Note of speaker meeting: "Social Mobility: How can employers and universities work together to improve graduate outcomes"

Speakers:

Shirley Atkinson, Vice-Chancellor, University of Sunderland

Nicholas Miller, Director, The Bridge Group

Andy Youell, Director Data Policy and Governance, HESA

Shirley Atkinson used her presentation to the group to share the best practice work happening at the University of Sunderland. She noted that a very large proportion of students at Sunderland were from a widening participation background and that as often they came to university at the age of 21 they were counted as mature students. Going further to describe the student cohort Ms Atkinson reflected that a large proportion of the students are either working part-time or have caring responsibilities, and despite these additional commitments the students are determined and innovative and the university has set high ambitions for them.

Ms Atkinson described the programme of work that the university set up which looked at improving the career offer from the university and the students' graduate outcomes. They found that it was common that the students were focused entirely on their degree outcome at the point of studying rather than looking further ahead to graduate employment. The university met with large and SME employers to understand their concerns for hiring. For SMEs it was clear that they felt it was often too risky to employ a graduate and on the student side there needed to be some work done on how the students could learn to sell themselves in interviews, overcome possible disadvantages such as not having contact for networking or gaining internships.

The university implemented several outputs. They created Sunderland Futures, which gave careers advice and support to students up to three years following graduation. They also discussed the relevance of the curriculum with employers and created modules to help with leadership and other skills. For SMEs they created an 'intern factory' in order to de-risk taking on a graduate. According to the DHLE data these changes saw a 16% increase of graduate employment over a two-year period in. Finally, the university also has campuses in London and Hong Kong. While students that are working part-time or have caring responsibilities aren't able to take a whole year out, it is possible for them to be mobile in short bursts. Ms Atkinson reflected on how this opportunity will help to improve students' confidence.

Nicholas Miller used his presentation to describe the evidence based research and conclusions that the Bridge Group had found in this area. He noted that the research often is reflective of large

employers and this is down the availability of data. He explained how access to higher education is an important vehicle to social mobility but not the whole answer and how evidence has told them that the evidence that university is the ultimate leveller is indeed a myth and in fact students from less affluent backgrounds are earning less than their peers.

Mr Miller described how the evidence points to both a supply and demand issue. Setting out how students from lower socio-economic groups have lower level of awareness of what it may mean to manage a career. For some sector's graduate jobs are found following internships undertaken in students' first years. However, for many students that have made a huge step in getting to university a career is not the predominate thought. This issue is compounded by internships and similar being both accessed disproportionately by the more affluent and that the majority are London focused, bringing in a geographical concern.

Mr Miller went onto describe concerns about how employers filter out or attempt to attract graduates. This included apprehensions about screening students based on A-Level grades, those who provide unpaid and unadvertised internships, and those putting premiums on indicators that not all students can achieve such as studying abroad or a post-graduate qualification. Often employers discuss a wish to diversify their workforce and yet visit only six universities a year, putting on events in a nearby hotel where a student would need to 'self-select' to attend. He concluded his comments by flagging that all good practice that is exercised is often entirely dis-incentivised by league tables.

Andy Youell set out the consultation for the new DHLE survey. He noted that previous there had been a narrow focus on job description and graduate salary, and how a longer period following graduation is necessary to more accurately understand the employment picture. The consultation also suggests that the information collected should be linked to HRMC statistics, and therefore a greater and richer source of information about what students do following university can be developed.

He noted that the survey will be centrally managed, that HESA would be working with the Office for National Statistics and that the governance of the process would be led by a broad group, including Research Councils and institutions. HESA will also be consulting on an additional section – graduate voice – which would ask students to complete what they felt they had learnt and give greater detail of their employment patterns.

Q&A and Discussion
The discussion opened with a conversation about **school influence and family attitude.** Attendees discussed the importance of working with schools early on to develop some of the presentation skills that some students may not have. The conversation also focused on whether it would be possible for a university to work with parents and help them give the confidence that a young person needs before and during their university studies. It was felt that there had been positive improvements in outreach to schools but parents had possibly been overlooked. A related discussion on cultural differences emerged, looking at the influence that family can have following graduation, with some female graduates being encouraged not to work. It was agreed that this what not the place of a university to intervene but that this was a nuance not recognised by data collection, and it did not

mean that the student had failed or that their education had no value. The group also discussed care leaver students, those that face challenges in a different way, who may have no family or networks. It was agreed that it is hard to define, capture and interpret meaningful data but that an awareness of scenarios like this is imperative.

The discussion then moved onto what is described as **a successful graduate outcome**. It was agreed that a 2:2 should not be considered a bad outcome and that the assumption that all people use the word 'successful' in the same way is incorrect. The group felt it was important to note that some students are limited geographically, because of other responsibilities they are unable or tend not to relocate for jobs, and therefore 'successful' is much harder if a student lives in an area where there are fewer jobs. It was agreed that there are limits to what the DHLE data can describe but that different questions need to be asked of it, perhaps less of a focus on **graduate salary**.

There were suggestions about **apprenticeships** and **credit transfer for job roles**. It was discussed that some universities already offer credit transfer from work, and there were concerns raised about apprenticeships. It was agreed that a genuine apprenticeship in some sectors could be transformative for prospective students, particularly when the increase in tuition fees can make some families nervous. However, the value of a degree was not to be underestimated, gaining a broad level of employable and transferable skills prepares a student to swap between sectors and job roles. A well-informed decision should be the aim.

Two concerns concluded the discussion. Firstly, there was a clear consensus that Erasmus and other exchange programmes provided skills and future opportunities for students, it was necessary to protect these opportunities following **Brexit**. Secondly, how to move the discussion past the characterisation that the response to this issue is getting people from lower socio-economic backgrounds into the 'top' universities.