

A hand holding a wooden gavel over a document with a date stamp '9 DEC 2010'. The background is a blurred image of a person in a white lab coat.

PROMOTING EMPLOYABILITY WITH SMART POLICY

The future will see workers increasingly moving from career to career and even country to country. Sound immigration policy – particularly as pertains to post-study work visas – can promote healthy ‘brain circulation’ and provide a boon to employability amid ever-shifting political winds.

In a recent survey, eight out of 10 international students or alumni said that the top reason for taking a degree in another country was to improve their career prospects.¹ International students are often supported by the bulk of their families' savings, and international education markets are increasingly driven by students' and families' analysis of the potential return on investment.

I serve on the research committee of the International Education Association of Australia, which has commissioned research and policy analysis on how international graduate employability is supported. Last year, I was asked to brief the United Nations body for Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum and Refugees. Over two days

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in Geneva, I saw officials from 17 governments who absolutely understood the importance of employability options but who had to balance this against factors including their national labour market, social cohesion and political winds.²

How do we balance these tensions within higher education? Some institutions have staked their claim to producing 'job-ready' graduates who can 'hit the ground running' – and we all know of studies where employers feel that higher education is not producing what they need. Other institutions eschew the 'job-ready' gambit for a longer-term vision. How can we focus on making them 'job-ready' when today's graduates will be changing careers more frequently than we did and working in jobs that don't even exist yet?

BRAIN CIRCULATION

The old concept of 'brain drain', something to be avoided for the developing world, has been replaced by 'brain circulation'. In New Zealand, we have high labour mobility rates for our graduates, domestic and international.³ Canada has a thriving co-op programme and Australia's more recent focus on work-integrated learning is advancing. Students still make individual choices and form their own profile, but institutions are increasingly taking part in this responsibility.

Analysis of Australian census data has identified trends in the uptake of the 'subclass 485' post-study work visa – and it points to sustained underemployment of international graduates, compared with a robust hiring market for domestic graduates.⁴ Another mixed-methods study found that some international graduates saw post-study work as 'extra time' to fine-tune their skill set, further improve their English and plan their next steps.⁵ Not all graduates are looking for the same thing.

Multiple surveys in different markets show that there is high interest in post-study work options but relatively low uptake after graduation. Students certainly want the option of post-study work, and uncertainty in this space is seen as a negative for a study destination. Do post-study work rights establish an expectation or obligation of well-paid, degree-relevant work? Attitudes on this vary considerably across our field.

DECLINE AND GROWTH

The European Union, the world's largest receiving market of international students, has called for its member states to offer a minimum nine-month post-study work period, and this is having a major impact. The most recent data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) showed a 25% average long-term stay rate of international graduates across the OECD. Several governments privilege science, technology, engineering and

mathematics graduates, whom some call ‘designer immigrants’.⁶

Canada’s policy revisions and strong ‘open-door’ statements from government, in stark contrast to travel bans and nationalism in its nearest neighbour, have made it the big winner in this space with phenomenal enrolment growth. The United States is in its third consecutive year of decline in new international enrolments. Its overall numbers, however, are buoyed by the significant increase of optional practical training enrolments, which make up nearly a quarter of the one million enrolments announced, whereas most other countries do not include post-study work in their enrolment reporting. This rise is due to the restriction of H-1B visas, where the annual quota is usually exhausted in the first three months of the year, greatly increasing the flow of graduates into optional practical training.⁷

Australia benefited the most from the UK’s suspension of its post-study work policy in 2012, which coincided with Australia’s expansion of post-study work. Conversely, the UK’s recent reinstatement of post-study work options has had immediate market impact.

COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

The research on this topic is growing rapidly. One of our challenges is the significant variation in research design, duration of post-graduation milestones and replicable measures of long-term retention, making it difficult to compare like with like. More work is needed to examine the impact of immigration policy shifts, cross-referenced with national graduate surveys and census data.

EAIE members know how difficult it can be for international students to

engage with the local scene and make local friends in their host country. Similar barriers exist for employment. International students may lack the social skills, slang and humour of the host country – all of which help us to relate to each other in our work lives.

The lack of work experience and professional networks in the host market hinders international graduates’ prospects. In some cases, prioritisation of academic performance precludes the broader

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social and professional networking that can make a difference for employment. In addition, local employers often have misperceptions about international students and the policies that allow them to work.⁸

The literature calls for coordination with governments, institutions, students, employers and communities. There are some great models of collaboration but, overall, we’re not supporting our students’ employability needs or connecting with employers enough. Whose job is that at your institution? Does our focus on recruitment and enrolment performance indicators detract from the student experience and graduate outcomes?

As the competition for global talent intensifies in the 21st century, the educational systems that are able to work together with their communities, governments and employers will rise to the top. Partnerships must be put in place to boost mutual understanding of, and investment in, the strategies and resources that can help overcome the barriers to employability for international students. These dynamics can only intensify as our economies adjust to the long-term impact of the current health crisis, bringing employability outcomes into even stronger focus in international education.

— BRETT BERQUIST

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