



A HECSU Survey:

How are Higher Education Career Services Experiencing the Recession?

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Introduction and methodology

According to the media, job prospects for students graduating in 2009 are unremittingly bleak. However, a survey of the heads of university careers services conducted by AGCAS in early 2009 suggested that this coverage might not be entirely accurate. As a result, the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) set out to explore two issues: firstly, how accurate careers advisers feel the media coverage of the graduate labour market is, and secondly, how recent graduates are responding to what are undoubtedly difficult labour market conditions.

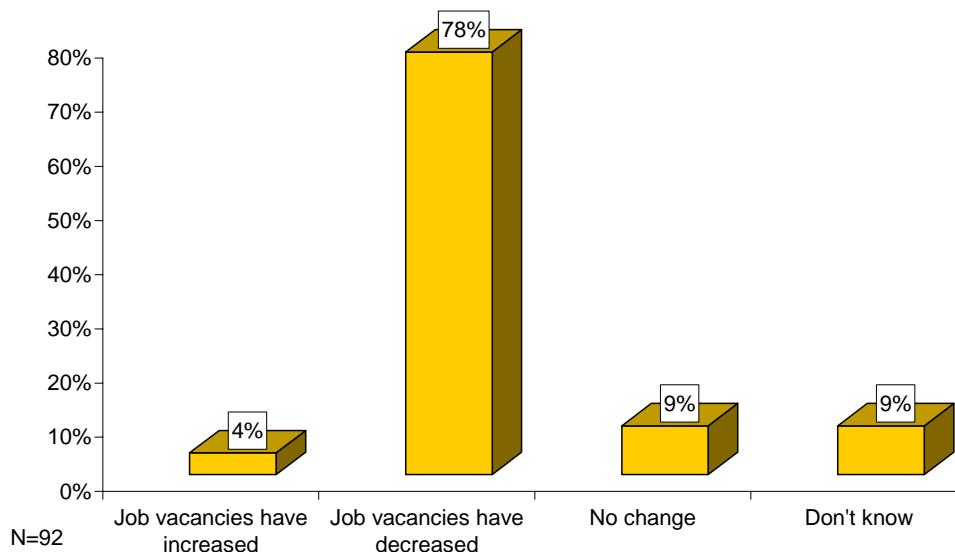
In July 2009 HECSU launched a short online survey asking university careers services how they think the recession has affected graduate vacancies and what kinds of strategies they have seen final year students adopting in response to the recession. The survey comprised seven questions, four of which were open-ended to enable participants to respond 'in their own words'. It was sent to 526 careers advisers and heads of careers services via HECSU's contact database. The survey closed in August 2009 and achieved a response rate of 17% (92 respondents).

Please note that the survey was designed to explore these issues rather than to provide an analysis of any variations between different sectors or regions within the graduate labour market, and consequently that the views of participants are illustrative rather than representative.

Changes in vacancies and employers

Overall, 78% of the careers advisers say that the number of job vacancies that they are advertising has decreased due to the recession. About 9% say there has been no change and 4% say that job vacancies have increased (figure 1).

Figure 1: Do you think the number of graduate job vacancies you are advertising has been affected by the recession?



In the words of one careers adviser,

“...one employer who is advertising with us currently had an original target of 300 graduates, but has cut back to 135”.

However, on their own these figures do not give us the complete picture. The comments made by careers advisers describing the kinds of employers they are dealing with suggest that there are a number of ‘trends’ in the kinds of vacancies being advertised. It also suggests that not all careers advisers are experiencing the impact of the recession on the graduate labour market in the same way.

Observations made by careers advisers included:

1. No change in the kinds of employers advertising but fewer vacancies
2. A change in the size of the employers advertising vacancies or contacting careers services about graduates.
 - Fewer large national employers
 - More small and medium enterprises (SMEs)
3. A change in the kind of employers advertising vacancies or contacting careers services about graduates
 - More community/voluntary organisations
 - More local employers

4. The majority of the careers advisers who had registered a change suggested that the recession was having more of an impact on some sectors than others. Many had seen a decline in the number of vacancies being advertised by firms in banking, finance, law and construction, but reported that other sectors, such as the public sector, social care, education and engineering, were still going strong.

“Some sectors such as investment banking have seen a marked decline in vacancies within the top end of the sector but not so much in the mid tier banks. Some increases in sectors such as insurance, public sector.”

