

## Who Has Heard About the HEAR? Evaluation of initial employer impact of the Higher Education Achievement Record

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### INTRODUCTION

Regardless of whether strategy/ policy on graduate employability originates from the Government, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), employers, or students, the associated rhetoric is remarkable by its inter- changeability. Notions of '... Competitiveness within a 'knowledge' economy and (global) labour market' [1], and the employable graduate as 'Future Fit' [2] recognise perceptions of the contribution that graduates play to (inter)national economic growth and broader social and cultural development [3]. This level of agreement between all stakeholders is positive in the context of recent recession and higher costs raising both concerns and the importance of employability to UK engineering students [4].

From 2010 each English HEI has been required to articulate their position in relation to student employability through the provision of an 'employability statement' for prospective students available on both the Unistats and UCAS websites [5]. In March 2011 the CBI, working with the NUS, produced a report [6] which included case studies that demonstrated the importance of recognising 'added value' alongside the HE experience, and this was emphasised by employers seeking graduates 'who stand out from the crowd' [4].

### 1 REVIEWING THE HONOURS CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

The conclusion from the Burgess Group Report [7] - the report of the scoping group looking at 'Measuring and Recording Student Achievement' - was that the system for classifying UK honours degrees was no longer 'fit for purpose' and the case for change was established. Subsequent debate about what kind of system might supplement or even replace the honours classification system

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focused on how 'student achievement might be recorded and communicated in a more informative way' [8]. The later Burgess Group Report 'beyond the honours degree classification' [9] declared that the system was at odds with lifelong learning and the need to do justice to the full range of student experience by allowing a wider recognition of achievement. The report signalled the need for 'radical reform, replacing the honours classification system with a more detailed set of information' [10]. Burgess [9] proposed that by 2010/11 the HEAR would be 'the central vehicle for recording all university-level undergraduate higher education student achievement in all UK higher education institutions'.

## 2 THE HEAR

The HEAR enables a 'richer picture' of the student to be captured and addresses the 'absence of a consistent cross sector record of student development and achievement...' [11]. It contains a range of information for both academic and 'non-academic' activities, skills/graduate attributes, achievements and experience 'which the institution is prepared to verify' [9]. Examples of information included are; Academic Prizes/Awards, Placement/WBL (Work Based Learning), Course/Programme Representation and aspects of delivery that contribute to outcomes and skills such as Problem Based Learning or Industrial Visits. Implementing the HEAR affords significant opportunity to HEIs to progress the employability agenda forwards via the opportunity to formally recognise more from the HE experience. The HEAR 'will give future employers detailed information on the skills, progress and attainment of their prospective employee' [11].

As Wilson [11] describes, the HEAR document can be considered both formative and summative; having the ability to evolve 'throughout the students experience at university'. In STEM subjects which make use of student placements in industry, Work Based Learning or have significant employer contribution for students, the HEAR will enable students to better understand how they can capture their employer-related experience and ensure they have authentic evidence of their employability.

Following the final report of the Burgess Groups [12], a pilot scheme for the HEAR was funded at 18 HEIs [13, 14], including Northumbria University. The Vice President for Activities and Development, from Northumbria Student Union (SU), with representative responsibility for employability, was a key member of the relevant University groups, along with academic staff proposing this project. Support from senior management at the University was also necessary to ensure the University could learn from, and progress with the HEAR following the pilot scheme. An extended transcript was produced for 69 students on programmes in Biological Sciences and issued in October 2010. There were very positive outcomes of the HEARs which for all students included detailed programme and module specification information, a graduate attribute statement, project title and synopsis, placement/WBL information, academic prizes/awards and student representation/peer mentoring role statements. Academic staff had consulted students and relevant employers in the lead-up to its issue and this development was very well-received, but the employer sample was small. In contrast, a survey undertaken by Southampton University (which also did not achieve a viable response rate) achieved positive feedback but indicated that employers were not sure what the benefits would be [15]. The pilot highlighted the considerable logistical and systems based challenges associated with HEAR relevant data capture and verification and, out of the 18 HEIs which participated in HEAR pilot, only 2 relatively small and specialist institutes successfully produced the HEAR for large numbers of students.

## 3 DEVELOPING A SUPPORTING PEDAGOGY

Burgess remains a high profile champion of the HEAR as the key vehicle for measuring and recording undergraduate achievement [7, 9, 12] and continues to promote the HEAR as something additional that students will receive for the higher fees they now pay. The Wilson Review of Business-University Collaboration also concluded that the HEAR provides 'a far greater granularity of achievement and currency than the blunt instruments of UCAS points or projected degree classification' [11].

