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HRD INTERVIEW:

Laura Whyte
Personnel Director - John Lewis

Issue 72

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Introducing the Graduate recruitment roundtable delegates...

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Kerry Foods

Alexandra Bush

National Head of Graduate Management
Training Scheme, NHS Institute of
Innovation & Improvement

Margaret Dane

CEO, AGCAS

Iain Heath

Head of Graduate Recruitment, Centrica

Matthew Higgs

Graduate Resourcing Manager,
Network Rail

Ana Pacheco

HR Advisor, Advanced Computer Software

David Pye

Chair, Recruitment and Employment
Confederation (REC)

James Rapinac

Director of Marketing, Gallup

Alyson Sparks

Director of Resourcing &
HR Operations, Deloitte

Ben Staveley

Head of Trainee Recruitment,
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Katrina Rostrup

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Chairperson: Jason Spiller

Editor - ^{the}HRDIRECTOR



It's important that employers continue to drive efficiency in their process, and to strive to find the people who are going to be successful in their organisation



Roundtable Graduate recruitment

Is the UK Education System failing both graduates and UK employers? How should educators and employers be preparing for the future skills needs of the UK economy? Sponsored degree programmes – are they worthwhile, how do they work? Can and should employers be more influential in setting the curriculum?

The roundtable focused on the key issues affecting current graduates, students contemplating their higher education route and the plans employers are considering across sectors, regarding graduate recruitment programmes. As some areas of the UK economy are beginning to slowly recover from recession, employers are looking to optimise their graduate recruitment strategy, aiming to attract and recruit graduates that can demonstrate skills beyond their academic achievements.

However, rising numbers of applicants to UK universities, plus negative media, has increased fear and panic amongst graduates. Consequently, employers are finding themselves inundated with applications and are struggling to fill vacancies with suitable candidates. This debate was dedicated to discussing the role of graduate recruitment in the future of UK business, and covered key business leadership and human resource issues.

Jason Spiller: The media is always looking for a headline and you do not have to look far for negative stories about graduate expectation.. is it as bad as it is reported?

Margaret Dane: I'm really speaking from the perspective of the University Career Services and the experience of students. I would say, the big issue has been that the media has presented a picture of gloom and doom. Things are bad, but they're not nearly as bad as it is portrayed, and one consequence of that has been that graduates haven't applied for jobs. I mean, I have heard people around this room today saying they are still unable to fill positions. So while I don't want to pretend that the market is good, it's as bad as it's been for 20 years - it's not that there aren't any jobs. I think one side of it is the perception of whether it's even worth applying and the other is, if they do apply, quite a lot of graduates are applying in a very scatter gun kind of way... they are not targeting the individual organisations.

Jason Spiller: From an employer's point of view, Alyson, give us some sort of idea of what's happening with your graduate programmes at Deloitte?

Alyson Sparks: The current headlines have had a huge impact on our hiring ability. We recruit over 1000 graduates a year, it's never easy to hire 1000 graduates but we have a fantastic proposition for students. Historically, our Autumn intake class concludes around April. We still are not full and it has been very difficult to attract the right candidates. Like most other organisations, we reduced our marketing spend as there was the notion that, we're in recession, we're in a buyer's market, they're going to be knocking down our doors. That actually has not happened and it is, I believe, very much driven by the headlines.

We receive upwards of 20,000 applications a year. In the newspapers and other publications, if the headlines are doom and gloom about the graduate market, you will see a corresponding dip in applications. We hosted career advisor days last week with around 50 – 60 of the top Universities and they all expressed the exact same observations. For us it is very frustrating. Students see the headlines and they don't even

bother - you can't blame them. If this is what students believe, there's only so much we and the careers advisors can do to actually paint a different story.

Jason Spiller: *Alyson's point flies in the face of the headlines. Is this what other people are experiencing?*

Matthew Higgs: I'll admit, working for Network Rail is not as sexy as a career in the city. The biggest challenge for us has not been, ironically for the last two years, trying to sell Network Rail, it's actually trying to filter out unsuitable candidates – a lot of people that have applied were actually not that good or were not that well prepared and their applications showed this.

Jason Spiller: *So why do you think that two years ago we had a so-called lack of talent, and now the opposite is true?*

Ben Jackson: It's such a difficult question to answer, as there are so many dimensions to it, but I agree with everything that's been said so far in terms of the media's role. That said, the combination of the sheer volumes of job applications and of people coming out of university, presents a problem for employers. By necessity, the early stages of the screening process tends to be based on some fairly arbitrary cut-off points. For example, the 2:1 degree classification is an almost ubiquitous cut-off. When you're an organisation with a defined budget to spend, and you're under pressure with limited resources, you have to resort to arbitrary cut-offs, and that is where a lot of these problems arise.