However, it is important to bear in mind that the number of vacancies available at any given time will vary within as well as between sectors. For example, some careers services reported that employers in the science sector were still actively recruiting, while others reported that this was a sector where vacancies had decreased.

It should also be noted that some participants had not yet begun to look for these kinds of trends so it may be too early to get a real sense of what (if any) impact the recession has had on the kinds of employers who are recruiting graduates in 2009.

In response to this decrease in employer vacancies quite a few careers services had been proactive in starting initiatives to target local and smaller employers as graduate employers. For some careers services this was done to cover short falls from the usual employers advertising vacancies with careers services. In a few cases careers advisers had themselves been approached by recruitment agencies who were looking for potential employees on behalf of their clients.

“Local SMEs, dormant employers (ie those that rarely advertise with us) that we approached and have woken up, many opportunities coming through our alumni networks (people moving up or out of their organisations and creating another vacancy) and jobs overseas (often with organisations we have never heard of).”

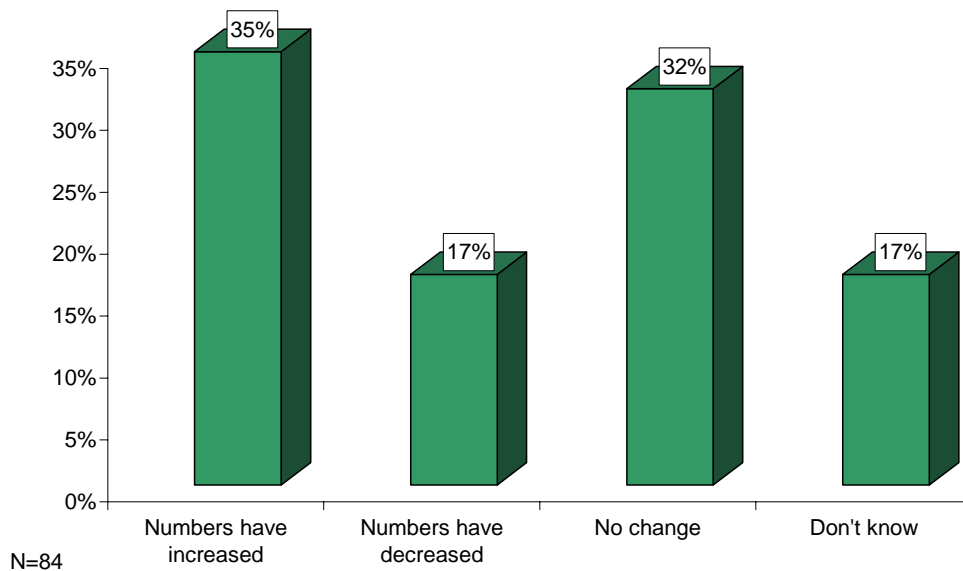
This suggests that some careers services are actively seeking to widen the network of employers they work with in order to help students identify alternatives to the ‘traditional’ large graduate employers. However, this strategy often needs someone like a permanent employer liaison officer to facilitate it.

How are final year students using the careers services?

The survey also wanted to explore the kinds of strategies advisers had seen students adopting in response to the recession, and also whether they think the number of final year students using their careers service has gone up or down.

Initially, we expected to find an increase in the number of final year students using the careers service, as we felt that many would be looking for assistance with job applications and advice on how to get a job. Perhaps surprisingly, only a third reported that the number of students had increased. Another third of the careers advisers said it is business as usual with no change in the number of students using the careers services, and 17% felt that there has actually been a decrease as a result of the recession (figure 2).

Figure 2: Do you think the number of final year students using the career services has changed as a result of the recession?



Student strategies

A number of careers advisers suggested that students graduating in 2009 began to realise that the graduate job market is competitive before they left university, while in previous years many had not discovered this until after they had graduated. The general consensus is that although final year students have not necessarily panicked, many are anxious about the perceived lack of vacancies in the graduate labour market.

“The key step change seems to be that they are taking things far more seriously compared to those who graduated in July 2008, and certainly more seriously than those who graduated in 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. Enquires about a whole range of options are up - work and travel and study overseas, placements both in the UK and overseas, opportunities to take up graduate internships, work placements and shadowing. 2nd Years are already beginning to plan and even some 1st years..!!! I think 2009-2010 will see a definite increase in student activity, but for how long that activity sustained, is perhaps another question.”

