FOCUS ON: GRADUATE SKILLS

Views from students, graduates and employers

August 2019

Key findings and prompts for discussion

The projects

QAA Scotland commissioned two projects to explore the views of students, graduates and employers on the skills students develop during their time in higher education in Scotland.

- 319 **current students** took part from across 15 Scottish HEIs.
- 247 **graduates** participated - 81% of these had graduated in the last two years: 70% were working full-time; 11% were studying; and 9% were working part-time.
- Views were gathered from 30 **employers** across a range of sizes and sectors.

Full project reports can be found on the Focus On: Graduate Skills webpage.[1]

Areas of focus

The projects considered:

- **Readiness for Employment**: How can we most effectively embed skills inside and outside the curriculum, including digital skills, for graduates from all disciplines?
- **Equality and Diversity**: How can we support students from all backgrounds and characteristics to develop skills that will help them to secure and sustain success in the workplace?
- **Global Perspective**: How do we ensure that all Scottish graduates are enabled to live and work in a global society, and that the Scottish sector is informed by global developments?

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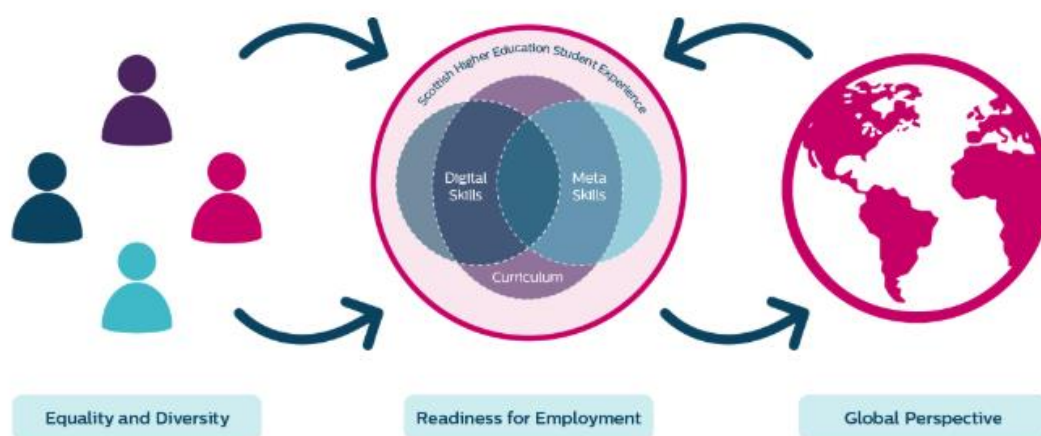
[1] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/graduate-skills

Survey and focus groups were designed around these areas of focus.

Participants were asked:

- - How well does the university experience equip students with graduate skills, digital skills, and global citizenship?

- - What is the contribution of academic and extra-curricular activities to development of graduate skills, digital skills, and global citizenship?

- - Do students perceive their university experience as good preparation for the graduate workplace?

- - Do current students feel that their institution ensures that all students (irrespective of background and different characteristics) can access the full range of skills development opportunities offered in higher education?

- - What do Scottish higher education institutions do well, and what could they do better?

Findings

Key to findings tables	
★	Positive experiences
▲	Areas for development

Readiness for Employment: Graduate skills

Students

⭐ The majority of student respondents agreed that their HEI experience had enhanced the skills they might need for employment and that they had gained a broad range of skills.

🔺 They were less confident in: knowing which skills were needed for their chosen career; the extent to which their skills would fit the expectations of employers and graduate-level employment; and having a clear way to evidence the skills they had achieved.

Graduates

⭐ 77% of graduate respondents felt that they were prepared for the workplace, with a broad range of skills (including transferable or 'meta' skills), industry-relevant experience and knowledge, and a 'work-ready' mindset. Graduates were positive about universities' links with industry through, for example, teaching staff using their industry experience and contacts for the benefit of students.

🔺 When asked what their institutions could do to improve, 20% said that providing more/varied opportunities for work experience/placement and improving access to employers could have prepared them better for their future, including for the workplace. 48% of graduate respondents did not feel that their HEI had offered opportunities to gain insights into local employers.

Employers

⭐ 80% of employers rated graduate preparedness for the workplace as good or excellent, and 83% indicated they value degrees citing the specialist skills and knowledge and graduates' contribution to business growth as being key factors.

What did we learn?

- There is further opportunity to consider how we use work-related learning, work experience and work placements in Scottish HE - the extent to which they are available, the variety of opportunities available, and the extent of flexibility in provision to meet the needs of a diverse range of students in all disciplines.

- Providing students with greater access to employers would help to equip them with a clearer sense of employer expectations.

- Students would welcome more ways to record and evidence their skills and achievements so that they are recognised by employers.

- Employers have the potential to help make skills development opportunities more accessible (for example, by offering paid internships).

Readiness for Employment: Digital skills

Students
⭐ Students felt they are generally equipped with the skills to use digital tools and software, and to find and analyse data. They are also broadly comfortable with using digital environments to collaborate, learn and study.
🔺 They are less comfortable with digital communications for the workplace and managing their online identity/reputation for a professional setting. Students also indicated that they are less familiar with digital innovation (for example, video, animation, infographics, audio and coding).

