

Supporting international students with careers provision: A review of UK higher education careers service provision and a case study based on the University of Exeter

Rachel Coombes

As part of my role as a Careers Consultant at the University of Exeter I decided to undertake some research in to the careers provision offered to international students. I wanted to review provision across the UK higher education sector and then focus on the University of Exeter, my employer, which has a growing international student body of over 4000 students and ambitious growth plans. With growing numbers of international students, from a variety of different countries, come different needs and expectations along with increasing pressure on University support services as a whole. Through surveying a number of universities, this report explores how UK universities have been dealing with this challenge and looks at the expectations international students have of careers services. It became clear that this was a topic high on the agenda of a number of institutions, and whilst this report focuses in detail on Exeter, the information obtained and recommendations made may provide useful insights for other universities.



Introduction

The UK has for a long time been amongst the most popular destinations for international students; however as other countries are starting to loosen their border restrictions, we are tightening ours. Finding work in the UK following graduation therefore is becoming increasingly harder for international students, making it all the more important for higher

education careers services to understand how best to support these students in a changing market place. Careers provision to date has mainly been focused on helping international students understand the UK job market. Increasingly now there appears to be a shift towards supporting students in finding work either back in their home country or elsewhere overseas. The Prime Minister's Initiative went some way towards supporting careers services by funding missions to China and India to help improve understanding of these markets, along with developing relationships with employers and resources to support UK careers services (AGCAS and NASES: 2011). Obtaining such detailed information however is resource and funding intensive and something most UK careers services are unlikely to be able to provide on an individual basis.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has published guidance to assist UK higher education providers in managing international students' experiences (2013). The report acknowledged that whilst surveys of international students have been on the whole positive there were areas that had lower levels of satisfaction; in particular, work opportunities and career advice. This is reiterated in work undertaken by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) which also found that of those students surveyed who stated dissatisfaction with the careers service, 58% were international students. It suggested that 'Careers staff believed this was often due to international students' employment expectations which could be challenging to meet' (ECU: 2012, p19). From the student perspective 'there was a view that the careers service is not sufficiently internationally focused, or only relevant for EU students' (ECU: 2012, p19).

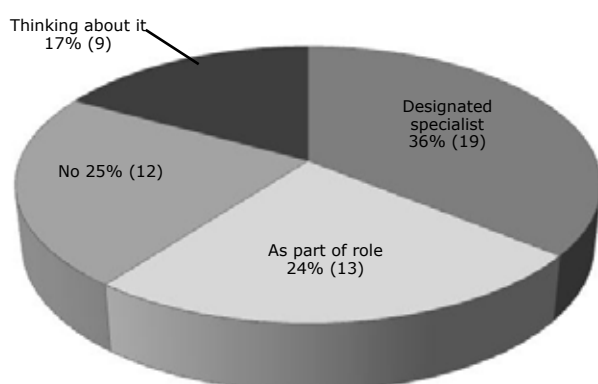
UK careers services

I carried out semi-structured interviews with relevant staff at 4 UK higher education institutions from April to May 2013. Institutions were sampled for their position in the market place, ease of access, availability of information or due to contacts I already had in place. I also conducted a secondary analysis of a relevant, informal survey of 53 UK institutions (Hillary, 2013), conducted my own informal survey¹ and attended a careers and international student advisors workshop². The findings from these are detailed as follows.

Staffing in the careers service

My analysis of Hillary's survey of UK Universities suggests that staffing the careers service to support international students varies a great deal across institutions. Of the 53 institutions who responded to the survey, 60% (32 institutions) had either a designated specialist or someone with international careers support as part of their role.

Figure 1: UK Institutions and International Careers Specialists



From Figure 1 (whole numbers of respondents are shown in brackets) it is apparent that most responding universities see the need to incorporate an International Careers Specialist or are thinking about doing so. Where reasons were given for those who

said 'No' often it was due to funding constraints or the size of the service. In most cases, there appeared to be around 1-2 members of staff involved in international career support delivery or often it would be split across the whole team. Job roles and responsibilities also varied. Typical activities included being leads for certain countries, International Opportunity Managers, International Careers Consultants, International Information Officers, Global Labour Market roles.

Responsibilities of international careers specialists

My reading of Hillary's survey suggests that there were a number of similar responsibilities in the roles of international careers specialists across various institutions; along with a number of activities common to most of these specialist staff:

- Running international student specific careers workshops
- Dissemination of information to other careers staff
- Liaison with international student support services
- Developing web resources
- Linking with employers

In both Hillary's survey and my interviews it was consistently reported that there are many other innovative approaches being undertaken, such as networking events overseas, buddy schemes and blogs. Some are easier to implement than others and can be very institution or resource dependent. It was consistently reported that international careers specialists do not usually offer 1-1 guidance advice solely for international students. It was argued that this was something all careers staff should have knowledge of. The importance of having someone to act as a lead in the area to help disseminate the information to all staff to ensure international students needs are catered for was stressed. Immigration information is also not usually a part of the role however UKBA registered staff in International Student Support roles were often brought in to deliver it.

