days a week and for my future career path i need to be able to talk to people confidently and be approachable.</b>
--

<b>have been able to have an insight in the working world as well as practise in interviews and development of certain skill areas and knowledge, enabling you to put these to use in your future career</b>
--

I believe it constantly improves my skills that I develop whilst studying academically and demonstrates good time management skills. It has also given me a good grounding and routine for when I begin my career
---

Other comments centred around the issue of employers being able to see that students had experience of the world of work, a ‘work ethic’ and had developed skills that were either specific to an industry or were very transferable.

There are several noticeable themes here, firstly the ‘transferability’ of skills and experience that these students identify, and the perception that employers really value any work experience gained – both these points are made in the articles written by Evans and Richardson and in the employer surveys mentioned earlier.

From the staff comments about if students made any connections between their part time work and future careers prospects, the following comments were made (others are in appendix 1):

Generally a lack of reflective skills
Depends on the student, but some don't seem to see the value of their part-time work
I wanted to answer Yes & No. Some students do, others don't!
The evidence suggests not when I have conversations
some students have part time jobs just to get money. They compartmentalize their life.
Generally they are a source of income and any development of transferable or specific skills is overlooked and, most importantly, rarely recorded.
They need to be able to identify how the transferable skills they acquire part-time relate to the skill set we're trying to furnish them with on their courses
A lot struggle to understand transferable skills

From looking at both the qualitative and quantitative data here, this is definitely an area that could benefit from further exploration. Students could benefit from further work with identifying, demonstrating and evaluating the impact that part time work has on their employability skills; some obviously have seen the benefits already, but not all. Staff's role in enabling students to 'identify, demonstrate and evaluate' will be important here, as these skills relate to academic success as much as employability 'success' and outcomes.

In answer to two questions about how curriculum teams and the careers service could improve their employability further, the student comments fall into the following areas:

More employer contact, via tutorials/lectures,

More employer contact via careers fairs, placements, work experience

More help with CV's, job application skills

Help with options (careers guidance in effect)

And lastly, the Careers Service to 'be even more omnipresent'.

Staff had the same questions, and came up with a similar list.

As previously mentioned, AGCAS has also undertaken their First Year Careers Readiness Survey. One of the findings is that,

Applying for work experience and networking with professional were perceived as important; however, students participation (or intention to participate) in these activities was much lower than for most other activities.

Therefore student engagement with particularly useful career activities like work experience and networking, which potentially could have 'high impact' needs to be looked at and encouraged more somehow. Alongside engagement with more tangible outcomes like a good CV, option identification etc.

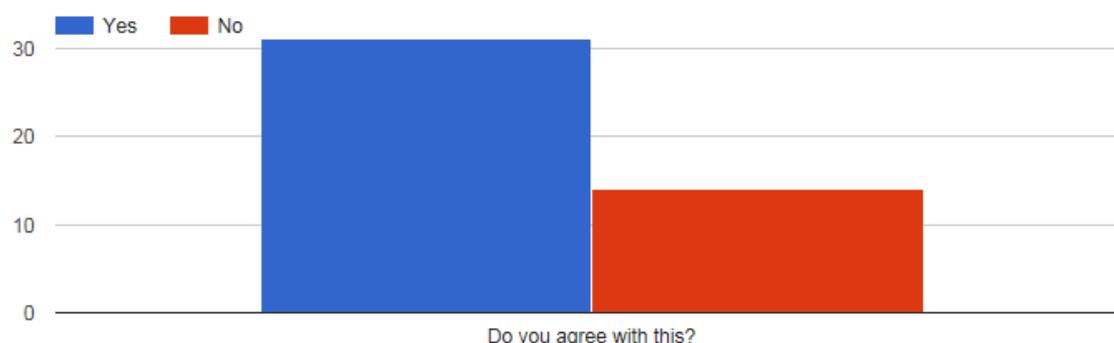
## IDENTITY

With identity being an emerging 'issue' in relation to employability as discussed in the introduction, students were asked if they would agree with the following statement;

There is some research that suggests employability can be about how students view their identity as a future worker/self employed person.

55.2% agreed, 14.9% definitely agreed, which would support the assertion that there is an issue here. 23.9% were not sure.

### An emerging issue in employability academic literature is around student identity



Staff responded to this question about the emergence of identity being an issue within employability, with 31 (62%) agreeing, 14 (28%) disagreeing and 5 (10%) not responding.

