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Version of item: Case study accompanying project final report

CS2: East Midlands International Students Working Group

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This case study concerns a collaboration of the universities belonging to the 'East Midlands Universities Association' (EMUA). One task group created by EMUA is the 'East Midlands Careers Task Group', which includes all the Heads of Careers Services from the ten universities in the region, and which itself has four working groups, one of which being the 'East Midlands International Students Working Group'. This group has been in existence for over five years, during which time they have collectively developed materials and projects concerning employment of international students, aimed at employers as well as students, which have been informed by continuing research in this very volatile area. Another part of the Groups' remit is the promotion of international opportunities to UK & EU students.

Key learnings up front

- **CS 2.1.** There is a synergy to be gained by sharing understanding and resources, hence this group has benefitted from being allowed by their institutions to address common issues collaboratively.
- **CS 2.2.** The group also benefitted by close support from their professional body, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS).
- **CS 2.3.** By working collaboratively it has been possible to make better links to the regional development agency (RDA), in this case the East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA), as the group can help the RDA to develop regional objectives.
- **CS 2.4.** The group has consistently been action-oriented, the regular meetings always yield allocated minuted action points.
- **CS 2.5.** Interventions need to be based on detailed and recent research.
- **CS 2.6.** There needs to be close and early involvement of Careers Services with Academic departments in their universities in any planned collaborations which may impact on issues of

employability, such as programmes or projects involving work placements.

- **CS 2.7.** The group benefitted from the ability of two of its members to carry out personal first-hand investigation of the employment market in other countries. (China and India)

International students working in the UK

There is a growing emphasis on developing employability skills throughout higher education in general, and the international strategy paper of the Department for Education and Skills 'Putting the World into World-Class Education'¹ published in 2004 identified a series of goals for the internationalisation of UK education linked to the development of a strong globalised economy. More recently the Department for Business Innovation and Skills report 'Higher Ambitions' set an aim:

We will bring together universities, employers, HEFCE and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) to identify and tackle specific areas where university supply is not meeting demand for key skills, and will expect all universities to describe how they enhance students' employability.

Participation of international students and graduates within the UK economy is seen to contribute to these goals, as well as being at the core of the personal development of students themselves. The provision of employment opportunities, and the ability to offer the possibility of gaining work placement experience (during and after their studies), are seen to be essential to enable UK universities to compete internationally with other suppliers of Higher or Tertiary Education. Hence as part of university strategies concerning internationalisation there is a need to consider all aspects of employment which concern students who come to study in the UK. International undergraduate students undertaking sandwich courses have the strongest opportunity of gaining work experience linked to academic study through an industrial placement. For an example of this see this information from Loughborough University².

International postgraduate students have more limited opportunities for gaining industry relevant work experience due to the short course duration and timing of a master's degree in relation to internship opportunities.

¹

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DfES10772004.pdf>

² <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/eng/undergraduate/degrees.html>

There is also, of course, a matching need for home students to develop employability skills for a globalised world, for example see the British Council: 'Erasmus Student Work Placements Guide'³ but the scope of this case study is to focus on work being done concerning international students.

There are three distinct forms of employment which concern international students, and the groups' work has concerned all three:

- Part-time work carried out during their studies.
- Work placements as part of courses or as placement opportunities in breaks during programmes.
- Post-study work opportunities.

There are frequent changes to regulations concerning permission for international students and graduates to work in the UK, this case study is not intended to be a definitive guide but rather to point to general points of good practice which must be followed whatever the current regulations stipulate.

Institutional involvement in collaborative projects

Some forms of collaborative project funding have employability (often linked to developing entrepreneurship) as a specific aim. Recent examples include 'China-UK Collaborative Partnerships in Entrepreneurship and Employability' funded under PMI2 Connect, as well as some of the 'Education Partnerships in Africa' projects, which specifically set out to: 'build greater potential for entrepreneurship, social enterprise and enhance employability.' The East Midlands International Students Working group points out that there needs to be early involvement of Careers Services in any plans which may impact on issues of employability, for example at the stage that project bids are being written, in order to consider the implications for the academic structure in terms of supervision and quality assurance of the placements.

Students' expectations

The group have found that students often arrive with unrealistic expectations of the services they can expect from their university careers service. This is in part due to the large differences which exist between such functions in different countries, in particular concerning a distinction between giving guidance and advice (the UK model) and actually obtaining employment for students (a model in some other countries). It

³ http://www.britishcouncil.org/work_placements_guide.pdf

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is also important to recognise that students are often under severe financial pressure, having in many cases taken out loans to fund their courses. Some students hence have an expectation that post-study work in the UK will help to pay off these loans; if, however, such work is not available (either due to changes in regulations as described below, or due to changing employment market) then it will take them far longer to earn an equivalent amount of money to pay off the debt by returning home to work.