An arbitrary cut-off does not actually assess an individual's suitability, so when you get into the richer parts of the process, such as the telephone interviews, the assessment centres and so on, you can be left, unexpectedly, with a relatively empty pipeline. There has been so much pressure on getting more people into higher education in the

UK over the last few years, it hasn't really been understood that there is even more pressure on the employers to have better screening processes in place.

Iain Heath: A lot of graduate recruiters focus increasingly on the 2:1 as a cut-off point. AGR research this year has shown, that in fact, that number is higher than it's been for a number of years and it's debated a great deal. Very few employers take the step to remove the 2:1 cap which is something we have done at Centrica. Over the past several years we've had an open door to people with 2:2s and we've found that whilst we don't necessarily recruit a vast percentage of our graduates from the 2:2 pool, the people we do take on - around ten percent of our intake - are people we wouldn't want to be without. I do think that the 2:1 question risks becoming a theoretical debate, and there are all manner of alarming statistics, but I don't see many companies doing anything about it.

Jason Spiller: *What sort of message does that send to people at University... that a 2:2 is more likely to make you more appealing to an employer?*

Iain Heath: Well I don't think it does, we are more interested in whether a candidate can do the job and do it well.

Alexandra Bush: I would agree with Iain. In terms of the NHS we have 2:2 or equivalent as our eligibility criteria, and we've found that's been really good for our inclusion figures in terms of black and minority ethnic candidates. We've got a fantastic diverse pool of trainees in the NHS and, in terms of their performance on the scheme and their performance with professional qualifications such as CIMA or ACCA, they don't actually perform any differently than a 2:1 candidate. So for me, the 2:1 is quite simply an academic measure.

Jason Spiller: *How do you communicate that criteria in a positive, ethical way?*

Alexandra Bush: We actually go out there and sell it as a positive, we're recruiting for potential not for past academic achievement.

Matthew Higgs: We have a 2:2 as a minimum cut off and it's something we are quite wedded to as an organisation. We've seen a similar sort of pattern as Iain is seeing, that probably only ten percent of our graduate recruits have a 2:2 that gets them through the door, and that includes our MSC programmes.

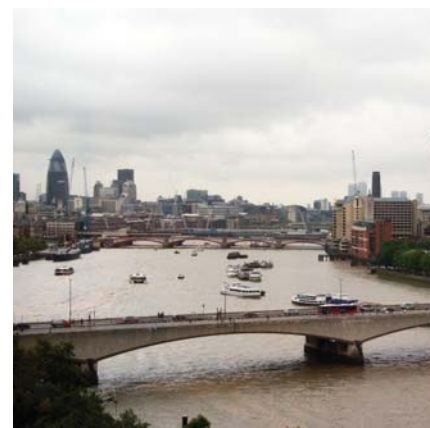


A lot of graduate recruiters focus increasingly on the 2:1 as a cut-off point; AGR research this year has shown that in fact that number is higher than it's been for a number of years



David Pye: I think some of this is about educating the graduates, in terms of what the employers expect. Looking at the research the REC has done, the feedback from some of the graduate communities is, that 'if I'm not at that top echelon 2:1 and so on, if I don't go to one of the top Universities, then I'm not going to get one of the top jobs'.

Margaret Dane: The 2:1 barrier has had impact - students have said 'I've got to focus on getting that absolutely essential 2:1' to the detriment of



doing other things, including getting good work experience, and really thinking about their future.

Jason Spiller: *What are the core reasons that employers take this view, with regards to arbitrary grade cut off?*



Whatever your academic cut off is, competency model strengths is key. We run psychometric tests online that test the ability to be organised, the ability to work in a team, the ability to communicate



Ana Pacheco: In our organisation, we have a 2:1 cut off and there are two main reasons for this. The first is the cost. We are a medium-size company and we do not have the resources to cope with hundreds of applications - although how many companies do? And the second one is, that the last stage of our interviews is done by managers who are incredibly busy, and so they need to know that they are investing time to interview high caliber candidates, which is understandable. At the end of the day, we are in a competitive market and so want to attract the very best candidates. At times, it can also be difficult to convince managers to accept candidates with less than a first.

Iain Heath: For us, it's absolutely the right thing to set the threshold at 2:2. Equally, cost and resources are factors. There's also the point that opening up to 2:2s spreads the same number of opportunities across a broader talent pool, but that does not solve the wider issue, namely there's far too many graduates for the vacancies available.

