

**GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY:
POLICY TRENDS AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES**

PROJECT BRIEFING

**University of Gloucestershire
Graduate Challenge Project**

FEBRUARY 2012

Project Overview

This project was carried out in the Sustainability Team at the University of Gloucestershire as part of the Graduate Challenge¹ scheme from October 2011 to February 2012. The project was designed to investigate external trends and student views on employability and sustainability, using a national literature review and an online survey of students at the University.

The University views both employability and sustainability as strategic priorities and is exploring the connections with skills development and learning opportunities provided for students. Both agendas are increasingly important in higher education, for employers and government, as the UK looks to emerge from economic downturn and national discourse grows around the 'green economy'. This study should help the University to shape its strategic work in these areas by showing national and student interest in sustainability and links with support for employability.

The project involved a wide-ranging literature review of research publications, policy briefings, environmental skills and green economy reports, education for sustainability publications and employability reports. The sources ranged from higher education institutions and sector agencies, government departments, sector skill councils and market research companies.

The survey was administered online to University of Gloucestershire students in all course types for one month, obtaining 406 responses. The data was analysed to identify trends and patterns around employability and work-focused learning, in relation to sustainability issues and skills, to produce recommendations for improving understanding and skills in these areas.

Literature Review – Findings

The policy context shows the need for students to develop strong soft skill sets alongside specialist professional knowledge and technical skills, as UK businesses operate in high value sectors and need adaptable graduates. However, the main driver of graduate employability is work experience. Internships, sandwich placements and short-term placements are key to advancing knowledge of the professional workplace, developing skills for chosen sectors and ensuring strong soft skills. The emphasis on soft skills across the literature is prominent and this is where concerns around higher

¹ The Graduate Challenge scheme provides 4 month placement opportunities for students to gain employment experience either within the University or in external organisations locally. This project was carried out by Lewis Barber, a recent graduate of University of Gloucestershire, under supervision of the Sustainability Team.

education and skills development for employability and sustainability connect. The review also points to the increasing importance of intercultural competence in global graduate markets.

In supporting employability, higher education institutions (HEIs) have varying degrees of success, but good practices are emerging and employability is gradually being embedded into University life. Leading examples engage employers in the delivery of internships and work-focused learning, as well as improving careers services, to co-ordinate learning and development for employment and support the major skills gap that exists in the transition from education to employment.

The development of sustainability skills is important from the view of higher education, businesses and government. However, organisations seem unsure how to progress sustainability skills and awareness. Businesses need commitment from government in funding support, market information and forecasting of future growth markets, but there is a struggle to cultivate a balance between short-term requirements for labour skills and longer term needs around sustainability skills.

Universities are looking to gain an overview of both employer demand and student development for sustainability skills. However, significant attention is paid to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, with other subjects either seen as vulnerable or less well understood in this skills agenda. Skill deficits in the 'green economy' literature are managerial and technical in nature, which adds to the general view of employers on skills deficits in communication, numeracy and teamwork, but there is a bias towards environmental and economic concerns in the reports. There is however a clear emphasis on the need for retraining and reflective Continuing Professional Development, which is also important in the employability studies and for sustainability skills.

The Education for Sustainability (Efs) literature advocates a broader range of skills for society to genuinely transform economic, societal and environmental practice. This demands collaborative practice between universities and employers, which is increasingly important in the national skills agenda and around SMEs. Student perceptions of sustainability are underexplored, but there is a gradual increase in research that indicates students expect universities to actively develop their sustainability skills. However, little is known about how students expect higher education to achieve this, particularly in the context of a changing sector and pressurized graduate labour market.

Student Survey - Findings

Important messages and findings from the survey included the following points:

- Students are proactive in pursuit of employability experience, showing high demand for employment related learning.
- Students place importance on career guidance and placements as the next steps to improve their employability.
- 60% of students see sustainability skills as fairly or very influential on future employment markets.
- When ranking career goals and values, intellectual development, career progression, creativity and innovation, and work-life balance featured most highly. Some of the obvious sustainability factors like contributing to environmental change and the employers' ethical stance were ranked lower, and contributing to economic regeneration lowest of all.

