

IN SEARCH OF DECENT WORK AFTER UNIVERSITY

STUDENT HANDBOOK:

**A career-development learning resource for
non-traditional students and graduates**

The EMPLOY project: towards enhancing transitions
to meaningful and sustainable graduate careers for
non-traditional students



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EMPLOY project website: **employ.dsw.edu.pl**
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1. ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

Who is this handbook for?

This handbook is aimed at 'non-traditional' students and graduates who are looking for some support in identifying a career path that will build on their life experiences and their university education in a satisfying way.

By 'non-traditional' we mean students and graduates from communities and groups who are, in some way, under-represented in university. This includes quite a diverse range of groups such as mature students, working class students, students from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities.

Over the past twenty years or so universities across Europe have begun to open their doors to non-traditional students. This has enormously enriched universities making them more vibrant, interesting and genuinely representative institutions. We wish to ensure that these students are fully supported throughout the various stage of their university experience including career development - not least because we know from this, and other research, that some non-traditional students continue to encounter barriers in the job market.

The specific challenges faced by students from non-traditional backgrounds are not identified in a lot of career guidance material and important issues are often left unaddressed. We have developed this handbook because we think it is important to take account of the experiences and needs of non-traditional students as they seek to build their careers and make, the sometimes tricky, transition from university to employment.

Learning from non-traditional student experiences

The material from the handbook draws on 360 interviews conducted by researchers from a network of six universities from England, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden (further information on the EMPLOY project can be found at the back of the handbook).

The research was funded by the EU through Erasmus+ and conducted over a three-year period. The research involved a very wide range of people across the six countries. We spoke to: non-traditional graduates and students; university staff; employers; representatives from various state bodies; unions; employer organisations; and professional bodies.

In these interviews we asked for people's views on what makes a graduate 'employable' and explored student and graduate experiences of education and employment. In particular, we were interested in finding out what could help non-traditional students as they leave university and enter the job market.

This handbook foregrounds the voices of students and graduates and highlights their experiences and specific needs. You will, as you engage with this handbook, come across student experiences or case studies from other countries. This may seem, at first appearances, not immediately relevant to the issues you face where you live. However, this trans-European dimension of the handbook, we feel, allows us all to step outside our own local or national experiences a bit and may help us to look at the issues we face from another perspective.

The handbook does not offer a list of tips and techniques for finding work - partly because there are many publications that already do that (please see the *Further Resources* section at the back of the handbook for a list of career services and useful publications). But we also think that sometimes this advice is too simplistic and suggests that unemployment or being stuck in unsatisfying work are things that can be overcome by having the 'right attitude'.

This is simply not the case. Decades of research, including the material gathered for this project, indicates that inequalities in education, work and society are deeply rooted in Europe. Such inequalities cannot be tackled by individuals alone.

Consequently, we think a notion of 'employability' as something that is framed as the sole responsibility of graduates, and all the assumptions that frequently go with that, needs to be interrogated. It is from this critical and realistic perspective that we want look at what non-traditional students and graduates **can** do to enhance career opportunities.

So instead of being a "how to get a job" handbook, we see this, instead, as a learning resource for those who are thinking about making the transition from university to employment - and particularly as a resource that prompts you to recognise the graduate labour market worth of the diverse experiences that you already have as a non-traditional student.

The handbook is tailored with the needs of specific groups of students in mind and includes material on:

- ▶ non-traditional graduates' experiences in making the transition from university to work
- ▶ what employers are looking for in graduates
- ▶ some of the common challenges faced by non-traditional graduates in the job market
- ▶ supports and strategies that can be used by graduates in seeking employment links and references to further information on employability, equality and higher education

Finally, you may be interested to know that this handbook is one of two emanating from the research: a companion handbook has been produced for employers and university staff and can be found on the project website: <http://employ.dsw.edu.pl/language/en>

How to use this handbook

It is intended that the handbook will be used in many contexts and for many purposes. As such, we have chosen a simple, adaptable design.

The handbook is, as we have mentioned, a learning resource and it may be used individually or collectively in a group-learning context. It aims to encourage critical reflection on employment and employability in a way that we think may be of some use to non-traditional students exploring possible graduate career paths.

So you will find, throughout the handbook, a series of learning activities, which are designed to get you thinking about the significance of your own biographical, educational and occupational experiences in identifying and securing the kind of work you would like to do.

The activities are based on adult education principles and methods which recognise lived experience as a source of rich knowledge.

An adult education perspective also highlights the importance of critical reflection in personal and group contexts as a way to challenge orthodoxies which restrict opportunities for development and to identify the sources of injustice and inequality.

Each chapter, then, which focuses on an important aspect of graduate employability, will usually open with an invitation for you, the reader, to reflect upon your own thoughts on the main theme of the chapter. It will then, in most cases, contain some of our reflections on what we feel we have learnt from the research.

Then, there will be some evidence (case studies, stories, etc.) from the research which we invite you to read through and annotate – sometimes suggesting a question to bear in mind as you read. Following this, there are some activities that ask you to reflect, individually and/or in groups, on your reaction to the material.

Finally, and in a hope that we can extend and sustain the learning and conversations online you will find a note at the end of each chapter which looks like this:

Continue the conversation on Twitter ... @Employ2016

We have used Twitter throughout our project to share findings, resources and to talk about non-traditional students' transition to graduate work. We would love if you could join in this conversation to share your reactions to the various activities and provocations in the handbook but also to share your own knowledge and experiences.

Diversity of experience as a rich resource for career development

Although there are, undoubtedly, challenges for non-traditional students in the search for good graduate work, it's also important to focus on the wealth of diverse experience that you, as such a student or graduate, can offer. And indeed, what we have learned in our research is that there is a desire amongst many employers across Europe to move towards creating a workforce with more rich and varied experiences and backgrounds. We are keen, then, that in working through this handbook that you start to see the value in the diversity of experiences of non-traditional groups and that you gain the confidence to develop a rich and honest story of your educational and occupational life which will be of real interest to graduate employers who know the value, in lots of ways, of a diverse workforce. In fact, the handbook will finish on this important and hopeful point – i.e. the diversity of non-traditional experience and background as a resource for graduate employment.

Activity 1.1: Creating a Career Development Journal

A lot of the learning activities in this book are based around individual and group reflective processes. In other words, we are asking you to take time to think quite deeply about your personal experiences in a broad social context.

You may be familiar with this type of process. Or it may be something very new to you. Whether you are new to reflective learning or not, it is important that you have a space somewhere to capture your thoughts and feelings that come up in response to the activities.

*One place to capture such thoughts is through a journal. So, we'd like to suggest, that before you go any further, that you start a **Career Development Journal** which will become the place for you to record and work through any learning that comes with this handbook. This 'journal' can take many forms- it could be a traditional, paper-based journal, or maybe a Word-based document, or blog, or audio voice memos on your phone - whatever works for you!*

Regardless of its form, we hope that you will continue to use the journal long after you have forgotten about this handbook and that it becomes a fruitful space to work through some of the personal and wider challenges in your efforts to develop a career or occupational path that has meaning for you.

Just a final note on reflection and journals. If you get into this process, it can become quite an emotional way of learning as we hold up the mirror to some of our past experiences. Of course, not all of these experiences are always positive and re-visiting them may have quite an impact on us in the present. If you feel that the process of reflection has unsettled you, you may need to talk it through with someone you trust or with the counselling services of your university.

Previewing the chapters

After this introductory chapter, we will start, then, by asking you, as we asked the participants in our research, to reflect upon your own occupational and educational biography. To help with this we suggest, and give some guidance, on developing a timeline.

Following that chapter, we then turn to look at how employers and students feel that a university does, or should, enhance employability. We consider, and will ask you to consider, what employers think makes an employable graduate.

We then move to more consideration about the challenges facing non-traditional students in making transitions to graduate employment. Again, we ask you to engage with the stories emerging from the research by reflecting upon the challenges you have, or still do, in developing a graduate career path.

The following chapters will look at strategies and, finally, supports which are available to, or need to be developed, to support non-traditional students in their efforts to develop a graduate career path.

2. REFLECTING ON YOUR EDUCATIONAL AND OCCUPATIONAL EXPERIENCES

The approach that we took in our research with students and graduates was a biographical one. What that means is that we believe that we can learn a lot about what is working and not working in society by listening, really listening, to people's life stories.

In this project we hoped to learn from stories of education and employment about what works and doesn't work for non-traditional students as they progress into and through higher education towards graduate employment. Our hope is that you may learn something useful too by engaging in the stories and activities throughout. But, before engaging with some of the stories and views of others, we think that it is useful for you to reflect a bit first on your own educational and occupational experiences and journey. We hope that, by exploring the questions that we pose through the text, that you can weave your own story into the stories of the participants of the project.

One way of starting to think about your own occupational story is to work through a timeline. You can use a timeline as a basis for a reflective piece of writing which tells the story (or one story anyway) of your work and educational journey. Or you could use a draft of your timeline as a basis for group discussion about higher education and careers. It may also be useful for you in terms of revising your CV, or LinkedIn profile, into something that tells the story of your education and work that you feel would be most relevant to a prospective employer - what story do you think they want to hear? Similarly, it might be very useful in terms of preparing for an interview for a job that you are keen to get - it can help us make the connections between our experience and education in ways that may not seem immediately obvious and may help you convince an employer that your work and life story was leading up to this job! Adding in some broader socio-economic contexts to the timeline - such as times of national recession - can also help us to keep the bigger picture in mind and remember career opportunities are not dependent on individual effort alone.

Activity 2.1: Creating an educational and occupational timeline

Just a few words of advice on completing the timeline. The temptation might be to start when you left school, or possibly going back further, the year of your birth, but we'd suggest to keep both ends open. In our conversations with students and graduates, stories often crept back along familial timelines to talk about parents, even grandparents - our extended familial and broader social contexts are all part of our stories and it's important to capture that detail too if we are to get a fuller picture of our own story. And you should keep it open at the future-end too - don't finish it in the present, leave space to speculate about the mid- and long-term future - our learning and careers takes place across these three dimensions of time: past, present and future. Sometimes we need to travel back in time and do this work on our past to make our future.

One way of approaching the timeline is to capture the 'facts' on one side - i.e. significant biographical dates and events - e.g. year of birth; left school; first job; or any significant life event you feel comfortable sharing. And on the other side, leave a bit more space for your thoughts and reflections on the significance of those details in your life now - don't worry if you are not sure if it is relevant to careers or employment at this stage. As mentioned above you should consider including broader socio-economic events and moments which have a bearing on your story.

We've started an example on the next page to show you what it might look like as you start to put it together, but be creative and add as much detail, colour and image as you like. Life can be messy so there may be some messiness in your timeline too. In the example below we have combined personal events with some wider socio-economic ones such as recessions.

Once you've done that, start reading through the rest of the handbook - and come back to your own timeline now and again to do some more work on it. The work on your timeline never really ends.

The 'facts' of my biography

1930/40s: mother born in Mayo – left Ireland for England to train as nurse. Father travelled back and forth between England in early life.

Born in 1970

1980s recession
Left school 1988

Worked in series of temporary jobs

Kids – 2000, 2002, 2004

2007 to present: recession and financial crisis. National embargo on public service recruitment for several years. Education sector hit badly.

University – mature student in 2010

Three years from now?

Thoughts on my biography

I wonder did my father's unsettled life, and my mother's migration to England, have an impact on the way I viewed going away when I grew older? Maybe I felt that I would always go away to the UK for a bit for work – but I came back – as they did eventually – and my grandparents too now that I think of it.

The eighties were a really bleak time to be in school – we had very little in the way of careers guidance, and, unless you did very well in school, there were very little options except going away, emigration.

Lots of shifts in my work – but I've always worked – always adapted to new working demands and necessities. And increasingly drawn, as I got older, to socially-relevant work that I could be creative in too – somehow. Maybe this is something I should talk a bit more about at interviews – sell a bit more?

