

SELECT COMMITTEE - STUDENT JOURNEY

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Student Journey held in the Swale 1, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 14 September 2011.

PRESENT: Mr K Smith (Chairman), Mr I S Chittenden, Mr P J Homewood, Mr R J Lees and Mr S C Manion

IN ATTENDANCE: Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer) and Mr G Romagnuolo (Policy Overview Research Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Interview with Nadia Lawes, Louise Wessen and Natasha Gibbs from GradsKent (Item 1)

Please introduce yourselves.

(NL) I have been the Project Officer of GradsKent since October 2010, and also manage the graduate portal. This is a Regeneration-funded project, set up to help to improve the graduate retention rate in the county. All jobs advertised through GradsKent are based in Kent and are suitable for graduates. Although these jobs may not all be necessarily at graduate level, they are those for which an employer is willing to take on a graduate. GradsKent also offer a range of internship and summer placements. Natasha's placement is funded up to next year, and Louise's placement is for 3 months, ending in November this year; I hope they will be funded further. Both accessed those placements by registering via the GradsKent website.

Are graduates under these schemes counted as being part of KCC?

(NL) Yes, Natasha and Louise are both recognised as KCC staff within their units, which are Emergency Planning (CC) and Employment Policy (BSS), respectively. The recruiting team covers salary costs; these are not covered by GradsKent.

And GradsKent is funded into 2012?

(NL) Yes, and we charge employers for advertising space. We aim to become self-sustaining by April 2012, but this is an ambitious target, so we might have to seek more funding to tide us over until we can become self-sustaining.

How many students could potentially be involved?

(NL) 11,000 students graduate each year from Kent's universities, and a large percentage of these are young people from Kent. We also support graduates who are returning home to Kent after graduating from universities elsewhere in the UK. There is much cross-advertising across the UK to spread the message about what is available in Kent.

Do any other County Councils have a similar scheme?

(NL) Most have some scheme to help their graduates find employment, although the majority of them have been set up by bodies other than a County Council, and are funded in a different way.

And do they add value?

(NL) For employers, these schemes are the only channel available to them to reach students. They are a cheaper solution than using agencies, and offer a way to filter applications to identify suitable students. We have many students who have studied humanities, which does not offer specific vocational skills, but we help them to apply the many transferable skills that they have. Our work seeks to avoid Kent losing its graduate resource.

What do the universities do to support and guide their students?

(NL) All Kent universities have good careers advice services, and some are now seeking to make these income-generating. We cross-advertise with all UK universities, so students can see what vacancies there are in Kent for graduates. Services which we use to advertise vacancies are mostly income-generating and are run by national bodies.

How do you measure your success?

(NL) By the number of graduates and employers registering on our website. There are currently 1,800 graduates and 201 employers registered. We have targets for the number of placements and the amount of income generated, and this year the monthly income target is £9,500. We also carried out a survey over the summer to measure the success of placements running during university vacations.

It would be useful to measure again in one year's time to see how many of the 1,800 graduates have found placements.

(NL) We upload the vacancies that we have, and for some employers we provide (and charge for) more services, eg a full recruitment package. However, some employers engage with graduates directly, and if neither advises us of the outcome we will not be able to measure it. *I can supply the Committee with statistics for this, and for the number of graduates placed within the KCC.*

How big are the employers that you work with, and in which types of industries are they?

(NL) The biggest demand for recruits comes from web development companies, and we struggle to fill all these vacancies. We place graduates who have these skills straightaway. We work with many small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). They like GradsKent as we are able to offer them a full recruitment service, which saves them time. Some larger companies also use our service.

How many of the graduates registered with you are from Kent?

(NL) The vast majority are from Kent, with a handful from London. *I can send the Committee some figures.*

What was your original brief when setting up GradsKent?

(NL) To ensure that we keep Kent's graduates in Kent.

Can you say where across the county placements are made? Is there a good spread, and do you include Medway?

(NL) I don't have statistics which tell you how many are placed in each area, but yes, we do include Medway.

(LW) I think GradsKent is very good. I found a KCC placement, but I was proactive and called to apply when I graduated. You have to be proactive to find something; you can't rely on it coming to find you. It's good that the service is specifically for graduates. You always find the vicious circle of needing experience to find a job, but needing to work in order to start to build some experience. I have a 3-month KCC placement and have gained valuable experience in a large organisation. All this is very good for my CV.

Did you get careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) and advice about how to enhance your employability?

(LW) Yes, and I have done voluntary work to add to my work experience. Some employers have said, however, that they prefer to count paid employment rather than voluntary work when assessing experience.

How long did you wait for your placement?

(LW) I graduated in July and came here in August, so I was lucky.

Why do employers not want to recognise or count the voluntary work that you've done?

