

## **Widening graduate employment opportunities for students on Education Studies degrees: a case study at a School of Education in one London university.**

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The purpose of this small-scale study was to explore the aspirations of a final year cohort of students on an Education Studies degree programme at one School of Education, within a London university, with the intention of widening graduate employment opportunities. The Education Studies degree attracts candidates who are almost always aspiring for a career in the teaching profession, and in particular, the primary sector. The responses collected via a survey revealed that thirty per cent of respondents were going to take up jobs in non-graduate employment, a job that they could have secured without a degree. The School of Education, in a bid to increase graduate employment opportunities, widened the choice of career routes into teaching by providing two additional teacher training courses for the post compulsory sector. This is the first phase of the research. The following phase, planned for next year, will track the students into their teaching roles in order to evaluate the popularity and success of these graduate courses.

*Education Studies; Graduate Outcomes; Graduate employment; post compulsory; teacher training.*

### *Introduction*

Unlike a degree programme in, for example, sociology or psychology, where students might aspire to a range of careers, roles and professions, students of the Education Studies degree usually aim to work in schools or other teaching institutions. In fact, the education industry has become a very popular destination for higher education (HE) graduates. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, n.d.) reports that 'The two most common industries for leavers to be working in after finishing their studies are Education and Human Health and social work activities'. Teaching is considered a graduate job and a degree is a pre-requisite for entry onto teacher training courses such as the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). It is recognised that not every graduate intends to find graduate employment, instead, some may choose to pursue a job that they could have secured without a degree (Roffey-Barentsen and Burnell, n.d.). One important outcome of this study is that a wider choice of career routes into teaching is needed. Providing teacher training courses for sectors other than primary, would serve two objectives: increase the graduate employment prospects of students, and raise the 'Graduate Outcomes' rating on the Graduate Employability league table (THE, 2020) for the university's School of Education.

In order to explore the aspirations and intentions of students on an Education Studies degree programme at one School of Education, all of the 42 students in the final year of their bachelor's degree (Level 6) who were due to complete their degree and graduate at the end of that academic year were contacted by

email and invited to take part in the study via an online survey. Of these, 27 self-selected as participants for the research and responded via SurveyMonkey. Unfortunately, 15 students chose not to respond and take part. The purpose of the research project is to measure change over time; this is the first of three phases intending to evaluate the uptake and success of graduate employment opportunities.

### *Graduate employability*

Graduate employment is distinct from general employment in that the roles are specific according to the skills needed to perform them. The government had set out its definitions of graduate and non-graduate employment on the Office for National Statistics website in 2017, with the following given as a definition of non-graduate jobs, by Professors Peter Elias and Kate Purcell at the University of Warwick:

a non-graduate job is one in which the associated tasks do not normally require knowledge and skills developed through higher education to enable them to perform these tasks in a competent manner. Examples of non-graduate jobs include receptionists, sales assistants, many types of factory work, care workers and home carers (Office for National Statistics, 2017).

The article goes on to provide a definition of what is considered to be graduate employment, and this, amongst other careers, includes teaching:

This skill level is normally acquired through a degree or an equivalent period of work experience. Occupations at this level are generally termed 'professional' or managerial positions, and are found in corporate enterprises or governments. Examples include senior government officials, financial managers, scientists, engineers, medical doctors, teachers and accountants (Office for National Statistics, 2017).

The fact that not all students manage to secure graduate employment after university is an issue that has come under the spotlight since tuition fees for higher education were increased. The Office for Students<sup>i</sup> was established after The Higher Education Research Act (2017) and changed the way that HE was regulated, with one of the regulations being 'outcomes'. Outcomes in this context is referring to the employment secured by the graduate after finishing their course. Outcomes was to be one of the TEF<sup>ii</sup> metrics. According to Hewitt (2020: 20-21), writing for the Higher Education Policy Institute, 'One of the most significant policy initiatives in recent years has been the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The Teaching Excellence Framework is designed to hold universities to account for the teaching and outcomes they deliver'.

Data on graduates' employment used to be collected by universities by conducting surveys of graduates; this was called DLHE<sup>iii</sup> data. According to Hewitt (2020), the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) system was flawed and data even altered by some universities who were 'gaming the system' in order to look more favourable and boost their position in league tables. Hewitt declares that 'Accusations included whistle-blowers suggesting that students working as 'baristas' were being reclassified as 'barristers'' (2020: 15). The Graduate Outcomes survey was therefore developed as a new and more reliable system in 2018, to replace DLHE. The new system would survey all

graduates 15 months after they leave university, in order to give them enough time to settle into employment. This survey is delivered by the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2020) released the latest statistics from its UK Graduate Outcomes Survey in June 2020. These were graduates from the 2017/18 academic year, 15 months after completion of an HE course. Results of the inaugural survey show that 81% of graduates were in employment or unpaid work. 76% of graduates who were working in the UK were in highly skilled occupations earning at least £24,000. Teaching is considered to be high skilled employment.

HESA also released statistics of graduates in full-time paid employment in the UK by salary band. Of the graduates in high skilled occupations, earning at least £24,000, 7.5 per cent are in the degree subject area of education, which includes a degree in Education Studies (HESA, 2020).

