



Co-curricular Activity and Graduate Employability: Scottish Employers' Perspectives



national union of students scotland



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Executive Summary

This small-scale study was conceived to tentatively explore the link between student co-curricular activity and graduate employability in a Scottish-specific context. In an increasingly competitive graduate labour market, the potential benefits of higher education students engaging in co-curricular activities to aid personal growth and development, build CVs and obtain greater competitive advantage in the jobs market, appear increasingly attractive. This research was conducted by NUS Scotland and funded by the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF). This report presents the findings from one part of a two-pronged employer survey which explored outward mobility and co-curricular activity and their links to graduate employability as perceived by employers.

The relationship between co-curricular activities and graduate employability was investigated through the perceptions of graduate employers based in Scotland. NUS Scotland and the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF) identified an increasing awareness of the importance of graduate employability. However, there was a lack of evidence to demonstrate whether students'

participation in co-curricular activities at university increased their employment prospects. The study surveyed a small but diverse range of graduate employers from across Scotland to gather evidence of employers' perceptions of the benefits of co-curricular activity and outward student mobility upon graduate employability. 46 employers participated in the survey and are acknowledged. The 46 employers who participated in the survey are acknowledged at the end of this report.

This report presents the survey findings and provides:

- a preliminary snapshot of Scottish employers' perspectives on the potential benefits of co-curricular activity.
- a basis for future research and investigation into employers' recognition of the potential benefits of co-curricular activity upon graduate employability.
- a starting point for HEIs and student support agencies to consider closer involvement of employers in the development of co-curricular activities and a clearer articulation of the impact of such activities upon graduate employability.



Survey Findings

The research findings offer a preliminary indication of employer perceptions of co-curricular activity and its perceived relationship to graduate employability. The survey data revealed:

- a generally positive employer perception of the relevance of co-curricular activity to graduate employability. 40% of surveyed employers claimed that job applicants with experience of co-curricular activities had, to some extent, a better chance of employment (40%), and another 40% claimed it significantly influenced candidates' success.
- most employers looked favourably upon graduated with experiences of adopting representative roles at University. 58% of employers recognised the transferable skills gained to some extent. 33% cited significantly so (14%) or definitely (19%).
- a substantial recognition by employers for co-curricular activity such as involvement in students' associations. 47% of respondents felt that to some extent there was an increase in skill-sets because of such activities, and 49% responded either significantly so (30%) or definitely (19%).
- employers were more interested in the relevance of "what the student had done" rather than in the fact that they had experienced co-curricular activity.

Recommendations

- A need for improved communication about the content and benefits of co-curricular activity to potential employers in relation to business competitiveness.
- Further investigation into the benefits and recognition of graduate skills and attributes acquired through co-curricular and experiences in relation to employer requirements and desired skill-sets.
- Increased exploration into partnership work between institutions and employers to enable employers closer engagement with Higher Education in contributing to, informing and influencing the development of graduate attributes gained through co-curricular activity.

Introductory Background

The ways in which co-curricular activities can be exploited to enhance graduate employability have been explored in Scotland for some time. However, it is arguably becoming more important to determine the views of Scottish employers during the emergence of what has been termed the 'economy of experience.' This is defined as the process whereby 'students and graduates aim to supplement their degree with a range of other qualifications, skills and attributes, which will give them the edge in applications for competitive graduate positions.'¹

The Quality Assurance Agency's National Enhancement Themes currently promote new work into how HEIs are preparing students to become effective 21st Century Graduates. However, as one of the QAA's own reports noted during the employability enhancement theme, there is little evaluative evidence to point to a causal relationship between co-curricular activity and enhanced employability; though there is much anecdotal evidence.²

A unique aspect of Scotland's approach to employability is the use of students' associations. This has led to the development of co-curricular programmes which are led and delivered by student association staff and ambassadors within HEIs. The reason for this has been to ensure that activities have been "student led," which evidence suggests makes for more flexible activities, catered to the wants and needs of current students. Ensuring that students take a lead in developing and running such projects provides additional benefits, including the value of the experience gained by undertaking such activity and the development of new skills such as project and budget management, event organisation, and training.

Whilst not explicitly concerned with co-curricular activities, a joint CBI/Universities UK report³ contains a number of results and opinions on those things which employers and universities can offer, and which students want, in terms of overall employability; a number of which can be traced back to co-curricular activities and the skills they provide. The most noticeable finding was that when employers were asked what universities should prioritise, 82% replied "improving students' employability skills," whilst 60% of responses cited "working with employers to provide more placement opportunities". The report

1. Originally coined by Brown and Hesketh (2004). See Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters, *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalisation of Higher Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 143-144.

