The Work-Readiness of Recruits from Colleges and Universities in Scotland

A Research Report Produced for Futureskills Scotland by the Training and Employment Research Unit (TERU) at the University of Glasgow
The Work-Readiness of Recruits from Colleges and Universities in Scotland

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Disclaimer: This work is the responsibility of the authors. It does not necessarily reflect the views of Futureskills Scotland or the Scottish Government.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This research was undertaken by Andrea Glass, Helenor Landsburgh, Alison Quashie and Professor Alan McGregor of the Training and Employment Research Unit (TERU) at the University of Glasgow.

The authors can be contacted at: http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/teru/
Futureskills Scotland was launched in November 2002. Amongst its key aims were:

• to improve access to labour market information and intelligence across Scotland; and

• to analyse the Scottish labour market to inform policy-making.

Sophisticated web tools have been developed and refined to meet the first of these aims. Free access to labour market information is available through Key Indicators (www.keyindicators.org.uk). Similarly, access to the most comprehensive set of labour market reports and analyses from around the world are made available through Research Online (www.researchonline.org.uk).

Futureskills Scotland also provides a series of core reports on the Scottish labour market. These are regularly updated and are available free from the Futureskills Scotland website (www.futureskillsscotland.org.uk).

In recent years, Futureskills Scotland has commissioned research from experts across the UK to provide informed and objective analysis of key labour market issues. This research sheds light on key issues for Scottish policymakers. It also provides a stimulus for wider debate.

Collating this work into a formal research series will help to bring the issues and discussion to a wider audience. Futureskills Scotland is committed to disseminating and promoting this research series as widely as possible.

The views expressed in this research series are not necessarily those of Futureskills Scotland.

Futureskills Scotland
November 2008
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Analysis of the Scottish Employer Skills Survey has consistently shown that employers hold the individuals that they recruit from colleges and universities in high regard. Three-quarters of Scottish employers who recruit someone straight from college consider that recruit well-prepared for the world of work. Over four in every five Scottish employers who recruit a recent graduate consider them well prepared for work.

Detailed case study research was undertaken with Scottish employers to examine these issues in more detail. It should be borne in mind that such case study research does not provide us with a basis for generalisation about ‘all colleges’ or ‘all graduates’. Rather, it provides a richer, deeper understanding of some of the underlying issues.

When recruiting someone straight from college, the analysis shows that:

• employers’ initially expect recruits from college to take time to familiarise themselves with the organisation. Employers expect such recruits to demonstrate a willingness to learn;

• expectations of college recruits increases with their length of service;

• training provided to college recruits is often focused on acquiring specific skills, as opposed to being part of a formal training plan;

• college recruits who are well-prepared typically demonstrate:
  o good technical and job-related skills;
  o good communication skills; and
  o a strong work ethic.

When recruiting someone straight from university, the analysis shows that:

• employers’ initially expect graduate recruits to take time to familiarise themselves with the organisation. Employers expect such recruits to demonstrate a willingness to learn;

• over time, graduates are expected to:
  o progress at a faster pace than other recruits;
  o bring more fresh ideas to the organisation;
  o take on more responsibilities; and
  o require less management support and direction than other recruits.

• formal training was offered to graduates by most employers in the case studies, often as part of a specific graduate trainee programme;

• graduates who are well-prepared typically demonstrate:
  o good technical and job-related skills;
  o good communication skills; and
  o a strong work ethic.

In terms of the impact that preparedness for work can have, these are similar in nature for college recruits and for graduates:

• preparedness manifests itself in terms of how big an impact that the recruit can make to the organisation and how quickly after recruiting this impact can be made;
• well-prepared recruits can have an impact on business in terms of:
  o increased efficiency and effectiveness;
  o less management and supervisory time spent in checking and correcting work;
  o initiative – as recruits plan some of their own work and solve problems as they arise;
  o innovation – developing new methods of working and introducing new techniques and technology;
  o fostering strong morale amongst staff; and
  o better customer relations and increased organisational reputation.