Wilson [11] recommended that at 'the earliest opportunity employers should use HEAR as a reference base for evaluating student achievement and skills'. As 2012- 2013 was the first academic year in which the HEAR was widely implemented across the UK HEI sector robust research has not yet been conducted in terms of employer support; this research project therefore aimed to explore the concept of the HEAR with employers to reveal its initial impact.

This paper complements and facilitates evaluation of a BIS [Department of Business, Innovation and Skills] funded project led by the Association of Graduate Recruiters [AGR] which focused on degree classification and social mobility [16]. The AGR were funded in 2012 to raise awareness of the HEAR among employers and to encourage the use of the HEAR in graduate recruitment processes.

'The potential impact of HEAR upon the efficiency and effectiveness of graduate recruitment is significant' however Wilson [11] recognises that the 'systems deployed by companies, especially the large corporate graduate recruiters, will require adaption to exploit this potential'. Practitioners have a role to play regarding developing the pedagogy surrounding the HEAR and it is valid that, as key stakeholders, the pedagogy should be informed by employer perspective.

HEI's also have responsibility to adapt to the HEAR, as the graduate employability is a measure which features in Institutional league tables and has taken on prominence with the publication of Key Information Set [KIS] data at programme level [17] not engaging is an institutional risk. However, a clear tension exists between aspiration and reality given the range of competing priorities institutions are currently required to engage with, not least pressure on expenditure. The HEAR report 'Bringing it all together' [12] documents some of the issues and challenges that were considered by the Burgess Group such as the ownership, technical implementation and the cost for institutions. Clear benefit for HEI (and student) investment therefore needs to be demonstrated during the initial years of the HEAR implementation.

Within this research the notion of 'Employment impact' assumes that employers have bought into the HEAR concept and will use it effectively in making recruitment decisions. It is important for HEIs to both work with employers to raise awareness of the potential of the HEAR and to understand how and why they will use the information in their decision making.

As one of the main risks to HEIs of not implementing the HEAR effectively is the employability of their graduates, the findings from the project have immediate significance and are therefore likely to influence practice and institutional policy in this 'transitional' period where HEIs are still learning from their initial implementation and are open to evidence based recommendations.

#### 4 METHODOLOGY

A broad range of STEM graduate employers, including organizations of different size and focus, were recruited using pre-existing internal networks, including placement providers, WBL hosts/contacts and organisations funding part time students *etc.* The survey was sent to industrial placement providers, industrial advisors for programmes and post graduate course admissions tutors/supervisors. Recipients were targeted in areas of food/nutrition, engineering and geography/environmental management.

141 personalised and individual invites to participate were emailed out in March 2014. A large effort was made to individually invite and personalise emails to drive up response rate. 3 emails returned auto-responses indicating alternative named contacts to invite to participate. 6% of the original emails 'bounced' back which, in addition to some further contact information meant that 36 additional postal surveys were later sent to employers. In total 180 survey invites were sent out (141 & 3 by e-mail and 36 by post).

The survey utilised the online 'Survey Monkey' tool and consisted of 10 questions, designed using a logic tree approach to avoid respondents being asked irrelevant questions. Respondents were given access to a HEAR exemplar as part of the survey.

The survey questions are listed below:

- When did your company/ organisation last recruit graduates? (tick all that apply)
- What evidence do you require before you would consider recruiting a graduate (tick all that apply)
- Please list the FIVE most important criteria which graduate applicants must meet to be employed by your company/organisation (with 1 being the most important). This can include specific knowledge, skills, abilities, experience or personal characteristics (please be as specific as possible).
- Is there any information on graduate applicants you would ideally like to see at an earlier stage in the recruitment process?
- Are you interested in extra- curricula activities graduate applicants are involved in?

- Were you aware of the HEAR?
- Are you using HEARs to support recruitment?
- Do you think the HEAR would enhance your recruitment procedure?
- What key information would you be looking for on a HEAR?
- At what stage in the recruitment process would you want to see a HEAR?

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1 Results of the employer survey

42 responses were received (although 2 of those were very incomplete) therefore a response rate of 22% was achieved. 28 completed surveys were returned from companies or organisations and 12 were returned from Post-Graduate Education contacts at HEIs. The results presented in this paper focus on the data from the sample of companies and organisations who responded; to enable evaluation of employer engagement with the HEAR process. Of the employers who responded; 14 were in the field of Engineering, 5 were Food/Nutrition employers and 9 were considered as 'General' (where they could recruit any graduates, including STEM (e.g. council) or where the firm was unclear (e.g. recruitment specialist).