Why did I go back? I suppose I wanted to do something more with my life – I was always passionate about learning and felt that I needed to do more. I was interested in education – maybe because of dealing with the kids' school – but maybe also after years of wondering why things didn't work out so well for me at school. Education became a kind of theme that I was interested in ...

Oh, I'm not sure but I think it needs to be something I believe in – and offer some sort of security – but what?

Continue the conversation on Twitter ... @Employ2016

3. PERSPECTIVES ON EMPLOYMENT AND 'EMPLOYABILITY' FROM EMPLOYERS AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

What do you think an employer looks for in a graduate? And, what are employers saying that they look for in a graduate? These are the questions which we will explore in this chapter of the handbook.

Thinking carefully about what employers are looking for might be useful in helping us in moving towards the kind of work we want to do. It may also help us prepare, more immediately, for job interviews.

It is also worth saying that the ability to present your life experience in a relevant and compelling way in interviews for jobs was mentioned frequently by employers as an important attribute they looked for when selecting candidates.

In one sense, then, this chapter, and the format of the handbook, is designed to help you develop such a story. But we would also ask you, as you read through this chapter, to think *critically* about employer expectations. Do you think they are asking too much? Are they missing things? Do you think that their preferences potentially discriminate against non-traditional students and graduates? And, crucially, if they do, what can be done?

As before, and in this process of learning about graduate employability, we feel that it is crucial, to start first with your own thoughts.

Activity 3.1: Your thoughts on what employers are looking for in graduates

Individual reflection: Take a moment to think about what you think employers in general are looking for in a graduate? If you have a specific field or employer in mind can you identify what they are looking for? Do you feel that employers are likely to seek non-traditional graduates as employees? Don't forget to record your reflections in your journal whatever form that takes.

If you are doing this with a group. Once you have explored these questions, discuss your thoughts in a small group. What are the common points? How do you differ from others? Has the group discussion shifted you in your thoughts? Again, use your journal to record any reflections you have on the group discussion.

What employers are looking for in graduates

So, hopefully, you have spent some time, either individually and/or as a group, thinking about what employers are looking for in a graduate.

But what do employers really think? Are they looking for the things that we think they are, or should be, when it comes to a graduate? Let's look a bit closer now at what we found out from our conversations and interviews with employers.

Reflections from research: employers on graduates' employability

One thing we learnt from our conversations with employers across the six countries is that a good university undergraduate degree is now often a basic requirement for many jobs. Not so long ago it was felt that a degree, in itself, was enough to get a good graduate job. But what makes a graduate desirable to an employer, it seems, has changed over time and although doing well, academically, at university is not unimportant and may even be used as a screening device at an early stage of graduate recruitment, many employers told us that it is the 'added extra' that specific graduates have that they say can make all the difference.

But what exactly is this 'added extra'? This is harder to pin down because employers mentioned many things and had varied ways of defining that 'little bit extra'. In fact, sometimes the requirements and expectations of graduates made by employers did not always seem consistent. Let's try to explore this further by looking at what they said.

Below you will find a list of the main things that employers are telling us that makes a graduate employable. We should also point out that what follows are the thoughts of employers and recruiters across a diverse range of sectors across Europe. As such, employers of different sizes, or in different countries, or in different sectors will be thinking of graduate employability in different ways. But it is useful, we think, to offer this diverse overview to help you think about employers' varied expectations.

Activity 3.2 Reading and annotating employer thoughts on graduate employability

Read carefully through the 'employability' lists from employers and the voices that follow. What strikes you? What do you agree and disagree with? Take some notes as you go. **If you working with a group**, please then compare notes in pairs or small groups.

Again, whether you are working in a group or individually, use your Career Development Journal as a place to capture your thoughts and reactions to what you read and what, if relevant, is discussed.

Country	What are employers looking for in a graduate?
Portugal	Honesty; humility; responsibility; respect; dedication; readiness to adapt; willingness to move and travel; posture and body language; level of motivation; readiness and the ability to manage stressful situations
UK	Self-awareness; flexibility; confidence; resilience; leadership qualities; strong communication skills; rapport-building capacity; presentation skills; ability to work as part of a team; being able to identify and contextualise experiences in ways that demonstrate skills that are needed in work situations; moulding oneself to a specific way of working within a company and identifying with its philosophy.
Spain	Flexibility and willingness to carry out various tasks, including those that the employee might not like or those that are not directly related to their university degree; ability to work as part of a team. Somebody who stands out of a crowd; ability to adapt to changing situations; capacity to publicly defend ideas; a good command of a foreign language.
Sweden	Theoretical knowledge and analytical, communicative and personal skills. Employers had different views of practical skills: as being adaptive to the workplace or having the capacity to develop the workplace by bringing in new knowledge and perspectives.
Poland	Interesting personality; passionate; open-minded; willingness to get involved; energetic in team-building; creativity; ability to merge theory and practical skills while performing the job; work experience; involvement in extracurricular activities; coherence and accuracy of CV; interview skills; ability to cooperate with others; organisational skills; willingness to take on new challenges; readiness to learn; general curiosity.
Ireland	Vocationally-relevant knowledge and experience; but also a broader knowledge traditionally associated with a university education; a range of social and personal skills; life experience; flexibility; reflective; adaptable; quick-learners; understands the core values of company; 'fitting' with the company culture; self-motivated; evidence of initiative.

Employers in their own words

What follows are more specific comments and quotes from employers on their expectations of a graduate which expand on the points above. Again, as you read, underline or make notes on anything that you think is interesting or puzzling. There are a series of reflective questions that follow that will allow you to explore your thoughts more fully.

“ It is now noted that we have come to the point [...] a university diploma is a formality [...]. This is the starting point (...) let's assume we have 10 CVs and we want to shortlist three candidates for the interview, so we sift through qualifications quickly because they are mandatory - a person with no qualification is not going to apply for such job; so we look at the other things in the CV (Ewelina, Public sector employer, Poland).

“ ... so what makes somebody different is that they have really made the most of their experience. So anything extra that they have done, anything extra that they have got involved in that sets them apart from somebody else ... maybe they've used what they have learned in college [university] and went on sought opportunities to use that ... kind of showing initiative to use it ... anything that set them apart [...] because that's what's appealing - well-rounded personalities ... people ... excellent interpersonal skills, mature outlook ... those kind of things. People who are not just relying on their academic achievement. But ... who've done that bit extra ... or developed themselves personally, or show that potential really. (Jim, Recruiting professional from multi-national, science-based industry, Ireland)

“ A candidate who, from the beginning, shows determination, reveals that he [sic] has done research and is informed, demonstrates determination, has 70% more possibilities than the others. This is fundamental, because in everyday life one learns and improves and tackles what is NOT SO good. But if you don't have determination and take for granted that you're the person for the job, that's no good. [...] people [need] to show they are willing to grab an opportunity and work hard, take responsibility and in a good-humoured way... (Lúcia, employer from private sector, Portugal).

“ [S]elf-awareness is quite a big piece, someone who kind of understands what their strengths and their weaknesses are. You get quite a lot of overconfident and you get quite a lot of under-confident students but it's that balance of kind of knowing what you can contribute and what you need to learn. I think you do want that certain level of intelligence and the reason we have kept the 2:1 [as a requirement.] we don't expect you to have the experience, we will teach you. So a thirst for learning is probably a big one as well. I think it's the soft skills that we look for more than the hard skills because you can teach the hard skills. (Jane, Private Sector, UK).

“ It is a little like a driving license, it is when you start working that you start forming a platform for further training and start to develop, but an understanding about who you are and who you are representing, to understand people, to understand how to develop people that are going to contribute to the company. It is an important knowledge... it is about different subjects, of organization, of behavioural science, different areas where this is discussed... if you have the academic knowledge and this reasoning and an understanding about the practice with people, economy and all you are well prepared. (Employer 3, Human Resources, Sweden)

“ We always ask employers the same question and they say, absolutely all the professionals, whether an entrepreneur, or a human resources manager or a manager, always tell us the same thing: 'I just want someone who is willing to work'. That's the tag or the main professional profile they always ask for: the desire to work. Of course, when you analyse what they mean you realise that not everyone has the same idea of 'willingness to work' (Local government staff dealing with paid internships in private sector, Spain).

“ It is also important to be curious, of course you should follow routines and rules but I don't think it's wrong to try new ways [of doing things] ... to be able to challenge a bit. (Employer 4, Sweden, Human Resources)

“ And it is important for the student [...] to include in their CV the skills they developed outside of the formal job market. It's important to see if the candidate, apart from their formal programme of study, has undertaken any other courses, postgraduate studies, whether they have other competencies and skills which could be maximized in the workplace in order to avoid having to employ someone extra, from additional companies (Hanna, Public Sector, Poland)

“ An important factor is passion. When a student joins our organization [...] it often turns out that they don't have that spark not to mention talent, they don't have that type of personality which would enable them to enter the office and say 'I know about this and I can help here, or come up with an idea on their own initiative (Maciej, local government, Poland).

“ If I have two positions and 15 CVs I don't invite 15 people for the interview. I do my shortlisting and select those candidates from whom I'd like to learn about something. I do pay attention to the sort of placement they undertook - for me it is an asset if the person has had contact with (Wioletta, Third Sector, Poland).

“ Attitude. It's all about attitude. Attitude and ability. ... [...] It's a willingness to get involved. It's about respect, and trust and recognition. [...] It's what steps do you need to take to be successful. What steps do you need to - or even just people who play football as a team, and they're the captain, and they have been for three years and they are really passionate about it. They all will be a really good leader because being a good leader in that situation is no different - transferrable skills is what's it's all about. [...] Disinterest, blasé, personally - can't stand cockiness, oh my god. Just because you have a degree - well done! so do 90% of the people who are in this building, you know. What have you got that nobody else has? That's what's going to make you stand out. (Talent manager with large private firm, Ireland)

“ [I'm looking for people who are ...] quietly confident ... without being arrogant, good sense of humour, and a self-starter. And somebody who is flexible, willing to get in and get stuck in [...] people who are bright, ambitious, but, you know within the bounds of decency and they are learning, they are raw and you can mould them as they go along. (HR Consultant, Ireland)

“ [We're looking for] ... good people ... who have good education, good research skills, could hit the ground running to an extent but bring in fresh thinking. [...] how rounded they are y'know ... how ... will these people hit the ground running ... will they be able to adapt to different environments when they come in. (Public Services Recruiter, Ireland)

Activity 3.3 Reflections on the employable graduate

Once you have read through the table and quotes, and have had some time to think and/or discuss your thoughts, address the following questions in your Career Development Journal or with your learning group. What are the common themes across countries on what makes a graduate employable?

How does the employers' notion of an 'employable graduate' differ/complement your own which you were prompted to reflect upon at the start of the chapter?

Non-traditional graduates employability value

At this stage you have spent some time reflecting on your own educational and occupational experiences. You have also, in this chapter, looked quite carefully at what employers think makes an employable graduate. Many of the attributes and competences that have been mentioned throughout this chapter are ones that are often easily identifiable in non-traditional student groups (e.g. experience; maturity; flexibility; evidence of commitment to an educational or occupational path; resilience; multi-tasking; etc.)

Activity 3.4 Identifying your employability value as a non-traditional student/graduate

Take some time, on your own, or as a group, to note down which of these 'employability' attributes or competences that you have come across in this chapter are ones that you feel you have.

Once you have noted them down, provide a specific example from your educational, personal or working experience which illustrates this skill or attribute. Your capacity to provide a relevant and specific example is something that employers will often look for in competency-based interviews.

Keep a record of this activity in your Career Development Journal.

A critical look at employability – not just the responsibility of the graduate

Some of the attempts to define graduate employability that are emerging from employers relate to personal attributes or skills, some of them relate to additional qualifications and experience. But all of them, it seems, imagine 'employability' as being something that belongs to, and, crucially, is the sole responsibility of, the graduate.