The case study research has provided a deeper insight into employer perceptions and expectations of recruits from college and university. Scottish employers generally consider such recruits to be well prepared for work and this impacts positively on their business. Where employers consider that any improvements are required, it is largely that college and university students need greater exposure to the work environment during their studies.
INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction
Futureskills Scotland conducts a large-scale survey of over 6,000 Scottish employers every other year, the Employers Skill Survey (ESS). This survey asks employers about skills, recruitment and training issues. Specifically, employers are asked how well-prepared recruits from school, college or university were for work.

Background
The majority of employers who have recruited someone straight from school, college or university thought that the recruit was well-prepared for the world of work.

• A high proportion of workplaces who have recruited employees directly from college or university say that they are well prepared for work (75 per cent and 81 per cent respectively).

• The proportion of employers who say that school leavers are well prepared for work is lower in comparison but still represents six in ten employers who have taken on a school leaver.

Results from the Scottish Employers Skill Survey are reported in more detail in ‘Skills in Scotland 2006’ available from the Futureskills Scotland website – [www.futureskillsscotland.org.uk](http://www.futureskillsscotland.org.uk).

But what does this mean? What do employers think about the way in which recruits from colleges and universities present to their organisations? What are their expectations of these recruits? What is the impact of their recruitment on the organisation as a whole?

Futureskills Scotland commissioned further case study based research to help answer these questions.

Specific issues around the work-readiness of school leavers has been explored in previous research undertaken for Futureskills Scotland - published as ‘Scottish School Leavers and their Understanding of the World of Work’ and also available from the website.

Methodology – The Case Study Approach
Using a case study approach provides qualitative information of some depth to complement the quantitative information.
obtained through the Employers Skill Survey. The case studies also allow a range of people in an organisation to contribute to a case study, whereas the Employers Skill Survey generally obtains information from one respondent in each organisation.

If those are the strengths of the case study approach, a possible weakness is that the 30 organisations that participated in this case study research are in no sense ‘representative’ of all employers. This is not a large sample from which statistically robust conclusions can be drawn. Rather, it complements the quantitative work which prompted this more detailed, qualitative research. Consequently, it is important to take a balanced approach when assessing this kind of evidence. There is no basis for sweeping conclusions about ‘all graduates’ or ‘all colleges’.

The sample of 30 case studies was split two-thirds employers who cited college and university recruits as ‘well prepared’ and one third who cited them ‘poorly prepared’ for the workplace. In taking this approach we have ‘over-sampled’ employers who indicated that they had a negative view of college and/or university leavers. In order to get the maximum value from the in-depth case studies it was important to provide employers with an opportunity to outline the areas in which they had experienced difficulties and the subsequent impacts on their organisations.

There is a spread of employers by size, broad industrial sector and location. In addition there is a mix of those with experience of taking on recruits only from college, only from university and from both. To ensure the case studies were comprehensive, at each site there were interviews carried out with the Human Resource manager (or individual with the recruitment responsibility), line managers and recent recruits.

The case study employers were asked to recall their experiences in relation to recruiting individuals into their first job after leaving college or university. Additionally, case study employers were asked to focus primarily on the recruitment of individuals from college and university into jobs for which they normally require this level of education, rather than on individuals who have taken up entry level, temporary and/or part-time jobs in competition with all other applicants.

The majority of the case study employers found it initially challenging to think about their recruits specifically in this context. Notwithstanding the use of specific qualifications such as HNCs or a degree as recruitment criteria, few had previously thought in any depth about the way in which their recruits’ experiences at college or university may have contributed to their work readiness. With the exception of individuals recruited specifically as graduate trainees and/or into graduate training programmes, employers often struggled to differentiate their university leavers from their wider workforce. This observation was even stronger for college leavers, with most employers struggling to see them as a group distinct from their other employees.
RECRUITMENT FROM SCOTLAND’S COLLEGES

Key Findings

Recruitment

• When recruiting, the main issue for employers is ‘getting the right person for the job’.

• In the main, case study employers had no difficulty in recruiting candidates from college – either in terms of quality or quantity.

• Although the majority of case study employers understood university provision they are much less well informed about college provision.