Further to this, students were asked 'What would help you build or 'create' your future work identity?'

In order of most important, the following 2 easily had the greatest number choosing them as most important in helping to build a work identity, interestingly but perhaps unsurprisingly both involve experiencing the world of work. Why both are so dominated by one cohort is the surprising aspect, which would be worth unpicking in future research.

- 1) Work experience/internships (74% were HE students)
- 2) Actually having a job! (66% were FE students)

One reason potentially for the HE response has been identified by the AGCAS First year Career Readiness Survey, which found that 49.2% of HE 1<sup>st</sup> years had had work experience in the last 2 years, and 63.9% had had a part-time job (these were higher than rates than the general responses from the rest of the survey cohort). This higher proportion of HE students having had work experience or part time work, and the time to reflect on its impact might go some way to explaining this. The FE students within the institution do get quite a lot of work experience as part of their course and several have part-time work. The difference is more likely to be around students having the time to reflect on how this experience has developed their work identity and/or employability skills, rather than the work experience/part time job in itself.

The following three factors were also identified, all fairly 'bunched' together score wise.

- 3) Good results on your course
- 4) Regular good quality contact with employer/s
- 5) Self audit tools to evaluate your skills

The split in response rate was fairly consistent, with the FE vs HE cohort response rate for this question. The only slightly higher HE response was for 'regular good quality contact with employers', which was 5% greater. From a student perspective, this supports the Gatsby benchmarks research that good quality contact with employers is a strong factor in young people's employability. The AGCAS survey would also support this, in that 41% of WUC 1<sup>st</sup> year students thought 'start networking with professionals' was an important activity to do during university, this was greater than the 34.1% of all responses. The difference here may well be due to the more vocational nature of the HE courses on offer.

## **Recommendations/areas for future research**

Employability provision needs to be multi-dimensional, experiential and embedded in the curriculum. (P5) (Artess et al 2017)

These recommendations will fall into two distinct areas, the first being what can be practically done within WUC or other institutions. Secondly will be suggestions about what could be done to further research this area, or help 'bridge the gap' between the FE and HE employability agendas. Many of these recommendations will not come as a great surprise to staff working in the careers field, either as researchers or in delivery. I have tried to ensure that with each one that has a direct link to the research done for this project, reference is made to this in the content.

### **1) All students to do a self audit of skills/attributes**

This can happen at the start, middle and near the end of their courses. This will help them reflect how they are preparing for fulfilling their career prospects. This will take into account any work experience they have done during their studies, and help prepare them for applying for their next option, or in identifying career activities they need to partake in. Analysis of these audits could provide valuable data of student preparedness for transition and inform curriculum areas of any skills or knowledge gaps that could be addressed. The research data collected for the project would certainly back this up in showing this would be useful, from both the student quantitative and qualitative data. Staff comments also suggest that students do not always make good use of self audits to evaluate previous experience, or draw links to experience that is seemingly different to their studies.

### **2) Student evaluation of part time work or work experience**

Linked to the first recommendation, getting students to do an evaluation of their part time work or volunteering would give help them a valuable insight into how these experiences can be a positive impact on their own outcomes. Not only would this recognise what has happened, either as formally part of their course or otherwise, but if done right could help students plan how to use future paid or unpaid work to address any skills or experience gaps. An analysis of this data on an ongoing basis could be used to encourage future students to engage with this. Again this recommendation draws upon the data collected, especially the comments made by students who are able to extrapolate 'value' gained and transferable from previous experience. Staff comments also back this up.

### **3) Offer more employability workshops**

Curriculum areas have often asked for careers education/employability workshops or tutorials as part of their provision. As part of the student survey, there was a willingness expressed by students to attend employability workshops outside of their academic sessions. A menu of topics needs to be trialled to see how well this willingness turns into attendance, perhaps with promotional support from academic departments and the student union.

It is important to recognise that embedding CEIAG or employability within the curriculum has been seen as a very good way to address students employability needs so far. This is partly so that a large percentage of students get at least some employability input, especially if happening in a generic employability credit bearing unit (Standage, 2016 University of Essex 2016 HESCU project and O'Riordan, Del Rio, Wieczorek University of Dundee 2016 HESCU project). This approach ensures that a greater percentage of students get an employability input, rather than just those students who turn their intentions into action by attending extra curricula workshops.

