

# A QUALITY GRADUATE

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For many years, employers have been concerned about the ability of graduates to work in a modern organisation. This concern pre-dates the recent rapid expansion in higher education and the concomitant concerns, expressed in some quarters, about the standards and abilities of graduates in the 1990s. The real issue is not whether graduates are better or worse in absolute terms than they were in previous decades. Rather it is the integration of new graduates into an organisation and the speed at which they can contribute effectively that has become a critical factor.

The effective attributes of graduates is now more critical for several reasons. First, in a rapidly changing world there is less time for graduates to become acclimatised to a particular setting. Increasingly graduates are expected to be able to ‘hit the deck running’. Second, although many larger organisations train graduates, the growing number of small and medium firms have less resources for training and expected a more rapid return on their investment in graduates. Third, the growth of the world market means that if Britain is to remain internationally competitive then graduates will need to be versatile and flexible as well as knowledgeable. Fourth, and more fundamental in the educational context, is the shift to addressing the student perspective and the need to respond by empowering students for life-long learning through enhancing a range of skills and abilities as well as knowledge.

This paper will outline what constitute the abilities of effective graduates from the point of view of employers (based on wide-ranging research undertaken through the *QHE* project (Harvey, 1993; Harvey with Green, 1994)) and then explore what independent study can offer in developing these abilities.

There is, of course, a basic question raised by any attempt to define a quality graduate from the point of view of employers or any other external stakeholder. Whose needs should higher education be attempting to fulfill? It may be legitimate to suggest that higher education serves its own purposes or the requirements of students and that employers should not dictate the nature of the outcome—higher education is not, after all, a training institution for employers. However, as will be demonstrated, the issue is not one of higher education providing employer fodder!

## **Why do organisations employ graduates?**

It is often taken-for-granted that organisations employ graduates because they want ‘bright’ (CUCD, 1990) or ‘brainy’ (Darby, 1993) people and a degree provides something beyond ‘native intelligence’. The employment of intelligent people might be a reason in itself, but then why does not everybody attempt to employ graduates? It is important to go beyond the notion of intelligence or ‘brains’ to try and identify what it is that a graduate has to offer by dint of being intelligent.

Several studies have provided lists of the advantages of employing graduates including such things as graduates demonstrating flexibility, ambition, logical thinking, quick learning, high levels of motivated, good communication skills, creativity, maturity, specialist knowledge, analytic skills, initiative, and so (Gordon, 1983; NBEET, 1992).

The *QHE* research, based on empirical investigation and literature review, suggests that there are four underlying reasons for the employment of graduates:

- the knowledge and ideas graduates bring to an organisation;
- their willingness to learn and speed of learning;
- their flexibility, adaptability and ability to deal with change;
- their logical, analytic, critical, problem-solving and synthetic skills and the impact they have on innovation;

Although there may be differing emphases, these reasons are common to both large and small firms.

### ***Enhancement continuum***

The four underlying reasons for employing graduates can be seen as lying on an 'enhancement continuum' which ranges from 'adding to an organisation' at one end to 'transforming the organisation' at the other (see Figure 1). The more that graduate employees are able to operate along the continuum, the greater the potential evolution of the organisation.

This is not, of course, to suggest that *only* graduates are able to contribute to the evolution of an organisation. The model is suggested as a means of exploring the rationale for employing graduates and employer satisfaction with the graduates they recruit.

Respondents in a study by Gordon (1983), mainly from large organisations, noted that graduates 'bring a fresh, creative mind to a job', 'are quick to learn, tend to question assumptions and are therefore, more able to cope with change' and 'bring a level of specific technological knowledge'. The earlier *QHE* study also suggested that employers are looking for more than just competent graduates who can do a job, what they really want are graduates 'who can make an impression' on the way an organisation functions (Harvey, Burrows and Green, 1992a).