Employers were asked which routes they use for graduate recruitment; they were asked to score a selection of routes from most to least important. Table 1 indicates the recruitment routes considered to be most important or important by a number of employers. The percentage of employers (n given in brackets) is shown for those routes; the number of employers who also felt the routes were less or least important is included for comparison.

Table 1. Recruitment Routes

Q. Which of the following routes does your company/organisation use for graduate recruitment?	Level of importance % (n)			
	Most Important	Important	Less Important	Least Important
Recruitment fairs	22 (4)	28 (5)	22 (4)	28 (5)
Recruitment Agencies	0 (0)	50 (5)	20 (2)	30 (3)
General Advertisements	20 (4)	10 (2)	45 (9)	25 (5)
Trade Advertisements	28 (5)	11 (2)	11 (2)	50 (9)
Direct contact with Universities	32 (9)	32 (9)	21 (6)	14 (4)

The most prominent result is the value placed by employers on direct contact with universities and/or university staff. Other methods which were identified by employers were graduate recruitment web sites (n = 7) and the LinkedIn business oriented social network (n = 1).

Tables 2 and 3 show the likelihood of graduate recruitment by the companies who participated in the survey and the evidence that they would require for recruitment to take place. A very positive picture was painted regarding current graduate recruitment, with 66% of employers just recently having recruited or in the process of or aiming to recruit soon.

Table 2. Recent/Planned Recruitment

Q. When did your company/ organisation last recruit graduates? (tick all that apply)	Response % (n)
Aiming to recruit in next 12 months	17 (8)
Currently in the process	15 (7)
Recruited within last 12 months	34 (16)
Last recruited >12 months ago	21 (10)
The company/ organisation recruits annually	13 (6)

The fact that CVs and application forms dominate the recruitment process (Table 3) demonstrates what is expected from a traditional recruitment process and highlights the general procedures and documents that the HEAR must somehow be integrated into, in order to be effective.

One very detailed reply was received regarding the importance of cover letters for assessing written communication skills and cross referencing the application with person specification/job description:

*'Comprehensive covering letter to informally assess their written communication and their understanding of the role and how/if they fit the criteria'.*

Table 3. Evidence Required Before Recruitment

Q. What evidence do you require before you would consider recruiting a graduate (tick all that apply)	Response % (n)
CV	30 (17)
References	18 (10)
Application form	26 (15)
Psychometric testing	11 (6)
Other (cover letter; VISA/ work permit/ qualifications; assessment centers; work experience)	16 (9)

Table 4 demonstrates what criteria employers would expect graduates to meet before they would be considered for employment. Respondents were asked to be as specific as possible and advised this could include specific knowledge, skills, abilities, experience or personal characteristics. There was some variance in the way this question was completed, some respondents failed to give five responses and others gave more answers. The table therefore shows how each applicant criteria was rated (with 1 being most important to 5 being least). For each of the scores on the rating scale the percentage of respondents (and number) is given e.g. four different criteria were listed at most important by varying numbers of respondents.

Table 4. Most Important Applicant Criteria

Q. Please list the FIVE most important criteria which graduate applicants must meet to be employed by your company/organisation	Rating % (n)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Academic qualifications, including reference to academic threshold e.g. '2.1 or better', 'within top 20% in academic achievement measures' etc.	47 (9)	11 (3)	26(5)		19(5)
Specific technical knowledge/ skills	26 (5)	22(6)	37(7)		
Drive/ enthusiasm/ passion/ self motivation	16 (3)	26 (7)		16(3)	
Presentation skills	11 (2)	7 (2)		26(5)	8(2)
Relevant work experience		22 (6)	11(2)	11(2)	19(5)
Team work/ inter personnel skills		11 (3)	16(3)	16(3)	27(7)
Personal attributes			11(2)	11(2)	8(2)
other				22(4)	

Employers still seem to be affording importance to the specific numerical value of the degree classification (and for some the focus was degree class in combination with the perceived quality of the awarding institute). Data demonstrates that the most important criteria which graduates must meet is a good/2.1 minimum degree award (criteria 1 AND appearing in criteria 2, 3 and 5), closely followed by specific academic and technical/ practical features of the degree programme.

Others also listed things like *'passion for...'*, *'a genuine interest in...'* *'drive/enthusiasm'*, *'self motivation'*, *'personal attributes'*, *'likeable'* *'will fit in with and get on with small team'*, *'committed to their own development'*, *'desire to learn and develop'*. Therefore despite the good degree/from good university dominating criteria 1 and 2, this was in the broader context of much more HEAR relevant criteria (criteria 3-5).