That is, the feeling is that the answer to what makes a graduate employable lies exclusively with that graduate – with you! And, as you read this you may be thinking that this seems like common sense. But are there other ways of thinking about graduate employability? The following activity explores this question.

Activity 3.5 Graduate employability: whose responsibility?

Questions for individual reflection or group work:

Imagine that you were able to interview the employers that we talked to. What are the kind of questions you would like to ask them?

Is there anything you would like to add? Or is there something that needs to be challenged?

How do these ways of describing an employable graduate relate to the experience of non-traditional students?

Who or what else, besides the graduate, may be responsible for graduate employability (have a look at the broader socio-economic events on your timeline to help you here)?

Try to come up with a definition of 'employability' which focuses on employers, the university or wider society instead of students and/or graduates.

We haven't discussed the role of the university in this chapter very much. The following activity, which may require some further research or discussion, prompts you to look at the university's role in terms of graduate employability.

Activity 3.6 Extended study question

What are the roles and responsibilities of universities in enhancing non-traditional graduates' transition to meaningful and sustainable careers? What are universities doing well and what do they need to be doing better in terms of graduate employability?

Continue the conversation on Twitter ... @Employ2016

4. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN MAKING THE TRANSITION TO MEANINGFUL AND SUSTAINABLE GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT?

In this chapter, we are going to consider some of the challenges that face non-traditional graduates in their search for work that has a value for them.

In the chapter that follows this, we will try to identify some of the strategies and supports that can help graduates navigate those challenges.

Again, we think that it may be useful for you, firstly, to consider these broad challenges within the context of your own experiences. So, before, we turn to what others had to say, take some time to do the following activity. Addressing our own challenges, and then contextualising them and re-framing them with the knowledge that these challenges are shared by others may help us move towards looking at some of these issues in different ways. And maybe we might start to look at the challenge of graduate employability as something bigger than our own problem.

Furthermore, it may be a real asset for you during a recruitment process to be able to draw deeply on examples of challenges you have faced and confronted in your educational and occupational life.

Activity 4.1 Reflecting on the challenges faced as a non-traditional student/graduate in the search for a career

Take the time to think about the following question and then work on it, individually, in a reflective piece in your Career Development Journal and/or part of group discussion.

What are challenges that you face, or have faced, in your search for the kind of graduate work that you would like to do? (Again, your developing time-line and/or journal may be helpful here to get you thinking)

Reflections from research: challenges facing non-traditional students search for graduate employment

The students that took part in our research talked about the various challenges that they face, or have faced, in their search for graduate work. Many of these challenges were identified as being from a background or community that are offered less opportunities than people from more privileged backgrounds.

So, for example, for some students from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds, it was simply this aspect of their identity that presented the greatest challenge in search for graduate employment. Maybe, more specifically, it was about being 'visibly' part of such groups that presented the challenge.

This is difficult to deal with but it is worth noting that many companies and institutions are bound by equality charters and legislation and it is worth checking specific companies' commitments and your rights if this occurs (see Further Resources section at the end of the handbook for more information on this).

Some students with disabilities reported encountering specific challenges in their educational and occupational careers and talked about how difficult it is for people to see beyond their disabilities, whether visible or not. Similarly, it was the sense of being immediately noticeable as working-class, for example through accent, which some graduates said was a significant barrier. Another aspect of how class presents a challenge for students, and this was evident in a number of the countries involved in the research, was the sense in which working-class students did not have access to the important social and occupational networks that middle-class students have which can become extremely valuable in making those first steps in the development of a career.

Many of the students involved in our research were mature students and despite employers expressing a preference for experience in graduates, there was quite broad agreement, for different reasons, that being older was a disadvantage in many situations.

A number of the research partners identified parenthood and its associated care commitments as being a barrier to study at universities and career choices. Many students talked about how their parental duties, and it was mainly women who reported this, had limited their capacity for doing anything except coursework during their studies and, consequently, had restricted their options for further study or internships both as a student and as a graduate. Even when they were successful in getting an interview, graduate-mothers faced more barriers - for example, students in one country reported being asked about their plans to have children during a recruitment process.

The commitment to family and place restricts many non-traditional graduates from embracing the so-called 'flexibility' (in terms of time and location) that many employers seem to value in graduates.

Interestingly, when we read across the various accounts emerging from the research there are some contradictions too. For example, in some cases students feel that, even with a degree, they are not qualified enough and they need to do a post-graduate qualification to gain employment which, again to return to financial challenges, for many is unaffordable.

Yet, there are instances of other students claiming that their age combined with their higher education has made them 'too experienced' to get work – that they are not the pliable human subjects that many employers are looking for in younger graduates. The contradictions, of course, do not lie in the lives of graduates, but more, in the barriers placed in front of them in a highly competitive graduate labour market.

One major challenge - lack of useful information - is one that, in some ways, can be more easily addressed. For some students coming to the end of their degrees, the greatest challenge was not knowing what career paths were open to them. These students felt that they would benefit from a careers advice that could take the time to listen carefully to their educational and occupational stories and hopes before, during and after university. A lot of students were not quite sure what path, if any, was open to them as a graduate and regretted that these pathways were not clearer to them when they first chose their degree course.

A final, but significant, challenge that was mentioned by some students, and maybe more predominantly in Ireland, Spain and Portugal, was the lack of opportunities for work. The impact of the crisis, in these countries in particular, has presented the greatest challenge for many highly-qualified and employable non-traditional graduates in their search for work. Meaningful work that builds on a university education was simply not available to them due to high level of unemployment and austerity measures.

Activity 4.2 Responding to the research findings on challenges: what is missing for you?

We have, above, outlined in very broad terms the challenges which the non-traditional students involved in our research encountered. However, we are very aware that this is far from the full-picture.

Again, reflecting on your own experience, what are the challenges which have been left out? To what extent do these challenges overlap your own ones?

This activity can be done as an entry in your Career Development Journal or conducted as a group activity.

Student case studies on challenges in transitioning to the graduate labour market

We've summarised some of the challenges above, but now we'd like to zoom in on some the detail of some of the students involved in our research to develop a clearer picture of the reality of these challenges. So, in what follows you will find some accounts from specific students about the challenges that they have faced, or do face, in their search for graduate work.

Activity 4.3

an invitation to identify, read and actively re-read a case study on the challenges encountered by students in search for a graduate career

Read through the following case studies a couple of times and, then, pick **one** that speaks most closely to your own experience or that moves you or engages you in some way. Read the case study over a couple of times (annotating as you go) before moving on to the activity that follows.

Ana - Portugal

Ana is 37 years old and was born in Portugal. Her father worked for the City Hall and her mother was a primary school teacher. She considers herself as an average student in school.

She did a degree in Modern Languages and Literature; however, she was never able to get a job as a teacher, even when she tried at national level (including the Portuguese Islands). She also tried to find a position in Spain and in the United Kingdom, but discouraged by high unemployment rates among teachers, she gave up following this professional path.

When she finished her first degree she got a placement in her hometown, in a University for the Elderly. In this placement, she organised a set of cultural activities for the elderly and participated in European projects. She also spent a few hours teaching English to kids at beginners' level. In this institution, there was a university Masters programme in Adult Education and Community Intervention. Ana thought this programme was attractive and would be open more doors to employment. Although she finished all the courses she never completed the final dissertation.

When the internship ended, she started to work in the Port of Guadiana. Sailors arrive there from different parts of the world with different needs and Ana's job was to help them in multiple ways. She worked for two years and whilst also doing some teaching.

Ana's schedule was hard: she had to work every weekend and during holidays (resting during the week) and this was difficult to fit with her desire to become a mother.

She began to search for a different job and had an offer from two former students from the USA who had developed a Properties Management enterprise.

Ana began working on a part-time basis but today she works full-time, and finally achieved some stability. Ana thinks the culture of her bosses is different and reflects positively on her everyday life. They offered to pay her fees for the Masters programme she is doing presently, on Business Management. As long as the work is done, Ana is free to manage her time. As a worker, she thinks that responsibility, assuming commitments, keeping dead-lines, being proactive and finding solutions to the problems, are crucial to build a climate of trust with her employer. She sees some of her experience as an asset; for example, being proficient in English or even her knowledge of the nautical world.

Nevertheless, she identified some problems related to age and gender: she has male colleagues that entered the company after her, perform similar functions and receive a higher salary. Ana knows some current initiatives and services of the university that could help students' employability, but stresses these services are suitable solely for younger students. Even if she wanted to join some programmes, it would be impossible to find the time: she has also to consider her job, the classes at the university, and her family.

Mike - UK

Mike, who is in his late thirties, completed a social studies degree majoring in politics and obtained a first class degree - the highest classification. He defines himself as being working class.

He was not encouraged by his school teachers to go to university and his parents saw it as a waste of time and 'not for people like them'. So, he left school at 16 and went into roofing.

But it was never a passion for him. After leaving school he continued his interest in learning.

He chose to study at Warwick because of its reputation. He enjoyed learning for his degree but always felt he didn't fit in at Warwick because of his age and social class background.

His ideal choice after completing his degree would be to do postgraduate study but financially he cannot afford this. He went once to see a Careers Officer in the Careers and Skills Office but didn't find the session helpful. He informed the person that he did not want to work for a large company but instead was interested in the public sector. He was told 'to go and look at this website' which he said he could have worked out for himself so he did not go back. Mike felt let down as he had wanted some guidance and information about particular jobs.

One of the key reasons why he did not want to work in industry is because he feels that they would discriminate against him because of his age but also because of his working class culture in terms of his accent and language. He also feels that the 'old boys network' is strong in helping certain students get top jobs. As he states 'when it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for them'. He also never attended any careers fairs on campus as they are dominated by the big companies and private sector. Mike would have liked more support and network systems to help in looking for a career.

In the end, Mike took the decision to go back to roofing for purely financial reasons. He intended to become self-employed and work for himself so that he can control his own time.

Rafael - Spain

Rafael is 23 years old and he suffers from a rare, degenerative disease and was diagnosed when he was only 8 years.

He comes from a very poor family. His father was a building worker and started work at 14 years old and does

not have any basic education. His mother used to work as a cleaner but she had to quit work to devote all of her time to Rafael's help and care. She abandoned education as she belonged to a large family, consisting of nine siblings, with significant economic problems. Today, Rafael's parents are divorced and he lives with his mother, his sister and his mother's partner.

Rafael has never felt the support of his father or his father's family. They considered Rafael should not study as he is a disabled person. However, he has always had the support of his mother, who instilled the importance of having a good education to 'be someone in life'. She also has passed on these conceptions to his little sister who is completing her secondary education.

Currently, Rafael is studying an undergraduate program in Journalism and he would like to get some specialization in the social field, to help other people who are in a similar situation, and also to help teachers as sometimes 'they do not know how to deal with some disabilities'. His goal is to normalize disability, to make it more visible, and to promote the view that having a disability is not a barrier to acquire a degree or for professional development.

His family is going through significant economic difficulties, derived from the parents' divorce and her mother's abandonment of work in order to take care of him. Thus, the only family income comes from the small pension he receives for his disability.

However, he has managed to cover the costs of this education by means of grants and scholarships. In spite of that, he finds other obstacles to completing his degree such as: commuting on a daily basis a distance of about 40 kilometres, and the need to go in a special vehicle adapted for wheelchair; and the lack of personal assistance in the classroom which is necessary for him to meet the most basic needs like drinking water, going to the toilet, taking notes or completing exams. This would help him to 'feel independent'. These gaps are normally covered with the effort and dedication of his mother, who is in charge of taking him to college [university] and stay with him every day until the end of the day and so, Rafael can fulfil his dream of becoming a journalist and developing a career.

Rafael in order to improve his employability skills he works as a volunteer doing a sport slot on a local radio programme.

He knows that he will have to cope with many barriers due to his disability but he seeks to create opportunities suitable to his situation.