Johnson, Pere-Vergé and Hanage (1993, p. 92–4) found that half the small employers they interviewed 'confessed to a lack of awareness of what graduates might offer and said that, quite simply, they had never even considered employing a graduate'. However, despite some employers having a 'highly pejorative' view of the intelligence of graduates, SMEs who did employ them appreciated the alternative perspective that graduates offered. 'A graduate will come with an outsider's view, not one which has been coloured by experience of working here. So they don't start off with preconceptions of what the answers might be'. Over a quarter of the SMEs in their study saw graduates as 'potential generators of new and fresh ideas'.

The empirical material reported in the following chapters reaffirms the thesis that, irrespective of size, organisations that recruit graduates are looking for *transformative potential*.

Employers are often criticised for not being clear about what they want from graduates. This imprecision is not surprising if employers are focusing on potential. By its very nature, transformative potential is elusive and dynamic. It is not a matter of specifying clear requirements for an unambiguous purpose, as if ordering stock from a supplier. Graduate recruitment thus has a speculative component that can only be hazily sketched and at best identified as a suite of potentially transforming skills, attributes and attitudes.

In the following chapters we will explore employer priorities and satisfaction in the light of the model proposed above.

### *Costs*

There are costs to employing graduates, not least higher salaries. There are also training costs to be incurred as most graduates have little or no industrial or commercial experience. The training investment is also a risk given the career aspirations and potential mobility of graduates.

However, financial costs are not identified as a major cost in larger organisations (Gordon, 1993). Graduate recruitment has been cut back in many large firms, but this is in line with a general reduction in recruitment in the recessionary period. SMEs tend to be much more circumspect about the cost of employing and training graduates (Johnson, Pere-Vergé and Hanage, 1993). This concern is aggravated by a fear that graduates tend not to stay in SMEs and use them as a jumping-off point to bigger things. 43% of Johnson, Pere-Vergé and Hanage's respondents were doubtful that their small company would be attractive to graduates at all.

In general, larger employers tend to see relatively few disadvantages in employing graduates in principle, although, as we shall see, they might prefer that graduates were more accomplished in some respects. Indeed, larger employers overwhelmingly indicated that they thought graduates were more productive than other workers (Gordon, 1983, p. 47). In any event, it is important for all employers to review their need for graduates and have a strategic plan that identifies how they will be used (DTI/CIHE, 1990a).

Potentially, SMEs have a lot to gain from recruiting graduates, who, through their knowledge, flexibility, innovation and day-to-day management skills, would enhance the effectiveness of the organisation. 'SMEs are the engines for future economic regeneration and graduates are the raw material your engines might need' (Jones, 1994). The further SMEs move along the continuum from added value to transformative organisation, the more appealing graduate recruitment is likely to become.

Furthermore, the increasing numbers of graduates and growing graduate unemployment is likely to lead to a reduction in the differential cost of employing a graduate. The notion of the 'graduate job' and a pre-determined career path progression for graduates is fast disappearing (Darby, 1993; McGeough and Harvey, 1993).

Employees can no longer expect to retain discrete specialisms and pre-determined career paths. The ability to transfer and combine skills and to influence the work process is assuming increasing importance. (BT, 1993, p. 3)

This propitious set of circumstances provides SMEs with an opportunity of increasing the quality of its recruits. However, the potential benefits do not appear, at present, to outweigh the perceived disadvantages.

Furthermore, career services in higher education need to raise graduate awareness about the potential of SMEs as a source of challenging and varied employment. Phillips-Kerr's (1991, p. 7) sample of graduates, for example, identified 'variety and interest of duties' as among the main criterion in career choice. Similarly, final year students identified 'intellectual challenge' and an 'opportunity to be creative and original' as the two most important factors influencing career choice.

Employers want graduates who not only add value but are likely to take the organisation forward in the face of continuous and rapid change. Five broad areas of graduate attributes emerge from the research as of major importance to employers:

- knowledge;
- intellectual ability;
- ability to work in a modern organisation;
- interpersonal skills;
- communication.

