

# 'Getting hired' is just a part of it

Korin Grant, PG careers consultant at Loughborough University, and Tristram Hooley, director of research at The Careers & Enterprise Company, present a fresh life-long career philosophy

Our new book alluringly promises students that if they buy it they will 'get hired'.<sup>1</sup> However, once they open it they'll discover that getting hired is just a part of what we want them to do. Too often students and graduates view careers through the lens of getting a graduate job. This has a dangerous consequence of focusing them on the 'getting' of the job and can lead them to view the task of building their career as essentially one of doing well in recruitment processes.

In reality, this is a small part of the challenge they face. They are building their career every day throughout university and beyond, and they need to start thinking about how they are going to gather career capital as well as just getting good at filling in application forms.

Career development is a significant motivator for students in their studies. It is important to most students that they achieve a positive career outcome following their degree – although in our experience they are often less clear as to what a 'positive career outcome' will look like. The introduction of

student fees has only added to the pressure on students to enter gainful graduate employment quickly after graduation.

Universities also place great importance on graduates' careers for many reasons. Some of this is a question of giving students what they want, but there is little doubt that the impact of graduate destinations on league table positions, reputation and student recruitment focuses the mind of many vice chancellors and heads of careers services.

As a result of these demands for graduate employability, most higher education institutions (HEIs) have well-developed career support services for their students, which assist them in navigating the graduate recruitment market. Many HEIs have established broad, institution-wide policies relating to employability and include discussion of employability and employment in their mission statements, strategies and marketing.

An institution's employability strategy is likely to set out the expectation that a student's experience across all aspects of their time at

university will offer them opportunities to enhance and develop skills, knowledge, expertise and attitudes that will make them desirable candidates in the labour market. Such strategies often promise that skills will be developed through activities in the classroom, during independent study, throughout their assessments and through the many varied activities that they are encouraged to participate in on and off campus.

If we think of 'career' as being about our passage through life, learning and work then this broad approach to employability is spot on. However, delivering a broad and responsive employability policy across an institution presents challenges in terms of student engagement and how it is framed.

A key problem with this kind of career and employability provision is that many academics resist its inclusion in the curriculum for reasons of time and philosophy. As a result, a lot of provision is optional, extracurricular and incredibly easy for students to miss. Students self-select to complete award programmes, attend appointments and participate in centralised careers workshops. Engaged students are surely benefiting from their interactions with career professionals, employer



THERE IS AN ENDURING TENDENCY FOR STAFF TO TALK ABOUT CAREER AS IF IT IS SOMETHING THAT STARTS AFTER UNIVERSITY



## STUDENTS FACE CAREERS-RELATED DECISIONS AND ISSUES AT MANY DIFFERENT POINTS IN THEIR STUDIES

knowing what they want to do, to making the most of their work experience and what to do if it all goes wrong. There are case studies to better illustrate the learning in each chapter and top tips to go with each theme. We also provide job profiles throughout the book, with the hope that serendipity might play a role in students finding the kind of job they will love.

We've also written a free online guide for careers professionals, academics and other staff who work with students so that they can easily use the book as part of pastoral support, modules, workshops or award schemes.<sup>2</sup> There are workshop outlines that include suggestions for slide contents, learning outcomes and suggested assessment methods. For those just beginning to create programmes, we have written a draft module specification, complete with intended learning outcomes and a suggested reading list. The idea is to provide staff with a toolkit to encourage students to think about their career differently.

Our message is that career is all around you whether you notice it or not. Career is happening already, right now. We want students to hear that message and higher education staff to view career as a key concept in university life.

### References

1. Hooley, T. and Grant, K. (2017). *You're Hired! The Graduate Career Handbook*. Bath: Trotman.

2. The supplementary guide for HE staff can be downloaded from [trotman.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/YH-Graduate-Career-Handbook-Supplementary-Booklet-1.pdf](http://trotman.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/YH-Graduate-Career-Handbook-Supplementary-Booklet-1.pdf)

events and workshops – but what about those who do not seek out support? How do we reach these students at the right time and with the right messages?

Despite oft-cited aims for a curriculum that includes employability, a disconnect often endures between what a student comes to university to do (a degree in chemistry) and encouraging deep thinking about self and career. There is an enduring tendency for staff to talk about career as if it is something that starts after university. This encourages students to view career development as something that can be put off and addressed quickly with a CV workshop at the start of their third year. Even where employability modules do exist, they are often disconnected from the rest of a student's degree and strongly focused on career choice and transition to the labour market.

We need to change the discourse around career development in universities. Career is not something that happens after university, it is happening all the time, prior to, during and after university. Career is the stuff of which universities are built, stringing together learning, aspiration and self-actualisation. We would argue that effective career development therefore needs to encourage students to reflect deeply on themselves and their values, their subject and what it means to others, why they have chosen their degree and how their discipline fits in with the wider world.

If we are going to expand students' notions of career, it also means expanding the way that we talk about career and manage it within the institution. This is essential because students face careers-related decisions and issues at many different points in their studies, very often without explicitly identifying that they are making a decision about career.

- Tamsin asks the programme administrator which final year optional module she can/should take.
- Fred's mother has fallen ill and he asks the welfare office how he can pause his studies.

- Troy is feeling extremely anxious about his dissertation presentation next week and is asking the mitigating circumstances team if his doctor's note will help.
- Sachin is not enjoying his assigned group project, and is asking his personal tutor if he can work on his own.

Each of these points of question or crisis can be responded to with a practical answer that answers the immediate issue for the student in question. But each also presents an opportunity for conversation and reflection. In these moments, ideally a student might be challenged to consider how they have come to this issue and what impact the different answers might have on their short and long-term career plans. However, achieving this requires both staff and students to engage with an expanded notion of career. It also probably requires staff outside of the careers service to increase their capacity to have career conversations.

If students could be encouraged to consider career more broadly, to think about it earlier and as a more integrated part of their studies and their life, we think that it could have huge benefits for their academic work, for their wellbeing and for their chance of getting a graduate job. If students think about career early on they can take action to build their skills, career knowledge and networks long before they enter the melee of graduate recruitment.

In response to these challenges, we've written a book that tries to present career as an ongoing and integrated part of university life. We want students to 'get hired' but we also want them to find the right balance in their studies and in their lives. We frame this as an ongoing journey that starts before the beginning of their studies and continues through to until well after graduation. *You're Hired! Graduate Career Handbook* is set out in 11 different sections, allowing students and graduates to dip in wherever they feel they are at in their career – from not