2. Working Together: Enhancing Students' Employability (QAA, 2006)

3. Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work (CBI/UUK, 2009)

goes on to highlight that despite much evidence of the good work, many students leave university feeling dissatisfied that it is not often suggested to them that they should focus on personal development opportunities beyond their degree, and because the choices available to them are often negatively influenced by the institution and/or programmes of study. One issue for the future which the report argues, and this report equally highlights, is that more needs to be done by government to support all stakeholders to enhance opportunities, especially at the “smaller” end of the spectrum, as most activity occurs at the “large” enterprise level.

The final point above is further developed in a report from the University of Glasgow which argues that government should explore ways in which employability can be incentivised amongst all stakeholders, including through existing funding mechanisms.⁴ The same survey also identified that many employers felt that HEIs were too often interested in financial partnerships with industry (perhaps not surprising given the current pressures they face), but that relationships beyond Research and Development (R&D) would be welcome.

Research Methods

A limited but diverse range of graduate employers across Scotland were targeted to take part in the survey. In total, 46 organisations responded with 45 valid responses. A break down of respondents by size, sector, and industry is provided in the appendix.

To gauge employer perceptions and opinions, and determine the extent to which they value and recognise co-curricular experience as part of a potential employee’s profile, the respondents were asked 4 closed questions relating to co-curricular activity. Responses were gathered from a Likert scale questionnaire with 5 options presented, from 1 for ‘Don’t Know’ to 5 for ‘Definitely’. There were also 2 open response questions to gather employers own opinions on employability priorities. Respondents completed the survey online, and the range of organisations targeted was primarily drawn from membership lists of CBI Scotland and the Federation of Small Businesses.

Employers were given the definition of co-curricular activity as ‘any non-academic, extra-curricular activity undertaken during their programme of study such as involvement in the student association and/or student societies’ before completing the survey.

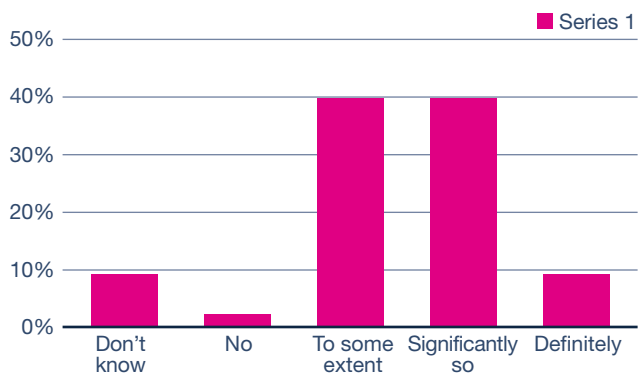
Survey results

Employers’ views on the benefits and relevance of study abroad experiences to employment

1.1 Multiple choice questions

Question 1

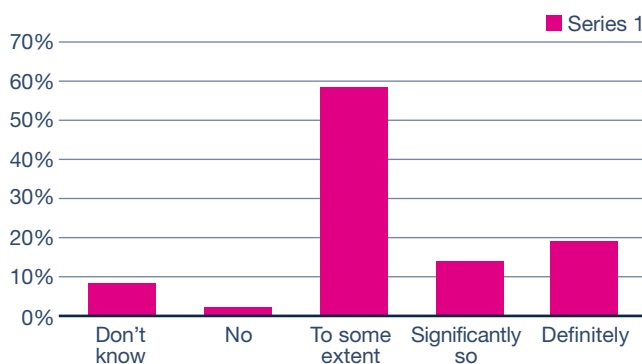
In your experience, do you feel that graduate applicants who have co-curricular experience have a better chance of employment?



This graph illustrates employers’ positive perception of graduate job applicants with co-curricular experience. 40% claimed that such applicants had a better chance of employment to some extent (40%) and another 40% claimed it improved graduate employment prospects significantly so. 9% of employers felt it definitely gave applicants a better chance of employment while another 9% didn’t know and only 2% responded that it did not give graduates a better chance of employment.

Question 2

Do you recognise the transferable skills gained by graduates who have held representative roles such as class/course/school student representatives during their programme of study?



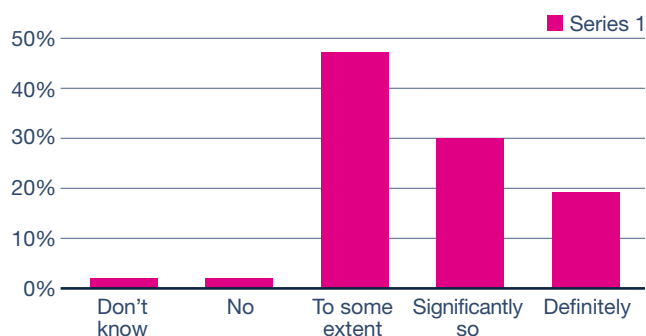
4. Employers’ Perceptions of the Employability Skills of New Graduates (SRCE Centre, 2011)



The above indicates that, on the whole, employers appreciate graduates with experience of adopting representative roles and functions whilst studying at university. 58% of employers recognised that these roles can develop transferable skills to some extent, whilst a significant 33% of respondents believed these experiences improved graduate employment opportunities significantly so (14%) or definitely (19%). 7% of employers didn't know if they recognised the transferable skills gained, while only 2% replied that they didn't recognise them. The results show that a significant majority of the employers surveyed recognised and valued the wider transferable skills and development opportunities that co-curricular activity can offer students.

