Department for Opportunities & Bridge Group Seminar: Graduate recruitment in a post Covid-19 world

Summary and Policy Recommendations

Thursday 8th July 2021

1. Overview

This paper sets out a summary of the discussion and recommendations from a panel event jointly run by the Department for Opportunities and Bridge Group. The aim of this session was to bring together a range of stakeholders to discuss the impact that Covid-19 has had on the graduate recruitment market, in particular those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The panel was comprised of:

- Nik Miller, Chief Executive, Bridge Group (chair)
- Stephen Isherwood, Chief Executive, Institute of Student Employers
- Elaine Boyes, Executive Director, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services
- Janine Chamberlin, UK Country Manager and Head of Enterprise Sales, LinkedIn
- Sarah Atkinson, Chief Executive, Department for Opportunities and the Social Mobility Foundation
- Andrew Bargery, Schools and Engagement Leader, PwC

2. Context

While a significant amount of attention has been paid to the schools 'catch-up' agenda, very little has been said about the impact on undergraduates, how the pandemic has affected their learning and job prospects and what new skills they may require for work in a post pandemic world.

Research carried out by the Department for Opportunities, has shown that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are also more likely to have struggled with the physical infrastructure required to study during a pandemic. 31% of undergraduates engaged with our programme reported having a weak Wi-Fi signal or using mobile data to connect to the internet. Without access to equipment, or a reliable internet connection, young people are being shut out of online internships and workshops, which are a crucial link to future employers during a global pandemic.

Within this context, the panel shared observations and insights and set recommendations for universities, recruiters, employers and third sector organisations to begin to tackle this issue.

3. Summary of speaker's presentations

Nik Miller

- The pandemic has been an extremely challenging time for all, but the inequalities that the Social Mobility Foundation, Bridge Group, and other research and advocacy organisations have been discussing for many years have been exposed and exacerbated by the context of the pandemic. As a result, the impact of the pandemic has not been felt equally across all young people.

- We are now in a transitional period as we begin to emerge from the pandemic. As a result, it is important that we go from ad-hoc initiatives to generating real evidence about what works to support graduates entering the work force in a post-pandemic world. Gathering such evidence will be vital in helping develop best practice in graduate recruitment during the Covid-19 recovery.

Elaine Boyes

- In response to the pandemic, virtual internship programmes were created using funding that was already in place for face-to-face programmes, and university careers services were able to go virtual very quickly. However, there were high levels of concern among careers services about the wellbeing of students. To tackle this, there has been greater collaboration between different services at universities.
- Some sectors have reduced hiring, making access to work experience more difficult for graduates. We have also seen a shift in the kinds of careers young people are interested in, for example, an uptake in nursing and other professions.
- A survey of 2,500 graduates – conducted between December 2020 and March 2021 – found students were averaging around 37 job applications during this period, and only around 40% had found full time work. Those currently unemployed reported a negative impact on their wellbeing from not working.
- The majority of universities (60%) are offering careers support services to their graduates for one to five years after they graduate. In recent years, there has been an increase in graduates taking up this support – however, take up amongst graduates who are first in their family to attend university remains lower than their peers. This highlights that there is still work to be done to ensure that all graduates access this support equally.
- There have been several unexpected bonuses from delivering careers services online: staff working in careers advisory services have been able to provide appointments outside of the standard '9 to 5'; virtual one-to-one meetings have proved more popular than face–to-face meetings; and virtual events have higher attendances.
- There is a mixed picture in terms of engagement with employers. Due to the shift to online provision, some employers are able to cast their net more widely, engaging with more universities, especially those that are geographically challenging to get to. However, careers fairs being conducted online has made it more challenging for employers with no strong brand recognition.

Janine Chamberlin

- Data is beginning to show that graduate recruitment has bounced back, after being down 23% due to the pandemic in July 2020.
- LinkedIn has supported students during the pandemic by making a number of online learning courses available for free, helping young people get the skills that employers are looking for such as digital marketing, software development and design, as well as soft transferable skills such as communication and problem solving.

- Employers need to take into consideration the difficulties that young people have faced in trying to gain work experience during the pandemic, and instead focus on 'skills-first' hiring. Rather than just focusing on formal qualifications and traditional work experience, employers should be looking for the skills and potential that a young person can bring. Skills-first hiring opens up the talent pool to a more diverse range of people, creating a more equal playing field.
- Due to current high levels of recruitment, companies have to make sure that they stand out to reach talent. Employers want to appeal to a broader pool of people, and, in order to do so, are ensuring that job specifications don't include terminology that would be off-putting to some groups, such as women. While this trend was on the rise prior to the pandemic, it appears it has now accelerated because of it.
- It does not appear that employers have become more risk-averse in their hiring due to the pandemic. Indeed, employers are offering more chances to work remotely than ever before, as well as providing more opportunities to candidates from 'non-traditional' backgrounds.