He wisely combines his professional field (Journalism), his skills with ICT and his 'disability' to take advantage and launch his message regarding people with disabilities. He has appeared several times in the media as an extraordinary example of self-improvement.

And this have had some impact in his career prospects: 'Now, I am going to collaborate with the TV, because they are going to do a program about disability once a month, and they have offered me the possibility to collaborate. And this is very good to gain some work experience for my career'.

In addition, he has several projects in mind to publicise his work to media companies and identify job opportunities. 'I am also making a website [...] and I will set up the portal and interviews [...] to make myself known'. He does not discount continuing his education as well as learning languages.

Clare - Sweden

Clare came to Sweden six years ago when she was 41 from one of the EU-countries where English is a main language. She has a Swedish husband and a little son to take care of. Clare has two degrees in Law and in Psychology, and 20 years of experience as a lawyer.

She came to Sweden as she married a Swede and imagined that there would not be any difficulties to get a job in her own profession. She studied Swedish before she moved and continued her studies when she came to Sweden. After a couple of years, she realised that she needed to change her career to be able to get a job. Clare's mother and father didn't have a university education, but her sisters and brother are HE graduates. She chooses the Huma Resources course after talking to a career counsellor at the university.

She now studies full time and is aware of the difficulties in getting a job as she feels she is too old. She applied for a part-time HR assistant job, and did very well at the interview, but was told that she was overqualified. When she was writing her final essay for the degree she applies for an Internship Course which is provided after the programme. Clare was successfully graduated but could not find an internship place after college [university]...

Before and after the summer 2016 she applied for HR jobs, but was not even called to interview. She started to look for other jobs and by the late autumn she was successfully employed at the state Insurance Agency.

Her Swedish university education obviously helped her to find a job, but it does not have anything to do with her degree. However, she is happy that after such a struggle, she was finally able to get a job, and start a new life and career.

Lila – Poland

Lila is 44 years old, married, and mother to two children. She was born and grew up in Wroclaw and still lives there. She is the first generation in her family who went on to study in higher education. After graduating she started her employment as a social worker, which corresponded with her programme of study.

In 1992 Lila finished her secondary technical school of textiles. Due to a difficult financial situation her family did not agree for Lila to continue studying. Her first attempts at finding employment turned out to be unsuccessful.

These were the first years of the political system transformation in Poland and she remembers this period in her life as, on the one hand, a time of social euphoria, but on the other hand, as a time of an 'unemployment wave' and 'illegal working' without employment contracts in, primarily, small start-up family businesses.

She gained her first working experience as a shop assistant. For around three years she worked in a beauty shop and then for the next two years in a children's clothes shop. During this time, she got married and gave birth to her first child. She decided to take three years extended post-maternity leave and after that period she decided to return to work.

Her family situation (lack of support from her parents, parents-in-law and the subsequent necessity to organize daily activities in a way that would enable her to time share the care of her children with her husband) forced her to look for employment which would offer her flexibility in terms of time. She found work as a tram driver in the Municipal Transport Company. In order to be able to take up the role she had to complete a tram driving course.

Lila's health problems started and they prompted her to reflect on her life situation, on who she is, what she does, what she would like to do, and what potential and talents she has. The thought of radical change in her career path and of commencing university studies occurred to her:

Lila's early experiences of the university were difficult for her mostly due to the lack of support from her employer and the need to juggle the three worlds of study, work and family.

Despite initial difficulties the studies turned out to be a success for her (she was awarded best student) as well as the source of personal satisfaction.

After graduating Lila found a job with the employer who she'd done her student placement with.

Julia – Ireland

Julia is a 45-year-old humanities graduate. During her final year at university she was commuting to Maynooth from Dublin where she lived with her wife and their children from previous relationships. Julia comes from a part of Dublin which, traditionally, has very low university access rates and she will be the first in her family to gain a degree.

Julia enjoyed primary school and traces her life-long passion for playing football to this time. She wanted to attend the local co-educational secondary school but her mother, imagining a better education, sent her, instead, to the local girls' secondary school which Julia hated.

Eventually, her mother told her that she could leave as soon as she found a job which Julia did when she was sixteen. Julia left school, without sitting the Intermediate Certificate, for a job in a local factory where her father worked.

Julia worked in the factory for fourteen years. Feeling the need to move on, and as the industry started to decline, she spent some time moving around a number of low-paid jobs.

Eventually, through a state funded community employment scheme, she became involved in coaching in schools which she loved. She also worked for a while in administration and, latterly, as a carer for an agency. During these years she was also caring for her mother who was terminally ill and her younger brother who died before she entered university.

Julia has relied on a tight/extensive network of friends and family (her wife and her son are also attending university) in making key decisions in following her educational path. She isn't overly-specific in defining the kind of work she wants to do but would like it to involve, at some level, helping people.

Julia's network, which provided models of educational progression and sources of trusted advice, eventually encouraged her to attend a HEI access course in a local further education university. This course was designed to provide access into selected programmes in one of Ireland's most elite universities.

However, Julia never felt comfortable on visits to the campus and 'didn't think they'd want someone' from her area. Instead, she was encouraged by, what she regarded as, the more mature-student friendly environment of Maynooth University.

Julia didn't receive any career-specific advice about her choice of course prior to university. However, she has quite a strong faith in the value of a degree in the labour market and returns a number of times in her story to her lack of education credentials and, what she sees as, an associated inability to escape low-status, low-paid and unrewarding work.

Julia is aware that there may be a need for further study, at postgraduate level but, while the government continue to resist funding most postgraduate education, this is something that is not an option for Julia. Instead, her hope is to get a 'good' job in the public or NGO sector which will allow her to progress once she employed.

Julia didn't have much interaction with the careers service at the university- she wasn't sure if it was something that was directed towards her. She did attend a careers fair but, again, didn't feel that any of the employers were interested in her degree discipline. She keeps an eye on online resources for jobs but hasn't seen anything yet. She also feels that universities could do a bit more about making graduate occupational destinations more visible to prospective students.

Julia considered to what extent her non-traditional student characteristics might work against her in a search for work. She was quite clear that she thinks, in particular, her address, would have a negative impact. She has in the past masked her address in various ways to circumvent organisational bias towards people from her area. Her age, she feels will have less of a negative impact on her capacity to get work but would probably still be somewhat significant, in a negative way, for employers. Being gay, she feels, is the least significant in terms of recruitment bias and she notes that attitudes seem to have shifted relatively swiftly in this regard.

Julia is unsure of how her career path will unfold but maintains faith, as her undergraduate studies come to an end, in the labour market currency of her degree to get her a 'decent' job.

Since Julia has graduated she has been unable to get the 'decent' job she had hoped for. For a period of time after her graduation she felt quite negative about the value and use of her degree - in fact, she returned to the care work that she was doing before attending university. However, she realises now that she is quite suited to that work and she sees it as valuable work even if society doesn't. Her ambition now is to get further training to position herself in a 'decent job' within the care sector. Although, her degree didn't lead directly to a graduate job, she feels that her university education allowed her to develop enough confidence and skills to feel comfortable taking on a graduate diploma which, she hopes, will position her more strongly in the care sector.

Activity 4.4 Going deeper and wider with student stories

If you are using this handbook on your own, respond to the questions below in your Career Development Journal.

- ▶ *If you are working as a group, these questions may be used as discussion prompts.*
- ▶ *We asked you to read through the case studies and pick one that you were drawn to in some way. Why did you choose this case study? What drew you into it?*
- ▶ *What are the broader issues behind the student's story which are contributing to their challenges?*
- ▶ *What are the options for the student in confronting these challenges?*
- ▶ *What are the responsibilities of the university, employers, state and wider society in confronting such challenges?*

If you are working in a group, you can use your Career Development Journal to record your thoughts following the discussion.

Activity 4.5 Extended study question

Job interviews, traditionally, constitute the first contact of the graduate with the world of work. What should job interviews be based on? Should they be based mainly on the analysis of the candidate's education biography and the effects of informal and extra-curricular learning of the graduates/work candidates? Is it worth structuring your CV/Linkedin profile this way and why?

Continue the conversation on Twitter ... @Employ2016

5. RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES: STUDENT AND GRADUATE STRATEGIES

As we have seen in the last chapter, there are a number of significant challenges facing non-traditional students in their search for meaningful and sustainable graduate employment. In this chapter, we will explore how we might effectively address these challenges by considering further how students and graduates have responded to them. But before we look at the strategies of the students and graduates involved in this research project, please complete Activity 5.1. Again, it is important, we feel, in the learning process to start with our ourselves and work slowly out from that to contemplate the experiences of others.

Activity 5.1 What can you do to respond to challenges facing you as a graduate?

In the previous chapter (Activity 4.1) we asked you to reflect upon the challenges you have faced in your efforts to develop the kind of graduate career that you would like.

Now, we are asking you, to reflect upon the things that you can do that will help you overcome these challenges. There are many things that are not in our control when it comes to our career development. But there are things we can work on all the same. This is what we'd like you to reflect upon here.

Again, it would be useful for you to move from personal reflections to a small group discussion if this is possible. As always, if you are working with a group, make sure you record your personal thoughts and reflections on the of the discussion in your journal.

Reflections from research: Ways in which students respond to challenges of graduate employment

There are a number of ways in which non-traditional students are responding to the challenges of developing a graduate career. Across the six partners involved in this research project, it seems that there are some commonalities in terms of strategies; and some are specific to one, or a couple, of specific national or sectoral contexts.

Often non-traditional graduates go on to some form of further education after graduation to enhance their expertise in their chosen field. This may be full-time and/or part time. It was felt that further study was particularly advantageous for graduates who were already working in their desired field. Of course, and we mentioned this before, there are significant time and money costs associated with graduate study although this will vary from country to country.

Most of the strategies outlined below are for students and graduates who are not yet positioned in the career that they wish to pursue but most of them are also useful for graduates who may be in a graduate job already but are considering changing position or occupation. Some of the most common strategies include:

- ▶ finding ways of formally or informally networking with individuals, companies and sectors in which graduates want to work;
- ▶ engaging in part-time or voluntary work relevant to a specific career;
- ▶ doing internships/work placements during or after studies;
- ▶ tailoring CVs tailored to individual positions and companies
- ▶ using online resources (in some sectors, it appears that LinkedIn profiles are replacing CVs.)
- ▶ researching prospective companies in advance of interviews
- ▶ developing awareness of various stages and methods used in recruitment for graduate positions;
- ▶ seeking out interview training;
- ▶ developing proficiency in first or second languages
- ▶ developing relationships with mentors in the sector

For more advice and tips on these strategies can be found in the Further Resources section at the end of the handbook.

One point worth stressing is that it seems that there has been a move away from generic CVs – now, a CV must be tailored for each job application. Indeed, some sectors have moved away from CVs altogether and rely more on platforms such as LinkedIn.

This is where some good and creative background research into the organisation comes in. Many of the employers talked about their 'values' and seeking people who identified strongly, and fitted in with, their company ethos. The implications for this may be that non-traditional students and graduates have to become quite expert in telling the story of themselves that employers want to hear.

We might be prompting you then, as a non-traditional student, to develop your career-storytelling skills and, indeed, many of the activities in this handbook have been designed to help you do just that. This is, in some ways, a performance where the audience and the stage changes all the time as you adapt your career story to the shifting expectations of various employers. The tricky part, then, is for you are to keep true to your own values and goals, while performing the recruitment/promotion dance for employers.

These are things that we have some control of and can work on, individually and through seeking support from colleagues, peers, mentors and career services, but they do depend on job opportunities being available. Also, some of these strategies, as we have already seen, present challenges for non-traditional students: for example, internships may be a very valuable way of graduates developing their early career, however, often these are unpaid, or poorly paid, positions are not financially viable for many non-traditional students who are under pressure to start earning a decent wage. For more information on internships and work experience, take a look at the Further Resources section at the back of the handbook.