Advisers reported that students have tended to respond to the challenging labour market conditions in one of three ways. Some students have actively tried to *'make themselves more employable'* in an attempt to compete effectively within the existing labour market, some students have tried to find ways of *'riding out the storm'* in order to postpone finding a job until the economy is less turbulent, and some students have been *'bewildered at the lack of opportunities'* and have given up any notion of finding a job altogether.

"Student responses to the recession have varied widely. We were probably busier than we have ever been in the autumn semester, with the 'clued up' students taking all the help possible, making early applications etc. At the opposite extreme, many students just gave up and took the attitude 'what's the point?'"

Those students who have been trying to make themselves more employable have been asking careers advisers to help them to source vacancies and come up with strategies for juggling 'back up' job offers. Some advisers also thought students were more receptive to feedback about their CVs, application forms and covering letters than they may have been under different circumstances. Around 63% of advisers reported that students were seeking more work experience and 42% reported that students were seeking voluntary work (figure 3).

"Our students...are coming in [to the careers service] now to increase their 'long-term' chances rather than get an immediate job. Those that come in are being more 'strategic' and looking at gaining relevant work experience or further qualifications."

Students seeking to make themselves 'more employable'

Some careers advisers reported that employer presentations and other events organised by the career service had been poorly attended, while others said they had seen an increase in the number of students participating in these events. One adviser suggested that students had been avoiding extra-curricular activities (such as employer events) in order to concentrate on their studies in the hope that they would get a better degree classification and consequently improve their chances of getting a job. This may also partly explain why only a few advisers (12%) reported that students were planning job applications earlier.

Advisers also felt that final year students were more 'flexible' this year, with a greater number prepared to find work outside their preferred location or industry. One participant also reported that this year's teaching graduates were more likely than their predecessors to accept posts as supply-teachers.

One adviser indicated that some graduates, particularly those hoping to work in IT or business, were considering studying for a vocational qualification which

could help them to develop the more practical skills they would need in the workplace.

Graduates attempting to 'ride out the storm'

Those graduates who were attempting to 'ride out the storm' were often looking to study for postgraduate qualifications or to spend an extended period travelling abroad in order to 'buy themselves time'.

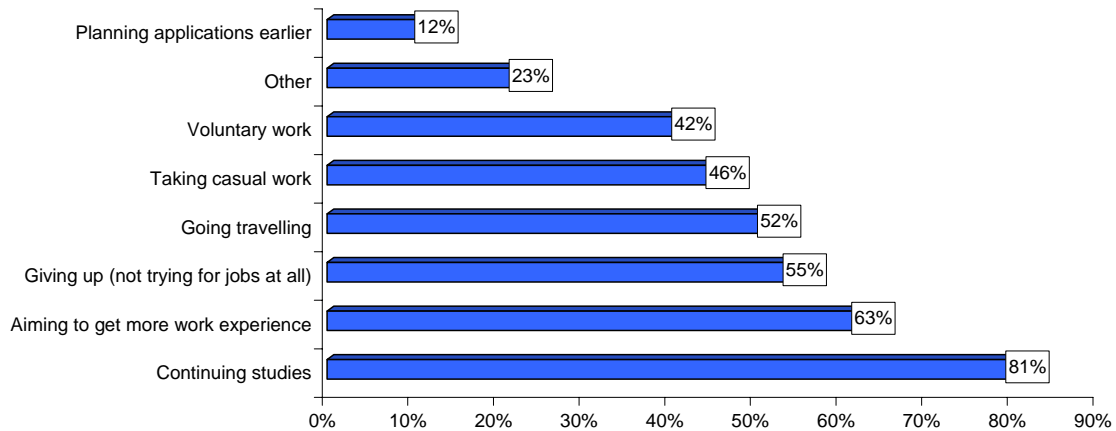
"The negative headlines based on skewed research by Highfliers around Christmas means students have been paralysed by inaction. More seem to be considering going off travelling if they can afford it hoping things will have improved next year."

Around 81% of advisers had come across students who were considering further study because they didn't think they would be able to get a job, and many were concerned that these graduates had not really thought through the pros and cons of postgraduate study and would really prefer to be going straight into work. This was demonstrated by the fact that some graduates considered their place on a postgraduate course to provide them with a 'back up' should they fail to find paid employment before September 2009.

A number of advisers also suggested that graduates are being made more anxious about the lack of jobs by the fact that what is considered to be a 'graduate job' is often limited to employment on a graduate training scheme, and that this interpretation is unhelpful to both the graduates seeking work and the employers trying to recruit them.