Both students and staff answers suggested this could be useful. Students genuinely felt they would engage more with a wide range of optional workshops, turning this into well attended workshops is a particular challenge here.

#### **4) Encouraging early student engagement with employability**

As stated by Rich (2015) in in the Occasional Paper 12 produced by HEPI,

students need to be supported to be more aware of need to develop their employability... and engage with it early and not last minute...' (p16)

Not only does this need to happen to avoid the 'last minute student dash', which confuses employability with employment, but it will help students build on their CEIAG provision from where they have come from. It must be remembered that 'employability' does not just start to happen or be learnt on day one of an HE course, but has in fact started years earlier, often in primary school. The challenge here is for HE providers to enable students to recognise their own employability learning prior to university, and to then build upon it, especially with many graduate employers wanting to work with students earlier in their HE 'life'. Admittedly many universities already recognise this and have a HEAR record or employability skills awards which help with recognising student achievement and skills development. The wider picture here is how to ensure that students coming from a widening participation background engage with social and cultural capital opportunities whilst at university, to positively impact on their HEAR record or skills awards achievement.

#### **5) Continued use of AGCAS First year career readiness survey and HEFCE Careers Registration**

The availability of both the AGCAS First year Career Readiness Survey and the HEFCE funded learning gain project 'Careers Registration' as research tools has provided institutions with data to build upon. This data should continue to be used to help inform careers provision and to help target student engagement. These are similar in nature to the year 11 intended destinations surveys, which have taken place in schools for many years.

This recommendation is more based on WUC having taken part in the AGCAS survey, and a wider appreciation of the Careers Registration learning gain project.

#### **6) Preparing students better for developing 'working' identity**

It was evident from the surveys that students do think that moving from a student identity to a 'working' one could be an issue. More could be done to help prepare students for this. Several options for FE and HE are available. These include,

more employer mentoring scheme opportunities, the issue will be how to scale this up for greater numbers than happens already,

more contact with alumni links, to help students envisage themselves in different career/study paths post graduation,

more opportunities for 'meaningful' employer contact, the debate here is how to define 'meaningful' – does a conversation at a careers fair count, or a presentation or a mock assessment day?

more opportunities to develop graduate skills through consultancy projects, community projects or gaining 'graduate' world of work experience,

peer to peer mentoring, for instance 3<sup>rd</sup> years mentoring 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> years to start engaging earlier with employability/identity issues,

self evaluation toolkits to map skills and experience across onto a 'graduate' or 'good' job, this could link with the aforementioned audit of part time/work experience and skills.

## **7) Non careers staff CPD**

Those staff not involved directly in CEIAG and employability delivery understandably have their own priorities for CPD relating to their own curriculum or student support areas. However it would be very invaluable for them to undertake some CPD to understand this issue further. Particularly as the focus on student outcomes, regardless of sector, is seen as highly relevant and rising up the agenda due to Ofsted requirements, destinations measures, DHLE and TEF. As institutions have become more judged on outcomes rather than processes, the flexibility or creativity of how an organisation engages with students and helps develop their employability means that organisations can be very imaginative on how to do this. But to be very effective here, the careers work undertaken cannot simply happen in a professional services bubble or silo, it needs a 'whole institution' approach. One step on the way to get this approach will be a better informed and trained whole staff approach to CEIAG/employability.

Having had so many staff engage with the survey constructively, and having had a chance to reflect on their qualitative answers in particular, there does seem to be differing levels of understanding around employability, quite understandably due to the nature of staff involved, their experience and qualifications.

## **8) Further research into FE and HE staff perceptions around employability**

The differences in staff views expressed about employability, depending on which cohort they teach was noticeable. Perhaps the difference is not surprising, based on the separation nationally between FE and HE teaching, research and delivery generally. The nuanced qualitative answers suggest these differing perceptions could suggest a continuum of employability development for students as their qualifications are gained. More research into how FE and HE staff view employability, its definitions and practical outcomes etc

would further explore this issue, and enable a better understanding of student employability needs for both those carrying on with study into Higher Education and those choosing not to.

The acceptance that responsibility for developing 'employability' is equally shared between institutions and students suggests that further research into staff perceptions could help inform employability delivery, engagement with it and student outcomes, and not just for that particular sector's outcome measures.