- Students embrace a wide range of options to build their skills for sustainability, showing they set their professional ambitions on sustainability initiatives in an employability context.
- Creative problem-solving, innovation and teamwork were rated as the top three skills for building sustainable societies.
- Students seem to be unaware of the value of some sustainability skills, such as stakeholder engagement and systems thinking, for building sustainable societies.
- In terms of sustainability issues in the curriculum, students pointed to good coverage of social and organisational matters, but less treatment of environmental topics and issues around global development and alternative trading and economic systems.

Conclusion

The results indicate high demand for work-focused learning schemes. If the University is to increase its employability profile it needs to provide more internships and placements for students. Care should be taken to address those students who lack engagement with employability initiatives, as results indicate that whilst some students maximise their opportunities, others have not had these experiences at university. Due to the diverse range of options that students value to enhance their employability and sustainability skills, more collaboration with employers is required.

It is clear that sustainability skills need more clarification and alignment with those employability skills that are better understood in higher education and by employers. Students perceive sustainability as influential on future graduate employment markets and would like the University to actively develop its professional support in a more tangible and focused way.

The recommendations students made to improve their sustainability skills were mainly employment orientated, signifying the potential for these two agendas to merge and move forward in more strategic ways across the higher education sector.

Overall, this project points to three key messages for the University of Gloucestershire:

1. A majority of students across all educational levels viewed sustainability as important for future graduate employment markets, and employers need innovative, informed graduates in this area. The 'green economy' discourse is limited, technicist and STEM-focused, which leaves many businesses unsure about how to respond to their key sustainability issues.
2. Students do not approach sustainability in a compartmentalised way; it is perceived as strongly connected to their employability and all related skills development provision and opportunities during their university studies.
3. Students wish to see courses improved to address sustainability skills and issues, supported through co-curricular activity such as: e-learning resources, placements and field work in sustainability, collaboration with students from other courses, case study approaches in the curriculum, and use of campus sustainability practices as learning resources.

Specific recommendations below are addressed to the University of Gloucestershire, with further recommendations for wider consideration across the sector.

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Recommendations for the University of Gloucestershire

- 1. The University should continue to improve the integration of activities across its careers service and employability support, including DegreePlus, placements, mentoring, PDP, achievement records and the Employable Gloucestershire Graduate Scheme.**
- 2. The University should look at ways to refine its employability activity focus to respond to students' professional needs and learning patterns, for example:**
 - Recognising the different levels of student attention to employability at different stages of study and reminding Level 2 students of the importance of employability;
 - Conducting research into students PDP/CPD and the relationship with course types (particularly vocational versus non-vocational);
 - Improving the provision of e-learning resources for employability, as students spend a vast amount of time on the internet and seek 24/7 access;
 - Re-evaluating the role of the PDP in helping students to set goals and find work-focused learning opportunities that employers and professions value.
- 3. The University should look at ways to connect its sustainability work with its employability activities, for example:**
 - Using DegreePlus to increase internships and volunteering around sustainability:
 - i) *externally*, in collaboration with the RCE Severn partnership organisations; and ii) *on campus*, linked to the University's sustainability and volunteering activities;
 - Embedding sustainability skills into role descriptions for DegreePlus placements, skills workshops and other work-focused learning activities in professional settings, which will enhance the development of sustainability profiles for employment;
 - Showing how baseline sustainability skill definitions and criteria apply in relation to specific subjects in the curriculum, particularly for postgraduate courses;
 - Exploring the potential for placement opportunities with sustainability focus that can improve global perspectives and international skills;
 - Supporting course leaders to offer dissertation research and projects in collaboration with sustainability educators and professionals in other subject areas, which will help develop the staff research profile of the University in this area.

Recommendations for the Sector

1. The HEA could improve the provision of e-learning and toolkit resources for students that link sustainability with employability in each subject, using its Subject Centre resources.
2. The HEA could bring together its previous funded projects in Employability and in Education for Sustainable Development to help develop baseline skill definitions in this area.
3. The HEA could develop or promote case studies in specific industries that demonstrate the practical ways that professions engage with sustainability.

4. Key sector agencies could collaborate to create leadership development materials that combine soft skills and sustainability skills in relation to 'real world' issues.