"I have also noticed that lots of students (in particular internationals, but increasingly UK students) think that they 'should' or 'must' get A Graduate Job (i.e. a training scheme) and believe that this is an easy option, designed purely to benefit them...The fact that information about graduate jobs focuses on the big name international companies seems to encourage narrow thinking about what is appropriate. The very term 'graduate job' is becoming problematic, as so many think it's that or nothing at all."

Figure 3: What strategies have you seen final year students adopting in response to recession? (multiple choice)



N=83

What do careers advisers think of the media coverage?

A few careers advisers thought that the recent media coverage of the graduate labour market was an accurate reflection of the current situation. However, the majority thought that the media coverage was too focused on a small number of surveys which only represented a fraction of the graduate recruitment market. In their view the media coverage was unbalanced and inaccurate.

“Not very helpful. All doom and gloom and no prospects. It depresses students and keeps them on the sofa watching the cricket. Statistics have, by and large, focussed on data from fewer than 250 employers (OK, it is the larger ones) but we have 3,500 employers recruiting from us.”

All careers advisers acknowledged that it would be harder for graduates to get a job this year, but most felt that there were a number of alternative paths to graduate employment for final year students and that these were being ignored by the media.

“It has all been very negative and doesn’t necessarily reflect regional differences and also that there are still plenty of job opportunities out there for graduates but they might not have a specific title of “graduate job”. The media needs to focus on how graduates can make the best of the current market and become more proactive and creative in their job search. Even if they cannot find their ideal job straight away they can see each job as a stepping stone onto something better.”

"[The coverage is] sensationalist. They use one source, AGR, as a representation of graduate recruiters which is so very distorted as only 7% of all grads actually achieve a job with these employers. We have been approached by local journalists looking for doom and gloom stories and are not interested in graduate successes of which there are many. They are not interested in publishing those! The majority of our grads go into the public sector and have done really well in securing grad jobs. We have a large local SME and whilst we have seen a reduction in vacancies they are still coming through at the higher level."

Most careers advisers also commented that the media coverage was too gloomy and was demoralising to new graduates, while a few participants suggested that the media coverage was putting graduates off applying for the few vacancies which are actually available. Many thought the media was only looking for bad news stories and most would like to see success stories being given more publicity.

"The media coverage has been consistently gloomy and negative and has created an impression that the graduate jobs market has collapsed which is untrue. Clearly the public and students will be influenced by what they see and hear in the media. Some employers have commented that applications are down as a result with the implication that some students have perhaps changed their plans and/or are not bothering to apply believing the situation to be far worse than it is."

"Most of it does not help as it creates the impression that the situation is even worse than it really is. Our university communications office has been working with a big PR agency to get good news stories into the media, but it can be an uphill struggle as too many journalists and broadcasters are looking for a bad news story to go along with rising unemployment figures. We also tried to combat this by giving our Principal for his graduation speeches some positive data about the number of vacancies which the Careers Service has advertised and assurance that they have a lifelong service from the Careers Service."

On the other hand, there were a few participants that thought the media coverage was accurate and felt that to say otherwise was to mislead graduates. One participant even argued that the reality of the current job market was far worse than has been reported by the media.

"It has given graduates a misleading impression of the current job market. The reality is far worse than most news stories. Its not just that large recruiters often give a misleading impression (stating that they

are still recruiting when in fact they often aren't or at a far lower level than previously) and that this is then reported as "truth", but that recession is affecting all levels of employers- and when the big cuts in govt expenditure kick in it looks like recruitment into Health, Education, etc (both massive recruiters of graduates) things are going to get much worse. I am shocked to hear fellow career professionals give the view that things aren't that bad - they are for our leavers."

Conclusion

The findings suggest that careers services are experiencing the recession in different ways and that one adviser's experience of the graduate labour market is not necessarily the same as another's. However, overall it would appear that vacancies are down and that careers services are actively seeking to mitigate the effect this has on students by targeting 'non-traditional' graduate employers instead.

The survey also suggests that final years students are responding to the recession in one of three ways: some students are actively trying to 'make themselves more employable', some students looking for ways of 'riding out the storm', and some students giving up finding a job altogether.

Most participants feel the media coverage is - at worst - distorting the reality and - at best – de-motivating graduates at exactly the time when graduates need all the ideas, encouragement and alternatives they can get.