Activity 5.2 Researching employers

Pick a sector that you think you might like to work in. You might start first by thinking of the kind of work in broad terms that you want to do (e.g. Caring; creative; lab work; teaching; etc.). Once you have narrowed it down to a broad sector, try to find two organisations from the sector which look attractive to you as an employer. Find out as much as you can about the two organisations. The aspects you might touch on might include:

- ▶ Organisation's core purpose (what do they do/why?) and their values.
- ▶ Who is the organisation serving? Who are their 'clients'?
- ▶ What is the history, structure and future plans of the organisation?
- ▶ Who are the key personnel?
- ▶ What is their recruitment process? Do they have a graduate programme?
- ▶ In what ways is your experience as a non-traditional student a benefit to the organisations? How would you enhance the work they do and the overall organisational culture?
- ▶ Are there any Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives or do they make any sort of commitment to supporting equality?

If you are working on your own, record your responses to these questions in your Career Development Journal. These responses will help in your research and preparation for graduate work.

If you are working as part of a group, please present your research on one of the organisations to the rest of the group. Once the group have presented and discussed their research, take some time to reflect on what was discussed and what stayed with you after the discussion. Again, jot down these thoughts in your Career Development Journal.

Activity 5.3 Towards developing an organisation or sector-specific CV and cover letter

Develop a version of your CV that is tailored to one of the organisations you did some research on.

Write a letter of no more than one page to the organisation's Human Resources department outlining why you want to work for them and how, by providing specific examples and comment, your experience, skills and education makes you a desirable prospective employee of the company.

There are resources in the resources section at the back of the handbook that give advice on CVs and cover letters – use these

Activity 5.4 Developing a LinkedIn profile

Use your CV to help you develop a LinkedIn profile that is tailored to the sector or type of work that you would like to do.

Look in Further Resources for some guidance on developing a LinkedIn profile.

Activity 5.5 Role-play interview

If you are working as part of a group, please organise a role play interview in which one student/graduate acts as the employer and the other as a job-seeker. The 'employer' should take into account the aspects that make a graduate employable (see activity 2.2); and the 'job seeker' should take into account the last exercise he/she did: what he/she said in his/her CV and what was highlighted in his/her motivation letter for the human resources.

Student voices on strategies

In the following extracts, students and graduates involved in the research describe some of the strategies they have used to enhance their chances of finding graduate work.

Activity 5.6

As you read through them, make notes and comments and think, in particular, about strategies you feel are worthwhile and might be relevant to your situation.



I handed my CV personally. I spoke with them about what I was able to teach and I showed readiness to work. A month later, I was contacted by them because their Portuguese Teacher left the institution. Although they had a lot of CVs, they remembered me because I was there and we had a conversation.



When I finished my degree I already had a job offer. It was a temp job, but I wanted to take the opportunity and I was the official designer of the MOTELx - Lisbon International Horror Film Festival. I was contacted by them through my contacts in the area of Design. I did all the tests they asked me and I started working in September. I gave my best, I thought I had to do it, I made a lot of sacrifices, but I thought 'I'm going to give my best because I want to keep on working with them next year'. In fact, even before the project finished they said they would like to work with me the next year. It was very rewarding (Jorge, Communication Design Graduate, mature student, Portugal).



I think companies are definitely tailoring it like 'this is our role, this is our company, this is who we want for the job' and they're making that public. So you can either choose to pretend to be that person or you can make yourself into that person ... if you're not the person the company wants you're not going to get employed (Ann, University of Warwick student, UK).



Last year I went to a Royal Bank of Scotland dinner. It wasn't part of the application process - it was kind of discovering more about us but then from that they did invite me to apply to them. I think because it's informal but formal but there are employees who have been with the company quite a while or sometimes graduates so you can talk to them. And because it's dinner, it's not an interview setting you can ask them any questions you want to, you can get tips. It does actually help (Ann, University of Warwick student, UK).



I decided to bet on myself, on what I like, and that is the strategy I follow. I constantly update my CV, I study languages (...). If you have no experience, you will not get anywhere. An effective public investment has to be built, for unemployed people or people like me who have not been able to work yet and I do not have a type of benefit. I need to live, I'm not sitting around, I'm earning my beans as well as I can and I am doing unpaid internships. And I would even be willing to leave Spain but for a definite job, not like other people who are going to try their luck. I cannot afford that economically (Laura, graduate in Law, first generation student, Spain).



"Strategies?" Try to make the best possible CV, search job adverts on the internet. [...] some of them have good work conditions, others don't... but I normally apply to those I'm interested in. And I also visit regularly the website of my Faculty... anything that is published, a seminar, a conference... I enrol on them in order to be more prepared (Amarillo, Graduate in History, first generation student, low income family, Spain).

“ ... But I still think maybe one can make contacts with companies to be able to create a bigger and wider solid network and ... because it is so important [...] to get the foot in the door in a place. Somewhere to show off who you are and what you can do ... (Sweden, Emma, 26 years old)

“ What is important is the ability to advance one's personal development skills development, enlarging one's knowledge by participation in various courses and training. This involves having control of what I have, what I can do, what I have achieved so far, but also being aware of what is happening on the labour market. I work while at the same time I continue my education. All the time I have in the back of my head that I can be fired but also that I can find a new, much better position. I wouldn't say I regularly follow the job ads on the Internet, I check what the actual employers' expectations are. The point is to be one step ahead, (Jakub, a 30-years-old graduate, Poland).

“ I have mainly been working in various projects (...) a variety of professional experience; this job involves working with very different people (which is a great advantage for me), working with people with different problems, at different ages - from children to the elderly people, with disabilities, with different mental problems, from different backgrounds [...] It's really important for me because I have always been interested in other people. And establishing relationships, contacts - this is important for me. (...) I've been working on different projects and am thinking about setting up a business. I haven't always been able to do my work the way I want it to be done in all these institutions... How to express it ... I had a feeling that hasn't been able to realize myself, that I couldn't show my potential. (...) The thing I realized quite recently[...] was that all these different experiences which I had are somehow directing me towards opening my own company and so that I could work for myself. (Urszula, 27 years old, Poland)

“ [During and after the degree] I applied for everything. I applied for every job on Activelink [social and community sector jobs website]. And I wasn't getting anywhere. It was very disheartening the whole thing. ... I got three interviews in a year and a half. Competency-based interviews. I didn't know anything about that. I didn't do any planning or anything. The first one - I did a terrible interview. ... And when I finished the masters I was applying aggressively and not getting anywhere. Very disheartening. ... Maybe I could have gone to the careers department [at the university] and found out about competency-based interviews but I didn't. My fault I suppose. But what I did was I got involved with a job club. ... I saw a notice in my local library about a jobs club and I went in and talked to them. [....] They had a programme for graduates. I applied for that and did that for two months on a Friday after my masters. [...] How to network. LinkedIn. Jobnet. How to do interviews. How to do CVs. How to do a pitch. How to sell yourself within three minute - all that stuff. ... It was all alien to me. All these buzz words. ... It was brilliant. I had to go in in a suit every week. It taught me how to network. ... And there were all these employers there. I was mentored by a guy from the Civil Service and he was brilliant - told me what they were looking for in interviews (Anthony, 36 years old, Ireland, Social Science graduate)

Activity 5.7

Once you have read through the strategies and reflected upon our own thoughts from the beginning of the chapter, reflect in your journal or discuss in a group your thoughts of the effectiveness of the strategies that students are using to enhance their employability. Again, relate it to your own context.

Take some time to reflect on the things you have control over in terms of your employability and jot down your thoughts in your journal.

Continue the conversation on Twitter ... @Employ2016

6. WHAT SUPPORTS CAN STUDENTS AND GRADUATES DRAW UPON?

We have explored, in this handbook, many of the things that impact on non-traditional students who are seeking meaningful and sustainable graduate work.

This broader socio-economic context, and the extent to which various states within the EU pursue social equality and foster diversity in education and work, certainly has a major bearing on the quality and ease of student-to-graduate employment transitions.

In the countries badly affected by the financial crisis (Portugal, Ireland and Spain) we know large segments of the population have been locked out of meaningful careers. More generally many graduates across Europe find themselves in precarious and difficult working situations after university.

But even though we must always keep that 'big picture' in focus – and importantly work on collective ways of ensuring the resources and social conditions needed to create meaningful opportunities for graduates and good work for all members of society – we have, in this handbook, also explored ways in which it might be possible for non-traditional students to enhance, as much as is achievable, their 'employability' as a graduate.

We started, as you will remember, by asking you to start working on a timeline which captures significant moments, and your response to them, in your own educational and occupational story. We have asked you to critically reflect on your educational and occupational biography by keeping a career development journal to capture your responses to the various stories of work and education (yours and others). You are close to the end of this handbook, but we hope that you continue to use your journal as a resource in the future.

We have also cast a critical eye on what employers are looking for, highlighted some of the challenges faced by non-traditional students, and discussed some of the strategies that graduates use to find work. We will look, now, at the kind of supports that we came across in our research that we think may be useful for non-traditional students and graduates.

Supports for non-traditional students in transition

In our efforts to identify useful supports, we drew on the experience and expertise of students, graduates, university academic and support staff, employers from a range of sectors, non-governmental agencies and organisations, state agency representatives.

We encountered five main contexts for support: informal supports; supports in university; supports provided by employers; NGO supports; and supports provided by the state.

Of course, the availability of these supports varies greatly between the different partner countries. In outlining some examples below we hope to make the existence of such resources visible to students in transition out of university. To this end we have also included a section at the back of national and international organisations where you can find further information on how to avail of these services (see Further Resources)

Informal supports

One thing that was very striking in our research was the importance that students and graduates put on informal support structures linked to friends, family and community. This appears to be the most common and readily available support for most students. Typically this included family's emotional and, at times, financial support and the support provided by wider social networks. What we also found striking was the problems that students faced when these supports were not available to them.

Below we offer a case study from Poland which illustrates what we mean.

Take the time to read Lena's story carefully and annotate it as you go – as you read think about the various supports that have assisted Lena in her educational and occupational journey. There are a series of questions posed following her story which prompt you to think about Lena's story in relation to your own.

Case study – Lena and the importance of informal support (Poland)

Lena, a 40-year-old student, is married and has two children. She is the first generation of her family to attend higher education. Lena has received her informal support from her immediate environment. In the following extracts, she talks through supports in various ways:

Having completed my secondary school, a technical one, I started working in a shop. I married quite young and I had my first child. After giving birth to my son I stayed at home, and when my daughter was born I then

stopped even thinking about having a job. There was also no need as my husband earned good money, not super money obviously, we did have our financial struggles, but it was ok overall. And you know, I come from a village and there was no other option there. It seemed somehow natural.

But when my son turned five and my daughter three, my husband had to change his job, unfortunately it was a lower paid one, and I had to start looking for a job myself. And this is how I ended up trading at the local market. I worked for a friend and was selling groceries, and seasonal fruit and vegetables throughout the year. As far as I remember I worked there for 3 years, I think.

Then my husband started working as a driver and this is how our problems with time management began. It's because when he was away I had to run the whole house.

And again I had my period of "not working". That's when I started feeling anxious about the future. Thoughts about my pension, security. But at that time I wasn't doing much about it.

And this was when I met a family who had built a house in the area and I soon started looking after their son. I also helped my own children in their schoolwork and I thought I was coping very well. My children were doing well at school, too, and that's when I thought of studying pedagogy.

But it wasn't until I started working at a crèche, where I'm only a helper, when I got really motivated to take up these studies. Now when I defend my thesis and graduate I will be looking to change my job, I'll be looking for something at a nursery. And so this is my work experience. (...) Surely, working at the shop and market did not offer me much professional development. I don't know how to put it but I was working because I had to, because there it was needed to keep the family. And there was no other option... But now I'm thinking, it seems to me... that maybe at that time I had no clear idea about myself and the future. It was hard work. I don't think I could identify its positive aspects. And then it was working as a nanny. That was somehow a coincidence, total coincidence. But I think that was a good happy coincidence because it was then when I started thinking differently about myself and I had the idea of furthering my education.

