

## GMT interview

# Graduate employability 2012

with Dr Paul Redmond

**Discussions on student employability are now more ‘en vogue’ than ever before. GMT explores the issues and challenges brought on by fast changing higher education and technology landscapes with an exclusive interview: AGCAS’s new President Elect, and one of the best known experts and public figures in the field, Dr Paul Redmond, talks to Aphrodite Papadatou about graduate employability in the year 2012 – and beyond.<sup>1</sup>**

**AP:** The recent higher education white paper reinforces governmental concern for employability. How will this affect the provision of undergraduate degrees? Will some disciplines where employment rates are low become ‘extinct’?

**PR:** I think the sector is going through a phase where it is asking itself big questions like ‘what is higher education for?’ and often answers to these are shaped by instrumentalist concerns – such as all university courses should contribute to the economy.

In some ways, this is fairly recent idea, but it has now become so mainstream to be almost ubiquitous. This strikes me as being a pity. Not only does it challenge the idea of the university, even economically, it doesn’t make sense. We need the artistic skills of the arts and humanities to innovate and produce future technology – think for example of the iPad: technology meets art and design. The only reason why early Apple computers offered different fonts was because Steve Jobs, prior to being thrown out of university, had been on a calligraphy course. To be ‘employable’, you need a range of skills and attitudes – creative thinking is one of them.

I think one of the reasons we get so muddled about this is because words like ‘employability’ are so easily confused with ‘employment’. People tend to think the two words are interchangeable, when in fact, this isn’t

always the case. Employability is a highly dynamic concept – it denotes a progression and a certain amount of self-sufficiency. Being in ‘employment’, on the other hand, is static; it’s about being paid to do a certain job. For understandable reasons, the graduate job market is preoccupied by the rhetoric of ‘getting a job’ – but getting a job is only part of employability!

A few years ago, I did some presentations to managers at Lehman Brothers. When they went out of business I kept in contact with several of their senior investment bankers. What struck me was how quickly these people were back in employment – in some cases, they had been offered jobs within hours of being made redundant. Forget all the rhetoric about ‘transferable skills’: to me, that’s ‘employability’ – the ability to find employment at the same grade, in the same line of work, whenever and wherever you need it!

Decent higher education should produce ‘employable’ graduates, regardless of subject of study or academic discipline. Employers know this, which is why when recruiting, so few of them specify academic disciplines. What they want is bright, enthusiastic, motivated and sparky graduates – people who can get things done without causing mass walkouts or criminal lawsuits. One senior banker told me recently, “You know, banking today isn’t technical – you don’t need a calculator. What you need is to be good with people, good at seeing things from other points of view.”

**AP:** Should employability be embedded in undergraduate curriculum, and is certification a good thing?

**PR:** At Liverpool, we think of employability as residing in three dimensions: curricular; co-curricular; and extracurricular. As such, different academic subjects can approach employability according to the

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constructs and conventions of their own curricula. For some, this might be employability modules; for others, visits to employer premises, or visiting speakers. What matters is that students on enrolment are clear about what their employability entitlement is – how their degree subject will approach employability. Alongside this, it's essential that students have access to co-curricular employability opportunities – things they can do as part of their studies, without necessarily receiving academic credit. For example, learning to give presentations or work in teams. Finally, students need lots of opportunities for developing employability skills through extracurricular options – these can be offered by the careers service, the student union, or even arranged by the student herself.

What we are working towards in Liverpool is to embed an expectation that students should be constantly developing a certain set of employability skills, all gained within the space of the three dimensions discussed earlier.

**AP:** Whose responsibility is it to ensure that graduates are employable?

**PR:** My view is that responsibility is shared or owned by students and universities – it's a joint effort, a joint commitment. Ultimately, however, I think it's the responsibility of the student. Universities offer fabulous opportunities for students to develop their skills and experience – all they have to do is join in. As Woody Allen said, "Anything can happen when you turn up for work." The same goes for higher education.

Since the credit crunch, parents are becoming increasingly active in terms of taking responsibility for their son or daughter's employability. I've come across lots of stories of parents 'trading' internships between themselves, organising work placements, turning up to job interviews, even liaising with employers in a bid to renegotiate their child's starting salary! In articles I've written, I refer to such parents as "helicopter parents". These are parents who actively take on some (or a lot) of their offspring's responsibility so as to provide them with what they think is the best possible life chances in adulthood. At university level we increasingly see them on their own at careers fairs for students. What I find fascinating is how comfortable 'Generation Y' students are with this level of parental involvement. Other generations might have found the idea of

parents getting involved in the career process horrifying; Generation Y seems to welcome it – in fact, some of them seem to be in the process of outsourcing the career search process to their folks!

From a sociological perspective, it's interesting to speculate about why this is happening – and why now. Primarily, these are 'Baby Boomer' parents, who have to some extent 'decoded' the job market. They've figured out how employment markets 'work', how educational 'capital' can be maximised through contacts and strategic alliances. Armed with this 'knowledge', they are in a poll-position to take it upon themselves to 'fast-track' their offspring through the early 'qualifying' rounds of the job market.

Of course this is often and largely a middle class phenomenon, and as such raises questions of social mobility and equality. After all, what happens if your parents don't know people who can offer you internships? As competition for graduate credentials intensifies, the phenomenon seems to be on the rise. Note, for example, how even in schools, work experience is becoming increasingly important.

**AP:** There is currently fierce public debate about students becoming 'consumers' of HE. Do you think their behaviour will really change?

