

UNIVERSITY AND BUSINESS COLLABORATION AT THE HEART OF THE EMPLOYABILITY DEBATE

AARON PORTER



In a special interview feature for this issue Aphrodite Papadatou catches up with former NUS President Aaron Porter. Aaron is now an active Higher Education consultant working across a portfolio of projects. Now Director for External Affairs at the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) Aaron is at the forefront of the employability agenda in the context of university-industry collaboration.

Aaron, it is great to see you still very much committed to higher education policy.

I remain very committed and passionate about higher education and employability is a particular aspect of that. Across a couple of roles I have got a real engagement with the HE policy agenda. In part with the NCUB, helping them engage with the outside world but also overseeing annual research on the student employability experience.

Looking at student employability in the context of university-business collaboration, is the role of university careers services still important?

Absolutely! Careers services play a central role in supporting employability for students through the service that students can access directly but we also know of the important role careers services play in working with academic departments to ensure the latter have the latest research or the latest innovation at their fingertips to embed it to their curriculum.

What is the importance of university-business collaboration?

NCUB has at its heart the desire to further increase the quality and quantity of university and business collaboration in the UK. And it is of critical importance – not just because students are saying that is what they want but because it is important for universities to be delivering cutting-edge research for what industry needs. It is also important to inform teaching. Universities will often say that they have two key missions: research and teaching. But the collaboration with industry is almost what makes both of those things relevant.

How is this collaboration manifesting itself?

Prominent examples would be access to work experience for students and joint research projects between research interested business and universities and things like CV clinics and guest lectures from industry, curriculum content which is informed by real case studies from business, and employer boards that help to shape the curriculum or offer some views on how it can be developed. These are all fine examples of how universities are already working with business. The key challenge for universities is spreading that good practice more widely between departments, but also to think about the diversity of employers that they are working with. There is sometimes a particular challenge for universities to work with micro and small businesses as the latter have what we refer to as a 'diminished absorptive capacity'. This means the extent to which small and micro businesses in particular are able to absorb knowledge from a university, which may be limited owing to their size and resources. But we know that SMEs in particular can benefit exponentially from university engagement. One graduate with a piece of research can transform a small business in a way in which it would have a much smaller impact in a larger business!

How will the latest developments in HE policy affect the delivery of employability in a university-industry collaboration context?

The Green Paper is an extension of government policy which has been developing for seven or eight years, it's the next step in that journey. It is notable that within the proposals the Teaching Excellence Framework to which a large proportion of the Green Paper is dedicated there are specific proposals about the extent to which there needs to be a higher education system that not only delivers for students but delivers for employers. However there are lots of practicalities which need to be properly thought through.

The business voice will have an important role in shaping the TEF and NCUB are engaging with the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills to help provide a range of business voices to inform its development. Another crucial dimension is social mobility and we know that some industries in particular are still not nearly representative enough of the university population, let alone wider society. More needs to be done by both universities and business to give young people in particular access and support so that they can succeed and thrive in a range of industries – particularly the media and law.

Where will investment come from for these activities?

Universities are already spending a lot of time and effort into improving employability. The Green Paper invited business to take a more active stake and therefore play a greater role in engaging with universities. The money comes from a portion of the tuition fee and the ongoing block grant and from streams of money that come in from employers. I expect all three streams to continue to invest in employability. What is potentially different and posed in the Green Paper is the fact that tuition fees might start to rise

further and in line with the with the TEF and I feel it is highly likely that the only way in which we be able to demonstrate excellence in teaching is by delivering successful returns on employability.

But how do we measure employability? It is not as we know something measurable only by looking at graduate destinations.

I agree. I think we need to be really thoughtful about what we use to measure employability. It would be quite restrictive if we simply used earnings data and destinations data as measures of employability. Employability in its broader sense is the ability to make contribution to society and to the world at work and that is not simply achieved by how quickly you get a job or by how much money you earn. Reflecting that in a national framework is tricky so the government has set itself an ambitious but challenging target in order to more adequately reflect high quality teaching and employability.

How is the NCUB making a difference in delivering employability now?

A real focus of our activity has been to provide work experience for students from a range of diverse backgrounds. Work experience, paid internships and placements are all very important means by whereby students get to know the world of work and moreover employers use it as a chance to learn about perspective future employees. If the individuals who are undertaking work experience are not diverse then it makes ensuring a diverse workforce difficult too. It is something that businesses are very mindful of. Many are undertaking new initiatives to target students from non-traditional backgrounds but more needs to be done. This has been a challenge for decades if not centuries and it will take time to be fixed but it will be fixed with investment in education right through the various levels, commitment from businesses to do something about it, and dynamism on the part of students who need to be motivated to pursue the opportunities.

Now for a slightly abstract question. What might the future landscape for HE and employability look like?

I would like to see every single student that goes through higher education have some access to work experience – that would be game-changing! The other area that lots of people that I know are also passionate about is the question of IAG, because it is just not good enough and it is maybe the single biggest barrier to realizing the potential of individuals. If the government are as committed as they say they are to teaching excellence and social mobility then we need to ensure that individuals have access to the right information to make choices. Technology provides a huge opportunity. For example, both Prospects and Hotcourses (who I work with) provide vehicles through which students can start making important choices about what to study or about HE-to-work transitions. But it needs to be done through a range of means – it needs to be embedded in the school system and it needs to be provided for by universities. It's not so much about the quantity of data. It is partly a question of the quality of data and more importantly a question of the advice and guidance itself. You can have really rigorous data available but if you don't know how to interpret it you are still at a disadvantage. How we allow young people in particular to understand data about their future prospects is crucial.

Many experts think it is important we approach IAG like other systems like the NHS, i.e. in terms of life-long cycles.

Indeed. I think we need to learn lessons from elsewhere. There are other industries that are using a life-cycle approach to a range of matters. As you say, they are trying to shift the NHS towards a life-cycle approach to health and social care. In the consumer world, a company like Amazon uses smart technology to understand your needs and make recommendations to you about things that are relevant to you. You would think something similar could be

used in advice and guidance where technology understands the subjects you are studying, what you are doing well in, asks you questions about what you are enjoying, examines the sorts of jobs you are looking at but also asks you about what other jobs you might be looking up, factors in the work experience that you are doing, and helps you with your career decisions in a life-cycle manner, not just when you are out of university.

Great, we all agree! Before we finish is there anything you would like to shout out about?

The one thing I would like to mention specifically is the Student Employability Index. In its second year NCUB have been working with Compass to deliver a piece of research which captures the views of 115,000 students in fifty five UK universities. We've got their views on a range of things, including their use of the career service, the extent to which they think employability is developed, their undertaking of work experience and placements. We are looking to publish this research early in 2016. Each of the universities involved will be given their own data so they can benchmark themselves against the national picture. We all think that the research as a whole provides a really informative contribution to the national discussion with regard to employability. It will certainly be useful to universities and it might be useful to government, policy makers and commentators. We are very much looking forward to engaging with careers services to help them understand what this means for them and how they can further develop the already good services they are providing.

To find out more about the Student Employability Index or any other work of the NCUB, contact Aaron on aaron.porter@ncub.co.uk or go through the NCUB website at www.ncub.co.uk