### **9) 'Joining up' the employability agenda between FE and HE**

The differences and similarities between FE and HE staff's perception about the employability agenda and its purpose or outcomes would suggest that further work is needed to help 'bridge' the different conceptions, thinking and practise between the two sectors. This would not necessarily mean reformulating what currently happens (which would be unrealistic) but to ensure that any learning gain (HE speak) or value added (FE speak) impact is captured and built upon, rather than haphazardly expecting or hoping that students will do this for themselves, intentionally or otherwise. Careers learning is not always a linear process for anyone, so greater appreciation of staff perceptions and knowledge here could be invaluable for students learning, and the capturing of this.

### **10) Mapping of links between Gatsby benchmarks, CDI framework, HEA employability framework**

Having spent time reading several academic papers and reports that cover either FE or HE CEIAG/employability for this report, and having worked with both cohorts, there is a distinct lack of any academic research, reports or toolkits that 'crosses the divide' of FE CEIAG and HE employability. To the extent that what is often viewed as the same 'thing' is referred to in the main as CEIAG within FE careers work, and 'employability' within HE careers work.

### **11) Informing practise and knowledge exchange**

With the demise of Connexions in 2012, and the increased awareness of employability as an issue within H.E., the perception of careers provision within schools and colleges is that there is a greater 'patchwork' of provision than within universities where, if anything, provision has gone up, or at least is more consistent from one university to the next.

What would be immensely valuable, for both FE and HE careers staff, would be some facilitated exchange of information and practise in both directions. A greater understanding of what happens with employability or CEIAG in each sector can only be a useful exercise. This could involve exemplars of good practise, skills development and regional/national LMI. This would help 'enrich' the work that both sectors do, and reinforce the view that students 'employability development' does not finish for them once college is done, or start at some point during a student's HE studies. HE staff would also benefit from knowing more about

the 'patchiness' of provision and how this might impact on students engagement or otherwise with university careers services.

There are various mechanisms that already exist that could help with this. For instance, the CDI and AGCAS could facilitate this exchange through their membership via input into conferences, newsletters, sharing contacts etc. Also organisations like local NCOP partnerships or regional HELOA groups could facilitate this.

## **12) Further research**

There is a whole range of issues here that could be very useful to research further. Not only how employability/CEIAG evolve and change for students moving from FE into HE, but also how these issues are not always 'new' for students in HE but a continuation of their experience with an FE background. As has been seen, there are common views held by FE and HE students about certain aspects of the employability agenda, e.g. definitions, and some differing ones, e.g. in relation to the relevance of part time work and how to build a 'work' identity. More in depth research here would expand further on these issues.

Another interesting area of research would be if there were any differing employability issues for ex FE students in comparison to sixth form or independent schools students whilst they are at university.

The identity issue about moving from a student one to a working one would be valuable to research further, for both university careers services and graduate employers when reflecting on their recruitment practises and induction programmes.

Staff views and the differences expressed during the research would also be a very interesting area to research more deeply into. Especially as non-careers staff have an impact on student outcomes, regardless of whether in FE or HE.

## **Personal reflections**

This has been a very interesting project to undertake. There have been many challenges to overcome. This has included the 'stop start' nature of getting different parts of it achieved and balancing the work demands of my 'paid' life with keeping the project happening has ensured that time has been an issue. Thankfully the 'quieter' periods have provided the space to read, analyse and think. Having another university library nearby provided a handful of very productive days where procrastination was not as possible. I have learnt a huge amount from doing this project, not only about what the wider research has produced (having not read much research for a number of years) but also it gave me a far greater understanding about what it is like undertaking research, which I know has improved my guidance already. The wider reading has also helped inform discussions with the staff and influence the careers work within the college. Would I do more research if I had the chance? Most definitely!

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### **Staff comments in response to Is there a difference between employability for FE and HE?**

They are simply different areas of economic activity. It is clear to me that some students are FE and others are HE. We have had problems with FE coming through as the skills sets, general approach and maturity are different to what we need in HE. Hence the jobs they get are going to be different as well.

For FE students it is largely about understanding which path of study they need to take to achieve their goal career/job. For HE students there is more of an expectation that they should be able to achieve a job in their chosen field without committing to further study.

FE are likely to target a different job market, or stay with part time employment.

I think it can do, it depends on what area of employment they are looking at.

There are some differences but the majority of attributes that make someone attractive to employ applies to all.