Besides, my friend who had already been studying there, was trying to persuade me to do so and felt very positive about it. I somehow didn't believe I would cope. But still, that friend helped me find a job at the crèche. And here came the strengths I think - the fact that I can work, that I can study at the same time, and that my work is related to what I'm studying. (...) My work as a nanny, a sort of work that doesn't feel like working, was especially an eye-opening experience for me. As I said before I started thinking differently... reflecting on myself... and my future. And this job at the crèche has given me the direction and confirmed what I wanted to do. It influenced me this way. It affirmed me and I know that this direction is a developmental one for me.

I plan to continue studying pedagogy at a Master's level. Now after EWIWP (early years and primary education) I will perhaps focus on therapy. But I haven't decided yet.

Activity 6.1

Lena has drawn, not always consciously, on a number of informal supports as she has developed her educational and professional career.

Take a moment to think about the informal supports that you draw on (or wish you could draw on) throughout your educational journey so far.

If your family have not been supportive, have peers supported you? If your informal supports have been important in education do you imagine that they will be equally important and useful for you in your search for graduate employment? What helps to sustain these informal supports? If they have not been an important part of your experience what resources have you drawn upon?

Are their ways in which the networks that we draw on for support can, and possibly unknowingly, act against our development? Are our informal networks always a positive influence?

As always, use your journal to capture your thoughts or, if you are working as a group, discuss these issues first before turning to your journal.

Supports at university

Many of you who are reading this handbook are in university at the moment and we would encourage students to seek support from their institutions. Some universities support students through designated ancillary services such as widening participation, access, disability offices or other initiatives. Typically, these services and supports are concerned with facilitating entry to university for non-traditional students and supporting them while they are at university. However, some also provide supports that enable non-traditional students to develop beyond university.

The universities involved in the research provide a range of supports for students seeking graduate employment. A valuable, but often under-used, university support is the Careers Office – although, it must be said, that such a support is not universally present, developed or utilised across the universities involved in this project. For example, there is no unified careers service provided in the Portuguese context and, in Spain, while there is a network of university-based, national and regional careers service associated with the university their visibility and sensitivity towards the needs of non-traditional students is under-developed. On the other hand, some university careers services, such as the University of Warwick, are receptive and responsive to the needs of certain non-traditional student groups – for example, there are targeted career campaigns to students with disability or students with children.

Historically, in countries where careers services are more established, these supports provided information about graduate job opportunities. A lot of this information-based service has moved online and a number of universities have online portals that allow students to explore recruitment activity.

But it also seems that there has been a shift in the purpose and activities of careers services in recent years. In some countries, these services have taken on a more towards guidance and training role. Yet, sometimes students, particularly mature students, feel that their life experiences are being overlooked in the encounters with career services in university. If this is the case, we advise engaging with them and letting them know about your specific needs and desires.

The importance of networks in developing graduate careers was a recurring theme across the six partner research teams. At the same time, it was recognised that many non-traditional students and graduates do not have the highly-developed networks associated with high-status work opportunities. In recognition of this, some of the partner universities have developed initiatives that endeavour to create opportunities for students to be welcomed into informal, professional networks.

For example, in the case study below from the University of Warwick we can see how the careers service, the university's law society and an employer body create a social event which nurtured such a network and, in this instance, suggested promising outcomes for Anne.

Innovations in curriculum and assessment can support this to an extent. One lecturer interviewed in Ireland discussed how a module which involved fieldwork and participation in state and third sector organisations led to students developing valuable networks and in some cases employment opportunities. And in Sweden, the students' union and professional unions have come together to provide rich mentoring and networking opportunities for students – an initiative that student representative bodies elsewhere may well want to emulate. Academic departments, particularly those with a strong vocational focus, can also provide examples of very rich initiatives which will enhance employment outcomes. The most valuable of these seems to be work placement – sometimes this is managed within departments and sometimes support is provided by a placement office or careers services. However, there is some question about the diversity and quality of work experience experiences and, what's more, concerns about equity of access to such initiatives for non-traditional students with care and work responsibilities and needs.

Finally, and maybe most controversially for academic staff, some universities have endeavoured to respond to the 'employability' agenda by integrating work-focussed elements at the curricular level. In Poland, indeed, that this curricular presence of 'employability' is mandatory under national policy in higher education.

To give you a sense of what universities can do to help here are some examples of 'best practice' we came across:

Case study – Careers Office at the University of Warwick

The Careers Office at Warwick has initiated some activities for non-traditional students. One strategy was to contact non-traditional students and say to them 'we recognise that you may not be as familiar with going to university as those whose parents have been to university and we would like to offer you more support'. This received a good response from students. Sessions on writing a CV have been held with adult students and they were able to bring their children with them.

The aim was to point out that if they have been out of a traditional career for a while raising children then 'you can develop employability from that'.

Some of the Careers Officers feel that there are issues relating to non-traditional students as they stated that the university assumes that once such students have entered the institution that they are on a level playing field with the other middle class students which they are not.

Anne's experience of careers supports at the University of Warwick

Anne found effective support from the Careers and Skills Office from which she received tailored advice on her discipline, Law, from a counsellor specialising in this area. The support provided her with helpful guidance

on how to present her CV 'because it's not the same as applying for a normal job' as well as with respect to which areas of Law to apply for in order to most successfully progress her career: The advisor ... said 'if you're going to go in, you need to go in the middle ground... the law centre is bottom ground, and if you go in there, you're not going to move up. She's saying go in at a middle ground company and then you can go either way.' Anne reported that further useful support towards her prospective career arose through participation in an evening dinner event with the Law Society where she met with and managed to establish a number of contacts with potential future employers. The event boosted her confidence by allowing her to ascertain, by meeting with members of solicitor firms in a relatively informal context, qualities that she felt they were looking for that could play to her advantage in a future interview - more precisely, career experiences that went beyond the university degree grade. In this regard, she identified that they were looking for recruits with an 'all-round view' - something that, given the strength of her past experience with various forms of employment, emboldened her to conclude 'Actually I can do this!'.

Besides careers offices and access programmes universities have also initiated various types of events and collaborations which students told us were helpful. Below we describe one such initiative from Portugal.

The University of Algarve Careers Fair

This very recent initiative is a job fair, organised by the university (in collaboration with the Students Union), with the aim to contribute to the transition of graduates into the labour market by providing a direct access point to employment and the development of a professional career.

Currently 30 enterprises and institutions participate in the fair, but one can expect this number to grow in the future.

Students and graduates who participate in this job fair can find different activities. There are simple exhibitions spaces/stands for enterprises; workshops for students and graduates where issues of employability are the focus. There are formal presentations, where the institutions explain their mission, functions, etc., and engage in dialogue with the participants. There are also sessions for direct recruitment. The graduates must send their *curriculum vitae* to the institutions before the event and - short-listed candidates will be interviewed during the fair.

This second year of the fair (2017) includes additional activities such as networking lunch which are reserved for official stakeholders, participant enterprises, and enterprises from the programme of Start-up and Spin-off of the University of Algarve. Each enterprise or institution can select four persons to attend this lunch and invite graduates who have been previously selected.

Activity 6.2 What are universities doing to support non-traditional students?

Please review the table which follows to get a sense of what universities are doing. As you read, have a think, or discuss as a group, whether your university offers such supports.

Table 1 - University supports for employability

University structure or process that supports NT graduate employability	Comment on services and supports offered
Careers Services	Evident in most, but not all, partner universities. Uneven experiences of non-traditional students of these services. For some students, there is a sense that these services are aimed towards the traditional student population.
Access offices/widening participation/disability services	Some very rich supports for non-traditional students evident through these services in some partner universities. There is some question whether 'transition out of university' needs to become more developed into the strategies and processes of these services whose traditional focus has been on 'access to' and 'support in' university.
Work-placement, internships	Work-based learning programmes which form part of a university education can be very highly regarded by students and employers alike. However, their occurrence, quality and equity of access are not consistent across departments, faculties or partner universities.
Students Unions and Societies	Peer-based student communities can be powerful allies in the development of career-based initiatives. Some really useful examples of student unions organising networking opportunities which can be particularly beneficial for non-traditional students without family or extended social connections.
Academic Departments/Faculties	The quality of relationships and communication between students and departmental staff can be an important part of career decision-making processes and the development of career opportunities. More likely to be advantage in smaller-sized degree programmes. Some academic departments have rich networks with occupational fields that, again, can become a networking opportunity for non-traditional students.
Curricular sensitivity to employment and career aspirations and needs of students.	Some universities have focused a lot of energy into integrating interpretations of employability learning into their curricula. Often this may be through work-placement modules. But, in some cases, it can involve employer engagement in curricular consultation – this is highly developed, and indeed a mandatory part of curriculum design, in Poland. Curricular attempts to enhance employability has also lead, in some instances, to the development of broader subject choices and the inclusion of non-vocational and transferable, personal development or team-working modules to promote graduate employability.

Spotlight on placements, internships and work experience

As we have discussed above, a valuable way in which universities can support students who are making the transition to graduate employment is through work-experience programmes. Again, this is unevenly developed across research partners but is something that nearly all cohorts we spoke with think is very important to develop. Some employers and students feel that universities have 'lost touch' with the 'real world' of work and that more of a balance between theoretical and practical knowledge is needed.

We think that, because of the importance given to this aspect of a university education, that there is a need for us to reflect a bit more on work experience programmes.

Work experience as an integral part of undergraduate programmes in Poland and there is intense cooperation between employers and academic departments. Despite this high-level of integration, there is some concern, across all the partners, about the quality of the work experience for all students. Even in universities where work placement initiatives are developed, there are concerns that non-traditional students can be effectively excluded from them because of their ongoing care and/or work commitments.

The value of work experience, but also the varying experiences of students on such initiatives, is illustrated in the case studies below from Poland and Ireland. As you read through these case studies, reflect upon your own thoughts and experiences of the value of work experience as part of an educational programme.

Case study – Katarzyna and the value of her EU-funded internship (Poland).

Katarzyna graduated with a Bachelor's degree and lives in a small town about 150km from Wroclaw. She is the first generation of her family to study in higher education. She participated in a EU-funded internship programme for a year. Here, Katarzyna explains the benefit of the programme:

For me the main strength of the internship programme was the fact that I could try my skills in an industry that was different to what I was studying - it was because the internship was not totally related to my discipline and I had the opportunity to see for myself if working in the economy sector, in sales and marketing, was something I could potentially do in the future, and if I could perhaps combine it with my work as a teacher, guidance tutor, therapist, to see if it's possible to combine these two worlds that are so different from each other in theory.

The company I was working for was a sole trader company and I was employed to help the person who was running it. This was another strength for me. I observed how this person creates their business and develops it all the time - this person was doing everything themselves, all responsibility lies with them. So I had the opportunity to see what setting up your own business looks like, how to create a brand in a given direction, I observed the boss and their responsibilities. I was able to watch all this first hand. I could also see what it's like from the organisational perspective. I think these are the two main strengths.

Case study: a tale of two placements (Ireland)

In this case study the Irish research team reflect on two very different work placement experiences: Maria, a mature, first-generation student from eastern Europe, secured a highly-sought after placement in the final year of her applied science degree. The work-placement aspect of this degree was central to its attraction and success with students. Maria, who was very strategic in choosing this degree, explained that the work placement was one of the main reasons why she chose the degree. In fact, she said she 'couldn't imagine' the degree without the work placement.

The programme prepared students for the work placement from first year. Students were made aware the placements were highly competitive and that employers would be looking at module results across their degree. They also started working on CVs and applications in second year. In the follow-up interview with Maria it emerged that she now has a job, albeit a temporary contract, with her placement employer. Maria is very happy with this as it is a small science-based company with an international clientele. Its smallness means that she is involved in an array of activities beyond her science-based skills and enabling her to develop sophisticated administration and managerial skills.