(LW) I am seeking work in Law, and in this field the legal recruitment agencies that I have spoken with do recognise my voluntary work, but I get the impression that some did not view it as highly as proper, paid working experience. Sectors vary in the way they view and treat voluntary work; I think the reluctance to recognise is just a trait of this particular field.

Would they count internships?

(LW) Yes, they like internships. It's just that there is such a high demand for places in Law that they have to be so specific in what they will count as relevant experience.

The Committee has been told that, for employers, good IT skills are paramount when seeking employment. What else do they look for?

(NL) All graduates are expected to have good general IT skills, but companies who specialise in web development demand particular IT specialisms. In general, employers look for transferable skills such as good communication, commitment and attitude, time management, etc. Most employers I talk to value voluntary work and like to count it as it shows a good attitude towards using unemployed time productively, to develop and try new skills.

During your 3-month placement, what will you do to continue your search for longer-term employment?

(LW) I haven't done much as yet, but I will need to start looking soon, as three months will soon pass. I would like to stay in KCC and will try to achieve that. With GradsKent I get to see suitable vacancies early, so I am lucky in that respect.

How does KCC manage graduate placements? Do they seek to extend one, or find the incumbent a second placement to move on to?

(NL) There are very few formal processes for graduates coming into the KCC, and places can only be offered to graduates if they are not taken up internally by existing staff. The salaries that are offered to graduates in placements are paid for from the recruiting manager's budget, as they would be for any other member of staff, so it is at the manager's discretion to offer placements or extend contracts.

GradsKent is project-funded so there is very limited capacity to extend it. Although there is no formal process which would support what we do, people bring opportunities to us. The situation with offering apprenticeships is different, as these serve a different age group and are not suitable for people at graduate level.

Although placements are short, they must still be very useful in getting yourself known and allowing you to see how an organisation works and how you might want (or not want) to fit into it, longer term.

(LW) Yes, it is good that you can get your foot in the door, but it is up to you to network and be proactive in seeking further opportunities once you are there.

It is good to hear that the KCC offers jobs to its graduates. I have a concern about the KCC using agency staff when it might not need to. Do we need agencies and GradsKent?

(NL) I know that recruiting a graduate takes longer than recruiting someone internally or via an agency, but a graduate would still only take about one month to recruit.

I would welcome more information on the different processes and how these might be improved, to reduce the difference in timescale.

(NL) Since GradsKent was set up in October 2010, there has not been one permanent placement, so the graduates who come to us do not expect to get one.

(NG) I was surprised to find out about GradsKent and that it was linked to a large organisation, as I hadn't heard of it before. I am still at university but have had a one year placement job in the past. I agree that we have to be very proactive to find things out for ourselves. You really need to be self-motivated and prepare yourself for your job search. You need to do some research on the company you are applying to, even if it's Argos.

What do employers look for when you go to interviews?

(NG) They want to see keenness and confidence.

(LW) Being personable is important, as you have to fit in and work with their existing workforce.

These are the same qualities that we are told they look for in a 16-year-old, it's just that graduates are at a higher level in a more sophisticated market.

How do you learn about the need for these 'soft skills'? Was it by experience or did someone tell you?

(NG) I picked that up from jobs I had when I was 14 and 15. As you learn what works in the adult world, you mould yourself to it as you grow up.

(LW) There are wider issues; your upbringing is important in teaching you how to conduct yourself, and your parents support and encourage you to develop good habits. They teach you social skills and respect early, and it becomes second nature, but some parents do not have these skills to pass on to their children.

Did school play any part in this?

(LW) Some came from my school experience, but the deepest rooted elements come from my family and upbringing.

What courses were offered at school, to help you learn about employability?

(NG) There was a careers tutor at Secondary school, but you had to take the initiative to go and see them. To get the most out of the session, you had to plan and prepare well. As careers advice was not part of a standard lesson, you really had to be proactive to take advantage of it.

The Committee is looking at the student journey from 11 to 24, and in that time there are huge steps that young people have to cover. We are finding that schools are about exam results and there is a gap between schools' preparation of students and what employers actually need. We need to find a way of building in employability skills.

(LW) When I was at school, my perception was that if I didn't get good grades I wouldn't get a good job. As university fees rise, schools need to respond and prepare young people differently as they will not necessarily go to university. They need other options, and may not know what they want to do as a career.

Does careers advice improve when you get to university, or does it just feel that much more desperate?

(LW) Both. I didn't go for careers advice at university but I spoke to people who are in legal careers and got first-hand information from them. I went for careers advice at school just once, as I found it was not helpful. It is too general and had no structure.

(NG) There is a fine line between jobs and a career, and they are not the same. Many people are too young at 15 or 16 to make a decision about the rest of their lives. I had careers advice and support at university but I already knew what I wanted to do. Help in preparing a CV would be useful for a lot of young people. We had a compulsory module in which we had to practice writing a CV, but this was at university and also during secondary school. I am using the same CV form now that I have had from secondary school.