Overseas Labour Market Information (LMI)

With a growing global market place it is not just international students who are requesting this

¹ Survey carried out using AGCAS Link which is an email enquiry system used by higher education careers professionals. The survey focused on the provision of overseas labour market information. 19 institutions responded to this survey.

² Workshop held by AGCAS and the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) in April 2013.

information but home students looking to work abroad too. Given the increase in demand for this type of information and the number of different countries students may be interested in, it can be difficult to judge how best to provide this information. Again, institutions were approaching this in varying ways, which I have classified into six forms of support:

Non-institution specific websites

Through the responses to the survey I undertook it is apparent that there are many useful websites that institutions are using to support their students. These websites collate detailed resources around specific countries and assemble information that would be highly resource intensive for institutions to do on their own. The main websites reported were:

- Going Global - www.goingglobal.com/
- AGCAS Country Profiles - www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/456-Country-Profiles
- Prospects Country Profiles - www.prospects.ac.uk/country_profiles.htm
- Gradlink - www.gradlinkuk.com/
- I-Graduate - www.i-graduate.org/

Institution specific websites for overseas LMI

One institution reported in my survey that developing their own country specific LMI was not something they had time and capacity for. They had developed these in the past but due to the time involved in trying to research them and keep them up to date they had decided to instead provide links to other sources of information. Several universities mentioned that they felt they should be doing more as they felt they did not have the best resources in place to help support students with overseas LMI.

One respondent I interviewed, however, seemed to have developed a very interesting approach. Their service did not provide detailed overseas LMI, thereby duplicating what may already be on other websites, rather they had created country profiles which detailed the institution's student destination information for that country along with alumni profiles, links to further information and jobs advertised by the University for that country. In this way the information was very specific to the institution and could be easily updated.

Workshops

Two respondents to my survey mentioned providing specific workshops for certain countries. These workshops often focused on the countries where the majority of international students came from such as China, India and Nigeria. The workshops provided information on job hunting overseas and the local LMI for that region. Six institutions also made reference to running more general sessions on working overseas, rather than focusing on a specific country. In this way, they are looking to help students understand some of the differences involved in applying for jobs abroad.

Events

One respondent to my survey reported specific events it was running related to overseas LMI. These were called Global Job Search events and targeted at international students. The aim was to provide students with information on international graduate schemes and also help them understand the differences between different countries recruitment processes. Other types of events held were virtual international careers fairs and even overseas Careers Fairs.

Alumni

One respondent I spoke with discussed using their alumni as sources of overseas LMI. Case studies are provided on their websites relating to how alumni have sourced jobs in various countries and advice from these alumni. This may not only help current students but also prospective ones.

Skype careers support

This was a unique approach undertaken by one respondent I interviewed who reported that they had developed links with a university in America. American students studying in the UK institution, who are looking to go back and work in America, can contact an American Careers Adviser for advice via Skype. This support is then provided for UK students at the American institution wishing to work in the UK. This ensures more country specific careers support for the student about working in their home country.

Collaboration with other universities

One respondent mentioned in their interview that a number of universities have been collaborating for several years to provide careers fairs in China. Further to this, universities in the East Midlands have formed a partnership whereby they hold recruitment events for international students with local employers. They also provide regional training events for careers staff, hold careers fairs in China and India and produce a number of other resources³.

University of Exeter: a case study

Having reviewed the various approaches to careers provision for international students, both in the UK and overseas, I was keen to undertake more in depth research into a single institution. I carried this out using semi structured interviews with staff from the University of Exeter; a focus group with current international students, institutional documentation and a questionnaire sent out to all international students. These methods enabled me to understand more clearly the views and opinions of both students and staff with regards to the services on offer. My own experiences and knowledge, working within the careers service, have also helped to inform this case study. My findings are presented in relation to students and grouped according to topic, followed by staff.

Students

I used the data from the student interviews, survey and focus groups to interpret the views of international students around the careers provision provided to them by the Careers service (known as the 'Career Zone' at Exeter). High levels of satisfaction with the Career Zone were expressed, however, despite these high satisfaction rates, when asked about any further support they would like some common themes emerged.

³ Information received from Careers and International Student Advisers Workshop, run by AGCAS and UKCISA, 24th April 2013.

UK labour market information

Five students requested more information about the UK market place, the recruitment schedule and placements.

Part-time work

Two students commented on the need for more help with finding part-time work. One student stated that she, and a number of friends, lacked confidence and knowledge in finding part-time work in the UK. It was suggested that more information around the process for finding part-time work, as well as the culture of the UK work environment, could help to build their confidence and support them in securing part-time roles which could ultimately improve their employability.

Advertising the service

One student felt that the Career Zone should be advertised better as they were not aware of it.