## **Knowledge**

Undergraduate education is frequently seen as developing students' knowledge. However, as much as this may be a useful context for developing many other skills and abilities, it is unusual, except in very limited areas, for a recruit from an undergraduate course to provide an organisation with technical knowledge that might provide a market edge.

For some employers the subject of the degree is of little or no consequence. Even for employers who value specialist knowledge it is still relatively unimportant because it has a short shelf-life (Figure 2). Rather than value specialist knowledge for its own sake, most employers:

- consider that understanding of core principles, technical ability, potential, and willingness to learn and continually update knowledge are more important than a stock of knowledge;
- consider problem solving to be a very important attribute but one with which they are only moderately satisfied because of graduates' lack of 'real world' application;

Employers are only moderately satisfied with the technical ability of graduates (Figure 3). Indeed, graduates are not seen as particularly good at applying knowledge or understanding to practical work situations because they are unable to improvise, lack commercial awareness and lack appreciation of the human or cultural context

within which they are working.

### **Intellect and adaptability**

Employers want graduates to be flexible, adaptable and receptive to change. Employers expect graduates to exhibit a range of intellectual abilities. They want graduates who are inquisitive, innovative, logical, analytic, critical, creative, able to think laterally and conceptualise issues rapidly.

Overall, employers:

- are unimpressed with the innovation of graduates, in part due to the insensitiveness of graduates to the implications of innovation;
- are satisfied that graduates are analytic, logical, able to conceptualise issues rapidly and deal with large amounts of information;
- think that graduates' critical ability is not quite so satisfactory. There was some expressed dissatisfaction with the lateral thinking and synthetic ability of graduates;
- are satisfied with the flexibility and intellectual adaptability of graduates.

### **Working in an organisation**

Working in a modern organisation requires an ability to cope with pressure, manage stress, meet deadlines, prioritise work and, most of all, be dependable. Team work is identified as the single most important *skill* by employers.

Employers were also looking for commitment, self-motivation, drive and desire to achieve. In general employers:

- are satisfied with the dependability and organisational adaptability of graduates but far less satisfied with their ability to cope with pressure, time management and organisational skills;
- are satisfied with the commitment, self-motivation, drive and desire to achieve of graduates, although this may be because employers' recruitment procedures are designed to capture such individuals;
- consider graduates have a poor understanding of the culture of a modern organisation and tend to be naïve about industrial relations issues, organisational politics, knowing how to deal with people of different seniorities, and recognising other people's motivations;
- are satisfied with graduates' ability to work in teams and with their cooperativeness.

### **Interpersonal skills**

Interpersonal skills is an area that is often regarded as very important by graduate recruiters, but one where there is a gap between expectations and performance.

Employers often refer to the:

- arrogance of graduates particularly in terms of a lack of the recognition of skills and abilities of non-graduates. There is a fine-line drawn between arrogance and self-confidence and it is the latter that recruiters look for during the selection process;
- lack of awareness that graduates have of the impact they make and their failure to realise that they have to gain the respect of peers and subordinates. They think they know it all and often lack tact and tolerance;
- inability of graduates to relate to other non-graduate employees. Graduates see themselves as ‘a breed apart’ and employers want graduates who can communicate with people who are not on the same intellectual level.

### **Communication**

Employers place a great deal of importance on graduates’ communication skills both oral and written. Communication skills, including listening, are important to employers because it is necessary for graduates in industry to communicate ideas and concepts efficiently and effectively to colleagues and customers.

Employers were:

- dissatisfied with both oral and written communication skills;
- often critical of graduates’ grasp of fundamentals of written communication, especially basic grammar, sentence structure and punctuation;
- concerned about the range of writing abilities of graduates. They may be good at producing essays, laboratory reports, academic projects and dissertations but graduates are relatively poor at producing other forms of written communication;
- disappointed by the inability of graduates to write reports. It seems that graduates have learned to provide balanced arguments that explore every nuance of a debate but are not experienced in making a persuasive case. Reports are much more prescriptive than essays and graduates are not good at writing them;
- unimpressed by graduates’ oral presentation ability. Graduates seem to have had little experience of making, or being assessed on, oral presentations.