There are many jobs in the teaching industry that do not always require a degree and would therefore be considered non-graduate jobs or low skilled employment. One such job is that of Teaching Assistant (TA). TAs can be voluntary, hourly paid, annual salaried, and although there are no specific qualifications, they can obtain a qualification such as 'CACHE level 3 Teaching Assistant' (Prospects, 2020), while some are educated to degree level (Skipp and Hopwood, 2019). TAs, therefore, may hold a degree but the job is still considered as a non-graduate one. In the introduction it was stated that some students on the Education Studies programme are working towards roles other than teacher, and that these will almost certainly be within the education industry, the TA would be one such role. Many of the students on this course are already TAs, some working voluntarily and some part time, and some are planning to upskill and take up professional teaching positions upon acquiring the necessary post-graduate teaching qualification. Interestingly, more than 82% of primary school teachers in the UK are female (British Educational Suppliers Association, 2019). This corresponds with the number of female students on this degree; 94% are female.

Recently the university developed and launched a strategy for developing a careers-led institution, enabling more graduates to be work-ready and secure graduate employment; the university states:

Our ambitious but achievable goal is to become the leading careers-focused, enterprising university in the UK, one which both prepares our students for the jobs of the future and provides the innovation to drive that future sustainably and inclusively (anonymous).

With a major emphasis on graduate and post-graduate employment and career progression, courses were rewritten and revalidated to include, for example, a work placement, and a career passport.

Many universities have adopted similar strategies and practices. Hewitt (2020) notes that there is reluctance among some academics about the role that employability should play in the university experience, but the idea is starting to be accepted.

Employability is becoming more embedded within the curriculum and careers services are working in less of an isolated environment. However, whether this comes from the initiative of academics or pressure from senior leadership differs by institution, and the latter approach may mean academics enter this space reluctantly (Hewitt, 2020: 46-47).

One practice that has been adopted within this School of Education has been to involve the whole academic team in planning, revalidating courses, and implementing two new routes to teacher training. Involving staff working on undergraduate programmes in the planning of these courses means that the whole team is aware of what is available to graduates, and can plan and promote accordingly. With a range of teacher training courses for primary and secondary teaching already available to graduates, widening the choice of career routes into teaching to include the adult education and post compulsory sector would only serve to improve graduates' outcomes.

### *The Respondents*

Table 1: responses to survey

Have your university expectations been fulfilled	Partially: 13	Fully: 11	Expectations exceeded: 2	No response: 1
What were your intentions when you joined the course	Find employment: 19	Further study: 7	No response: 1	
What are your intentions now, after finishing the course	Find employment: 11	Further study: 12	Other: 4	

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As stated in the introduction, the participants taking part in this study were on a BA Education Studies degree at a London university and about to finish at Level 6 (the final year of a bachelor's full time degree). They were asked to complete a survey that intended to capture their expectations and intentions with regards to employment.

The first question in the survey asked if their university experience had fulfilled their expectations. Of the 27 students who responded, 13 ticked partially whilst 11 responded with fully; 2 indicated that the university experience had exceeded their expectations; 1 skipped the question.

When questioned on what their intentions had been when they joined the course, 19 participants indicated that they had intended to work, whilst 7 were going to go on to further study. One participant skipped the question.

When questioned about their plans *now* that they had finished their degree programme, 12 participants responded that they intended to pursue post-graduate study, 11 were going to seek employment, while the others were either continuing in their current employment, travelling, or seeking an internship. When asked to state what that other employment might be, a range of responses were collected including 6 opting for Teaching Assistant, one Childcare, one Retail Manager, one Midwife, and two Education Officers with the Department for Education. One stated English Language Teacher. Closer analysis of these responses reveals that 9 participants were going to seek employment in non-graduate jobs, whilst 6 were seeking graduate employment.

When questioned about their intentions for further study, 8 out of those 12 who indicated their intention to pursue post-graduate study, stated their chosen course. These were 4 PGCE Primary, one School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT), one Midwifery, one Policy Studies, and one undecided.

### *Work-ready Graduates*

What does become clear, from conducting this survey, and analysing the results, is that not every graduate secures graduate employment. Some, and that includes nine students from our own survey were going to take up jobs in non-graduate employment, a job that they may have secured without a degree. Another inner London university noted that their 'graduates are certainly getting jobs, but they are not necessarily getting the right jobs to fulfil their potential or to meet their aspirations', write Gaskell and Lingwood in *The Guardian* (2017). Tindell, Weeden and Storan (2018) have stated that one in three graduates in

London will not secure employment, in what is considered to be a graduate job, upon leaving university. HESA statistics also demonstrate almost a quarter of graduates in the UK are not in graduate employment; they state that in 2020, 76% of graduates were in high-skilled employment.

The findings from our survey certainly reflect the London average in terms of one in three graduates not securing a graduate level job. However, the participants of our research are graduates of the BA Education Studies degree, a programme that leads directly to teacher training and, hence forth, graduate employment. We therefore questioned if the narrow choice of teacher training options that were available to these students were inhibiting their aspirations.