Changes in regulations

A major obstacle for Careers Services has been the frequent changes in regulations concerning student visas and their right to work (during and after degree courses). This in itself makes giving advice (and publishing guidance) difficult, and contributes to the next key issue concerning employers' awareness. One response by the East Midlands group has been to publish their guidance to employers on the internet, rather than by producing printed brochures and CDs which were their previous preferred methods.

Employers' lack of awareness

In part in consequence of the changes in regulations many employers are uncertain of who can be employed legally, and the sanctions for illegally employing workers are very high. The easiest course is therefore not to employ international students and graduates at all. This particular obstacle, the group have found, is most common amongst small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) who may not have a specific HRM function, who may not have experience in employing graduates at all, and indeed may be run by entrepreneurs who themselves are unfamiliar with university education in general.

What was done

The group has consistently been action-oriented. As a matter of course the group meets each month, and the meetings are minuted and the action points arising are allocated to named members of the group. When the group is working on a particular project (for example preparing the employers' guides and the China and India events outlined below) the group has specific meetings supplemented by weekly conference calls to overcome the difficulties of being a dispersed region spreading from Northampton to Lincoln.

The group identified a series of steps where action was needed, and by being able to make collective bids for funding have been able to gain funding from EMDA for five distinct activities which can be thought of as being combined to form an ongoing project. Other funding was obtained for other related activities from AGCAS and PMI2. The group feel strongly that their bids were greatly strengthened by operating in unison.

This specific work is done as an addition to the more general work (i.e. not specifically geared to the employment of international students) which the careers services carry out, for example: advertising graduate vacancies, assisting in arranging internships, placements, work experience, facilitating interviews, running Career Fairs.

Key outcomes and impact

Employer's guides

The group's activities have included commissioning research into employers' attitudes to employing international students and graduates⁴, with a focus on SMEs (funded by EMDA). As a direct consequence of the findings and recommendations of this the group has produced online guidance to employers pointing out the advantages to be gained from employing such students to increase business success⁵.

The headings of the advice given include:

- Ways in which International Students can become involved in your organisation.
- Employing an International Student during their course.
- Good practice when recruiting an International Student.
- Employing an International Student after their studies.
- Where do our International Students come from?
- What do our International Students study?
- Case Studies.

International focussed Events

In 2009 the group organised an event: '**Business and Employment Possibilities**' to bring together potential employers who have interests in doing business with China, and Chinese students and graduates. This event was organised in collaboration with East Midlands China Business Bureau. In total 250 students and graduates from the universities in the region met 36 representatives of organisations, in a day which included

⁴ <http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/367/>

⁵ <http://www.emua.ac.uk/groups/careersgroup/international.html#ways>

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workshops and opportunities to network. The aims were to give practical advice and guidance to both employers and graduates concerning the methods and benefits involved⁶.

Comments from participants included:

"I have an overall understanding of the current situation of employment in the UK – it has been very useful!" BA Business Management, University of Derby.

"I met students who have skills that are useful to my company and got around the landscape of employing Chinese students". SME, East Midlands.

"I finally removed much of my ignorance about getting additional help for my possible trading with China and Hong Kong". SME – East Midlands.

As a result of the success of this first event, and having reflected on lessons learnt, the group then prepared a further event; an India-East Midlands 'Business and Employment Possibilities' day, with the support of the East Midlands India Business Bureau, and the group intends to explore the possibilities of other such events with similar national or regional foci.

Involvement of academic and careers service staff

As a result of the group gaining closer involvement of Careers Services staff with academic departments, the Head of the University of Northampton's Careers Service is a member of the project team for a PMI2 Connect project linking that University with Shaoguan University in China, which is developing jointly-validated training modules for UK and Chinese students concerning global entrepreneurship for the 21st century. The group are keen to further develop such collaboration within institutions.

Opportunities for primary research

Two members of the group have had separate involvement with PMI2 projects, the one described above and another involving the AGCAS with the 'National Association of Student Employment Services' (NASES)⁷. This second project aimed to:

⁶ A short video report of this event is at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRY6ot1MaNU>

⁷ See: http://www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/133-China-Visit-A-Report-on-the-AGCAS-and-NASES-PMI2-Visit-to-China

- Improve understanding of the Chinese labour market in order to help UK educated Chinese graduates enter the job market more successfully on their return to China.
- Develop relationships with Chinese employers who might be interested in recruiting UK educated Chinese students.
- Develop information resources to be distributed nationally to support careers and employment advisers working with international students.
- Develop relationships with HE careers professionals in China.

As the group members were personally able to visit China and meet employers and careers services, and to observe the systems and time-scales of seeking employment there, they are far-better equipped to advise and aid students intending to return home. Further guides for returning students are available⁸.

⁸ http://www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/132-Starting-Your-Career-In-Country-Guides-for-International-Students