James Rapinac: The goal is to understand, to what degree the candidate is a good fit for the organisation and the specific role applied for - and also, looking ahead to the career path for the candidate, within the organisation. At Gallup, once we've identified the talent profiles of individual candidates and qualified them in terms of the right fit, we then look at qualifications, the grade point average that they have achieved, how successful they were at university and other similar criteria.

Matthew Higgs: Whatever your academic cut off is, competency model strength is key. We run psychometric tests online that test the ability, for example, to be organised, the ability to work in a team and the ability to communicate. When we actually took our fairly reasonable competency model and our fairly reasonable levels of attainment that we were expecting, that's when the real shortfall in the pool became apparent, as there are some basic criteria and skills lacking in candidates. These were not manifestly demonstrated within the selection tools and we were using an online application form that is scored by a human being, against the criteria we put out, so it's not automatically scored.

Ben Jackson: A degree is a reasonable measure and, generally speaking, a good thing to have. But it doesn't demonstrate your human qualities. The fact is, you are looking for the person who has a degree of self-awareness, maturity, the right attitude, as well as the competency and the skills to be able to do the job. So what about employability skills, should these be driven by the higher education establishments, or is that something that should be the responsibility of parents and guardians?

If you use a basic distribution model in terms of the quality of individuals, all the employers sitting around this table are fishing in the same pool. Obviously, the most desired recruits are those that have reasonably good academic ability, great interpersonal skills, a high level of maturity and crucially, the right attitude. So even though we now have over 270,000 graduates annually from UK universities, is there any evidence that we actually have a pool of people with these most desired attributes?

Katrina Rostrup: At GradWeb we manage a lot of campaigns for different graduate employers and the types of graduate they employ will vary. Some employers will be targeting the top layer, but there will be other employers who have to be a little bit more realistic, in terms of their expectations. There is only a very limited top layer and not all the graduate employers are going to get those people because, frankly, there just aren't enough to go around. The graduate pool, as we know, has got bigger, but the quality has not increased, and this top layer has not increased by the same proportion.

Margaret Dane: Getting negative feedback is something graduates haven't had a lot of experience of and, in a sense, they've almost got to fail before they realise that there's some learning that has to happen, regarding these attributes desired by employers. Regarding courses that are run about application skills, students think, 'do I really need this?' So what is the role of higher education, to plug missing life skills? Academics will say the curricula is full already!

David Pye: The REC conducted research entitled Avoiding A Lost Generation chaired by Baroness Prosser, looking at the cost of youth unemployment between ages of 16-24 including many graduates. One of the key things that came out of the work that we did was that most students and graduates are completely unprepared. They are either unprepared for what University will be like, and then when they get to



University they are unprepared for what work will be like. One summary point was that there should be a shared responsibility from employers, recruitment companies and higher education.

Preparation for the world of work should start at 14 - do some volunteer work, get some life experiences, because, in eight years time, that is going to be the difference between you and someone else. It seems, over the last 20 years, as the availability of more information has become more accessible, paradoxically, this has done little to prepare candidates more roundly.



I have a sense that some of today's generation of students and graduates are in part obsessed with the idea of presenting their CV rather than actually being the people that we actually want



Alexandra Bush: The better prepared candidates are definitely those that have work experience – there's definitely more about people that have learned how to deal with people and situations in a work environment. They communicate better, they can think on their feet, and they interact more effectively in a team situation, because they've had prior work experiences.

David Pye: Agreed, work experience is a motivator and as an employer it is unquestionably a driver with regards to recruiting.

Jason Spiller: *From what has been said, many graduates seem rudderless as they embark on their potential career path.*

Alyson Sparks: It can be difficult for students. There are so many choices and there's so much information. The career advisors and employers try to break it down as simply as possible, but it's still overwhelming. I think from a University or perspective, helping them navigate, helping them make those decisions and helping to break it down and importantly, understand more about themselves, is key.

Jason Spiller: *Is it just that many of the subjects that students study, are not really considered desirable by employers?*

Alyson Sparks: I think it is harder here to disseminate the options. In the UK we can recruit from an accountancy degree, a history degree, a philosophy degree, it makes our organisation a much more interesting place. But it makes the recruiting much more difficult. I think it's then harder for a student to figure out what they want to do because the options are just endless.

Ben Jackson: I wonder if that's why there's been a bit more of a trend in recent times for employers like PWC, Ernst & Young, Morrisons and Logica to run sponsored degree programmes. They've worked with universities to create programmes that are very specific to their sector and organisation. You could therefore envisage a world in which students are choosing not only a career, but also their future employer!