Masters students

One Masters student responded that she would like to have been involved in programmes the university offers such as Ex-Factor⁴ and the Career Mentor Scheme⁵. Further to this, given the short time period that Masters students are at the university, another suggestion was to provide a package of information from the Career Zone to students before joining. The main recruitment period in the UK is September to November but this is the Masters students' first few months at university, when they are just settling in, and need time to adapt to studies and get used to the different recruitment process to their home country.

Advertisement of jobs

Another student suggested advertising jobs that state specifically if they accept international students to help students know who to apply to.

⁴ A two day employability programme for first year students.

⁵ A one-to-one career mentoring programme for second year students.

Staff

Nine interviews with staff from relevant departments were undertaken to further draw out some of the issues being faced with supporting international students in a careers capacity.

Global employability team

This team was created initially to develop global placements and links with employers, however their remit has grown to include providing one to one support for all students around finding opportunities and understanding the global market place. An issue they are facing at present is that the boundary between their remit and the Careers Consultants can be unclear at times. This was reported by the respondent, and is also something I face as a challenge in my role as a Careers Consultant, as students have sometimes been passed between the two teams, demonstrating that clarity around this is needed. Also, there is a mistaken assumption that the team specifically support international students given their involvement in global aspects.

Work experience and placements

An Employability Officer (EO) stated that one of the issues she faces in trying to help international students is finding and securing work placements. The majority of international students on the course were struggling to secure placements and so were dropping the placement element. The EO found these students struggled with knowledge of British work place culture, how to go about seeking work and that their CVs varied greatly in quality. It was suggested that more focus on these elements could help address these problems. The Employer Liaison Officer, working centrally in the Career Zone to support work placements, commented on the difficulties faced in trying to advertise placements fairly for international students who wish to know which placements will or will not accept international students. Stating this on a job advert could run the risk of discrimination, however, if it is not made clear who is eligible then students become frustrated by taking the time to apply for positions they find out later they are not eligible for.

The Business School

The Business School currently has the highest proportion of international students on campus. It was suggested by a member of the Business School careers team that more careers support needs to be offered for Masters students by the central Career Zone, as much of the information provided is aimed at undergraduates. When asked about areas they felt international students may be struggling with, several were identified. The first was a lack of knowledge of the employer culture in the UK and confidence in finding work. Further issues included language as a potential barrier to international students finding placements in the UK, along with the different recruitment cycles students may come across, depending on where they were applying for a placement.

International student support (ISS)

My respondent stated that the team run workshops on UK visa regulations for international students and also provide support on their website about working in the UK during studying, with links to the part-time work section of the Career Zone website. An employability workshop was run for the first time this year, in conjunction with the Career Zone, specifically for international students. The event proved to be successful and had strong attendance figures, suggesting a requirement for specific workshops for international students.

International alumni relations

The University has an alumni team, known within the institution as DARO. One member of staff reported that international alumni are keen to get involved but staffing shortages within DARO make it tricky to manage this effectively. In the past, DARO has held career panels overseas in Hong Kong and Greece and would ideally like to do more. It is also keen to look into alumni to alumni support, webinars and alumni guide books to help support their alumni. The input of the Career Zone into these has been limited to date but more involvement could be beneficial to help improve resources for alumni. At present, the Career Zone currently offer help to all alumni up to 3

years after graduation however there are no specific resources for international students. Development of online resources specifically for international alumni could be seen as something the University can give back that in turn will persuade alumni to have more involvement with the university.

International Office (IO)

In speaking with the IO, one member of staff stated that they had noticed a marked increase in the number of questions around employability from students and agents. To help manage this, they suggested more support from the Career Zone through including information into their presentations, particularly pre-departure briefings, about the services on offer. Also, introducing workshops for students on working in the UK (e.g. seeking the right employer and identifying employers in key markets) could be beneficial along with case studies of international alumni. Questions on placements, internships and careers fairs in the UK are often asked so regular updates or information from the Career Zone to the IO would be beneficial. It also became apparent that the International Officers build up a great wealth of knowledge about their market places which could potentially be used in some way to help our international students once they join us and inform our career provision through sharing of information.

Recommendations for Exeter

- Appoint an international careers specialist in the Careers Consultants team to be a link between the various other departments at the University who deal with international students.
- Develop workshops on working in the UK in collaboration with International Student Services to provide advice on visas.
- Provide further support for Masters students and make them aware of career planning needs before starting course.
- Review the global information provided on the website and look to develop certain country specific web pages.
- Develop more links with the International Office to see where services could support each other more.
- Utilise alumni more and create profiles of international alumni on the website for current and prospective students to review.
- Access training opportunities for staff in the Career Zone to improve knowledge of overseas information.
- Seek regular feedback from international students on service provisions.
- Run further employability workshops for international students specifically.

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For correspondence

Rachel Coombes
r.coombes@exeter.ac.uk