• The jobs that college leavers secure tend to be those which make best use of the job-related skills they acquired at college.

• Employers use standard interview techniques to recruit individuals from colleges.

Employer Expectations

• Employer expectations of recruits from college was high in the longer term. Having said this, many of our case study employers had high expectations of employees generally.

• Despite high expectations college recruits were not expected to ‘hit the ground running’. In the initial period after joining the company, college recruits were expected to take time to familiarise themselves with the routines and practices of the organisation. Employers expected these recruits to demonstrate a willingness to learn.

• Training was available, although it was rarely part of a formalised training programme for college recruits. Training related mainly to acquiring specific skills e.g. learning to use a new piece of equipment or software package.

Impact

• Employers consider that most recruits from college are ‘well prepared’ for work. Well-prepared recruits are those who typically demonstrate good technical/job related skills, good communication skills and a good work ethic.

• The level of preparedness for the workplace displayed by recruits can make a substantial difference to their effectiveness. The main differences are around the strength of the positive impact the recruit can make and the length of time from recruitment to making a positive contribution. That is, preparedness manifests itself in how much of a contribution the recruit can make and how quickly they can make it.

Recruitment from Colleges

Type of Jobs

Individuals recruited into their first job straight from college tend to secure positions in which the job related skills that they have learnt in college would be utilised.
In terms of industrial sector, the seven case study employers that had recruited individuals straight from college were operating in retailing, printing, landscaping, leisure and marine rentals, entertainment, and electronics. The types of jobs that recruits from colleges secured were either:

- **trainee positions e.g. trainee structural engineers in the marine rental company; or**
- **positions in which recruits were expected to use the vocational skills that they had gained in college e.g. a graphic designer in the printing company, a horticultural labourer in the landscaping company or the fitness attendant at the leisure centre.**

The starting salaries for these jobs were in the range £9,000 to £17,500.

**Recruitment Requirements and Assessment**

Having a college based qualification or having attended a college was not a prerequisite for any of the positions secured in the case study organisations by individuals recruited straight from college. Although not an essential requirement for any of our case study employers, at least one employer viewed college based qualifications as desirable. When recruiting, all of the employers in the case studies considered experience and track record more important.

College recruits are often competing for jobs with other candidates who do not have a college-based qualification. Typically, these other candidates can demonstrate relevant work experience.

All the employers that have recruited individuals from college recruited them through a formal interview process. Interviews are favoured as a means of assessment because they provide an opportunity for candidates to outline their qualifications, skills and experience, but more importantly their ability to communicate with others. The employers taking on individuals from college indicated that an interview approach is their preferred method for all candidates, although a couple use complementary methods, with one administering a series of practical tests and another a group exercise.

**Recruitment Difficulties**

Most of the employers could identify no difficulties at all in relation to recruiting college leavers. They had no difficulty recruiting the numbers they required and were generally satisfied with the quality of college recruits.

**Expectations of Recruits from Colleges**

Three of the seven case study employers expected new recruits to spend the first three months on the job familiarising themselves with the routines and practices of the organisation. Although not an essential requirement for any of our case study employers, at least one employer viewed college based qualifications as desirable. When recruiting, all of the employers in the case studies considered experience and track record more important.

But the other four employers were more demanding, viewing this initial period as probationary and expecting recruits to prove themselves by achieving initial targets.

By the end of a three year period, most case study employers expected that recruits from college would be taking on more responsibility and be making some contributions to organisational development.
Over the longer term, half of those employing college leavers anticipated that they would be progressing within the company and taking up managerial positions. One employer had no long-term expectations of recruits from college and another anticipated that they would not stay with the company over the longer term. The fact that an individual was recruited from a college did not alter the views of most of the employers in terms of expectations and they viewed these individuals in the same way as any other new recruit. Only one employer, a clothing print company, had higher expectations overall of recruits taken on from college than their workforce generally. This was specifically related to the skills that they brought with them from their college course that would enable them to get to grips with the demands of the job more effectively.