Question 3

Do you feel that active involvement in student associations and societies increases the skill-set of graduates?

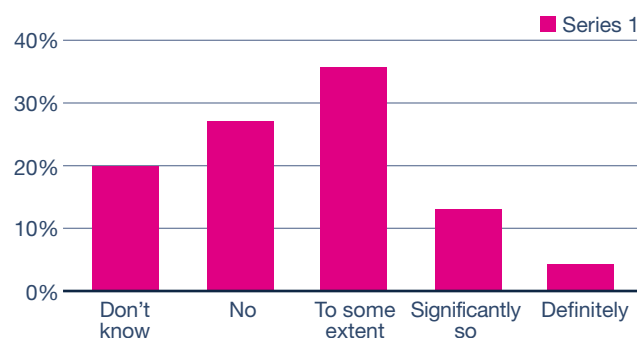


The graph above shows that a substantial proportion of respondents recognised the role of student associations and societies in contributing to the development of graduate skill-sets. 47% of the employers recognised an increase in graduate skill-sets to some extent, with 49% agreeing that skills-sets were improved either significantly so (30%) or definitely (19%). Only 2% didn't know, and a further 2% claimed it did not increase the skill-set of graduates.

As we saw previously, there was widespread agreement amongst the surveyed employers' belief that graduate attributes were increased through students' experiences of co-curricular activity. As the majority of employers surveyed recognised and valued graduates experiences of co-curricular activity when seeking to appoint employees, it is possible to deduce that whilst employers recognised it's contribution to helping graduates to develop the types of attributes valued by employers, they were also aware of the wider potential benefits to their companies and the enhancement of their company vision.

Question 4

Would formal institutional recognition of co-curricular activity from colleges and universities in the form of an additional certificate/expanded transcript be of value to employers when recruiting?



Employer responses to this question (above) presented an interesting and seemingly contradictory view from the previous responses. Employers seemed to be, at best, ambivalent about the value of formal institutional recognition of co-curricular activities. Whilst 36% thought that it would be of value to some extent, only 17% either responded significantly so (13%) or definitely (4%). A large proportion responded no (27%), and a further 20% replied don't know.

Most employers surveyed appeared to recognise and value the personal qualities which graduates can develop through co-curricular opportunities, such as confidence and motivation, when recruiting graduates, and acknowledge the potential benefits that employees with such qualities may bring to their businesses. It may be that the employers surveyed considered it to be sufficient for a job applicant to include co-curricular experience in their CV, and that additional information is explored in greater depth through interview. However, it would be interesting to explore further if and how a more detailed formal summary of the transferable skills acquired through co-curricular experiences might inform the selection and interview processes of graduate job seekers.

1.2. Open-Ended Questions

Question 5

In your experience, what are the main graduate attributes of most value to your company that are gained through co-curricular activity?

Sample Attributes Cited

- "Transferable skills"
- "Confidence"



- “Team-working experience, more rounded experience”
- “Indicative of a motivated person”
- “Extended general knowledge”
- “Increased ‘soft skills’”
- “Project focus experience”
- “More rounded and better able to communicate”

Question 6

In terms of the future company vision, how important do you consider the acquisition of graduate attributes gained through co-curricular activity for your labour force?

Sample Levels of Importance Cited

- “It is during these activities, graduates will learn the real skills needed to be successful in today’s workplace. Creative thinking, teamwork, decision making and interpersonal skills.”
- “Important”
- “Crucial”
- “Fairly important”
- “Yes we need graduates who are confident and willing to apply their skills in different fields”
- “Co-curricular activity enhances the organisation”

Question 7

If you had the opportunity, would you be willing to undertake partnership work with student associations and institutions to raise awareness of the importance of employability skills? How would you envisage that partnership? What would be the potential benefits for your company?

Sample Answers

- “Yes, but we already run a work placement programme.”
- “Yes we would be willing. Case study work plus placements. PR and getting valuable work done.”
- “Yes, we have numerous graduates who come to work with us who instantly need retrained to work in an office environment. The gulf between academic knowledge and real life experience is still far too wide.”
- “Yes. Face to face contact. May not be immediate but there are not enough real life interactions between prospective employees/graduates and potential employers.”
- “No - only because we are a young business and do not have sufficient spare time at the moment to dedicate to such a project.”
- “If time permits then yes I would be willing to do this”
- “Yes, but literacy and numeracy are the most important. The benefit would be more employable students.”