(LW) I never had any CV training.

(NL) I know that more universities run a compulsory CV module now.

Did the careers IAG you were given include advice about the level of demand in the sector/s in which you were interested?

(NG) I was offered information about careers which related to my course.

It's important to distinguish between information, advice and guidance. There could be plenty of information, as this is easy to provide, but advice and guidance is more difficult. Some popular courses do not lead to jobs; forensic science has grown in popularity in recent years but there are very limited jobs in this field.

(NL) Yes, I have a lot of forensic scientists, criminologists and psychologists on my books.

What can you tell us about the start of the university process? Have expectations changed now, about who can go?

(LW) Yes, expectations have definitely changed now. If I were starting now I would still go, but then I knew definitely what I wanted to do. My cousin is looking at university but is not so decided about what he wants. The increase in fees will have an impact, and there needs to be something like internships to pick up those who do not go to university.

(NL) I think 18-year-olds who expect to go will still go if they (or their parents) can afford it. Those who cannot afford it will not go, even if they were previously expecting to. I have heard a range of views about the impact of the new fees, but

affordability still plays a large part in the decision. What I have heard is anecdotal but it makes sense.

(NG) I think for most people the decision will depend on their financial background, as they are not guaranteed a job at the end of university.

(LW) I was shocked at the level of the increase in fees, from £3,000 to £9,000 a year.

The new fees are a loan to the student, and it doesn't need to be paid back until a graduate's earnings reach £26,000 a year. Are there any other reasons for young people not to go to university?

(LW) I think people will still go as they are brought up to expect to go, but the money side of it does make you think. For some, university will always be automatic, and others will think more about it.

(NL) I think if some are genuinely undecided they will not go due to the money involved.

At school, were you given any guidance about alternative pathways into employment?

(LW) Not at school, but in the final year of university. For Law, there is an alternative route, for which the fees are cheaper, the course longer but the qualifications you end up with are identical.

(NG) If there had been I would not have listened! At A Level we had examples of what other students did, and there was some advice around alternatives but nothing specific.

There is the apprentice scheme, in which Level 4 is the equivalent of a degree course. This offers a less academic route. How aware are young people of this, do you think?

(LW) People need better information about apprenticeships, as they associate the word just with plumbers or hairdressers.

Many current university students know what they want, but many of the next generation will need to make a difficult decision when they leave school. The Committee is concerned about the paucity of careers IAG in schools.

(LW) There needs to be more careers advice at secondary school. Many young people go to university as they don't know what they want to do, and a few years of studying puts off the decision. Some people will still go to university even if they can't afford it, as they can't decide on anything else to do.

For IAG, schools have to provide a website for pupils' use. How do you value the use of social networking sites (SNS) for careers IAG?

(NG) SNS could be used to advertise degree courses or jobs, but how you engage with them depends on how you view them in general. I think that, to be respected, and for its importance to be appreciated, IAG needs to be professional and formal.

(LW) A 16-year-old will not look for jobs or IAG on a social networking site; they go there to chat to their friends!

So where else could young people get careers IAG?

(NG) I searched the internet via the Employment Placement Unit at university, which I where I found GradsKent. I would find careers information on a website. I would also find voluntary jobs and work experience that way. If work experience were paid, people would make more effort. Some people would not join SNS if they feel they have nothing to put in their profile.

(NL) I think it would be very short-sighted not to use SNS, as many students have not heard of LinkedIn. GradsKent advertises placements on Facebook as we know the audience is there. We have 180 Facebook fans at the moment, and each posting that we put up gets 250 hits. We can target people using Facebook, and it is a very cost-effective way of accessing our ideal market. Graduates who are already in work are those who are most proactive, but Facebook will reach those who are not so proactive.

It was suggested that Nadia could discuss and explore the use of SNS with Richard Lees and Steve Manion from the Select Committee, and Research Officer Gaetano Romagnuolo.

(NL) Some young people never use an application form but apply for jobs and placements online. They get a job offer without ever having actually applied in the traditional way. Some young people are very switched on to this way of doing things, but more need to be.

The KCC's policy on the use of SNS might need to be addressed. Careers IAG websites are meant to provide information but do not include use of, or links to, SNS. The current policy means that every survey which officers want to issue using SNS has to go through the KCC media team for approval, which is slow. The Select Committee will need to make a recommendation to address this and serve the needs of Kent's students while dealing with the concerns of politicians.

Did employers ever visit your school to talk about careers?

(LW) I don't remember this happening at school but they did come to university. Some employers have the custom of visiting universities.

(NG) Yes, at A-Level college, and we had a day trip to look around a university and choose a course.