As already stated, students who enrol onto Education Studies undergraduate degrees are almost always looking to pursue a career in the primary sector. Very few of those students consider teaching in the post compulsory sector, like further education colleges, sixth form, or teaching English language within adult educational settings, according to Wright, Loughlin and Hall (2018). Some education students do consider teaching in the secondary sector, however, unless they have a subject specialism, this is more difficult. Further Education tends to be the less known about sector of education and very few students realise that this is a route that they can pursue a career in. Post compulsory education is an important sector in England and other parts of the UK, even more so since the school leaving age was raised and all 16-year olds are staying on in education for another 2 years (Crawley, 2016). What we have attempted to do in the School of Education is to adopt practices that broaden our students' horizons by enabling them to consider teaching in all the sectors of education, including the post compulsory sector, as viable career routes. In doing this we have added two teacher training routes:

- the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET);
- the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA).

Adding these courses to our portfolio of post graduate training courses has expanded our teacher training provision, and thereby increased our Education Studies graduates' options. During future phases of this research, we intend to follow the trainees through their training and into their teaching roles, in order to assess and evaluate whether these new teacher training provisions have proven to be successful.

Many universities are now adopting strategies and practices to increase their graduates' employment opportunities, and many of these are implemented at undergraduate level. Clarke (2018) argues that 'graduates are expected to exit their studies in work-ready mode and with demonstrable levels of employability. At the same time, employer groups have been unwaveringly vocal in their calls for universities to deliver graduates who are willing and able to make an immediate contribution in the workplace' (p. 1923). If this is the case, universities and students need to work on strategies that put them ahead and give them the best chance of securing that graduate job, after spending three or four years, and quite probably accumulating a large debt, working towards it.

Adina Pascal, writing in FE News (2020) notes 'With an overabundance of academically qualified applicants, employers are placing greater emphasis on making offers to the most 'workplace-ready' candidates equipped with a range of transferable skills and experiences'. As mentioned previously, this university is developing itself into a careers-led institution, with the aim to enable more graduates to secure graduate employment. Some innovative practices have been implemented within undergraduate courses too. These include modules that will provide students with opportunities to apply a full range of skills, competencies and experience required for successful development in a range of potential education related careers. For example, modules on volunteering, including a work placement, and the introduction of a career passport, allowing students to acquire and develop their reflective skills, self awareness, life style and self care approaches and where necessary improve these.

The importance of individual attributes and behaviours has also been flagged by Clarke (2018) as necessary for career success. One such individual attribute she refers to is self-management skills. This, she states, 'refer to personal awareness in terms of values, attitudes, abilities, aptitudes, interests and work-life balance' (1932). In addition, 'career-relevant behaviours' such as being able to adapt and showing flexibility, demonstrates the ability to cope with change in the workplace. Clarke also notes the 'career-relevant behaviours [that] influence objective and subjective employability over and above social and educational backgrounds' (cited by Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2015 in Clarke, 2018: 1932). If what Clarke asserts here is accurate, and career-relevant behaviours along with self-management skills are vital for securing a skilled graduate position, teacher training courses can be key in equipping graduates with the attributes and behaviours associated with this career route.

### *Conclusion*

With universities becoming more career focussed, and careers led, institutions are under pressure to prepare students for the workforce. Many are now implementing strategies and practices to ensure that the degree students graduate with secure those students graduate employment (Clarke, 2018; Pascal, 2020; Hewitt, 2020). The Office for Students is scrutinising universities for providing students with value for money degrees, not just degrees that ensure jobs, but degrees that ensure a rate of return for the tuition fees, writes Dandridge (2019), Chief Executive of the Office for Students. Tindell, et al (2018) look at the value of higher education to young Londoners, in terms of their goals and aspirations, after completing their undergraduate degrees. They found, from their study, that one in three graduates will not secure employment in what is considered to be a graduate job, even though, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), education is one of the most common industries.

By providing the PCET and the CELTA courses as viable and alternative career routes, we feel that we have improved the employment prospects of our Education Studies students. This not only strengthens our claim to becoming a careers led university, the strategy referred to previously, but also goes some way to satisfying the OfS who are holding universities accountable for the

destinations of their students, in terms of their employment, salaries, and eventual rate of return for students' loans.

So far these courses are proving to be popular; interest in and applications for places are increasing. We have a number of applicants, not just from students on the Education Studies undergraduate programme, but from other programmes across the university. In providing these courses as routes into teaching in further education, we feel that we have successfully widened students' career options and enabled them to consider this route to teaching as an alternative to primary school teaching.

Our future research will involve following graduates through their training, and into their careers. In addition, our research will explore the motivations and aspirations of the students, and why they chose to pursue a career in the post compulsory sector, and/or English language teaching, as opposed to the other educational sectors. We anticipate that the findings will assist us, as a school and university, in the marketing and recruitment to these courses, and to enriching the student experience while at the university.

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<sup>i</sup> The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulator of higher education in England.

<sup>ii</sup> The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has been introduced by the Government in England to recognise and encourage excellent teaching in universities and colleges.

<sup>iii</sup> Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey