

Higher Education
Dialogues – Deep Dive

What technology can universities use to provide better career service to their graduates?

Spotlight report
January 2021

The fourth online event in the British Council's Higher Education Dialogues Series for 2020-21 revisited the theme of employability (previously covered in [Session 1](#)) with a particular focus on the use of technology to provide better career service to graduates. During this interactive session, 65 participants from eight countries engaged with input provided by UK experts and also observed and discussed a real-time example of technology-enhanced employability assessment. The session was moderated by Clare Sears, the British Council's Deputy Regional Director for Wider Europe.

Overall, the main aims of the session were to:

- describe how the work of career service teams has evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic
- highlight how technology (particularly asynchronous interviews and virtual assessment centres) is currently being used to support employability
- demonstrate low/no cost technologies that can be used to enhance employability.

Using Technology to Enhance Employability

Martin Edmondson, CEO of [Gradcore](#), opened the session with an overview of trends in the way technology is being used by universities in the UK to enhance graduate employability. Three main categories of technology were highlighted:

1. Infrastructure systems, which include commercial full-featured career management platforms such as, for example, [Handshake](#) or [Career Hub](#).
2. Mainstream platforms, such as Teams and Zoom, which are increasingly being used for careers and employability delivery.
3. Recruitment software, which supports activities such as video interviews, psychometric testing, virtual assessment centres and internship hosting. Examples of such technologies are [Forage](#) and [Sonru](#).

COVID-19 has accelerated the use of two particular technologies in career services and recruitment: asynchronous video interviews and virtual assessment centres and these (and particularly the latter) were the focus of the rest of the event.

Asynchronous Video Interviews

John Cusworth, Director of Partnerships at Gradcore, noted that 'the pandemic has provided the perfect storm for the digitisation of employability provision'. Asynchronous video interviews (where job applicants complete an interview at their computer in response to automated questions) gained popularity in the early 2010s and, according to the 2020 [ISE Recruitment Survey](#), over 65% of graduate recruiters now use them. Several benefits (for both employers and candidates) of this approach to interviewing have been recognised:

- they can be completed and evaluated without restrictions of time and place

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- they are cheaper and quicker than conventional in-person interviews
 - they provide a high-quality experience.

Virtual Assessment Centres

According to the Target Jobs careers website,

‘Virtual assessment centres are a way for an employer to get a group of candidates together online to be assessed for its graduate or work experience programmes. Just as with an in-person assessment centre, activities could include:

- information sessions
- question-and-answer sessions
- a group exercise (which can be based on a case study)
- an individual case study exercise
- a presentation
- an interview’¹.

Employers have recognised the savings (for example, on the cost of arranging venues, travel and catering) that a virtual assessment centre offers and, according to John Cusworth, ‘virtual assessment centres are the primary means through which a graduate will be assessed for a graduate job, for the foreseeable future’. To prepare graduates for this situation, universities in the UK are increasingly integrating virtual assessment centres into their career services. Two examples of this were provided during the event.

Vanessa Freeman, Acting Director for Careers and Employability at [City University of London](#), described how virtual assessment centres are used as part of a [Micro-Placements Programme](#) which seeks to enhance students’ employability through short placements with London-based employers. Ali Orr, Head of Graduate Outcomes and Employability at [Kingston University](#) also explained how, as part of a Graduate Internship Scheme, 140 students took part in a virtual assessment centre, following which 80 graduates secured internships, working in teams of 2-3 with local employers.

Through virtual assessment centres, students gain experience of a recruitment scenario they are likely to face in the future. They are also able to develop the skills required to perform in a virtual recruitment context. The feedback students receive as a result of working through a virtual assessment centre also allows them to reflect on their employability skills, to become more aware of these and to focus on areas that need to be improved.

Feedback from students attending virtual assessment centres at both City University of London and Kingston University (see this [video](#)) has been very positive. While they describe

¹ <https://tinyurl.com/y4nk87br>

the process as challenging, they also recognise how it has been beneficial for their skills and confidence.

To provide a concrete example for participants, a real-time virtual assessment centre task was organised during the event. A group of students worked together on a collaborative task, leading to a presentation about ways of tackling pollution. Following their presentation, the students answered questions by members of a panel. This demonstration showed how virtual assessment centres can be set up using online platforms, such as Teams or Zoom, that are widely available, with little or no additional cost.

Using Technology Effectively

In addition to describing how technology can be used to support the development of graduates' employability skills, the event also provided some guidance on ways of using technology effectively in employability contexts. Key points were that:

- diversity among students in terms of their access to and familiarity with different kinds of technology needs to be acknowledged and addressed; technology-enhanced approaches to employability should not place certain categories of student at a disadvantage
- where students from different time zones are involved in online employability activities, these activities should be scheduled in a manner that does not require participants to be available at an unreasonable local time (such as in the middle of the night)
- as noted above, good results with online employability activity can be achieved using widely-used platforms such as Teams and Zoom; generally, 'keeping it simple' is a good principle to adhere to, as this will most likely lead to inclusive solutions which are also less expensive to implement
- some investment in the development of the digital competences of career services staff may also be necessary to ensure they have the skills and confidence to manage technology-based employability delivery
- training for staff will also be necessary for them to act as assessors when students take part in virtual assessment centres.

Key Employability Skills

In the previous Higher Education Dialogues event on employability, several key skills that employers value were noted (for example, teamwork and communication). One interesting question that arises in the context of virtual approaches to recruitment is whether these conventional skills still apply or whether there are additional attributes that candidates must provide evidence of. The panellists at this event were in broad agreement that, despite the use of virtual recruitment environments, employers still value traditional core employability skills. However, given the impact of COVID-19 on working practices, the panel also felt that additional attributes such as resilience, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, self-

management and digital literacy have become increasingly valued by employers². The World Economic Forum's 'The future of jobs report 2020' includes a list of the top 15 job-relevant skills in 2025; this includes many traditional attributes, though it is also interesting to note that three of the top four skills specified refer to analytical thinking, problem-solving and critical thinking.

Take-Away Questions

Here are some take-away questions from this session for universities and staff who would like to use technology to enhance their students' employability skills.

1. What key employability skills are valued in the fields that your graduates aspire to work in?
2. To what extent does the university target the development of such skills among students, through curricula and dedicated employability initiatives?
3. To what extent have recruitment strategies in your context become virtual as a result of COVID-19? If they have, what kinds of virtual recruitment strategies are being used?
4. Is technology currently used in your institution to support students' employability skills? If so, how is technology being used for this purpose?
5. Which strategies from this event – particularly asynchronous video interviews and virtual assessment centres – might be feasibly incorporated into the work of your careers service department?
6. What professional development do your careers staff require in order to effectively implement technology-based employability skills support for students?
7. What particular constraints exist in your context to the use of technology to enhance students' employability and how might some of these constraints be addressed?

Resources



Session recording



Speakers' slides

- Asynchronous video interviews: The tools you need to succeed:
<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201102-asynchronous-video-interviews-the-tools-you-need-to-succeed>

²See also <https://adventuresincareerdevelopment.wordpress.com/2020/11/24/ise-annual-survey-3-key-student-recruitment-trends/>

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- Virtual assessment centres: what to expect and how to succeed:
<https://tinyurl.com/y4nk87br>
 - World Economic Forum (2020). The future of jobs report 2020:
<https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020>

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