Graduates
⭐ 81% of graduate respondents felt their HE experience had enabled them to develop digital skills. Their views mirrored those of current students: using digital tools and software, finding and analysing data, and collaborating in digital environments were strengths.
🔺 However, professional use of digital communication was a relative weakness, as was digital innovation.

Employers
⭐ Some employers are aware that Scottish HEIs support students to develop digital skills, particularly in terms of using digital tools and software, finding and analysing data, and collaborating in digital environments.
🔺 Other employers are less aware of this.

What did we learn?

- Students understand clearly the importance of digital skills for learning and employment. While students appear to be broadly comfortable with technology and data, there is scope to enhance skills development opportunities in the areas of communication, identity/reputation management, and innovation.

- Students would welcome the development of more ways to record evidence of their skills and achievements so that they are recognised by employers. This is especially true of digital skills, and this view was shared by graduates.

- Providing evidence of students' digital skills would also help to raise employers' awareness of how Scottish HEIs support students to develop these skills.

Equality and Diversity

Students
★ Around 80% of student respondents said that they had not experienced any barriers to participating in skills development opportunities.
▲ Of the remaining respondents, a key barrier was age, with mature students more likely to have caring or work responsibilities which made participation difficult or impossible. Other barriers included financial cost, language, and mental and physical health.

Graduates
▲ 44% of graduates said there had been barriers to their participation in skills development opportunities, and 47% did not feel that opportunities were easy to access. Key barriers included cost and timing, as well as distance. As with current students, the necessity to work in order to support their studies, made participation difficult or impossible for some.

What did we learn?

- Financial and time constraints are two major barriers to participation in skills development opportunities. Some students may simply be time poor - for others, the issue may be timetabling clashes (for example, the spread of classes across the week making it difficult to schedule work experience opportunities). Embedding skills development within the curriculum is arguably fairer than anticipating that students will be able to take advantage of extracurricular opportunities.

- We know the sector works hard to ensure that students are not disadvantaged on the grounds of protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation). However, practical barriers to participating in skills development opportunities are likely to impact some students more than others. Those without family or financial support, or with additional responsibilities (caring or work), may find it especially challenging to participate.

- In some cases, more could be done to raise awareness of the skills development opportunities that already exist.

Global Perspective

Students
★ Students felt comfortable in their ability to understand cultural differences, and to interact and communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds.
▲ They felt less comfortable in their awareness of global issues and their ability to propose or contribute to solutions.

Graduates
★ 66% of graduate respondents felt well-equipped to live and work in a global society, with 82% expressing confidence in being able to live and work internationally and 90% stating that they had developed appropriate global and cultural understanding.
▲ However, 66% of graduates said they were not aware of the overseas opportunities available to them during their time in higher education.

Employers
▲ Only 43% of employer respondents agreed that Scottish HEIs equip students and graduates with relevant global skills. This figure was higher (63%) in relation to graduates' cultural understanding and ability to interact with people from other countries, a finding that echoes the views of current students.

What did we learn?

- Current students are able to understand cultural differences, and to interact and communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds - in other words, they are comfortable at the level of individual interaction. They may need support to better understand how to apply these skills, especially in terms of thinking about addressing global issues.

- This is also reflected in the views of employers, who suggested that the difference between individuals was confidence. Graduates displayed greater confidence in their ability to live and work internationally, suggesting that this confidence may be built in the workplace as graduates mature, rather than in the HEI.

- Cost and limited provision of international mobility experiences were perceived as barriers to the development of global skills. More attention could be paid to how students could develop 'internationalism at home' by, for example, internationalising the curriculum.

- In some cases, more could be done to raise awareness of the skills development opportunities that already exist.

Key issues for discussion

The following questions are designed to stimulate discussion in your organisation (institution or students' association), with the aim of highlighting potential enhancements to practice.

Does your organisation take a **holistic view** of graduate skills, integrating digital and global skills alongside what are sometimes termed 'meta' skills? For example, are students encouraged to think about how they communicate in a digital environment, or how they might bring innovative approaches to global issues?

Where in your organisation does responsibility lie for **promoting** skills development opportunities? What more could be done to ensure that as many students as possible are made aware of the opportunities available - particularly students who might be difficult to reach?

Does your organisation formally **record and recognise** students' skills and achievements - for example, do you use Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) or digital badges? Are there other ways you could support students to evidence their skills?

Is a **diverse range** of skills development opportunities available within your organisation? For example, are opportunities to study abroad limited to certain lengths of time, or is there a range (year/semester/month/week)? Is funding available?

What is the balance of skills development opportunities between those that are **embedded within the curriculum,** and those that are extracurricular? Is this balance providing fair access to those opportunities?

How **flexible** is your organisation in terms of timetabling? If a student was offered valuable work experience which clashed with classes, would you be able to accommodate this?

Is there more you could do to remove **financial barriers** that prevent students from participating in skills development opportunities?

Is there more you could do to develop students' preparedness to live and work in a global society **without studying abroad** - for example, integrating the experiences of international students into the curriculum?

What is your approach to **employer engagement?** Is there more you could do to create opportunities for students to get a sense of employers' expectations, both at course and institutional level?

How do you encourage students to **manage their identity, reputation, and career,** particularly in terms of the digital environment?

How do you ensure that students are not only developing skills, but also **confidence** in those skills and how to articulate them? Is there more you could do to help students demonstrate their learning to employers and to build the confidence they will need in the workplace?