Jason Spiller: *How realistic is that and how would that model look?*

Ben Jackson: The courses that are running at the moment seem to be predominantly based on

generic business disciplines - so as it stands this is pretty simple. But, given that the market is changing so rapidly, especially in response to the media coverage and so forth, who knows where it could go? I wonder if there is a shift coming where students almost feel forced to take a degree which is going to give them direct work experience or knowledge of a particular sector or role, or even organisation. Only then will they feel confident of securing a position in the future. That doesn't seem like a good outcome from a diversity perspective.

Jason Spiller: *So what you're suggesting is, if students are going down very specific routes with very specific subjects, they might be narrowing their options?*

Ben Jackson: That's my fear. I did Latin at University, so in some respects, I couldn't have been less qualified for my eventual career. But when I was applying for University, I was told it was a great choice. It doesn't specifically qualify you for anything, but it doesn't rule anything out.

Margaret Dane: Around 65 percent of jobs for new graduates are open to graduates of any discipline in this country and that is actually an important point, because we are virtually unique in the UK, that these courses, sports science, for example are very vocational - the fact is there aren't enough specific jobs to go round. They feel doubly cheated and rightly so! I think we've really got to think about this quite carefully, in terms of the advice we give students. Sure, do what you are interested in and what you are good at, because you can still re-qualify, you can do a Post Graduate professional qualification or a Masters at a later date. But, really helping people to think about their own futures. How do you do it? If anybody has the answer there's a fortune to be made.

Ben Staveley: I have a sense that some of today's generation of students and graduates are, in part, obsessed with the idea of presenting their CV rather than actually being themselves, which as



employers is actually what we want. And I suspect that it may be our fault, as employers. We have highly systemised processes of working out who we need, have identified a list of qualities and competencies. Students focus on an accumulation of brownie points for their CVs, rather than actually developing as a human, which strikes me as really a rather sad development.

Ana Pacheco: I'm the mentor for our graduate scheme, so I spend a lot of time with the graduates after they join. I decided to gather their views on this topic before I came here today and they all agreed, that they have felt pressurised since the age of 14 to make defined career choices. I think graduates realise that they have to have business awareness, but they prefer to gather this from other experiences, rather than by closing their career options too early.

Iain Heath: It might be more helpful to the wider economy, for employers to also develop skills in areas such as, entrepreneurship, and other fields that can encourage the right graduates into less-obvious career choices. Apprenticeships can also be a very viable alternative to a degree for some students and I think these could and should be offered more widely and promoted more.

Jason Spiller: *It seems that employers really do need to get more involved, much earlier, if the outcome is to be improved.*

Margaret Dane: Employers have been involved in a number of activities, such as, helping people to think how they present themselves to potential employers, or what choices they are making. But the crucial issue here is scalability, there are so many students and graduates that specific mentoring is a huge undertaking, and not realistic. Sandwich courses are a really good example - there are much fewer sandwich courses now than there were 20 years ago, despite the emphasis placed on employability and work experience.

Alyson Sparks: I think, if there's a message to go back to the Universities with, it's either provide more of these opportunities or allow students on any course to take a year out if they want and not have to pay fees.

Alexandra Bush: It all depends who's responsible for graduates to be fit for the workplace - are we saying the Universities are responsible? Employers need to work with them and I think the idea of sandwich courses fits the bill.

Ben Jackson: The organisations that GradWeb work with, which have the most successful talent pipelines, are the ones who have a multi-faceted entry-level intake. They may be looking at apprentices, summer placements, industrial sandwich placements and graduates. Ultimately, therefore, they are operating across a much wider talent pool. In terms of sandwich placements, successful candidates often then join the graduate scheme, so the process becomes much more efficient.

My greatest concern is that we seem to have a system in place which suggests that not going to university is a bad thing, and that is patently wrong. There are so many other entry level ways of starting out and getting into organisations and going on to have a very successful career. And yet here we are with a massive oversupply in one channel. i.e. the graduate channel. Surely there's got to be a way of having different people with different skills at different levels coming into an organisation's talent pipeline at the entry level from different routes? I think there needs to be much more choice for young people, for the qualifications that they are choosing to study, and therefore ultimately for the employers.

Alexandra Bush: Agreed and that they are fit for purpose straight away is an important issue - that they know the organisation and how it operates.

David Pye: Tim Campbell who won TV's The Apprentice is now devoting his time to helping

young people that are not taking the University route. Are they attractive to employers? Absolutely.

Iain Heath: I just wonder what it will take to create a shift in perception amongst students and their parents, that an apprenticeship is a choice worth consideration. Is it going to be harder to remove the young person from the idea of University and being a graduate, or is it going to be harder to remove their parents from the University aspiration and expectation? Employers can develop new ways to invest in emerging talent, such as placements, work experience and apprenticeships.