**Examples of well prepared – Recruits from College**

Employers were asked to outline what they considered ‘well prepared’ for the workplace means when recruiting employees directly on leaving college. Employers expect that well-prepared college recruits will demonstrate:

- **good communication skills**;
- **technical job-related skills and knowledge**; and
- **a good work ethic**.

Where college recruits were well prepared the benefits to the employer included:

- **increased efficiency**;
- **high motivation levels helping to enthuse other staff**;
- **being able to make a strong contribution to the company very quickly after joining**; and
- **promoting a positive image of the company**.
RECRUITMENT FROM SCOTLAND’S UNIVERSITIES

Key Findings

Recruitment

• With the exception of recruitment onto graduate training programmes, the main issue for employers is ‘getting the right person for the job’.

• The majority of case study employers understood university provision, often as the result of their own experiences.

• Individuals are recruited from universities either into specialist graduate training programmes, into trainee positions for which employers require degree level qualifications (but not always specialist skills), or they compete for positions that are open to non-graduate level candidates.

• Most case study employers see a degree as a proxy for achieving a certain level of competence that represents the minimum standard they look for in a new recruit. However, there were a minority of case study employers who recruited graduates specifically for the technical skills they acquired from their university course.

• Around a third of case study employers had experienced problems in recruiting the numbers of graduates they required. Most employers had not experienced problems in terms of the quality of graduate recruits. Often the graduate recruitment difficulties were related to the nature of the job on offer.

Employer Expectations

• Most of the case study employers had higher long term expectations of graduate recruits than other recruits. Employers anticipated that in the long term graduates would progress at a faster pace and with less support, bring fresh ideas to the organisation and take on more responsibilities.

• Despite high expectations, graduate recruits were not expected to ‘hit the ground running’. In the initial period after joining the company, graduates were expected to take time to familiarise themselves with the routines and practices of the organisation. Employers expected these recruits to demonstrate a willingness to learn.

• Formal training was offered to graduate recruits by most employers. Some employers ran specific graduate trainee programmes. These provide recruits from university with a good grounding in all aspects of the operations of their employer.

• Employers expect graduates to progress at a faster pace than other recruits, bring more fresh ideas to the organisation, take on more responsibilities and progress with less management support than other recruits.
Impact

• Employers consider that most recruits from university are ‘well prepared’ for work. As for college recruits, well prepared recruits from university are those who typically demonstrate good technical/job related skills, good communication skills and a good work ethic.

• The level of preparedness for the workplace displayed by graduates can make a substantial difference to their effectiveness. The impacts are similar in nature to those of college recruits. That is, preparedness manifests itself in how much of a contribution the recruit can make and how quickly they can make it.

Recruitment from Universities

Type of Jobs

23 of the 30 case study employers reported recently taking on recruits into their first job from university. These organisations were across a wide range of industrial sectors including retail, manufacturing, health and social care, education, hospitality and business and financial services sectors.

Recruitment Requirements and Assessment

Individuals are recruited from universities either into specialist graduate training programmes, into trainee positions for which employers require degree level qualifications (but not always specialist skills), or they compete for positions that are open to non-graduate level candidates.

Almost half of the case study employers taking on recruits straight from university stipulated that a degree was a requirement for the positions on offer. Some indicated that they would consider individuals with relevant experience in exceptional circumstances but this was not their preference. As would be expected, the successful completion of a degree programme was a prerequisite for all individuals recruited onto a graduate training programme.

Most case study employers see a degree as a proxy for achieving a certain level of competence, which represents the minimum standard that they are seeking in a new recruit.

The most frequently cited characteristics which employers sought in graduate recruits were communication skills, job-related technical skills, the ability to work in teams and enthusiasm. When recruits were asked what they thought employers were looking for more than half identified communication as important and around a quarter identified job-related technical skills and knowledge, team working and enthusiasm. This suggests that recruits from university are aware of the skills and characteristics that employers consider when recruiting.

Recruitment Difficulties

Around a third of case study employers with recruits from university have experienced problems in recruiting the numbers they require. Employers perceive that problems recruiting the quantity of graduates they require is most acute when:

• they are competing for a small pool of potential graduates;
• the employers themselves struggle to offer attractive packages; or
• the skills they require are highly specialist.

