

DEVELOPING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS: AN ACTION PLAN FOR STUDENTS

If you are on the brink of choosing a degree course, this Action Plan will help you to make the most of your university years, even if you are not yet sure of your career. The Action Plan is published by the Association of Graduate Recruiters. It is an extract from their report, Skills for Graduates in the 21st Century, which predicted the qualities needed for the future world of work.

In the future you will need the skills to manage a varied career and to be an effective learner. These are the skills which will allow you to develop and make use of your own individual strengths. They could easily be called "enabling skills" because they will enable you to be effective in managing your work and its relationship with the rest of life. They will put you in charge, instead of being at the mercy of your work.

The task is not impossible. There are simple things you can do to develop these Self-Reliance skills. The Action Plan lists a number of things suggested by employers and academics, which can be done to make the most of the opportunities which exist at university to develop these skills.

1. INCREASE YOUR SELF-AWARENESS

- List your strengths and weaknesses. Use others to help. Continually update the list.
- Actively seek feedback from colleagues, staff, close friends and family. Get outside your comfort zone.
- Notice which experiences really motivate you. Write them down.
- Make an effort to establish your values and underlying beliefs. You will not be comfortable if you do things which work against these values.

2. MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION ABOUT WHAT, HOW AND WHERE TO STUDY.

- In a Guardian/Gallup survey of recent graduates, 30% said they would probably not take the same course if they had their time over again.
- *Think about your reasons for doing a degree.* Can you define exactly what you will gain from a degree? Is it the best option? Is now the right time? Is a full time or part time course best? If you are a sixth form student, should you take a year out? A degree can be immensely rewarding, but you need to have a clear idea of what you will gain from it. If possible, think about what you would like to be doing in five or ten years' time, and plan accordingly.
- *Get to know your preferred learning style.* How do you learn best? Alone or in groups? In the morning or evening? Via computer? With unstructured challenges or set questions? Do you prefer books, lectures, projects, home study, essays? Do you prefer an academic or vocational approach? What motivates you? These questions need to be answered before you can make an informed decision about where to study.
- Ask universities some searching questions.

3. GAIN RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

- This can be through vacation work, gap year work, sponsorship through university or by choosing a sandwich course.
- Any work experience is useful. Customer-facing work is especially good
- If you can't get paid work, voluntary work is always available and can be just as useful.
- If you already have some work experience, try to make your next job more focused on your intended

career.

- Use family and friends first, to find work. They are contacts you already have.
- Small business experience is good. You may be given more responsibility, and there may be a wider variety of jobs to be done.
- Spend occasional days work shadowing family and friends. This will help you explore many more options.
- Think about what you have to offer your employer: This will enable you to "sell yourself" more effectively.

4. DEVELOP SKILLS FOR THE WORKPLACE

- They may be developed through the curriculum or in outside activities such as university clubs and societies.
- Become involved in teams.
- Take responsibility and initiative. Start something new, and lead it to completion.
- Make different kinds of presentations to different kinds of audiences, including factual and persuasive presentations and, if possible, one to an audience hostile to your case.
- Make the most of opportunities to travel. Practice a language. Take an interest in the local culture, even the economy or politics. Don't just sit on the beach!

5. SET ASIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO REFLECT ON YOUR LEARNING.

- Use a learning log. Employers always look for evidence of skills learned. Seek support from colleague.
- Learn from both successes and failures. If an experience is painful, turn it into something positive by learning from it. Recognise your own reaction to failures and disappointments, so you can cope better in the future.

6. USE YOUR CONTACTS: DEVELOP THE ART OF NETWORKING

- Start with family and friends. They are an easily forgotten resource. Draw up a list of those who might be able to support you in your decisions or help you find vacation work.
- When networking, ask people for advice. They are usually willing. Also ask them whether they know other people who might be able to help, and whether you can mention their name. Your network will expand, and all kinds of help may result.

7. EXPLORE OPTIONS

- Don't sit in an academic bubble. Read a newspaper. Talk to people (questioning, listening, recording).
- Visit the careers service to look for vacation work. Use AIESEC and networks at your university. Find out about the changing graduate jobs market. Visit careers workshops in the first or second year.
- Turn research into action. Be proactive. Set objectives and do some "action planning."
- Make the most of your final year project. It can be a route into employment.

8. PRACTICE NEGOTIATION SKILLS

- Negotiations occur all the time. Practice negotiation skills and recognise all the opportunities to develop them in everyday life.
- Recognise that negotiation within a long term relationship

9. DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

- What will make you different from the other thousands of graduates? Perhaps you could learn an unusual language, take up a distinctive hobby or set up a new voluntary organisation.

10. DON'T PANIC! YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE PERFECT

- Tackle this Action Plan in manageable chunks and review your progress regularly. You will find you can achieve a great deal over three or four years if you start now.