Abstract

This project looked at the employability of Public Service degree graduates, using a survey to track their career paths since graduation and evaluate how well their university experience equipped them for employment in this challenging and changing sector. The report includes a summary of their responses and key issues for the teaching team to incorporate into the curriculum design.

Keywords

employability, public sector, graduates
Introduction and Background

The Public Service degrees have been running at Anglia Ruskin since 2002 and the Foundation Degree (FdA) Public Service was the first Public Service degree in the country. The FdA includes compulsory work placements: in the first year with disadvantaged groups, and in the second year with a public service or related organisation, all designed to improve students’ employability through equipping them with skills and knowledge that are directly relevant to the public sector. The degree has close links with local and regional public services and these are maintained and developed through the use of guest lectures on all modules in the FdA and an annual Public Service Forum as well as through the organisation of the work placements. Much of the approaches to learning and teaching taken by the public service team encourage the development of employability skills through the use of constructivist or active and experiential learning (UKCES, 2008). Teaching emphasises group work, presentations and simulations in an effort to improve students’ self-confidence, group working and communication skills. Students are able to take an employability module, Preparing for Work, in their final semester which is delivered in partnership with the Employability Service. In this module they reflect on their achievement of ‘graduateness’ and employability and develop skills in interviews, psychometric tests, CV writing and other preparation for employment.

There is a continuing debate around definitions of employability, with the dominant view being one of employability as the development of a set of skills, understanding and attributes that can be identified and ‘measured’ in some way and an opposing, broader, holistic and student-centred view, of employability as being the development of engaged and confident learners with intellectual capacities that enable them to make a full contribution to society (Pegg et al., 2012). Work has also been carried out to determine how employers view employability (CBI, 2011).

Simply because a student is taking a vocational course, such as the FdA Public Service, there is no guarantee that they will become employable as a result (Harvey, 2003, in Pegg et al., 2012). The project therefore aimed to generate detailed information about employability in the public sector through asking graduates to evaluate the usefulness of the degree in preparing them for employment, enabling the identification of any skills gaps in the Public Service curriculum.

Although evidence exists of careful career planning and strong motivation in graduate entrants to the public sector (Cooper and Ingram, 2004), little is known about the specific paths that individuals take into employment in these organisations with some evidence pointing to convoluted entry routes (Constable, 2012). Many Public Service students are non-traditional entrants and research has shown that these students tend to face worse outcomes than ‘traditional’ students (i.e. young, white, male, middle class with a family background in HE) in terms of their career (Blasko et al., 2002). It is therefore increasingly important to provide clear advice and guidance to these types of students about career prospects and entry routes to their chosen profession and to increase their employability while at university. A debate currently exists about the benefits of graduate entry to services such as the police, in terms of improving service delivery in modern public services, particularly in the current challenging economic climate, and more research is needed in this area (Foster, 1999; Hogan-Howe, 2012).

Method

A questionnaire was devised that asked graduates about their current career, the path they took to their current role and how well their university experience equipped them for their career. The questionnaire was piloted by sending to two graduates who completed it and then gave feedback on the design. It was then sent by post and electronically to all graduates. To increase the response rate first class post and a personalised letter or email was used, and non-responses were followed up with another letter or email and second copy of the questionnaire (Edwards et al., 2002).

Findings and Discussion

Contacting graduates was the most challenging aspect of carrying out the research as many had moved since graduating and both postal and email addresses were no longer current. The online survey tool, SurveyMonkey, proved to be the most effective method with 12 responses from emails and 16 from Facebook requests. A response rate of 20% was achieved through electronic means and 14% from postal versions, giving a total response rate of 34%. Contact was much easier to establish with recent graduates than with those who had graduated several years ago, as is shown in Figure 1 below:
46% of graduates were working in the public sector, in a range of occupations from the police, fire and ambulance services to local government, teaching and the military. 40% of graduates were working in the private sector, in roles such as recruitment consultants and managers. 6% were travelling and were ski instructors, TEFL teachers or simply travelling. 31% had changed career direction completely by training in another area, such as social work or nursing or were already working in another area such as industrial chemists and civil engineers. Two graduates reported being unemployed, three reported unskilled work such as line and sales operatives and one was working in a bar, all of whom had graduated less than two years previously.