**PR:** I suspect that ultimately, students will always be students! Some things never change – even with an economic downturn. Throughout the last century, the UK higher education system underwent lots of changes, but, on the whole, students' attitudes to life have remained consistent. The same students want to have fun; they want to enjoy themselves; they want to make the most of higher education; they're full of enthusiasm, full of excitement, and determined to have a good time! (This of course is why it's so rewarding to work with them). Every September I give a talk to first-year students and every year they tell me how fantastic it is to be at university and how much they are looking forward to the whole experience. Even with the hike in tuition fees, I still expect student attitude and behaviours to remain the same.

That said, I think – or hope – that students will be more tuned in to what they're being offered. After all, going to university represents a significant long-term investment.

**AP:** Audiences across the country now know about Generations 'X' and 'Y', least not because of your engaging speeches and work with the national media. What is the post-2012 generation?

**PR:** The next generation will be known as the 'Millennials', or 'Generation Z'. These people are actually going to be very fascinating to work with because in some ways, they have grown up in a very different economic and technological climate to us: cyber-space has always been a fundamental part of their awareness. Some commentators call them 'digital natives'; for them technology is a way of life: strictly speaking, it's not even technology (if it's existed before you were born, it's not actually technology – it's furniture).

What we know is that they're the most globally connected generation, but also, in other ways, the most isolated. This is a generation that will have 'friends' dotted digitally around the world, but who don't know their neighbours. Thus the Millennials will be very difficult to engage with, particularly in education.

The challenges of communicating to the Millennials will be immense. Recently, while watching a Formula 1 grand prix, I was struck by a commentator who said that the producers were aiming to make the TV coverage of the race as good as PlayStation's coverage. The virtual is now better than the actual. The digital natives have taken over the on-line asylum!

**AP:** Do you think that graduate recruitment is going to change?

**PR:** Yes definitely; I think it will change for a number of reasons. First, since the recession, employers have had far less money to spend on recruitment, and across all sectors, budgets have been cut. I suspect that the era when employers invested heavily on building up a strong campus presence is... well, perhaps if not over, but things are definitely more austere. But counter-balancing this is a greater savviness amongst recruiters for harnessing new tactics such as using social media and better targeted recruitment strategies to make better, more proactive use of careers services. I also think we're beginning to see signs of organisations recruiting via internships – a development which has huge implications for both universities and students.

The impact of social media is only just becoming understood. In the future, employers, careers services and graduates will all use social media as an integral part of the recruitment process. The so called 'Facebook revolution' could not possibly escape our sector – we will see social networking sites being increasingly used in graduate recruitment alongside more traditional methods. However, it's not all good news. Students have to understand the risks involved in social media, how on-line profiles can be easily become self-destructive if not correctly managed. You have to be very careful about what you disclose about yourself on-line, and we shouldn't assume that 'digital natives' automatically know the protocols and boundaries. Ultimately, this could wreck a future career, even before it's begun.

**AP:** You have recently done some work on unpaid internships. What did you find and what is your message to employers?

**PR:** Actually this is part of the work I do with AGCAS. At AGCAS we have a very clear-cut position on internships: We do not support unpaid internships – and I believe many of the careers services are now following this line.

**AP:** Can you tell us more about AGCAS's recent work on impact of university careers services?

**PR:** I am currently leading a group of heads of careers services looking at impact measurements – a very big and interesting issue! Traditionally, when trying to assess the impact of careers services, heads have looked to destination data. The problem is, this is rarely a reliable measure (after all, job markets can go up or down). Our group has been trying to look at other measures – for example different levels of audits; different ways of working with management; different ways of working with students etc.

We have now developed a series of indicators to help careers services measure impact. It is absolutely fascinating work, and raises very interesting issues about what it is that we do. From a management point of view it raises questions like, why do you invest in resources? What has the highest rate of return? Who is the key stake holder of careers services?

This group has enabled us to rethink impact, and we have come up with some really interesting, challenging

ideas. We have so far road-tested the new impact measures in Warwick, and we gave a full presentation at the AGCAS Biennial this autumn. We have developed a series of exercises to actually help practitioners measure the impact of their career services. For example, we think about the impact of group sessions – how do you cost a talk on CVs to a group of fifty students? How cost effective and meaningful are they?

These are the things we have been thinking about, and we have come up with different ways of measuring and evaluating them. There is a resource already up on AGCAS' website, but people will be able to find out more about it in our next Biennial.

**AP:** What are your priorities at AGCAS next year?

**PR:** Higher education and careers services are both going through immense change at the moment, so I think our priority now is to help careers services respond to changes that are taking place at their universities. Our priorities are to lobby Government as effectively as possible and to represent our members effectively – all while remaining at the cutting edge of Careers Information Advice and Guidance. We will keep developing and providing the best careers advice and information support to our members; and we will

remain in effective communication with our partners, such as Prospects and AGR, to achieve all this.

**AP:** Finally, outside the remits of AGCAS duties, what intrigues Paul Redmond now? What are you working on?

**PR:** I'm continuing to work on my generational research, particularly in terms of how different generations in the workplace can work together more effectively. I've noticed that in many organisations, a 'conversation gap' exists between members of different age cohorts. Partly this is because of the way the different generations communicate; it's also because of very different aspirations and expectations. I'm working on a new publication called 'Generally Speaking' which is all about helping managers and new graduates develop effective mentoring partnerships – by doing something very radical. Talking to each other!

I've also got another book coming out in January. It's aimed at helping parents understand the graduate job market. The book follows on from my 2010 publication, 'The Graduate Jobs Formula', which has been selling really well.

You can find out more about AGCAS at [www.agcas.org.uk](http://www.agcas.org.uk)

You can find out more about The University of Liverpool's Careers & Employability Service at [www.liv.ac.uk/careers](http://www.liv.ac.uk/careers)

You can also catch up with Paul via Twitter [www.twitter.com/PaulAtLiverpool](http://www.twitter.com/PaulAtLiverpool)