

**Connecting students
and employers in a
virtual world.**



Brought to you by:

ii Handshake


gradconsult

INSIGHT PAPER

**A DIGITAL
DISCUSSION
EVENT ON 23RD
APRIL 2020**



Handshake

[illegible]

Q1. What does recruitment look like in a time without face to face events assessments?

Each breakout room were asked to discuss the above question with these supporting questions as prompts:

- What elements of physical events should be maintained in the shift to virtual? Which should be replaced?
- What unique opportunities are available through virtual events that wouldn't otherwise be possible with physical events?
- How do students want to engage virtually?
- Will these changes be the new normal? Or short-term shifts? What are the implications of this?

Key takeaways from the groups

'Activities need to be light touch and easy for the employers to set up and run'

'Need for strict briefs and shorter content'

'Employers collaborating and making menu of opportunities available to HEIs'

'Massive difference in the impact this situation has had on big employers and SMEs. Big employers were set up to shift swiftly to online.'

'Accessibility for students is much better (e.g. recording of sessions allows those who wouldn't normally engage a better opportunity to get involved)'

'Don't want to lose the authenticity of a human interaction through digital interaction'

'Students can lack confidence. Need training on new virtual events'

'Maintaining the ability to speak informally and not just delivering a presentation and ending. Having a social part of the online session/event'

Our summary

There is clearly a huge amount of innovation taking place across the sector but also recognition that you can't, and shouldn't attempt to, recreate all face to face activities in a virtual environment. A key focus should be seeking to retain an authentic and human feel to online engagement, allowing for exploration, conversation and serendipity to occur.

Employers have even more limited time than normal and are seeking to collaborate and scale. The use of technology potentially allows them to engage larger groups of students from multiple institutions in one online session. University careers services should be seeking to curate a number of online events and promoting them to students.

Some students lack experience and confidence in unfamiliar digital engagement environments – both employers and universities could be doing more to prepare them and help them succeed from mock digital assessment centres to coaching calls or digital engagement prep workshops/advice/top tips videos/podcasts.

There is a role for universities to support employers by developing simple models for online engagement and assessment that employers can use with minimal technical knowledge. Honesty and frankness on all sides about what can and can't be achieved is crucially important.



Q2. How do we preserve and build relationships between employers and students while the economy recovers?

Each breakout room were asked to discuss the above question with these supporting questions as prompts:

- What can universities be doing to support employers to develop their ability to attract and recruit students digitally?
- How can employers engage in curriculum activities and project-based learning?
- Should universities be building our own models for virtual internships that employers can utilise?
- What is the role of alumni in helping employers build brand presence 'on campus'/online?

Key takeaways from the groups

'Virtual internship models - completely new landscape. Seek to develop models through collaboration'

'Adjustments to teaching create opportunity - build virtual shell modules for internships which can be adopted institutionally where there are current physical modules'

'Building employers in the curriculum through online pitches and as a panel for assessments'

'Using alumni to deliver skills sessions as well as act as a link into businesses'

'Universities should consider working more closely either regionally or dependent on their focus to make it easier for employers to access more students in one go'

'Giving practical support to employers such as accessing our online spaces and technology if they don't have access to it'

'Be sensitive to the climate employers are in - perhaps will have less resources and therefore unable to do as much on campus activities. Stick with them as things will get better!'

Our summary

Working at a regional and sector level to create models and solutions that can support employers to access students is vital. Employers will not have the resource to deliver engagement at individual course, faculty and institution level.

It is important to reflect on what already exists and focus time and effort on filling genuine gaps in provision that will solve employer issues.

Some employers will inevitably have to pause recruitment activities but will still potentially be open to support students career development activities in order to retain a level of brand presence on campus/online - engaging alumni in these activities is a good way to reduce pressure on graduate recruitment functions, some of which will have been temporarily furloughed. Suggestions that furloughed graduate recruiters or graduate hires may wish to engage in social mobility mentoring or coaching programmes for students are worthy of exploration.

In recent years, many universities have made great strides to move from transactional relationships with employers to closer partnership working and enhancing curriculum-based employer engagement. Digital platforms provide various potential opportunities to deliver this engagement efficiently at scale.



Q3. What positives could come out of this? What will you take away from this discussion to create those lasting positive changes?

Each breakout room were asked to discuss the above question with these supporting questions as prompts:

- What efficiencies come with the increased use of technology?
- Could digital delivery breakdown geographic mobility issues and increase access for disadvantaged students?
- Could some students be more comfortable engaging online than in face to face activities?
- How can we retain this engagement when face to face delivery comes back?
- Is this an opportunity to collaborate more?
- Could certain sectors and employers become more attractive because of how they operated during the crisis?

Key takeaways from the groups

'Engaging students who wouldn't usually attend physical events'

'More virtual meetings and opportunities so less need to travel'

'Real opportunity for students from different backgrounds and subject areas to engage with employers and for students not to drop out of an assessment centres due to financial issues'

'Reframing what meaningful careers look like - outpouring of support for key workers and businesses who have 'done the right thing' may impact on what sectors see increase in interest from students'

'Collaboration will be key - conferences that many missed now potentially open to all, raising the bar for the sector'

'Feel a sense of community nationally and globally'

'It has proved that we can adapt VERY quickly'

Our summary

There is no doubt that this has been and will remain a challenging time, but there are also many opportunities that have arisen and shifts that have occurred which could become huge positives as we move beyond the crisis. This session, as just one example, has shown it is possible to share ideas and collaborate without leaving your home and how collegiate our sector is.

Student engagement was a huge issue before the crisis, we have already identified some interesting trends in increased engagement from certain cohorts (such as Maths and Computer Science students) in digital alternatives to face to face events. It could be that virtual alternatives break down some of the geographical and socioeconomic barriers to engagement that the sector grapples with plus creating more viable opportunities for students with disabilities which have been previously lacking.

Employers have made significant cost savings (travel, venue, accommodation, manager time), reduced their carbon footprint and achieved comparable candidate attendance/feedback scores from candidates attending digital events. There are also clear cost, time, social mobility and geographic participation benefits for candidates too. This paves the way for digital delivery to become part of the 'new normal' in the post-COVID19 era.

The sector has demonstrated a great deal of resilience and innovation already, it is likely that future challenges won't seem as insurmountable. We should come out of this stronger and with a host of new skills, models and solutions at our disposal.





We finished the session with some insights collated from the vast amount of research that Handshake have done into connecting employers and students virtually:

- Medium of connection matters more to employers than students. Our data suggests students are adaptable, but employers tend to prefer video. Balancing preferred mediums with accessibility is critically important.
- Mobile is critical for accessibility and experience. Not all students have access to a laptop / desktop at home. Solutions must be cross-platform.
- Re-creating existing experiences digitally, probably isn't the answer. Some things don't make sense to try and digitise: Queues are a great example. Employers don't want to go to dozens of different Sims career fairs.
- Digital opens up the opportunity to remove repetition and create more meaningful experiences. Employers give the same pitch over, and over again. A smart virtual approach offers unique ways to provide this at scale.
- Serendipity and discovery are really important to recreate. So much context can be lost in the transition from physical to digital but there are some really neat opportunities here.

The last word

At the end of the session, we asked the participants to give a one-word summary of the how they found the 90-minute session. They said:



Based on this positive response, we will be hosting a number of similar sessions exploring key themes around how best we can work together to support students to achieve success. Look out for further announcements in the coming weeks!