Students focus on an accumulation of brownie points for their CVs rather than actually developing as a human, which strikes me as really a rather sad development



Katrina Rostrup: I think the whole discussion has pretty much gone full circle. You can't look at each of these points that we've discussed this afternoon in isolation, they are all connected, but as you said before Jason, there doesn't seem to be any joined up thinking between full time school education, higher education, employers etc. We have now one type of institution that provides higher education, and so everyone is



encouraged to study for a degree at university as there is no alternative.



Faced with having to do 400 interviews within the space of two weeks, you have to adopt a very structured approach to ensure all decisions are consistent



There should be more choice of education and training available at different levels of entry: GCSE and A level, and some institutions should be more focused towards the vocational subjects. We still need our centres of academic excellence where you can study classics, geography etc, but we need more of a variety of higher education institutions which focus on the technical and practical courses like the former polytechnics and technical colleges. I think this would help students to be a little bit more self selective, based on their own strengths and therefore the direction in which they should pursue a potential job or career.

Jason Spiller: *Should employers take a more creative approach to selection and assessment techniques?*

Iain Heath: Just to pose a question and maybe spark off some ideas, is there a risk that graduate

recruitment becomes a bit of a pantomime where everybody knows what questions we are going to ask and we get the answers we expect to varying standards?

James Rapinac: What could be a more creative approach to selection assessment techniques? A big part of the answer is, simply asking the right questions and asking these questions in the right way. The questions should be aimed at trying to get a focused understanding of the candidate's capabilities, what their talents are and how they are likely to behave in situations that are important to the role.

Katrina Rostrup: One of the problems goes back to the issue that we have talked at length about, the sheer volume of applications. When you are conducting a large number of interviews, invariably you've got a number of people who are undertaking those interviews within a specific timeframe and consistency in decision making is key. You've got to be consistent in the approach and questioning to each candidate and provide an equal opportunity for each candidate. The interview framework can also allow the opportunity to ask additional questions around an individual candidate's experience that may be particularly relevant, but these should be kept to a minimum.

In an ideal situation, I'm sure as recruiters we'd all like to be able to ask all sorts of questions, but if you're faced with having to do 400 interviews within the space of two weeks, you have to adopt a very structured approach to ensure all decisions are consistent.

Alyson Sparks: For us, it comes down to the fact that we are a volume recruiter, we get 20,000 applications, 40,000 if you look over experienced hire as well. So we've got to have some filters. The better the filter, the better the indicator of future success. And providing a consistent interview is important. If I look at an opportunity to improve, it would be giving more training to those

interviewers, so that when a candidate appears 'staged', they can spot it and they know how to dig a bit deeper.

Matthew Higgs: We've found that sticking a candidate in a room with a business case to solve, giving them a folder, a flip chart, three pens and a calculator and saying "see you in 60 minutes for a fully prepared presentation" certainly separates the wheat from the chaff.

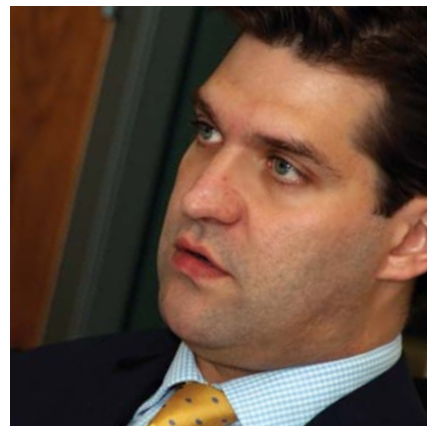
Alyson Sparks: We utilise an e-tray exercise, which is like an inbox exercise, on the final assessment day. They then participate in an interview with a partner where the interview is based around this e-tray exercise. They probe into why they made certain decisions, why they chose to do some things before other things, why they came to the conclusion that they did and of all of our assessment tools, that one alone, has the best indicator of future exam success.

Ben Staveley: The rigour of having to confront something which they haven't dealt with before, can be quite illuminating. It is incredible that some law graduate candidates are even lacking in the ability to write with confidence.

Iain Heath: The assessment should extend to having people come into the workplace and prove what they can do.

Jason Spiller: *Has the recession made employers more demanding for recruits that can get on board and be up to speed with the minimum of fuss?*

Ben Jackson: In the past, most recruiters tended to go out there looking for "the best candidates", so the approach was based on attracting the biggest pool of applications. They would then use a standard process including application form screens, maybe verbal and numerical testing, interviews and assessment centres, and they would miraculously identify "the best candidates". But we saw last year a 40 percent increase in application volumes across all of the



campaigns that we manage, and this has driven an immediate shift in employers' behaviour.

