



## Why universities can't take all the credit for graduate employment rates

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As many students have come to recognise, the degree qualifications can make weak currency in a labour market flooded with graduates. And, as a result, many students are turning to extracurricular activities to try and get a competitive advantage in the battle for those graduate jobs.

This is probably a pretty sensible move, given that the 2016 University Employability Survey shows that employers of graduates ranked degree classifications fourth in their list of the most important recruitment criteria. First on the list was an applicants skills profile, including creativity, the ability to solve problems and entrepreneurship – none of which shout very loud from a degree certificate.

This has marked a shift in how students are playing the “game” of higher education – as our research shows. We found that students are now specifically choosing extracurricular activities which could help their “employability”. This has led to the rise of enterprise societies at universities that are often sponsored or supported by private sector businesses.

We also found that some students are playing an even more advanced version of “the game”, making the conscious decision to invest more time in their extra-curricular activities than their degree programmes. They do so in the belief that building a portfolio of distinctive experiences will give them more of an advantage when they enter the labour market.

### **Enhancing employability**

This poses a problem for the participants and the assessors of the Teaching Excellence Framework. This is the flagship initiative from the Higher Education and Research Bill which aims to give students more choice by ranking universities gold, silver or bronze depending on the quality of their teaching and the employment levels of their graduates. The latter is based on destinations of leavers taken from higher education data averaged over the past three years.



Is the future brighter for graduates with wider skills?

While the exercise benchmarks against age, gender, ethnicity, disability and markers of deprivation, it doesn't – and arguably cannot – recognise the significant role played by extracurricular activities in enhancing graduate “employability”. By failing to do so, the TEF is partially blind to student life.

And given that our research shows more students are actively choosing to join clubs or societies simply because they view them as being a good way to boost their chances of getting a job, it may well be that university teaching could actually have a lot less to do with the employment rates of graduates than universities assume.

### **Taking a wholistic view**

What has been largely ignored in debates about the TEF so far is the tenuous connection between teaching quality and employment outcomes. It is assumed that student outcomes – such as employment and further study – are directly and solely attributable to learning on degree programmes. The broader employability environment – such as extracurricular activities both on and off campus, are ignored.

I'm one of many who have issues with this reduction of employability to employment. And while the TEF is set up in a way that fails to distinguish between the two, we need at the very least, to have a discussion about how student outcomes are attributed.

It is clear that as a sector, we need to take a wholistic look at university life and recognise the distinctive contributions of curricular and extracurricular dimensions to student outcomes – while also enabling better coordination of both. And a reconfigured TEF might well be the instrument to incentivise such coordination. Because as it currently stands the TEF may well reward universities for outcomes which are not theirs to claim.