It is also worth considering how the definition of a 'graduate job' can itself be a barrier to finding employment, as some students take the view that anything other than a place on a graduate training scheme is tantamount to failure.

Appendix.

We also asked participants to give us their 'top tips' for students who are graduating in 2009 and their suggestions were extremely useful.

Top Tips for Students Graduating in 2009

Sourcing vacancies

Don't take a scattergun approach – target the jobs you really want - one well written application is worth 100 rushed ones.

Make finding paid employment your full-time job – plan, be organised, be systematic, be focused and be professional – focus on the quality of your applications rather than the quantity.

Be clear about your objectives – you cannot be equally qualified for all jobs in all organisations.

Network – think about your own network (friends, family members, tutors, careers advisers, ex-work colleagues, professional bodies, local/community organisations) and use every contact you have to find vacancies.

Consider going to conferences or professional events to meet people, make contacts, and find out more about the area you are interesting in work in.

If there is a professional body attached to your discipline, join it and become active at a local/regional level so you can mix with professionals working in your area.

Be flexible and mobile – if you are willing to work anywhere in the country you will have a larger pool of jobs to apply to.

Take advantage of recruitment events which will enable you to meet employers and get to know the graduate employees who are currently working for them.

Apply for jobs that interest you even if the specification does not require you to be educated to degree level – entry level jobs allow you to gain experience, prove your ability and secure promotions – don't dismiss the idea of starting in a more basic role because they think you will be languishing there forever – you won't be.

Keep looking for jobs – sourcing vacancies takes time and it is easy to lose your motivation – use your Careers Service, family and friends for support, and remember you only need one application to succeed.

Think about setting up a support group with any friends who are in the same position as you to broaden your network – coordinate your searches so you can recommend suitable vacancies to one another.

Use speculative approaches to identify job opportunities at small and medium-sized employers – don't just rely on advertised vacancies or restrict your applications to multi-national employers or companies who are already household names – approaching the company yourself shows initiative.

Keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities before they are advertised e.g. new firms moving into your local area.

Do your research into the industry or profession you are interested in to ensure that you are aware of the full range of employers you can approach.

If you are interested in graduate training schemes make sure you know when companies begin the recruitment process to ensure you are prepared for the next round – identify which opportunities will become available in autumn 2009 and remember that opportunities which may arise in spring 2010 are only 6 months away.

Applications and Interviews

Make sure your CV and cover letters are professional – check you are using language which is appropriate for a business letter, check your spelling and your grammar, and ask someone at your Careers Service to proof read them.

Always tailor your application to the job role – a general CV and cover letter won't get you anywhere – carefully consider every element of the job specification and give evidence of your ability to fulfil the criteria.

Make sure your enthusiasm for the job comes across in your application and at your interview – you'll need to demonstrate your motivation and commitment to the role and the company – this is easier if you have a genuine interest in the role or the sector.

If you are invited for an interview redouble your efforts to research the organisation and the job role – think about what the employer might ask you and ask your careers service for a practice interview to try out your technique.

Follow up unsuccessful applications to get some feedback if you can.

Identify your unique selling points and make sure you are marketing yourself effectively to potential employers.

Building your CV

Take action to fill gaps in your experience - any work experience (paid or unpaid) looks better on your CV than unemployment – the experience will also give you something to draw on in subsequent job interviews.

If you can't secure a work experience placement, ask if you can 'shadow' someone for a day instead.

Do something with your time – volunteering is impressive on any CV.

Remember that voluntary/temporary work might even lead to a permanent paid position.

Use any free time to develop your knowledge and skills so you are ready to take advantage of the upturn when the economy starts to improve.

Use your careers adviser to help you identify which activities or courses the employers you are interested in are most likely to value.

Travelling can be a great experience – but remember that if you are away for too long you will end up competing with the students who will be graduating in 2010 when you begin to apply for jobs on your return.

Don't stay in education unless you have a real purpose for doing so and can articulate what you plan to get out of it.

Planning your career

See your career as a journey - identify what you want to achieve and work out how you can do this – you need an action plan so in 6 months time you have achieved something and made some progress.

You are responsible for your career and you need to start managing your career now – have a structured career development plan – think about where you want to be in 5 years and how you plan to get there.

Have short-term, medium-term, and long-term career goals and plan steps for your progression – even if you don't land your dream job straight away you will know you are working towards it by gaining the relevant skills and experience.

Remember that the process of deciding what you want to do is not fundamentally changed by the recession – it just might take you a little longer to get there.