

Mini-Conference 2020: Graduate Employability & Alumni

Webinars held on 9, 16, & 30 June 2020: Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has halted travel, interrupted studies and caused a mass migration online, throwing into question the viability of semester one. Graduates, however, are still looking for jobs. Amid a pandemic-induced recession and anxieties over the availability of work visas, graduates are wondering how they can find opportunities and make their applications stand out. The Graduate Employability and Alumni strand of the British Council Education Futures Mini-Conference 2020 focussed on how employers, universities and the UK government can support recent graduates in their job search.

Current state of the graduate labour market

The pandemic has significantly changed the jobs market for graduates. Positions that students had previously prepared for may no longer be available and may have even been replaced by unexpected opportunities in other sectors. The good news is that graduate job opportunities are beginning to bounce back after bottoming out in March and April. The bad news is that a return to normal will take longer than desired, and this “normal” may be quite different from before.

There are already signs of this change: some sectors are seeing hiring shortages exacerbated by the crisis. According to LinkedIn data, job postings in management consulting, financial services, and supply chains were more or less flat between March and May 2020 when compared with the previous year. However, there was an 80% increase year-on-year in healthcare and pharmaceutical job postings, an 18% increase in public administrative postings, and a 12% increase in IT roles. There are still longstanding shortages in engineering, technology and professional services. The pandemic has caused booms in insurance, financial services, law and banking.

While the government is expected to intervene, there is not yet much clarity on what it will look like. Recruiters, businesses and graduates are hoping for government stimuli that would support job creation, support for quality assurance for new apprenticeship schemes and investment in equity of access to high quality advice and guidance for jobseekers. Employers can do more to provide virtual internships and short-term learning programmes, as well as communicating with potential applicants and universities.

Finding opportunities in the Covid climate

Due to the uncertainties of how the easing of lockdowns will proceed and the looming end of furlough schemes, employers are taking a wait-and-see approach for future hiring plans. The major slowdown in graduate roles is expected to continue through the end of the year, though strong recovery in China, Singapore, and Southeast Asia is an encouraging precedent for the future of the UK market.

The anticipated slow pace of hiring initiatives provides valuable time for graduates and jobseekers to reflect, evaluate personal skills and experiences and determine their next course of action. Students who may be looking to change course from their original employment plans can identify gaps in knowledge and their professional networks.

The alterations to the jobs market and to the in-demand skills mean that students must embrace a high degree of flexibility. Many employers are seeking graduates that will be able to aid the transition to the digital world, so students should work on developing skills related to the ongoing digital transition across the global economy. For example, students proficient in Microsoft Excel could upgrade to proficiency in Microsoft Power BI, a data visualisation tool.

The current conditions do not allow for traditional practical experience, but students can look to virtual internships, online courses and online insights events to bridge knowledge and skills gaps. Upskilling through online learning or virtual internships also shows learning agility and a proactive attitude to prospective employers.

Beyond the availability of jobs, students are also concerned about work visas. Internationally mobile students coming to the UK will be relieved to know that the Graduate Immigration Route, which will allow graduates to stay in the UK for up to two years to find work, is still on track to be launched in summer 2021. There are also many online resources available to help international students find positions that will sponsor visas and provide other information about visa processes and regulations: UK Council for International Student Affairs, the UK government list of approved employers for sponsoring appropriate visas, and StudentCircus, which promotes graduate level vacancies that offer visa sponsorships.

Support available to students and graduates

Students can lean on their universities' careers services resources, connect with alumni, search on sites such as Bright Networks and Inside Sherpa and broaden their professional networks through LinkedIn. Students should leverage their current network and use these online resources to become aware of open positions and to further expand their network.

Careers services at universities have been working overtime to continue providing support for job-seeking students, both locally and abroad. According to an AGCAS survey, 84% of university careers services have moved events online. Many are offering online support via video and audio calls, online chats, webinars, podcasts and social media. Students should take as much advantage of these resources as they can, but careers services should make sure that their webinars are engaging while staying short.

Students and recent graduates should carefully consider undertaking postgraduate study. While investing in further education is an appealing option when the job market is weak, UK recruiters do not typically differentiate between students with one-year postgraduate degrees and students with undergraduate degrees. This means that a one-year programme in English or politics may not open any additional doors – so students must be sure that the extra qualification and extra debt will really increase job options. PhD programmes or postgraduate programmes that develop specific and in-demand skills are an exception to this rule.

The global pandemic may have altered the current market and the skills in demand, but basic principles for applying for jobs remain the same. Companies with a high volume of applicants are increasingly using AI to sift through and narrow down the pool of applications, so it is especially important that students (honestly) list skills that match those listed in the job posting. Resumes should do more than just list skills and experiences. Employers are looking for candidates who can tell a compelling story of how they managed and adjusted to this crisis – as well as how they were able to turn it into an opportunity for skills development and learning.

When interviewing for a position, students should be prepared with answers between two and five minutes long that give basic examples of achievement and impact in a structured way. Jobseekers with virtual internship experience must be prepared to showcase skills learned and the value of the experience. Even though practical and on-the-ground experiences are not possible at the moment, virtual internships can still provide helpful platforms for learning and networking.

Ultimately, the job market is beginning to look like it will bounce back - according to LinkedIn, the massive downturn in recruitment appears to be levelling off, and prospects for the job market moving forward are positive. In the meantime, there are plenty of opportunities for students and graduates to develop new skills, network, and be productive and proactive. Employers will increasingly need flexible, digitally adept and energetic graduates to carry them into the future.

The above summary contains excerpts from the following three sessions at the Education Futures Mini-Conference and is prepared by Olivia Ryan, British Council Insights and Consultancy.

Getting into the world of work: How to make the most of the support available to you in the UK, 9 June 2020

Panellists:

- Caroline Baldwin – MSc Careers Manager, University of Bath
- Gail Angus – Careers Manager, University of Glasgow
- Helen Atkinson – Careers Consultant, Newcastle University
- Winston Liew – CEO and Co-Founder, Addonlife Sdn Bhd and University of Leeds alumnus
- Sitta Marattanachai – Head of Business Development at Energy and Environment Consulting Group and Imperial College London alumna

Preparing for work: What skills and experience are employers looking for, and how should you present yourself in your application? 16 June 2020

Panellists:

- Kyle Dunnington – Senior Account Executive, LinkedIn
- Indrijati Rahayoe – Chief Human Resources Officer, Prudential Indonesia
- Pitchaya Siriyodhin (Nina) – Head of Resourcing, Tesco Lotus Thailand
- Jonathan Chen – Partner, PwC China

Employability in the post Covid-19 environment: supporting the class of 2020 30 June 2020

Panellists:

- **Esther de Perlaky:** Co-Chair of AGCAS International UK Higher Education Task Group and International Employer Liaison Manager at University of Warwick
- **Charlie Ball:** Head of Higher Education Intelligence at Prospects
- **Stephen Isherwood:** Chief Executive at Institute of Student Employers

Resources for students & graduates:

- University careers services
- LinkedIn
- [Register of licensed sponsors \(UK Government\)](#)
- [UKCISA](#)
- [Study UK: Preparing for work MOOC](#) – British Council online course for building employability skills
- [Target Jobs UK](#)
- [Student Circus](#) – graduate jobs that can sponsor visas
- [InsideSherpa](#) – Virtual internships
- [Prospects](#)
- [Next Step Support](#)
- [Bright Network](#)