Yet, on the other hand, another science student, Ronan, who is a working-class student with a disability, struggled to find a suitable placement in his second year and, eventually, when he did, found the experience to be extremely poor for him - something which he feels has marred, not only his time in university, but as he sees it, provides him with little hope of work in the future. Ronan's disability means that he struggles with social interactions and, as he said, he finds interviews particularly difficult. The work placement for him was 'a disaster'.

Activity 6.3 How well does your university support you?

Reflect and, if working with a group, discuss the effectiveness of your university's curriculum, services and supports in meeting the experiences and addressing the career aspirations of non-traditional students. It would also be useful to explore the most effective ways of communicating your needs to the university authorities, careers and support services and student representative bodies.

Are there career events held in the university that you know of that might be of use for you in your search for work? Share what you know about these events and how best to approach them.

Supports beyond the university

The university is, of course, the obvious place for you to look for supports in your move towards graduate work. However, there are a range of services and supports beyond university that you may also find helpful. In this final section we will outline some of the supports and processes that can facilitate the development of a more diverse graduate employment field.

We will outline some case studies below which may help you broaden your idea of the places you can look for support. First though, in the table below, we offer an overview of the kind of supports and processes that we came across in our research that may benefit non-traditional students. Some of these initiatives are offered by the state, others by employers and civil society, and many represent a combination of partnership work amongst various stakeholders.

Table 2 - Supports beyond the university

Support/process aimed to benefit non-traditional graduates	Comment on support's value for non-traditional students
Positive-discrimination recruitment processes	<p>Although all employers are careful to point out their recruitment processes are based on equality principles, very few work actively to diversify their workplace through adapting recruitment processes which acknowledge that the 'equal opportunities' status-quo rarely favours non-traditional graduates.</p> <p>However, some employers are thinking hard about ways in which to diversify recruitment processes. Some employers, for example, have set targets in terms of recruitment for ethnic minorities.</p>
Top-up pay for graduate internships (State, employers)	<p>Graduate internships are often the most obvious pathway for graduates into a career. However, the low-paid nature of such work is a real barrier for many non-traditional graduates who are often under severe pressure to start earning after years of a reduced income in university. And yet there are examples in Spain of EU/government-sponsored funding which 'top-up' the relatively low wages of internships. Such funding opens up the possibility of internships to many non-traditional graduates. Also in Sweden, study loans are available which should widen access for non-traditional students.</p>
Non-university career guidance (state career guidance services)	<p>Some graduates have found that the adult education guidance that brought them to university in the first place were very useful in working through career options as they exit from higher education.</p>
Networking	<p>As we have seen, some universities work in partnership with employers and student unions to provide opportunities for non-traditional to develop networks. In Sweden mentoring programmes involving student unions and professional organisations provide a very useful opportunity for networking for non-traditional students.</p>
Advocacy	<p>There are some interesting examples of organisations which work hard to advocate on behalf of specific cohorts of non-traditional students in developing graduate careers. For example, AHEAD in Ireland supports students and graduates with disabilities in and after university. They have worked with a number of employers to develop internships that are tailored to the needs, experiences and strengths of individual graduates with disabilities.</p> <p>Some unions are starting to take notice of the impact of precarious employment on the development of career trajectories and, in more general terms, the future capacity and quality of certain professions.</p>
Graduate programmes which serve sector rather than employers	<p>Some graduate programmes offer opportunities for graduates to further develop their learning in a vocational context. These programmes are usually offered by organisations in the non-profit sector and are designed more to enhance the capacity of the field in the long-term than the needs of an individual employer.</p>
Community-based employment services	<p>Some graduates have found it useful to engage with community-based employment services and training as a way to enhance certain job skills or as networking opportunities.</p>

Below you will find two case studies (from Spain and Ireland) of graduate supports that exist beyond the university. These supports are often the most difficult to find for busy non-traditional students but it may help, in reading these, to know that they do exist. As you read through, think where you might look to explore some of the supports beyond the university that you could access.

Case study - Spain

ACTIVITY OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES FOR EMPLOYMENT (EXPERIENCIAS PROFESIONALES PARA EL EMPLEO / EPES) (WITHIN THE PROGRAMME "ANDALUCÍA ORIENTA" / ANDALUSIA COUNSELS)

This program (EPES) focuses on improving the employability of the unemployed, through business practices and personalized mentoring. The objectives of the program are to facilitate the approach to the world of work and provide knowledge of the habits, practices and values typical of the work environment.

The EPES actions are aimed at unemployed people who are in the first two years of access to the labour market and who lack work experience in the professional field which they want to enter.

The requirements of the program are: a) the candidates have completed a formal training or a specific Training for Employment; b) they are registered in Andalucía Orienta (Andalusia Counsels), which demonstrates an active search for employment.

This activity represents 'best practice' for several reasons:

1. Interviews with graduates show that one of the main barriers to accessing a job is the lack of professional experience. This action specifically relates to this condition.
2. The service prioritizes three significant groups of non-traditional students: ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and groups at risk of social exclusion.
3. Although the internships are not always paid, they are remunerated with a scholarship for attendance and, sometimes, for travel.

The service connects unemployed people with companies in the area, to develop work activity for a maximum period of six months. The contact with a company favours an approach to the culture of work, the knowledge of the professional profile related to the university degree and the integration in the structure, norms and values of an economic organization. In many cases, after the completion of the internships, the company can offer a work contract.

One aspect to be emphasized is the personalized tutorials with the candidate by skilled work mediators, who help to make the most of the internship experience (for both parties: company and student). On the one hand, the tutor puts a value on the advantages that these groups at risk of exclusion from work can provide to the company, as well as the benefits in their subsequent contracting: the recognition that can mean for the collaborating company as a socially responsible company that offers opportunities of practical training to students in their work centres; and, of course, also the opportunity to identify and develop, within their corporate culture, future employees for the company.

On the other hand, the tutor advises the candidates, so that they can polish those skills of employability that needs improvement. In addition, every week the programme contemplates group tutorials of all the people that coincide at the same time doing internships, although they are from different professional profiles and the participants come from different companies. This situation promotes diversity. Group work improves employability, enriching the group with the synergy generated from the exchange of experiences, opinions and cultures of the different companies in which the internships are carried out.

Case study - AHEAD (Ireland)

AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) is an organisation that supports university students and graduates with disabilities throughout Ireland. Based in Dublin, AHEAD work with students, graduates, university staff and employers to enhance the experience of students with disabilities. GetAhead and WAM are two AHEAD initiatives which, directly, support students with disabilities make the transition to graduate work.

GetAhead is a network of student and graduates with disabilities currently making the transition from third-level education to full time employment. The purpose of the GetAHEAD network is to up-skill graduates with disabilities by providing training events and valuable information covering a wide range of topics and resources including: volunteering and work experience; interview preparation; CV writing; job seeking; legal entitlements; grants available; and disclosure.

WAM (Willing Able Mentoring) is a work placement programme which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the

mainstream workplace. Participating employers (WAM Leaders) collaborate with WAM to offer mentored, paid work placements for graduates with disabilities. This partnership brings graduates with disabilities and WAM's network of employers together so that both can benefit from each other - ensuring genuine learning opportunities for all. WAM is unique in that it seeks to engage and support employers in order to simultaneously develop the potential of employers and graduates with disabilities. To date, the programme has provided over 250 placements for graduates with disabilities (AHEAD, 2017)

Activity 6.4 - Reflections on supports

In your journal or group discussion, reflect upon any of the supports identified in this chapter which you feel would benefit you.

As a follow-on exercise, you should do some further research (using the Further Resources at the end) or through the services in your university or local employment offices to make a list of the various services and supports that could assist you once you leave university. It would be useful to start conversations with these services before you finish university - it's never too early to start working on the next step of your career.

Continue the conversation on Twitter ... @Employ2016

7. STUDENT DIVERSITY AS AN ASSET IN THE GRADUATE LABOUR MARKET

We have covered a lot in this handbook and you may find that you have more questions than answers as we come to the end. For us, this would be a positive outcome as it suggests that the handbook has, in a small way, helped you to start thinking critically about your career trajectory. There are, undoubtedly, things that you can do to enhance your chances of developing the kind of career that you want. However, it is difficult to do that alone and important to recognise that many of the challenges you face are those presented by the social, economic and cultural contexts in which you live.

And while we must not forget, and indeed continue to fight against the many forms of injustice that contribute to the challenges for non-traditional students, we also feel that it is important for every student and graduate reading this handbook to see, and importantly, to speak of, your diverse experiences and background as a rich asset in terms of your career development.

To that end, let us finish on a positive note and look at two final stories: stories in which two students' backgrounds – the very aspect of their lives which labels them as 'non-traditional' – in the end, becomes a resource for them to develop a career.

Case study – James (Portugal)

James comes from a family of farmers with low economic resources and low educational achievement. However, his parents did own some land where they grew citrus fruits. James worked with his parents during the summer vacations since he was 14 years old and later in his teens abandoned school to dedicate himself solely to this work.

From then on, his educational trajectory was anything but traditional. Responding to the pressure of his mother and sister, he went back to education to enrol on a professional course in electronics and technology. However, he still helped his family during weekends and vacations.

He then went on to complete a post-secondary professional course (Maintenance of Green Spaces). These courses, in Portugal, are offered in higher education institutions, last for one and a half years and are supposed to be a fast route to employment, targeting specific sectors of professional activity. However, students also have the opportunity to continue their studies to a tertiary level.

It was while he was in higher education that James resolved to use the experience and knowledge he already had in agriculture to develop it further. And so James decided, in 2011, to study Agronomy at the university. As a university student he found he was able to visit numerous producers (access was easier that way) and he took every opportunity to actively learn from study visits, seminars, etc. Gradually his knowledge grew from his capacity to mix theory with practice gained at university, but also, and importantly, with his years of agricultural experience. This expansion and deepening of previous experience with a university education was fundamental to James securing a job, in 2013, in an orchard.

James non-traditional background became an asset, and not a problem, at some critical points in his career biography.

The values he kept from a working-class family (such as: responsibility; humility; the importance of working hard; being punctual; knowing the value of money) were also used as assets to get a job, as these personal traits, he discovered, are appreciated by employers.

Higher education gave him, not only an opportunity to develop social networks but also the desire to know more and to understand that innovation and knowledge is crucial in employment.

James still works in the agricultural sector. However, now is in partnership with his boss to develop an innovative project. His next step will be to enrol in a master's programme in fructiculture.

Case study – Kalle (Sweden)

Kalle is a 34-year-old mature, human resources graduate. His parents are from a working-class background and are now retired. His mother dreamt to be educated but could never afford it – in fact, his parents' highest level of formal education was primary school. Kalle lives with his partner who is also a graduate and who encouraged him to return to university.

Before he entered university, Kalle worked in the care sector as an assistant nurse. However, he wanted to

change, and progress more in, his career. After graduation he was not sure of getting a job in the HR sector not only because of age but also because of his sexual orientation (Kalle is gay). He was not sure he would be welcome. So, instead of looking for work after his degree, he applied for a postgraduate internship course in HR.

And it was during this programme that Kalle's previous low-status work - the work that he was keen to move away from - became an asset in the, sometimes slow, development of a graduate career. Kalle was able to draw on his pre-university working experience in the care sector to secure a placement in a health care public institution. After some time, he was working as a recruitment officer with a supervisor.

It wasn't a straightforward success story though: his work experience was progressing well and he was on his way towards securing a permanent position when his supervisor left the company. As a result Kalle was moved to the administration sector once again with a new supervisor to learn a new role at a lower salary level.

However, in the end Kalle finally secured his permanent position with the organisation. After these turbulent experiences, he feels good that he has a steady job.