There are apprenticeship schemes for young people of different ages. If we were to identify something new for graduates, would a scheme of internships be a good thing to establish?

(LW) Internships tend to be for people who have fewer qualifications than graduates, and the pay for them is pitched accordingly. Graduates would expect better pay levels than this.

(NG) I don't understand this view. Internships are normally regarded as short work experience periods which are unpaid. To learn about the area of work, and to get yourself and your skills known, you should be prepared to work for a while for free, although graduates would need and expect paid internships if they were offered.

(LW) To get the experience that you need, you would have to do whatever was available.

(NL) GradsKent offers internships with KCC, but many people are unfamiliar with the concept and would need some guidelines about how to run an internship successfully. They are 12-week placements offering no pay except expenses, and they only cover project work. If they were connected to a job which is critical to the Council's business, the intern would have to be paid. The KCC internships are snapped up, and we have 15 applicants for each one.

How would you compare internships with voluntary work? Are they seen as more 'honourable'?

(LW) Both are still worth doing as you learn soft skills, gain experience and broaden your knowledge.

(NL) In internships you learn project management, and it's good for your CV.

It was agreed that Nadia would prepare a paper for the Committee on internship schemes in the KCC and elsewhere.

Are you advised about internships when you go to university?

(LW) I had some guidance about the need to find work experience to supplement my Law studies, but the realisation of the need to find something only really hits you once you get to graduation.

(NG) Some students are not willing to do a summer job.

(NL) Some students feel that they cannot afford to take on unpaid work so they seek summer employment to make some money.

What recommendations could the Select Committee make to help the student journey?

(NG) After A-Levels, a student who is not going to university will need more information on apprenticeships.

(LW) In secondary school, pupils need to have compulsory careers advice, which includes genuine guidance as well as just information. This could be done at two points in a student's school career – at 11 and again at 16 – as young people's ideas and interests change as they mature.

(NL) There should be compulsory sessions at school to teach students how to prepare a CV, and guidance and training in interview skills. There should also be more focus on teaching young people about personal finance and managing a budget. All this could be done as part of Personal, Health and Social Education (PHSE) sessions.

What preparation would you have wanted to have as students, in an ideal world?

(LW) More IAG. Kent Law School provided mock interviews at my university. It was a good way to practice presentation skills, and many of the standard questions asked do not change so would be useful to practice in advance of having real interviews. You could build up interview skills over years. A programme of training and practice in presentation skills should be compulsory for students from 11 to 18, and they should have to research and prepare a presentation on a subject for a certain date. The discipline and time management skills they would get from doing this would be invaluable.

The Committee has been told that careers advice at school is not delivered by a specifically-trained teacher but by whichever teacher has a free period. Do you think there is any value in a mentoring scheme?

(NL) Might the mentor pass on a biased opinion, or impose their own views upon the student, or would they genuinely listen to the student's views and interests? The approach used is all-important, and good training and preparation of the mentors would be vital.

We have heard that the training given is good, and deals with the danger of dictating a view.

(LW) Mentors could help young people in two ways; with advice about jobs and preparing for work, and advice about wider aspects of adult life.

What do you think of the idea of students having a ‘passport’ or portfolio which would go with them through their education and list the stages they have completed? It would demonstrate their preparation towards being work- ready.

(NG) Some schools ask pupils to prepare a portfolio at GCSE level, which includes all their certificates, but this would not demonstrate their grasp of the ‘soft’ skills that employers look for.

(NL) I think having a ‘passport’ to which things will be added would help a student to realise early that they need to learn how to present themselves and their skills and be aware of what a future employer will expect of them.

Should employers have an input into what should be included in the portfolio?

(NG) It depends at what age it is started.

It could be done in two stages – firstly, building it up, and secondly, applying it. It would be one portfolio which would grow with the student. It could be stage-based and relate to the stages of a student’s education.

(NL) A student would need to practise using it, eg by identifying what they need for an interview, and which bits of it are the most relevant to pick out.

(NG) Employers would have differing views about what they want to see in a CV, so there couldn’t be one formula.

(LW) Not everyone has the chance to work as they study and learn the soft skills that they’ll need later, so these would need to be learnt at school. In our sixth form at school we had an ‘enterprise’ scheme which was very useful in helping us to learn presentation skills and team working. It was like the projects that they do in the TV series ‘The Apprentice’; they have three days to come up with an idea, pitch it and sell it, etc, and how they handle it will determine the outcome that they get. Such a scheme could be made compulsory in schools.

This sounds good. Enterprise is a key issue, as 95% of Kent’s businesses are SMEs. Young people could be told about what support is available for those who wish to develop their entrepreneurial skills.

(NL) There is an enterprise hub at the University of Kent and its work is very effective.