

Higher education and the employability agenda – sport and exercise science leading the way!

Kelly Goodwin provides a basic overview of the changing face of Higher Education (HE) making reference to the employability agenda and maximising relationships between academia and the sport and exercise science practitioner.

Increased tuition fees

The August flurry of activity surrounding A level results and the increased need for universities to meet their student numbers through clearing once again, brought the matter of increased tuition fees to the forefront of the media. HE is about to change significantly as fees are set to triple in the face of economic crisis. This is not without implication with university applications falling by 8.7% compared to last year (The Guardian, 2012). Despite this dip, morale remains high; the trend for employers looking to employ individuals with Higher Education qualifications is expected to continue (Willets, 2012).

Value for money?

Inevitably, the increase in tuition fees may make prospective students 'cost savvy'. Normally when one pays a high price for something, that transaction builds expectation (Fullick, 2011). This has raised discussion around the topic of the student becoming a consumer of HE. A topic open to debate but one simply cannot ignore the fact that the cost to go to university has increased threefold, inevitably raising the question "Is a university education value for money?" Research is finding that many young people are now considering the worth of Higher Education (FreeSpeech, 2012). This in itself raises questions regarding how one successfully measures 'value' or 'worth'. A simple method is to monitor graduate employability. Undeniably, the ability to secure a job is a very effective way to demonstrate whether a programme of study is equipping the student effectively for the world of work.

White papers of influence

To help prepare for radical tuition reform the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) produced a white paper: HE, Students at the Heart of the System in June 2011 - a reform paper empowering the student and renewing the focus on quality teaching, feedback, preparation for work and graduate

outcomes. It is an enlightening paper especially if one considers that reforms identified are now coming to fruition such as Key Information Sets (KIS) and Student Charters. It would seem that this white paper does have influence - as the employability agenda is a key focus it is worthy of consideration. The need for universities to look again at how they work with practitioners across teaching and research activities is clearly stated leading to the paper requesting Prof Sir Tim Wilson to undertake a review of business-university collaboration. Published in February (2012) this review focuses on enhancing graduate skills and ensuring a smooth and successful transition between university and employment. An agenda for change is proposed; an agenda that will help make the UK the best place in the world for university-industry collaboration (Wilson, 2012).

“To enhance employability graduate skill sets need to be highly relevant to industry requirements. As such there is a need, greater than ever before, to understand in more detail the potential employment roles, specific skill sets required and career progression routes in the field of sport and exercise science.”

The employability agenda

Wilson (2012) highlights the need for Universities to publish graduate job destinations. In addition, strategies to develop and record students' employability and entrepreneurial skills should be

promoted through public literature to inform student choice. How effectively a course of study demonstrates its alignment with the employability agenda may influence HE recruitment figures. Using employability as a method of evaluation is by no means a new concept. The UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) already undertakes The Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. This in turn produces powerful statistics that influence HE league tables. What is new is the recommendation that the universities publish job destinations and career prospects providing Higher Education with greater freedom to collect and disseminate employability data and greater opportunity for practitioners to demonstrate their involvement with HE.

Networking between universities and the business community is critical (BIS, 2011) and needs to be fostered. Universities are seen as an integral part of the supply chain to business assisting growth and economic prosperity. In order to strengthen the supply chain, improvements to each link of the chain are needed. This can be achieved by close collaboration between academics, practitioners and employers and an understanding of each party's priorities and capabilities (Wilson, 2012). Keeping it simple, communication needs to be improved.

The Wilson Review (2012), in short, identifies the need for the design and delivery of university programmes to be relevant for current and future business needs; graduates who are skill competent and confident; businesses which effectively update Universities with the necessary employee skills and graduate recruitment that matches business need with graduate skills.

Sport and exercise science leading the way

In the field of sport and exercise science the recognition of the importance of university-business collaboration is well established. Often sports science practitioners work