What they are now recognising is that they don't necessarily want candidates who are the best on paper, and they don't actually want to attract the biggest pool of candidates; what they actually want to do is implement tools, exercises and so on that are absolutely specific to our organisation. They are designed to be specific to the challenges that graduates will face on a day to day basis, and ultimately they provide a clear opportunity to allow that candidate to put across how they would behave in those situations, and what their level of expertise is for dealing with the work challenges. It's actually really encouraging that employers are looking at the issues that are facing them and are adopting more creative ways to deal with them, such as self-selection and situational judgement questionnaires.

Jason Spiller: Are employers communicating a clear message of what it is like to work for their organisation?

Alyson Bush: We have some people apply who actually don't want to work in the NHS but do want a graduate scheme. In order to sift these people out we utilise ability tests early on, but

when it comes to the assessment centre, we give them a business simulation, a day in the life of an NHS Manager, so they know that this is what they're going to get faced with. If you want to join the NHS and make a difference to the lives of people, think about joining us. I can say our retention rates have gone up, so it is actually more cost effective in the long run.

Ben Jackson: This is why self-selection is so important. It enables you to ask candidates to assess themselves effectively, to look at themselves and ask whether or not they really want to work in this environment, performing this role. In any volume campaign, as counter-intuitive as it may seem, what you are looking to achieve is actually to put off a lot of candidates because they simply aren't the right people for the organisation. However, if you have the messaging right, then whilst many will walk away, the right candidates will get excited about it. One person's negative is another person's positive, and that's where self-selection really comes in, plus it makes the process more efficient from a cost and resource perspective.

Sarah Brook: I think the challenge is, are you recruiting for a particular job or are you recruiting for a future leader? That's the dilemma, as we are doing both.

James Rapinac: Provided there is a large enough employee population in a specific role, such as partner, or in a role family that you would want graduate recruits to aspire to, we recommend identifying who the top performers are in that role – ideally we will look at the top ten percent and understanding the unique attributes of those high performers. These should be built into the candidate assessment so that it will give an indication of the degree to which candidates possess these attributes that indicate the potential of being a top performer.



Self-selection is so important - candidates assess themselves and ask whether or not they really want to work in this environment



Ben Jackson: When you approach the process of creating these tools, the most interesting aspect is to assemble three groups; graduates, their line managers and the programme's stakeholders and sponsors, and conduct sessions with each to determine what good looks like, and what the programme's proposition is. It's fascinating just how different the proposition usually is from each perspective. Getting each group to agree over time is the ultimate measure of success.

Katrina Rostrup: A lot of these people actually have minimal, if any, work experience so in terms of demonstrating their behaviours in situations they have to draw upon examples from their extracurricular activities. Just picking up on the



point before about interviewing people who are well practiced in terms of standard interview questions e.g. team leader questions and the team working and so on, I don't see that as a problem because I would never mark somebody down for preparing and planning ahead for an interview. If somebody has gone off and done three practice interviews with somebody and spoken to a friend of their father's and found out how to conduct themselves in an interview, it is a positive that they have done some preparation. The people who pitch up on the day but clearly haven't bothered to go onto a website and look at what the core skills are that are being assessed, or what to expect at an assessment centre, have no excuse as all this information is now easily accessible. Nobody wants to recruit individuals who require spoon feeding all of the time.

Jason Spiller: Are assessment tools and procedures really up to the job, do they give a full enough picture of an applicant?

Matthew Higgs: It comes down to the design of your assessments - a phrase we always use when we are doing the re-design, 'what does good look like', 'what does better than good look like' and 'what does excellent look like?' I think it is around the design of the tools that you are using, whether it's a business case or the career activity or interview. The assessment centre is the best way of doing it, but it's not 100 percent accurate, but you need enough to make an informed decision on that person.

Ben Staveley: I'm not worried about the rehearsed answer because you can pick it up. As an interviewer, you often find that as candidates are answering, they're reaching mentally through their Rolodex for a particular answer that they've prepared, but it's often the answer to a slightly different question from that which you have in fact asked.

Sarah Brook: Isn't it the case though once we've got this top 25 percent that we'll then all madly

sell into that group because we are in a very competitive environment. That's what we've found in our assessment centres spending some time doing the hard sell to all of them in reality but particularly to grab hold of the ones that we really want to keep so it's not all our market I think.

Matthew Higgs: It's very easy to design the assessment centre from hell.

Jason Spiller: Do you think employers are willing to go the extra mile to bridge this gap, and how much influence should businesses have on higher education and the curriculum and the preparation of young people coming into the workforce?