Kalle is very clear that his earlier work in health care added to his success in finding his graduate job and, looking back on it now, it is work that he can appreciate. In fact, the Swedish research team were also able to speak to his new employer and it is clear, from what they said, that they really valued the perspective and skills that Kalle brought from his previous experiences:

.. Yes, but he had experience as an assistance nurse and that was a huge advantage when it comes to our work; he brings new ideas, and wise views ... He has shown interest and contributes a lot with his views, with new knowledge ... and questions 'but why do you think so and why do you do it so?' It's very valuable ... [His experience as an] assistance nurse makes it possible to include a perspective that we miss, he comes from the real world ...
(Kalle's employer)

Many of the students and graduates involved in the EMPLOY project talk about going to university as part of an occupational life-project to move away from low-status work. However, Kalle's case makes clear that such work doesn't become irrelevant to our careers when we go to university - for many of us, like Kalle, previous working experience can become an asset when we return to the graduate labour market.

Activity 7.1 - Naming your non-traditional experience as your strength

You have spent some time over this handbook reflecting on the challenges facing non-traditional students and reflecting on your own. But we have also prompted you, through various activities, to reflect on your own experiences. Deep and prolonged reflection on our experiences can transform them into knowledge - a really useful knowledge that can be used to your advantage in the graduate labour market.

Take some time to reflect on James and Kalle's stories and, although yours will be very different, use it as a starting point to think (or discuss) the ways in which your background and experience as a non-traditional student can become a resource in terms of your graduate employability.

These strengths may take some time to uncover as they are so embedded in who you are that you may not immediately see them as assets. For example, if you are a parent of young children who has struggled to just survive university while caring for your family, you may not self-identify the time-management skills, capacity to multi-task, resourcefulness, and commitment to self-development that has got you this far - and yet these are the skills that so many employers value.

But this, of course, is one example. Think also about the perspective that you, as a non-traditional student, can bring to re-vitalise the culture and vision of progressive organisations.

Use your Career Development Journal to, unashamedly, write down your observations about the strengths and assets which can be located in your experiences and background as a non-traditional student. Writing these down in your journal will allow you to begin to form the words and get comfortable with the phrases that, one day soon, you will need to write more fluently in applications, CVs and profiles and hear yourself say without apology in interviews and conversations with prospective employers.

Final reflections

Activity 7.2 – Final reflections

Read (or listen) back through all the entries in your journal. What are the themes emerging from your own reflections? What are the things that you come back to? In what ways, can anything that you have learned help you start to see ways forward in the development of your career? What are your next steps?

If you have been working as a group discuss your learning collectively and then write an entry in your journal which captures what you have learned as a group by engaging with the material in this handbook.

If you have been working through this handbook on your own spend some time to write a final (for now) entry in which you reflect on what you have learned.

We hope, and encourage you, to use your Career Development Journal (whatever form(s) it takes) into the future and that it becomes a space to work through some of the challenging aspects of making a career that all of us face throughout our lives.

8. FURTHER RESOURCES

General resources	<p>The project website for the EMPLOY project: employ.dsw.edu.pl/language/en</p> <p>Job hunting advice for mature graduates: gradireland.com/careers-advice/equal-opportunities/job-hunting-for-mature-graduates</p> <p>Advice for job seekers with disabilities: ibec.ie/IBEC/ES.nsf/vPages/HR_best_practice~Diversity_and_the_integrated_workplace~a-guide-for-job-seekers-with-disabilities-10-04-2014/\$file/WORKWAY+JOB+SEEKER+GUIDE.pdf</p> <p>How to use your disability as a strength when applying for a job (The Guardian, May 2015): jobs.theguardian.com/article/how-to-use-your-disability-as-a-strength-when-applying-for-jobs</p> <p>Graduate guide on LinkedIn (The Guardian) theguardian.com/careers/linkedin-how-use-graduate-guide</p> <p>Overview of national guidance systems for each EU member state: euroguidance.eu/guidance-in-europe/national-guidance-systems/</p> <p>Online career development training modules aimed at the European job market for students and graduates: career-modules.eu</p>
England	<p>Graduate Prospects prospects.ac.uk</p> <p>Target Jobs targetjobs.co.uk</p> <p>Milkround milkround.com</p> <p>The above three are good for both vacancies, information about job roles and general job search suggestions, and have links to more industry-specific sources of information.</p> <p>I could (icould.com/) is a database of film clips from people doing different kinds of jobs – it's target is probably school leavers rather than graduates and is stronger on some areas of work than others, but nonetheless is a useful resource to know of.</p> <p>National Careers Service nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/job-profiles/home is not aimed at graduates at all, but it is still a useful resource</p> <p>Graduates still looking for an internship will find graduatetalentpoolsearch.direct.gov.uk/gtp/index and step.org.uk useful.</p> <p>Graduates in the UK are nearly always able to use their university careers service after they have graduated as in the case of Warwick, this is in perpetuity. Other universities are also likely to have equivalents to our website, warwick.ac.uk/services/careers/careers_skills and our careers blog, careersblog.warwick.ac.uk</p>
Ireland	<p>gradIreland – an online platform which supports all graduates in developing a career. It does have some helpful resources directed at non-traditional students. gradireland.com</p> <p>AHEAD – organisation which supports and advocates on behalf of students and graduates with disabilities. ahead.ie</p> <p>Citizens Advice Bureaus a free local service which offer confidential advice on rights and benefits citizensinformation.ie/en/</p> <p>IMPACT Trade union with interest in youth unemployment, non-exploitative internships and precarity impact.ie</p> <p>Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed offers training, advice and other support to the unemployed inou.ie</p> <p>Migrant Rights Centre mrci.ie</p> <p>National Centre for Adult Guidance: ncge.ie/further-education/adult-educational-guidance-initiative</p> <p>All the ETBs (formally called VECs) will have dedicated Adult Guidance Counselling Services.</p> <p>Non-traditional students may have used their services to get to university and a number of our participants have returned to them as graduates and found the guidance service very useful. Find your local ETB through the national site: etbi.ie</p>

Poland	<p>careersinpoland.com - przewodnik dot. życia, pracy i studiów w Polsce</p> <p>studyinpoland.pl/en - serwis doradczy dla osób studiujących w Polsce, zawierający m.in. informacje dot. edukacji, języka polskiego, zakwaterowania, kosztów życia, służby zdrowia, transportu publicznego oraz zezwolenia na pracę</p> <p>pracuj.pl - strona zawierająca oferty pracy w Polsce, profile pracodawców, porady dot. rynku pracy</p> <p>centrummigranta.pl/pl - Centrum Migranta</p> <p>mpips.gov.pl/ - informacje dot. rynku pracy, prawa pracy, osób z niepełnosprawnościami, wsparcia dla rodzin z dziećmi</p> <p>oferty.praca.gov.pl - centralna Baza Ofert Pracy;</p> <p>mojestypendium.pl - ogólnopolski serwis o stypendiach;</p> <p>niepelnosprawni.gov.pl - państwowy serwis dla osób z niepełnosprawnością</p> <p>biurokarier.dsw.edu.pl/linki - przydatne linki dla osób z niepełnosprawnościami</p> <p>biurokarier.dsw.edu.pl/przydatne-linki</p>
Portugal	<p>GASP – Gabinete <i>Alumni</i> e Saídas Profissionais da Universidade do Algarve (Alumni and Professional Careers of the University of Algarve): +351 289 244 460; ipedro@ualg.pt; alumni@ualg.pt; ualg.pt/pt/node/97013</p> <p>CRIA – Divisão de Empreendedorismo e Transferência de Tecnologia da Universidade do Algarve (Division of Entrepreneurship and Technology Transfer of the University of Algarve): +351 289 800 097; cria@ualg.pt; cria.pt; https://www.facebook.com/criaualg</p> <p>Portal Emprego da Universidade do Algarve (Employment Portal of the University of Algarve): emprego.ualg.pt/procurar-trabalho-emprego/canal/4178/canal_destacado/0</p> <p>IEFP – Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional (Portuguese Institute of Employment and Professional Development): iefp.pt</p>
Spain	<p>PORTALES DE EMPLEO:</p> <p>Empléate, portal de empleo del Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social, empleate.gob.es/empleo/#/</p> <p>Portal del Servicio Andaluz de Empleo, juntadeandalucia.es/organismos/empleoempresaycomercio/sae.html</p> <p>Portal de empleo privado, Job and Talent, jobandtalent.com/es</p> <p>Portal de empleo privado, Monster, monster.es</p> <p>Portal de empleo privado, Infoempleo, infoempleo.com</p> <p>Portal de empleo privado para personas con discapacidad, Por Talento, portalento.es</p> <p>Portal de la red de universidades españolas, Universia, emplea.universia.es</p> <p>Portal de voluntariado (voluntariado y empleo), Hacesfalta.org, hacesfalta.org</p> <p>GUÍAS DE BÚSQUEDA DE EMPLEO:</p> <p>Adecco (2014): 15 años, 15 consejos para buscar empleo. fundacionadecco.org/recursos/15-consejos-para-buscar-empleo-fundacion-adecco.pdf</p> <p>Cámara de Madrid (s/d): Guía de técnicas y habilidades de búsqueda de empleo. trescantos.es/portal/uploads/tuciudad/paginas/guia_habilidades[1].pdf</p> <p>Servicio Andaluz de Empleo (s/d): Guía práctica para la búsqueda de empleo. juntadeandalucia.es/export/drupaljda/Guia_Practica_Busqueda_Empleo.pdf</p> <p>ESIC (2015): Guía práctica para la búsqueda de empleo. esic.edu/empleabilidad/pdf/recursos/2015-guia-practica-para-la-busqueda-de-empleo.pdf</p>

Sweden

Information for international students

Study and work abroad. Independent Living Institute (ILI), Sweden. As ILI is based in Stockholm, Sweden, our website features an online service for reporting discrimination due to disability in Sweden and a database with information about personal assistance service providers in Sweden (both in Swedish).

Equal Treatment of Students in Universities Act

www.studyinsweden.se.

Study and Career Counselling – Stockholm University – su.se/english/student-services/study-and-career counselling

Find jobs and internships on job portal MyCareer - Stockholm University – Register at MyCareer to access ads for jobs, internships, project placements, and trainee positions, both in Sweden and around the globe. su.se/english/student-services/study-and-career

Mentorskaapsprojektet – pao.su.se/studentliv/mentorskaapsprojektet

Read more on jusek.se – Jusek är akademikerförbundet för jurister, ekonomer, systemvetare, personalvetare, kommunikatörer och samhällsvetare. Ett fackförbund som stärker medlemmarnas konkurrenskraft genom hela karriären.

Arbetsliv-PAO-programmet vid Stockholms universitet – praktikplatser

pao.su.se/studentliv/arbetsliv/praktikplatser

pao.su.se/studentliv/arbetsliv/exjobb-uppstasforslag

pao.su.se/studentliv/arbetsliv/extra-och-heltidsjobb

SthlmUP – personalvetareföreningen sthlmup.se/

Facebook facebook.com/groups/596262767127903/

Sveriges HR förening sverigeshrforening.se/

9. EMPLOY: ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

EMPLOY is a European project, funded through Erasmus +, involving six partners from a range of countries from north and south Europe and is co-ordinated by Dr Barbara Merrill from the University of Warwick in England. The purpose of the EMPLOY is to promote the enhancement of the employability of students in higher education from a non-traditional background (both younger and adult) through improving the efficiency of transitions into the graduate labour market.

This student handbook is one of several outputs emanating from the three-year research project which involved researchers from the England, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

As well as contributions to scholarship on non-traditional students' experiences of transitions out of university, the project has also produced: a website, newsletters, social media commentary via Twitter, a series of podcasts, national workshops and an Employer/Staff handbook.

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University of Lower Silesia: Professor Ewa Kurantowicz, Dr Adrianna Nizinska, Magdalena Czubak-Koch.

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EMPLOY project website: employ.dsw.edu.pl
EMPLOY on Twitter: [@EMPLOY2016](https://twitter.com/EMPLOY2016)