Stephen Isherwood

- ISE found last year that the job market fell by around 15%, but varied sector by sector. For example, pharmaceutical companies and public sector vacancies have increased, travel and construction and the built environment has fallen quite dramatically, while most sectors have stayed fairly flat, such as professional services. Many employers have learned lessons from previous recessions in which they cut hiring, then found 3 years down the line when the economy is booming they have a dearth of talent to promote into early management roles.
- ISE Employer Pulse Survey found that both demand for new recruits is increasing but also that the number of applications per job has also increased.
- Some recruitment practises, such as assessment centres, will stay online post-pandemic and employers need to support disadvantaged students in being able to access such opportunities fairly.
- Employers are finding that online engagement is a good way to engage with a more diverse pool of students and build relationships with a wider range of students. However, some employers, especially those with a weaker brand identity, are looking to return to in-person recruitment.
- Employers have had a range of experiences with providing work experience and internship opportunities. Some have stuck with all placement students, whereas others have found difficulties in replicating placements in an online setting, or have had capacity issues due to employees being on furlough. Many organisations are exploring the possibility of getting students back into the office, but these opportunities will be few and far between this year.
- There are always fewer internships than graduate level roles. It is important that students from disadvantaged backgrounds understand this and are not disheartened from applying for the top graduate level roles because they don't have a prestigious internship under their belts. Transferrable skills can come from a broad range of experiences, including volunteering and life experience, such as from being a carer.

Andrew Bargery

- PwC's first priority when the pandemic hit was making sure that their entire cohort of 180 graduate students for their March intake had their places honoured, with inductions transitioned online. They did not run programmes in summer 2020, but students had their offers honoured for subsequent programmes. In September, 1,500 graduates and school leavers were on-boarded virtually, with all offers honoured. This summer they have decided to run an adapted virtual 3-week summer internship scheme in lieu of their regular summer programmes.
- Before the pandemic, many stages of recruitment were conducted online (video interview, online behaviour based assessments), though this culminated in an in-person assessment day. Since the pandemic, they have successfully adapted their assessment day to be delivered online. Though PwC is still in the process of fine tuning what their recruitment process will look like in the next cycle, at least some of these online innovations will be retained.
- PwC has invested in technology to run a "virtual park" to help connect to students by running panel, networking and skills events, with 12,000 students taking part since the autumn. This has allowed PwC to engage with around 150 universities rather than the 75-80 that they engaged with pre-pandemic - however they have concerns around the impact of digital divide for the hardest to reach young people with these innovations.
- PwC used to use competency based recruitment model which encouraged students to look back upon their past experiences, but have now realised this can be problematic from a level playing field perspective – more of a focus on an individual's potential is needed rather than purely past on what they have done in the past. Relevant work experience is not essential for graduate jobs from PwC's perspective.

Sarah Atkinson

- The SMF has found that knowledge transfer works very well online - students have been engaged with online events and can attend more than when they were delivered in-person. This has allowed students to build up their confidence slowly. Generally, SMF has found that student engagement has gone up, especially in events such as careers carousels.
- Providing in-person opportunities will be preferable moving forward, but the SMF has found that one-to-one mentoring that they provide students is vital in providing close support remotely, as building connections and confidence has been tricky outside of this in the pandemic.
- Recruiters have seen benefits from the online engagements with young people, reaching out to non-Russell Group unis, SMF cold spots[1] – it will be important to bring this practice into the post-pandemic world.
- It is incredibly important that employers invite students to tell their stories that relate to difficulties they've faced in the pandemic. Students have had to navigate a crash course in independent study but currently don't feel confident that these are stories that employers want to hear – they need support to help tell these stories to show the resilience that they have shown in spite of the pandemic.
- Disadvantaged students will be the ones that will be the least able to keep up where there is ambiguity and where change quickly happens, due to not having good access to information. Graduate recruiters need to share their insights about what works

[1] Social Mobility 'Cold Spots' refer the bottom 20% of areas, predominantly coastal and former industrial towns, which have low performance with regard to educational measures and adulthood outcomes, meaning that young people from less advantaged backgrounds have limited opportunities to get on in life. Find out more from the Social Mobility Commission here.

when they have taken positive action, as every employer is learning and trying to keep pace with developments.
- It is vital for employers to not underestimate the impact of very simple practical information in helping disadvantaged young people feel more comfortable coming in to the workplace. Whether students are on-boarding in person, online or a mixture, giving them straightforward information allows them to focus on their own preparation for starting work.