When asked if there is any information recruiters would like at an earlier stage in the recruitment process 29% said yes and listed that they would like: *'Predicted Degree Class'*, *'Career Aspirations'*,

'Course Content', 'Eligibility To Work In UK' and 'Work Experience'. Again, this demonstrates the strong focus on the traditional expectation for a good degree is still prominent with many employers, but this is considered along with other HEAR relevant criteria such as work experience and communication skills.

46% of respondents answered yes to the question "Are you interested in extra-curricula activities graduate applicants are involved in?" There were two main responses by employers who agreed that they were interested; those who were interested in activities which showed team-working, taking responsibility, leading, and 'going the extra mile' as these are likely to be people who are the most personable, self-motivated and self-reliant' (suggesting that an applicant who has 'gone the extra mile' whilst at university, was more likely to repeat this once employed), and those who were interested in what the student had done at university that was relevant to their specific application (a more business focussed level of scrutiny); relevant work experience/ learning about the business etc. Employers stated:

*'We normally look for individuals who have utilised their time at University well, and have supplemented their studies with appropriate work experience or have undertaken activities such as voluntary or charitable work that have developed their interpersonal skills and knowledge of business activities'. The relative importance of extra curricular activities undertaken by applicants lacking work experience was also highlighted '... but if graduates have a lack of work experience, then any extra-curricula activities become more important to help judge a graduates background, interests, work ethic etc.'*

When asked the question "Were you aware of the HEAR?" only one company/ organisation answered yes (4% of responses received). Further, the HEAR was not currently being used by any of the respondents to support recruitment; 1 respondent did qualify their answer with the statement that *'...last recruitment predated the HEAR'*. This data indicates that, overall, the sample of industry surveyed cannot be described as well aware of the HEAR.

On a more positive note, 64% of companies/organisations agreed that they felt the HEAR would enhance their recruitment procedure. The HEAR was considered to offer:

*'Useful & relevant information not normally covered in CV/application form', it could 'give us a better idea of the candidates strengths [sic] and weaknesses [sic] of the units studied', could allow companies to 'pick the most relevant [sic].'* In summary one employer stated *'Any information that helps us to identify the talent that we seek, through the recruitment process, or before, would have potential to be very useful for us'*.

Of the 46% of employers who indicated that they did not think that the HEAR would be useful, 1 qualified the fact that they wouldn't use it with the statement *'Although admittedly I don't know enough about it'*, 2 qualified by saying they were restricted to the use of NHS jobs for all recruitment; 1 qualified it with reference that although it seemed good, they did not think the web based nature of information was compliant with their data protection policy/would transfer burden of printing for e.g. interview panel to the admin/HR.

Table 5. Items to Include of the HEAR

What key information would you be looking for on a HEAR?	Response % (n)
Project/dissertation	27 (5)
Specific module/course information	20 (3)
Academic attainment/position in cohort / awards and prizes	20 (3)
WBL/placements/work experience (paid or voluntary)	20(3)
Non academic activities and achievements <i>'details of non measurable performance, such as the individuals passion for their subject.'</i>	13 (2)

This data reinforces the general conclusions of the institutional HEAR pilot; most employers were broadly positive about the potential impact of University accredited information which was not normally collected via CV/application form in a good level of detail on their recruitment processes.

Employers indicated that they value the information that is relatively straightforward to include in a HEAR, such as detailed module and programme information. However, information identified as

especially relevant to most of the employers such as detailed project/dissertation information, specific details of WBL/placement experiences etc. continue to be the most challenging and complex logistically in terms of data capture and verification. How much of a priority the resolution of such issues can be given, especially in very large and complex HEIs remains unresolved in this initial phase of HEAR implementation.

The one employer who had heard about the HEAR had obviously given its use in context some consideration and made reference to looking at the HEAR from the start of academic journey to see evidence of momentum/development/graduate exit velocity:

*'I would like to see the HEAR document at the end of each year, but especially at the start of the process (year 1); opinions of lecturers on attributes such as team working, independence, flexibility and focus.'*

When considering the timing of the HEAR, 86% felt they would like to see the HEAR from the outset of the recruitment process and 14% felt they would want it at the selection stage for interview. Additional qualitative comments given by respondents are shown below:

*'The higher academic achievement report is an excellent idea as it allows the training officer to access what the students have already learnt without going over the same ground again. It also demonstrates the success of the student, their commitment to their degree and their interaction at university with a positive attitude.'*

*Regarding the mock report attached, this looks a very comprehensive summary and one which I feel would be valued by employers. However, for completeness, I think the section concerned with 'Placement/Work Experience' could include more detail where applicable. (Information such as attendance figures, interaction with staff in the workplace, a basic reference from the employer as to the candidate's suitability to the line of work).'*

*'Student report looks good, lots of valuable info presented in an easy to read document.'*

## 5.2 Research from the student survey

Research with students was conducted with second year undergraduate students in Engineering and Biological Science. Students were issued with a simple survey to ascertain their level of knowledge regarding the HEAR. Halfway through the survey students were shown a sample HEAR and had the purpose of the HEAR explained to them.