Sarah Brook: I would agree that we should be bridging the gap and I think it's a big challenge, I'd very much like to get closer. And education should be about knowledge, ideally, having students doing some skills training.

Margaret Dane: I think this debate about what role individual organisations can have in course design is quite an important one, because you are never simply teaching for one employer, that's where a sponsored tailored degree is a very different proposition.

Jason Spiller: I would have thought that businesses would want to get their brand into higher education, but would Universities welcome this intrusion?

Alyson Sparks: Influencing curriculum, I'm uneasy about that. It would need representation from a body. Take the ICAEW, for accounting, that body would then speak on behalf of our collective accounting firms and if there are concerns, or if there's trends that we see that should be addressed by the Universities a body can keep on top of these issues... I don't think it's up to Deloitte to go and tell them that.

Ben Jackson: Well you might not all want the same things.

Alexandra Bush: There is a great deal that is generic.

David Pye: Life skills would be a good way of connecting employers - the sooner a connection is made, the better for both parties.

Ben Staveley: There are a lot of law firms looking for the same people - we go into universities, do skills sessions. Part of that is that they can use the knowledge when they come to interviews themselves, and it's quite helpful for us as it gets our brand out there. And from the students' point of view, they are aware that there is a deficit in their knowledge that they need to plug.



A phrase we always use when we are doing the re-design, 'what does good look like', 'what does better than good look like' and 'what does excellent look like'?



Katrina Rostrup: But those tend to be more one off sessions don't they? Aren't we talking about something modular or part of the curriculum. Who is going to run that? You can't ask all employers to do that I don't think.

Margaret Dane: I don't think we should imply there isn't much happening out there because places like Reading University have developed a Career Management Skills module which is



accredited, it's been so successful that they've sold it to 60 other Universities, including in other countries. So in one sense people are starting to address it and employers get involved, but will students take advantage of it?

Jason Spiller: *How do employers assess their success in graduate recruitment?*

Alyson Sparks: I think still it comes back to your assessment centres as such, if you know you are doing that correctly, and as much as you can, have the students armed with good information, then the better really.



There is a problem at the highest level with the strategy for this country's higher education sector, and for the employability of young people



Iain Heath: It's tough to know, is our benchmark of success providing opportunities for emerging and developing talent or is it cost per hire? In different companies the answer may be different, but for me it's certainly recruiting the best graduates.

Jason Spiller: *If you have somebody representing a sector, then there is a criteria, and that seems to be the only way forward because otherwise it would just be a mess?*



Margaret Dane: AGR sector focus groups are starting to do that because they are recognising that although they are competing for the same candidates, actually by sharing their experience, their knowledge, etc, it's a win/win situation. The other point about the modules - I mean, the reality is, the aim is not to make people just better at applications but to make them clearer in their own minds about what they want to do, so they will self select themselves out of the inappropriate jobs and ultimately, that will reduce the inappropriate applications.

Ana Pacheco: If you make the process too easy, then you end up with graduates that are not mentally ready or who are not mature enough to successfully run with the career opportunities presented to them. The graduate may not be sure what they want to do with their career, but because the process for applying for a particular job is so easy, they just do it without much thought and, ultimately, their job application is a waste of time for everybody.

Iain Heath: I know in previous jobs I've had, back in the days of actual CVs and covering letters, I've had covering letters saying Dear Mr Heath, It has long been my ambition to work for – insert name of rival (do we need to insert a utility company here)– and the temptation to write back and say “well the best of luck with that” is quite strong! It's just the cut and paste approach of looking at big companies in the sector, write to all of them and hope for the best.

Jason Spiller: *It just creates a logistical problem for the employer, because you have to go through heaps of applications, perhaps part of the education should be about realistic expectations and honesty.*

Ben Staveley: I think there's a slightly unhealthy degree of interest in the self image they are portraying, as against: “fundamentally am I the right person for this job”? Some candidates seem to think that actually all they've got to do is throw a bit of glitter over their experience so far and that will be enough to get them through the door for an interview or even having got an interview, get them into the job. Somehow the message should be; you need to be realistic about where you might end up, and don't try and pretend to be a different person in an attempt to try and get in somewhere.

Iain Heath: I think you are absolutely right - this sort of reinvention is somewhat naïve. However, it's perhaps understandable that anyone who in their own recent history has morphed from a 12 year old to a 15 year, from GCSE to A-level to University, may still be meeting themselves coming back. They've become good at adapting

to new environments and they may feel that being all things to all people is the way to find a niche. Fact is, fundamentally there's an oversupply of the wrong type of graduate.