When asked how well they felt the Public Service degree equipped them for their career, 74% of all students responded either ‘reasonably well’, ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ (see Figure 2). Those working in the private sector, studying or travelling however were slightly more likely (79%) to respond positively to this question than those working in the public sector (70%) which could suggest that public sector graduates are more dissatisfied with their university experience than other students.
responses from those working in the public sector and those who are not (working in the private sector, studying, unemployed or travelling) which are discussed below.

**Work-based Learning**

Those working in the private sector were much more likely to see Work Based Learning 1 as useful preparation for employment than those working in the public sector which is an unexpected finding. On this module students are required to do 50 hours of placement activity with ‘disadvantaged groups’ and work organisations such as homeless shelters, with young offenders and with people with drug and alcohol dependencies. The module aims to give them direct contact with groups of people they are likely to come into contact with on a daily basis when working as public servants, to break down their stereotypes and give them an awareness of the causes of and solutions to these social problems. It is, therefore, interesting that those not working in the public sector found this to be better preparation for employment (64%) than those working as public servants (35%).

Those working in the public sector (65%) were more likely to see Work Based Learning 2 (a module involving 100 hours of placement with a public service or related organisation) as useful career preparation than those working in the private sector (44%), which is perhaps unsurprising given that students had the opportunity to experience daily working life in the sector that they eventually joined. However, all students gained transferable employability skills from these work placements, such as time management, communication and planning skills and it would have been easy to assume that all students would have viewed such practical experience as beneficial.

**Assessments**

As mentioned above, students gave a range of responses when asked which elements of the degree were useful preparation for employment. Reports, essays and the dissertation were all indicated by around 50% of graduates, indicating that general writing skills benefit some graduates in their careers. Presentations were seen as helpful preparation by the greatest number at 58% and essays and the dissertation as the least helpful assessment methods, both achieving a rate of 47%. Again there were some marked differences in the views of the two groups of graduates.

**Dissertations**

The greatest difference was with the dissertation, with 65% of those working in the public sector viewing this as good career preparation and only 32% of the others agreeing, a difference of 33%. There is a requirement for the dissertation to be written on a topic related to the public services and so it is logical that students with a career in this sector would find the subject matter to be relevant. However, dissertations require the application of many employability skills, such as independence, time management, information management and critical analysis and all students should develop their skills through the process. It is therefore important for the public service team to ensure that all students reflect on how the process of writing a dissertation develops these skills and that they are aware of their transferable nature.

**Presentations**

As Figure 3 indicates, while a majority of students viewed presentations as useful career preparation, those working in a public sector were more likely (65%) to agree with this than those working elsewhere (52%). This could be seen to reflect the nature of work in the emergency public services where employees are in daily contact with members of the public, often in distressing situations, and where good communication skills are vital. Presentation skills involve a degree of self-confidence which is also an important element when working in the public services, as presenting oneself confidently is essential in emergency situations. However, it is difficult to envisage a working environment in which communication skills and self-confidence are not important and so it seems likely that all students need to be given the opportunity to reflect on their development of these skills and the ways in which they are transferable to employment in the widest sense.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Having graduates reflect on aspects of the Public Service degree and their experiences in higher education in light of their current employment was a valuable experience and has provided insights that will enable the teaching team to improve students’ employability. Contacting graduates was the most challenging aspect of the research and social media could play a role here in future research. Inviting new graduates to join, for example, a Facebook page would allow the team to stay in contact with them, to track their progress and could also provide the graduates with peer support as they begin their careers. Surveying them around two years after graduation would be most beneficial as these results may have been skewed through having those who had only been in the world of employment for a relatively short time.

The Public Service placement module, Work Based Learning 2, could allow students to complete a wider range of public sector placements in future, to provide work experience that is more in line with their interests. For example, rather than focussing on the emergency services, students could undertake a teaching support role, work in local government or in a social care setting.

Employability links need to be strengthened on all work placement modules as well as the dissertation, to allow students to reflect on how their development of skills and knowledge are transferable to all employment sectors. Students should be given the opportunity to identify the wider purpose of the activities that they experience (Yorke et al., 2003). This should ensure that all students see the value and benefit of such projects and work experience and could be carried out through embedding a wider range of PDP activities (QAA, 2009).

The project results support a view of employability as a broad and holistic concept in that encompasses skills, knowledge and attributes as well as intellectual and personal development. Simply providing students with activities such as work placements is not sufficient to development them into highly employable graduates. Rather students must be given opportunities to reflect on their own skills and personal development and to make the links between their studies and experiences at university and the world of employment in a wide sense.

References


CBI_NUS_Employability%20report_May%202011.pdf [Accessed 12 August 2013].