Within Engineering there were 92 possible participants in class on the day the survey was administered. Students were asked 5 questions:

- Have you heard about the HEAR Transcript you will receive access to upon your graduation?
- How much do you know enough about the purpose and function of HEAR Transcripts?
- Do you think you would currently have any non-academic University achievements which would be worthy of recording on your HEAR?
- Would you be encouraged to undertake activities for the purpose of them appearing on your HEAR?
- When you think about applying for jobs which do you think will be most important?

The questions were asked of students two months into semester 1 of their second year; as the majority were starting to think about potential placements and how they might direct their future careers into specific areas of engineering. For each question there were some students chose not to answer.

Only 5% of students (n = 4) had heard about the HEAR that they would receive upon their graduation. The same number of students felt they knew a small amount about the HEAR but none of the students felt they could be classified as knowing a lot about the HEAR.

36% of students (n = 28) felt that at the time of completing the survey they would have content which would be worthy of recording on a HEAR. This suggests that there are activities which students themselves feel would add value to their transcript and complement the standard degree classification.

Students were shown an example HEAR transcript and had the philosophy and purpose of the HEAR explained to them. Following this, 52% of students (n = 43) felt they would be encouraged to undertake activities for the purpose of them appearing on their HEAR. This suggests that students are

aware of the value that there may be in enabling employers to see a University approved transcript which evidences a greater range of their skills and activities they have participated in.

Table 6 shows students' responses when they were asked what they felt would be most important artefact when applying for jobs. The results demonstrate that although students saw the potential value and benefit of the HEAR they still felt that employers would be more likely to follow tradition and pay attention to their CV.

Table 6: What students think employers will use to recruit

When you think about applying for jobs which do you think will be most important?	Percent% (n)
Your degree grade	20% (15)
Your CV	66% (50)
Your application form	12% (12)
Your HEAR Transcript	3% (3)
Totals	100% (80)

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The HEAR represents a significant 'step forward' from the traditional transcript for students across the academic spectrum as it recognises academic and non academic achievements, skills and experiences. It also 'provides a far greater granularity of achievement and currency than the blunt instruments of UCAS points or projected degree classification' [12].

The data has evaluated the feedback from a sample of STEM employers drawn from companies and organisations of different size and focus and obtained through an online survey. Results demonstrate that within the sample there is little/no current knowledge or use of the HEAR within organisations/companies. This research suggests that the information being disseminated by AGR has not significantly impacted on employers, to date.

There is broad and positive support for the concept of the HEAR and the ability to display project and work experience on the HEAR is identified as valuable. There is positive data to show current/ongoing graduate recruitment with direct contact with universities an important graduate recruitment route.

'At least a 2.1' is still considered to be one of the most important criteria for recruiting graduates, but this is set within a broader context of far more HEAR relevant criteria, highlighting real scope for the HEAR to make a significant and positive impact on employer recruitment processes.

The information considered to be important by employers includes data which remains logistically challenging and resource intensive to capture and verify e.g. identifying suitable points to capture, log and verify such as detailed project information for each student. This burden increases with the size and complexity for the HEI. These data highlight a real tension between employability aspirations and rhetoric of HEIs in the general context of severe pressure on expenditure and competing priorities, especially for very large and complex institutes.

Separate small scale research has been conducted with two different undergraduate STEM cohorts at the HEI and conclusions also show that students know nothing or very little about the HEAR. The data also highlights generally positive/ broad support for the HEAR as a means by which students who undertake 'additional' non-academic activities can get their efforts recognised.

Evaluation of this initial data set highlights an evidence base from employers and students which clearly suggest that continued implementation of the HEAR has scope to make a positive impact on graduate recruitment processes and places emphasis on the development of best practice to enhance student engagement with the principles underpinning the HEAR. Both institutions and practitioners have a role to play in the continued development of a supporting pedagogy.

An implicit impact of the collaborative nature of this project is that knowledge of the HEAR has been obtained by academics in different disciplines. This knowledge will subsequently inform the career planning and lifelong learning conversations and teaching activities the staff conduct, allowing them to emphasize the relevance of student actions.



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