Jason Spiller: *It certainly seems the media once again is fanning the flames. But it also seems that employers must be more open and pro-active and graduates much better prepared.*

Ben Jackson: The most important thing is that any employer in any sector or industry knows their business better than anyone else. Recognition of this in recent years has driven different behaviours and a huge amount of change in the way that employers approach attraction and selection. It's important that employers continue to drive efficiency in their process, and to strive to find the people who are going to be successful in their organisation.

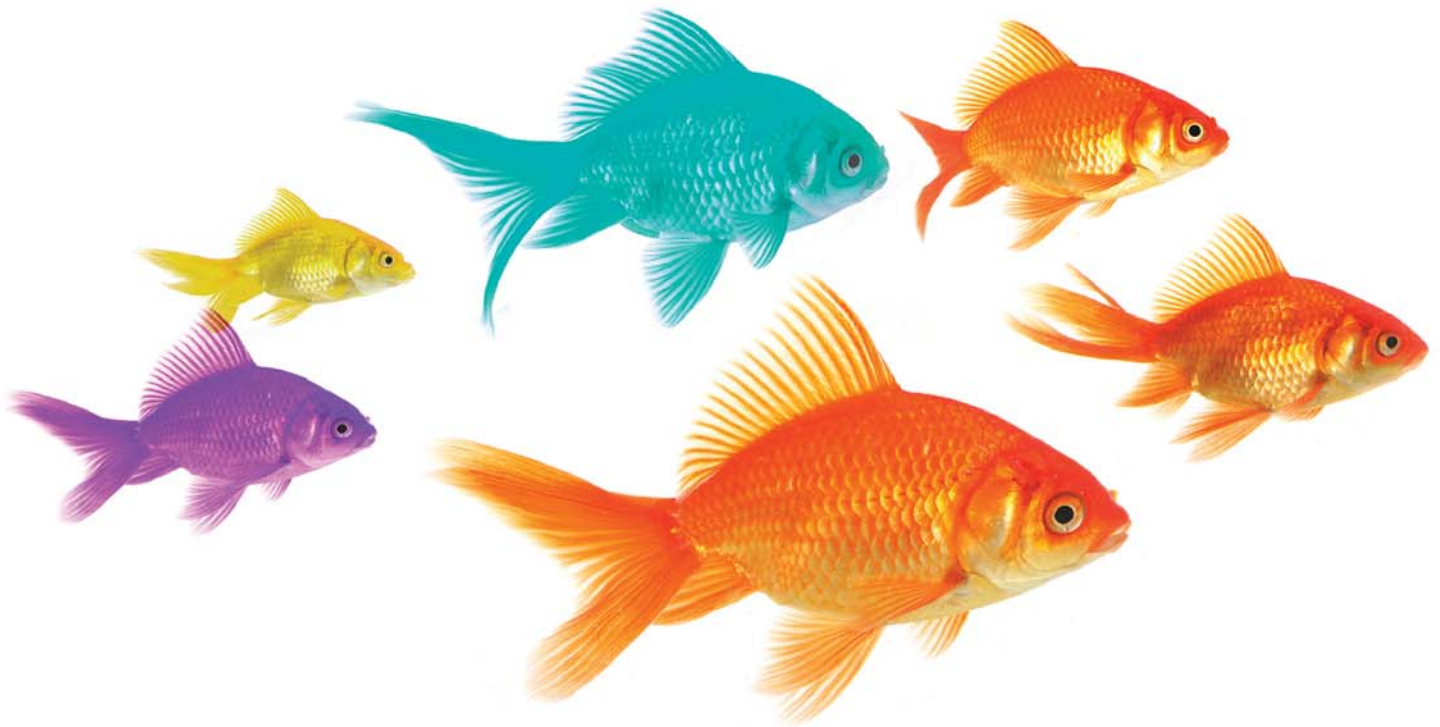
What we seem to have confirmed today is that there is a problem at the very highest level with the strategy for this country's higher education sector, and for the employment and employability of young people in general. For many, the university proposition simply isn't right. It's great that we are being creative and devising new ways of assessing, identifying and attracting graduates, but it's clear that something needs to be done to address these core issues, and to provide greater choice for young people who seem pressurized into feeling that university is their only viable option.

If we are saying that the issue rests with, for example, the politicians, they by necessity have to look at things on a macro level. They can't look at every individual tiny component, so they make decisions that they know will only be appropriate to a percentage of people a percentage of the time. That said, I think ultimately where the Government in this particular area has failed is in an arbitrary drive to increase numbers without focusing on quality, without focusing on employability, and without focusing on the expectations of those graduates who are going through the process.



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