These are employers’ perceptions and do not necessarily reflect the situation in relation to the actual size of the recruitment pool.

Most recruitment difficulties occur as a result of case study employers being unable to recruit the quantity of graduates they require – only three of the case study employers expressed any concerns about the quality of recruits taken on from universities.

**Expectations of Recruits from University**

The case study employers do not appear to be especially demanding of recruits from university in their first three months. Around three-quarters expect them to spend this period familiarising themselves with the daily routines and practices and show a willingness to learn about the organisation. This is very much in line with their expectations of any new recruit on joining. Two employers expected new recruits to make a limited contribution with some support. Only one employer, a primary school, expected that recruits would be making a full contribution on leaving university. This is perhaps indicative of the specific vocational nature of the relevant graduate training course.

Expectations changed markedly over time. Most case study employers anticipated that after three years, individuals that they have recruited from university will be fully competent at their job, taking on more responsibilities, progressing within the organisation and being in a position to lead teams and projects. In short, case study employers expect recruits from university to progress rapidly, and see universities as providing recruits with the basis from which they can develop to play a full part in the activities of the organisation.

In terms of longer-term expectations, case study employers are divided into those that anticipate that university recruits will be taking up management positions and contributing to organisational development, and those that do not see a long term future for them within the organisation. The latter view was mainly expressed by employers in small organisations with few opportunities for progression or who had recruited individuals into jobs that they did not view as especially challenging over the longer term.

The vast majority of employers who recruited graduates had higher expectations of them than of their other recruits. This was the case even though the majority of employers recruited graduates into positions where a degree was not required (although in the majority of cases a university qualification was considered *desirable*). As with those recruited from college, the reluctance to rule out individuals without university level qualifications but with relevant experience appears to be a human resource procedure to provide employers with a larger pool of potential recruits.
Where employers recruited from universities they expected that these individuals would be able to:

- progress at a faster pace;
- bring more fresh ideas to the organisation;
- take on more responsibilities; and
- progress with less support than other recruits.

These employers clearly have an expectation that those who have attended university will add value to their organisation around efficiency, innovation and management.

The small number of employers that did not appear to have higher expectations of recruits from university fell into two broad categories:

- the first were employers that rely heavily on training up recruits to their own specification subsequent to them joining the organisation. These employers use attendance at university as a proxy for attainment of a desired standard, but beyond that they anticipate that they will be responsible for training up the recruits in their own way; and

- the second were those that had recruited individuals from university into more routine occupations in retail and hospitality. Although there is potential for them to add value, in reality recruits are being taken on for positions that do not require degree level attainment, so expectations do not differ from those of non-graduate level recruits.

**Examples of well prepared – Recruits from University**

Employers were asked to outline what they considered ‘well prepared’ for the workplace means when recruiting employees directly on leaving university. Employers have expectations of university recruits across a range of competencies including basic, technical and core skills.

- more than half of employers with recruits from universities mentioned the need for technical job-related skills and knowledge;
- more than half of employers cited good communication skills; and
- around a third highlighted the need for basic skills\(^1\) and a good work ethic.

When university recruits were well prepared the following impacts were noted:

- increased efficiency;
- minimal supervision is required freeing management resources to concentrate on other tasks;
- recruits are able to make a strong contribution to the company very quickly after joining; and
- new innovations may be introduced to the company, for example, suggesting new software or new ways of working.

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\(^1\) It is interesting to note that when employers talk about basic skills in relation to recruits from university, they appear to be anticipating a much higher level of skills around literacy and numeracy than would normally be considered basic. In reality these relate to specific aspects of a job e.g. working with budgets, writing reports etc. This suggests that those working with employers must be careful in making assumptions about what employers mean by terms such as ‘basic skills’. There appears to be a difference between the accepted official definition of basic skills as “The ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general.” (The Basic Skills Agency) and the more subjective, contextual definition used by employers. Employers tend to see literacy and numeracy as a set of more complex capabilities. This also shows that employers have expectations of university recruits across a range of competencies including basic, technical and core skills.