4. Policy Recommendations

For Employers

1. Employers should join the Social Mobility Employer Index which audits the actions organisation are taking to ensure they are open to accessing and progressing talent from all backgrounds. All entrants receive bespoke advice and practical guidance to help improve areas including hiring practises, outreach and data collection.
2. Employers should take a skills-based approach to graduate recruitment, and consider that many undergraduates may not have been able to access work experience or internships due to the pandemic.
3. Employers must ensure they are supplying undergraduates and graduates with the necessary technology and advice on virtual interviews and working.
4. Employers need to provide buddying and mentoring programmes to new starters from disadvantaged backgrounds, these individuals should ensure new starters are given support and practical advice around working from home.
5. Employers need to take steps to safeguard the wellbeing of new starters as there is less opportunity for them to build networks and relationships with their peers and enjoy a social life in online on-boarding processes. Building in regular wellbeing catch-ups with line managers and coffee mornings for new starters to network with other colleagues are effective ways to help new starters feel more of a part of the company culture.

For Recruiters

1. Recruiters should continue to provide outreach and information sessions online, as this allows them to reach more students from non-Russell Group Universities and social mobility cold spots, rather than purely running in-person events which reach less young people with the same resources.
2. Recruiters need to take into context the differentiated impact of the pandemic on a range of young people, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to have been able to access work experience or placements. Recruiters need to focus more on skills-based recruitment and looking at the future potential of young people rather than looking at past experience or what school they have gone to. They should encourage young people to tell their story of how they have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic – students have demonstrated that they have been resilient and adaptable in the past 18 months and they should be made to feel confident that telling such stories which show that they have the skills needed to succeed in the workplace
3. Recruiters need to share their insights about what works where they have taken positive action, as every employer is constantly learning about best practice and is having to keep up with new developments. This should take the form of sharing positive case studies of where students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have succeeded in navigating the recruitment process, as well as continuing to attend roundtable events and speak at policy seminars to share practice among peers.

4. Recruiters need to support disadvantaged young people in navigating online methods of recruitment by providing guidance materials and videos to support them in their application.

For Universities

1. Careers services need to signpost students to existing free support, such as that provided by LinkedIn, as a way to upskill and show employers what they have been proactively doing in this period to further their careers. Support needs to be provided for students to embed these experiences in their applications and interviews.
2. Careers services need to retain flexibility that has been provided to students in the pandemic – for example, by continuing to provide appointments and events outside of regular hours.
3. Careers services need to provide students with skills to boost their resilience and avoid burnout. Where the amount of applicants to graduate level jobs is increasing, students need to understand that the playing field is more difficult and not be disheartened from applying to lots of roles. Such support could include advising students on strategies to expedite the process of applying to roles, alongside existing support to improve CVs, cover letters and interview practice.
4. Universities need to work more closely with recruiters and employers, especially with diversity and inclusion teams, to share best practices.
5. Online events are very effective at knowledge transfer and can allow students to build up their confidence in a low-pressure environment. Universities need to continue to provide online careers advice events even after a return to in-person support.
6. Careers services should provide more support that is 'long and skinny', i.e. with multiple touch points, rather than intensive one-off engagements, which may be more suited to an in-person opportunity such as a work placement.

For Third Sector organisations

1. Organisations that provide support for students to access university should look towards returning to providing in-person opportunities, alongside an online offer to continue to reach young people who would otherwise not be able to access in-person support.
2. In online support, one-to-one mentoring is vital to provide close support for students and to help them build their confidence and connections.

5. Next Steps

For more information about how to become an inclusive employer please refer to the employer's toolkit produced by the Bridge Group in collaboration with the Social Mobility Commission. For further resources please see the Institute of Student employer's guide and the AGCAS website.

6. Background to Department for Opportunities and Bridge Group

Department for Opportunities

The Department for Opportunities (DO) is the Social Mobility Foundation's advocacy and campaigning arm. DO's vision is for the UK to be a country where every young person can access opportunities that allow them to get on in life, regardless of background. We work with a coalition of the willing, including civil society, employers, schools, universities, charities and local councils, to mobilise support and promote practical solutions to tackle the problem of social mobility in the UK.

The Social Mobility Foundation (SMF) is a charity that aims to make practical improvements in social mobility for young people from low-income backgrounds through programme work and our annual Social Mobility Employer Index. We run free of charge programmes of mentoring, internships, university application support (including trips to universities and help with personal statements, aptitude tests and interviews) and career and skills workshops to support young people through their school and university years.

Bridge Group

The Bridge Group is an independent, not for profit, policy association. They drive policy changes across government, higher education, employers, and the third sector to achieve greater social equality. They achieve this through research and on-going dialogues with experts, policymakers, and practitioners. The Bridge Group takes a practical approach, turning ideas into action.

The Bridge Group offers senior stakeholders expert guidance on policy, drawing on our knowledge and experience and the latest research. Launched in 2010 at Google UK, the Bridge Group has maintained relationships with key influencers across sectors and has established itself as an authoritative voice on social equality.

7. Contact Details

If you have any questions regarding this seminar or any of the information shared here, please contact:

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