

AGCAS: A STRONG VOICE IN THE HE DEBATE

ELAINE BOYES



In one of the richest GMT interviews to date, AGCAS's new Executive Director Elaine Boyes discusses the ever-increasing importance of careers services. Interviewed by Prospects' Chris Rea, Elaine delves into her professional history, her love of membership communities, and all things AGCAS – without of course leaving out the very pertinent issue of today that is Brexit. Connect, and be inspired!

Elaine – let's start with your journey to AGCAS

My background is in membership organisations. I worked for three years at the Nuclear Institute, the membership organisation for professionals in the nuclear industry.

It was a really interesting time. Because there had been no new-builds since Sizewell B, there had been no significant recruitment to the industry since the 1980s and there was a serious skills shortage.

With a significant proportion of the workforce due to retire in the next few years, the focus was on knowledge transfer and training. There was a lot of collaboration between the Institute, Sector Skills bodies and employers.

Before that I was at the BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT, running publishing activities and member communications. When I joined there was just a membership magazine but when I left we had a books programme, multiple

publications and a recording studio – and membership had doubled from 35,000 to 70,000. I was also briefly at the Hull York Medical School, dealing with external relations and student recruitment.

I suppose there has been a theme building up to working for AGCAS: professional membership, employability, student recruitment, and skills – they all helped lead me here.

I like working in professional organisations. With membership organisations you get to see people at their best – sharing best practice, supporting each other.

That's certainly the case with AGCAS. Our members haven't become careers professionals to earn lots of money – they are focused on providing the very best support to their students and graduates. They are completely committed.

What was really interesting about joining AGCAS is that it's such a busy, changeable time for higher education. It has never been more important to ensure the voice of the AGCAS membership is part of the debate.

You've been in the role for less than a year. How has it been?

Yes, it's coming up to ten months. It's been great. I've joined a fantastically committed organisation with wonderful members. Talking to partner organisations and sector bodies,

I learned very quickly that people want to hear from AGCAS. Our members are recognised as very knowledgeable experts. AGCAS represents 98% of the careers service community, which obviously gives us an advantage in terms of speaking on behalf of the community.

The enthusiasm amongst AGCAS members is unbelievable and significantly higher than anything I've seen in other membership organisations. Our latest membership survey revealed that 83% of

respondents have been involved in a training and development activity in the last twelve months, up from 61.8% in 2012. Task group involvement is growing too. These are signs of an engaged membership – and with everything that's happening in HE it's a good job.

In other organisations I've worked at we used to say that 10% of members are active and 90% are the silent majority. This is absolutely not the case with AGCAS. It's a noisy majority! This makes it such a great organisation.

How is that energy and enthusiasm directed into AGCAS's strategy?

We've been consulting on our strategy over the last few months. We are looking at where we fit and what we do as an organisation, clarifying our mission and vision.

It's about being recognised, through the expertise of our members, as the experts in careers advice and the graduate labour market and taking that knowledge to the wider community.

Delivery of the strategy is divided into five areas: research and knowledge; learning; community; quality; and advocacy. In the quality area, our members have been very clear that they want to be able to demonstrate the high quality of the services that they deliver.

We are also working on a series of themes, the two early ones being regionalisation and internationalisation. Regional economies and labour markets are going to acquire even more significance within the city/region devo agenda.

There is an opportunity for the careers sector to inform policy and decision making. This is where our advocacy work also comes in.

AGCAS has a strong regional structure and we are well placed to deliver in this area. We have regional groups of heads and

regional training groups. Members possess considerable knowledge about their local labour markets and industry sectors. They create training and learning opportunities and share best practice within their regions. There was a really successful southern one-day conference at Canterbury on best practice earlier this year. I met Welsh heads last week, AGCAS Scotland of course are very strong – it all makes for a set of healthy regional networks.

With these regional clusters of experience and knowledge, there's an opportunity for heads of service, say, to lobby and inform regional government and LEPs.

Yes. If devolution happens, it's important that heads of service within a region have that opportunity to get their collective voice out there.

The knowledge base is important here – I'm thinking about the work we do with HECSU on understanding and reporting on the graduate labour market, particular regional data. That knowledge will potentially become even more important as power is devolved regionally. A skilled graduate workforce will be essential for successful regional economies and career services and AGCAS will have a role to play in helping shape policy and strategy in these areas.

We're also looking at international issues, particularly outward mobility for UK students and the needs of international students in our universities. Best practice is also important here.

We had international delegates at the annual conference in Chester in September – careers professionals from many countries bringing their best practice and taking ours home with them. That is such an important aspect of what we do. We may not always trumpet this enough but the work UK careers services do around employability and graduate skills really is world class. We need to share that.

How do you address your different constituencies? We know about your members but what about students and graduates and employers?

One of the first things heads said to me when I joined AGCAAS is that they wanted AGCAS to be more visible. It's an important issue that I'm addressing at the moment.

We've worked with organisations such as Prospects/HECSU and AGR for a long time and we are familiar with each other. But there are other relationships we need to develop. Large numbers of graduates work for SMEs, for example, so we need to reach out to bodies that represent the interests of these employers.

In the realm of policy, AGCAS was mentioned in the Shadbolt Review and we will be keeping a dialogue going with the other organisations involved in these policy areas.

With students and graduates, AGCAS isn't visible as such but is present through the work of careers services. This where the work we do with HECSU on *What do graduates do?* and the careers information content we deliver in partnership with Prospects is so important – they are resources that members rely on to help them do their jobs.

At one time it was possible to generalise fairly accurately about careers services – most of them had a lot in common in terms of structure, delivery and approach. Now it seems that they have never been more different from each other.

Members tell me that their services are more diverse than ever before. You've people engaged in work placements, enterprise, delivery in the curriculum, skills awards and employer engagement, not to mention careers advice and coaching.

That's partly what makes AGCAS such an interesting place to work, the fact that we represent so many different professionals. It's so important that our activities, our

training and development and our tasks groups reflect that diversity of professionals within careers services.

How do you welcome a new head of service, particularly someone new to the sector?

Heads of service come from all sorts of backgrounds, bringing different experiences, knowledge and skills. That's really interesting for us and for the sector. We work hard to support new heads.

I welcome them personally, other heads in their region will contact them early on, we run an induction session at the heads conference in January – it's important that we get them connected and active early in their careers service life.

The main thing for new heads is the peer support. From my own experience, I know that when you are new in a leadership role that peer support is crucial. We offer mentoring and provide training and development, qualification routes and task groups.

The support of other heads helps with things like sector consultations or thorny DLHE questions. AGCAS's annual resource survey is a useful tool for heads who want to benchmark their service against their peers and it definitely helps them make a case internally for more resources.

Employability is such a big issue and the impact of the White Paper and TEF will bring new challenges and pressures for careers services. How will your members manage that?

The thing is, the pressure is already there and it's not always externally driven. Many services know what they want to do. They want a big impact internally. Metrics are nothing new. For members there is certainly a lot more pressure on them to deliver but hopefully it will bring more opportunity and resource as well.

Heads of service have a dual role as leaders of a professional service but they are also the chief adviser to their