No, a job is a job or course progression is continuing education at higher level

But don't feel there necessarily should be, however, HE may well be looking more toward management roles, but these tend to be more biased to theory and seem to lack the practical knowledge and understanding to enable them to do the management role

It's all about the relevant skills

HE students should be better prepared for problem solving and therefore potential management roles

The skills set may be required at a different level, but fundamentally the same at whatever point of entry to the workplace.

Vocational education is about expanding a person's understanding to enable gainful employment. the better the understanding and skills the better the employability prospects and reward.

HE students should at the point of leaving should be more mature, professional and qualified compared to FE students so their chosen careers and employability skill set should reflect this.

different skill sets and entrance in to the profession or industry

Understanding of employability may progress as they get further into study.

I think so, yes. Because graduate-level roles should include different requirements to those roles sought by FE-leavers. Many overlap, but some will be different (eg supervisory or research skills)

There needs to be a reason people complete a degree, and not just for enjoyment

Not in terms of principles, but actual skill levels/ expectations will differ

Employability is about specific skills and transferable skills. FE and HE students have mix of both.

It is important to recognise that HE and FE will likely lead to different types of jobs, but students cannot be under the impression they are unemployable without a degree.

## **Appendix 2**

Carried out surveys over the summer for an ecology company therefore gaining experience.
Retail teaches you enormous amounts of patience! Even when people are rude or the job isn't exactly what you want - but any part time job gets you to understand working life and have a taste before doing it full time - SO important
The real work place gives you a social and professional skill set that no one can teach you, you learn how to conduct yourself in the work place by being in the work place. Within my friend groups (ages 19-22) it is very obvious who works and who doesn't when it comes to client communications and confidence.
Gain industry experience and developing particle skills
Employers seem to prefer someone who is already employed.
Employers can see you are willing to work.
Definitely, as it suggests more experience in the industry.
Educational knowledge is great but industry knowledge is paramount
In the field I am studying in so will meet future clients
It shows that you have a work ethic and are prepared to learn new skills.
A part time jobs helps to prepare you for the workplace and gives you some necessary experience for your CV
Shows that you are committed to working and can hold a job
Part time work has allowed me to develop skills, improve my cv and make contacts within

the working world
Showing you can work in another dynamic other than education and depending on the job whether you can deal with customers appropriately and professionally.
Shows previous experience and provides initial professional reference
More experience
Employment history/real life experience is more valuable to employers than someone with a PHD who has never worked
Working part time gives me skills and experience that can only be developed in the work place.
I work in catering part time and this has helped me to gain social skills as well as gain more confidence which is important for many jobs.
A part time job provides hands on experience, references and also a proof/evidence to show that graduates from the college are employable.
Having just education is useless without application of the skills taught. The skills taught should overlap with real world work.
Most employers want you to have work experience in addition to your degree.
I think encouraging students to have a job while studying at Writtle will add to their CV and show future employers that you have the current skills to work as a team and maintain a job.
It means you have had experience in the workplace and it gives you a reference
Helps understand what employers look for in general in an employee
Having a part time job alongside university allows you to expand your knowledge on the real world and see how work is never as black and white as it looks on paper.
It shows you have work ethic and potential skills for the full time job
Working within the Equine sector will improve the relevant skills. Working in the catering sector will improve human communication and other attributes that are transferable onto a relevant vacancy.
Shows commitment and responsibility
Would give you more experience and skills
You learn so many skills even just working in retail etc and it is also something to add to your CV. My confidence would be nowhere near it is now was I not working in a shop 2 days a week and for my future career path i need to be able to talk to people confidently and be approachable.
You have been able to have an insight in the working world as well as practise in interviews and development of certain skill areas and knowledge, enabling you to put these to use in your future career
I have already done some work in the field I am studying
I do think it helps, but as my jobs have been in entirely different areas I think it's not enough
It shows employers that I was committed to my interests and got a summer job even when I didn't really have to.
I have learnt how to organise an event and also have had more experience working as a team which will be exceedingly important when looking for a job.
Having a full time job after sixth form before uni like i did will improve longer term career opportunities as it gives an example of the working world so you know what you will be stepping into after you leave WUC
Helps to have some experience of the work place.

As you have shown that you are able to work successfully in a work environment and are able to commit to a job

It's more experience to place on my CV, which demonstrates I can take up a range of rolls and have gained skills.

Shows work ethic

I believe it constantly improves my skills that I develop whilst studying academically and demonstrates good time management skills. It has also given me a good grounding and routine for when I begin my career