University Students Consultative Forum

Consultation on Careers and Employability, 11 June – 29 June 2014: Summary

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the Forum.

Note: There were 248 posts. 36 forum members made at least 1 post and 9 people made 10 or more posts.
1. What do you think of the effectiveness of the OU’s Careers Advisory Service?

- Those that had used the service had found it positive, in particular the forums; however many of those commenting had not had direct experience of the service. This led to questions about profile although it was pointed out that many students are not studying for career reasons.

- There was support for a permanent careers forum where students could ‘drop in’ for advice.

- Some positive comments related to CV help and information on getting experience.

- Specific forums for students at different stages of their study were suggested, and in particular specific advice for those at an early stage in their study in relation to making choices and gaining experience.

- There was a proposal that students were proactively contacted towards the end of their qualification with an offer of support from the Service.

- There was a feeling that greater integration between the Careers Advisory Service and Student Support Teams was needed, particularly in relation to module choice.

- There was some discussion about the best way of contacting students with information about the Careers Advisory Service. There were drawbacks to both emails and StudentHome messages and a very negative reaction to the suggestion of text messages.

- One student raised the prospect of paying for additional careers support however this was not widely supported.
2. Why do some students not use the Careers Advisory Service?

- The first major reason cited was that a large number of students are not studying for career reasons and therefore have no interest in using it.
- It was suggested that there still may be a role for the Careers Advisory Service in relation to these students in advising what skills had been acquired and areas in which they might be applied.
- The second major reason was that students are not aware of it. It was suggested case studies would be useful in advertising the services provided, possibly on qualification websites as well as on the CAS website.
- There is a sense that students do not necessarily know what the service can offer, and a sense that it may not be for them, particularly early on in their studies.
- It was suggested that certain students are very clear about their career path and know already what they need to do and therefore do not require any additional advice.
- It was raised that there does not appear to be much information directed at the 18-24 age group, it appears to be mostly targeted at those who want a career change rather than those just starting out.
- The importance of making sure a student was on the correct pathway for their career aspirations from the outset was stressed. However the careers forums specifically do not advise on module choice, therefore greater integration of the careers service with the Student Support Team would be helpful.
- It was pointed out that for students with disabilities there are particular barriers to employment; and it is not clear that the Careers Advisory Service could help with advice on this.
- It was suggested that the OU should facilitate networks of students in particular sectors.
- A further proposal was that careers forums with careers advisors present could be integrated into particular modules e.g. at Level 1 or Level 3 although some students objected to this.
3. Do you think the OU supports the individual career and employability needs of students? If not, why?

- There seemed to be a general feeling that it did not because there is not sufficient awareness of the Careers Advisory Service and its offerings, exemplified by students offering advice on Facebook forums.

- A general dissatisfaction was expressed with the decreasing flexibility offered in terms of module choice, which was thought to be a barrier to employability.

- It was suggested that the OU is no longer so good for Continuing Professional Development as it becomes more qualification based, more expensive and with an increasing emphasis on 60-point modules.

- Some students commented that the Careers website is not easy to navigate.

- Events either online or face-to-face, promoting careers advice, were suggested, possibly in the gap between modules but there was some dissatisfaction with the integration of signposted employability skills as part of modules, when some students do not feel they are studying to gain these skills.
4. In order of importance, what services, new or existing, would be most valuable as part of the Careers Advisory Service?

Suggestions included (in no particular order):

- A permanent forum linked from StudentHome for asking careers-related questions.
- A link, similar to that for the SST, to contact a careers advisor.
- More opportunities for networking.
- Setting up a virtual jobs fair.
- More information on potential employers, particularly OU-friendly employers.
- Online lectures from academics or others about professional practice.
- More explanation of how OU students can get the most out of their degree.
- Send an email to students who are in their final module to advertise what is on offer, just in case they have not realised this service exists.
- Little video clips / animations of practical job hunting and application skills. Maybe clips of people describing their jobs & how they got into them, how they've used their OU qualifications, that kind of thing.
- Access to careers advisors is important.
- Forum-based events in which companies are involved.
- Work experience opportunities
5. What level of service should be provided by the Careers Advisory Service? e.g. response times, method of contact, etc.

Points expressed include:

- The Careers Advisory Service should cater for the diversity of students and therefore use a range of strategies and communication methods.
- There was general support for an automated response in order to know a message has got through with an indication of when a more substantive response could be expected.
- A substantive response within 2 working days was suggested.
- The ability to contact by phone, email and via a forum were important; live chat would also be useful.
- A designated name person would be useful, particularly if a student has complex needs.
- Face to face careers surgeries with bookable slots, possibly at a weekend, were suggested.
6. In what ways are you developing skills that are relevant to your career through OU study? Are there any skills that are missing?

Suggestions for skills developed through study included:

• Undertaking research, particularly library skills
• Synthesising ideas from a range of materials
• Using tools to analyse transcripts
• Undertaking self-directed study, including self-organisation and self-motivation
• Communication skills, particularly in written work e.g. assignment/report writing
• Self-confidence
• The ability to see different sides of an argument and look at issues creatively
• Team working skills developed online and particularly at day and residential schools
• IT skills

Suggestions for skills missing:

• Practical laboratory work
• An online module on report writing or presentation skills might be useful
• Face-to-face group work
• Mathematical skills in some science qualifications
• Literacy skills – suggestion of forum for those struggling.
7. Anything else?

- The view was expressed, in reference to point f of The Open University Student Employability Policy Statement, that opportunity to reflect on the skills gained from studies is not the same as being assessed on one's reflections on skills gained. The opportunity to reflect is there 24/7 already.
- It was suggested that skills development should not replace knowledge acquisition; and that skills integrated in teaching materials should be directly relevant or essential to the study of that particular subject.
- There was a request for elaboration on point h of the Student Employability Policy Statement: ‘The University recognises and values the capacity of OU students for autonomous and self-directed learning, important employability skills in themselves. We will provide students with opportunities to assess their own needs for development activities that support their employability.’
- This request was not responded to on the forum. An elaboration would be that students have the opportunity to assess their own needs via personal development planning, which is embedded in the majority of key introductory modules at the moment, and will be in all key introductory modules by 2017. Students are also signposted to the Careers Advisory Service website at key points throughout their study, where there are tools to help them assess their own development needs to support employability.

Next steps

- We will come back to the Forum in the autumn to show how the University has taken your input into account.