

# CareerChats:

## MANAGING EXPECTATIONS, MOVING TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken” – is probably the best career advice to give to young people, and we have Oscar Wilde to thank for his wise words.

By **Nannette Ripmeester**

**B**ut discovering and being yourself is not easy in this fast-paced, technology-driven world. Especially for graduates who are about to move into the world of work. How can we support young people who want to live their dreams? We have interviewed employers, students and HEI professionals to discuss the issues of career preparation and employability. CareerChats help us close the gap between education and the world of employment, so that students become the most talented version of themselves, because “the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

### Bridging the Gap

When you are challenged to follow your dreams, it always helps if someone can show you the way. But to what extent do Higher Education Institutions (HEI) need to support their students who are trying to bridge the gap between education and the world of work?

### Employers and Recruiters

We have asked global employers what main skills they are looking for in a candidate. Each employer indicated the need to be on top of your subject; “If you hire a

software engineer, you assume they have the necessary skills”. However, there is a big demand for more than just technical skills: “As an organisation, we have four key skills which all staff are regularly appraised on. These are client centricity, innovation, sustainability and the ability to connect. However, there are also seven characteristics which I personally look for in a candidate: common sense, the ability to take responsibility, integrity, likability, competence, courage and personal strength,” says Stuart Jehan, Strategic Fund Development Manager at Robeco in Luxembourg. “At Philips and IBM, they are looking for enthusiastic change-enablers and flexible team workers; Vopak is looking for street-wise innovators. Whether you call it soft skills, transnational skills, transferable skills, or 21st-century skills; these are the skills that will get candidates hired. These are the skills that you will need as a professional to succeed in today’s, but more importantly, tomorrow’s world.” And how can our students show they possess those skills? According to Selene Siregar, recruiter at Michael Page in Jakarta, “Students need to be able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. Ideally, students can think on their feet and relate the answers they give in a job interview to their skills and experience in such a way that they demonstrate how these can be beneficial to the prospective employer.”

### Self-Reflection

This ability to understand what skills an employer might be looking for, does not appear to be very well-developed in recent graduates. “Many do not recognise

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some of the key skills they may already possess – even if gained in a completely different scenario – or do not realise the importance of soft skills. For instance, a part-time job serving coffee, although this may not seem relevant for an office job, indicates your skills in sales and/or dealing with people,” mentions Stuart Jehan. His words are echoed by many other employers. In general, recent graduates do not realise what they have to offer a prospective employer. This reflection on yourself, your capabilities, your skills and how you can apply your academic knowledge to the ‘real world’ is critically evaluated by employers.

### Higher Education Institutions

However, if we ask HigherEd Professionals how to support students, the insight they offer is slightly different. Nearly half of them said; “I think our graduates are well-prepared in terms of understanding job market requirements given the nature of our programmes.” Although some do recognise the challenges, such as Adriana Perez Encinas from Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, who says: “I think the students are not so well-informed, at least until some months before graduation. And I do believe they experience uncertainty.” Brett Berquist from the University of Auckland states that: “In the broadest terms, most undergraduates finish their studies with a mystical understanding of how the job market works.” Maybe the solution lies in the long summer breaks they have in Finland, as Salla Jutila from University of Lapland explains: “During those long summer breaks, Finnish school kids and students gain work experience. This helps them understand job requirements better.”

### Students

Whatever way we move ahead in helping our students prepare for the labour market, depends on the decisions the HEIs make, yet the fact that something needs to happen is clear if we look at what students and employers say. “I expect the university to provide me with sufficient connections and knowledge to find a good job,” says Olga Spinu, a Romanian student studying in Rotterdam. Or as Dutch Josje Diepeveen says: “I do not expect a university to take me by the hand but I do expect help and support when making the transition to a career.”

We asked the HigherEd Professionals whether they believe it is the role of a Higher Education Institution to prepare students for their first steps onto the labour market. Catherine Chapeau, responsible for employment/work placement at Grenoble INP states that: “The purpose of a higher education degree is to allow a student to exercise a professional activity based on their professional ambitions. So, yes, the role of a university is to prepare the student for entering the labour market, but also to enable them to adapt and evolve on this labour market.”

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In line with this, Diganta Talukdar, an Indian student studying in Groningen, says he expects his university degree to support him into the future of work: “The need for jobs or employment may change and the value of my degree should not be influenced by those changes.” Emma Hagg from the Swedish Karolinska Institutet mentions that Swedish regulations require a focus on employability: “We have a responsibility to make our students employable – and that includes preparing them for the transition to the labour market, irrespective whether this is inside or outside academia.

Both career paths are equally important.”

Katie Orr, International Director of Nova Scotia Community College in Halifax, thinks it is essential for higher education to bridge the gap. Certainly for Community Colleges – as their performance and funding are based on this. Geoff Wilmshurst, Vice President Partnerships for Camosun College, agrees

it is important, but also thinks there are different roles for different levels of higher education. “At college level, this is vital to what we do and is in fact our raison d’être. At university level there is room, in my opinion, to provide an education that is related to general thinking and problem-solving that is not necessarily geared towards a specific job outcome.”

That brings us back to what we understand under employability. Do we believe it is ‘just’ making it possible for students to find a job after graduation, or is it providing people with an ability and adaptability that will prepare them for the ‘rest of their lives’? Do we give them a fish or do we teach them to fish? We believe it is preparing them for the rest of their lives. ❧

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

“There are seven characteristics I look for in a candidate: common sense, taking responsibility, integrity, likability, competence, courage and personal strength.” **Stuart Jehan, Strategic Fund Development Manager, Robeco, Luxembourg**

**CAREERCHATS**  
CareerChats take place between global employers, international students & Higher Education Professionals, and explore the alignment between career needs, employability expectations and related motivations.

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