Conclusions

The survey findings showed that a significant proportion of employers recognise and value graduates’ experiences of co-curricular activity when employing graduates. Overall, there was a high level of awareness of the transferable skills which graduate can acquire through these activities whilst studying at university. Many valued these ‘soft’, transferable skills and personal attributes very highly and were looking for personal qualities, skills and attributes which might have the potential to enhance their businesses or organisations when appointing graduate employees. Considering the level of importance that the employers placed upon these qualities and attributes and there acknowledgement that co-curricular activity can contribute to their development, there would appear to be opportunities for further study into the relationship between curricular activity and graduate employment prospects. There also appeared to be both a willingness and desire from some employers to forge closer relationships with universities and to inform the development of activities and initiatives

contributing to building the graduate attributes and profiles desired by employers.

There appears to be opportunities for all stakeholders to work more closely in highlighting the role of co-curricular experience in the future competitiveness of Scottish industry. This merits further research within the Scottish HE sector. It may be useful to implement a wider qualitative and quantitative study of how industry could, and would like to be more closely involved with working with higher education institutions to identify the ways in which industry and university partnerships might enhance the attainment of graduate attributes for employability. Closer partnerships and shared responsibility for the development of graduates not only ready for work, but also ready to contribute to the wider Scottish culture, economy and labour market can only be achieved if institutions, graduates and employers are ready and willing to work together to clarify and articulate their expectations, needs and desires.

References

Employers' Perceptions of the Employability Skills of New Graduates (SRCE Centre, 2011)

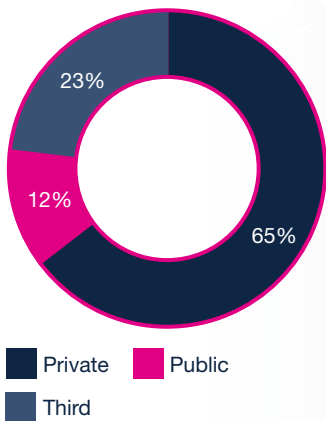
Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalisation of Higher Education (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work (CBI/UUK, 2009)

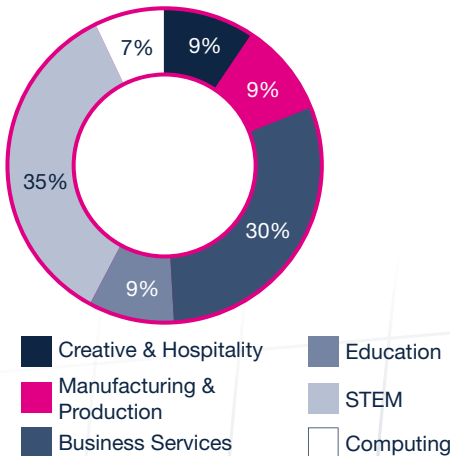
Working Together: Enhancing Students' Employability (QAA, 2006)

Appendix: Breakdown of Employers

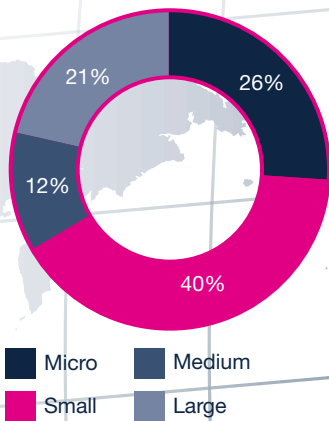
i. Breakdown of respondents by sector



ii. Breakdown of respondents by industry



iii. Breakdown of respondents by size⁵



5. For these purposes we have used EU definitions, wherein: Micro = up to 10 employees; Small = up to 50; Medium = up to 250; and large = over 250.

Acknowledgements

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- Cisco
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- Covert Group Security & Cleaning
- Cultural Enterprise Office
- Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce

- Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce
- Edinburgh International Science Festival
- Flexitricity
- Forth Dimension Displays
- Future Balance
- HR Consultancy
- Hydro Group plc
- IBM
- International Fish Cannery (Scotland) Ltd
- Inverness Chamber of Commerce
- LOGICALWARE
- LUX Assure
- New Park Management Ltd
- Precision Photometrics Ltd
- Reactec

- Redpath Construction Ltd
- Renishaw plc
- Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen
- ScienceDirect
- Scottish Chambers of Commerce
- Scottish Enterprise
- Shanks Ltd
- sparqs
- Staffinders
- STEMNET
- Taylor Mckenzie Research & Marketing Ltd
- TBDA (Scotland) Ltd
- The Lovat
- Totseat Ltd
- URS Scott Wilson
- Wideblue