There is little evidence that employers or academics are seriously committed to working towards the European Commission’s language policy for higher education.

The importance given to information technology usage by employers was not particularly high although they were very satisfied with graduates’ ‘computer literacy’. Some employers, though, noted that graduates are often more comfortable communicating with computers than with people.

## Core skills

Employers expect graduates to exhibit a wide range of attributes in addition to the acquisition of a body of knowledge. The *QHE* research suggests a set of generic or core skills and attitudes including:

- willingness to learn,
- team work,
- communication skills,
- problem solving,
- analytic ability,
- logical argument,
- ability to summarise key issues

and a range of personal attributes including:

- commitment,
- energy,
- self-motivation,
- self-management,
- reliability,
- co-operation,
- flexibility and adaptability.

Some academics point out that most of the skills being identified are at the heart of the academic process. Higher education has always produced these skills, they are implicit in the undergraduate experience. Others argue that this is an idealised notion that is under increasing threat from expansion and reduction in the unit of resource. It is now necessary to ensure that the implicit content is made explicit and codified within a clearly identified and integrated set of aims, objectives, teaching and learning processes, outcomes and assessment methods.

## What can independent study offer?

Independent study provides a useful way of developing a range of attributes as will be briefly outlined below. Furthermore, it also a useful means of *demonstrating* a diverse set of abilities to a potential employer. Willingness to learn, along with many of the personal attributes, such as commitment, energy, self-motivation and flexibility are not easy for graduates from standard taught courses to demonstrate to employers. Independent study, by its very nature ensures a vehicle to demonstrate such attributes.

++ JO/SELENA do you want to add an example here?+

The key issue, though, is not the demonstration of the range of 'core' attributes, as useful as that is in the employment market, but the extent to which independent study empowers students through the enhancement of such attributes.

## *Willingness to learn*

The single most important attribute of graduates is willingness to learn and to continue to learn. Independent study is not only indicative of a willingness to learn but more importantly provides an initiation into the world of life-long learning. Instead of a structured learning programme provided by a conventional taught course, independent study places the onus on the student to identify a programme of self-learning.

### ***Team work and co-operation***

Team working and co-operative activity appear to be the Achilles heel of independent learning. This assumes that independent learning really is independent. However, much independent learning is also linked into co-operative endeavours and reference-team building. At Lancaster University, the first year of independent studies almost entirely involves co-operative activity and developing team working [+JO is this true, do you want to expand on this?]

Even where there is less onus on the development of teams, independent study does not involve a student disappearing to work alone in dusty archives or undertaking field work in an isolated setting. On the contrary, independent study often involves collaborating in a variety of settings with external organisations, or at the very least working closely with a tutor. Indeed, grave concern is expressed if students 'disappear' and make no attempt relate to the support structures set up for independent study.

### ***Communication skills***

...presentations, negotiations with others, variety of communication modes

### ***Problem solving***

Problem solving lies at the heart of most independent study projects....

### ***Analytic ability, logical argument, ability to summarise key issues***

Independent study provides no more opportunities for these activities than a conventional course of study. The nature of work, what is assessed and the kind of assessment process will be a major determinant ...

### ***Self-motivation, self-management and commitment***

Undergraduate independent study is similar to postgraduate study in encouraging a rigorous self-discipline. Despite tutorial support and reference peer-groups independent study does require considerable self-motivation and self-management along with a clear commitment to complete a programme of work within a given time frame.

### ***Energy and reliability***

### ***Flexibility and adaptability***

What employers want more than anything are continuing learners who are adaptable and flexible. The experience of independent study, which invariably requires considerable flexibility and adaptability to deal with unforeseen circumstances and yet provide a result is an ideal 'training' for such attributes.

## **Conclusion**

## **References**

Harvey, L., 1993, Collected Papers.....

Harvey, L. with Green, D., 1994, **Employer Satisfaction**. Birmingham, QHE.