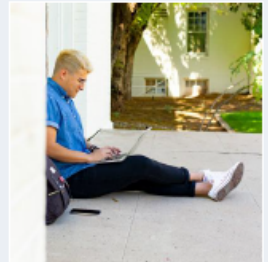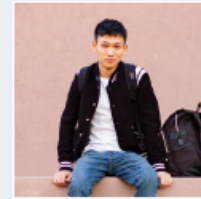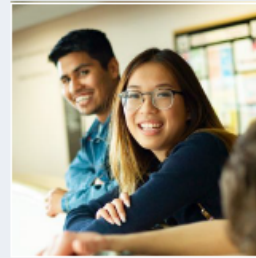**Handshake** gradconsult

Virtual Delivery Reflections: A community event for HE careers service professionals

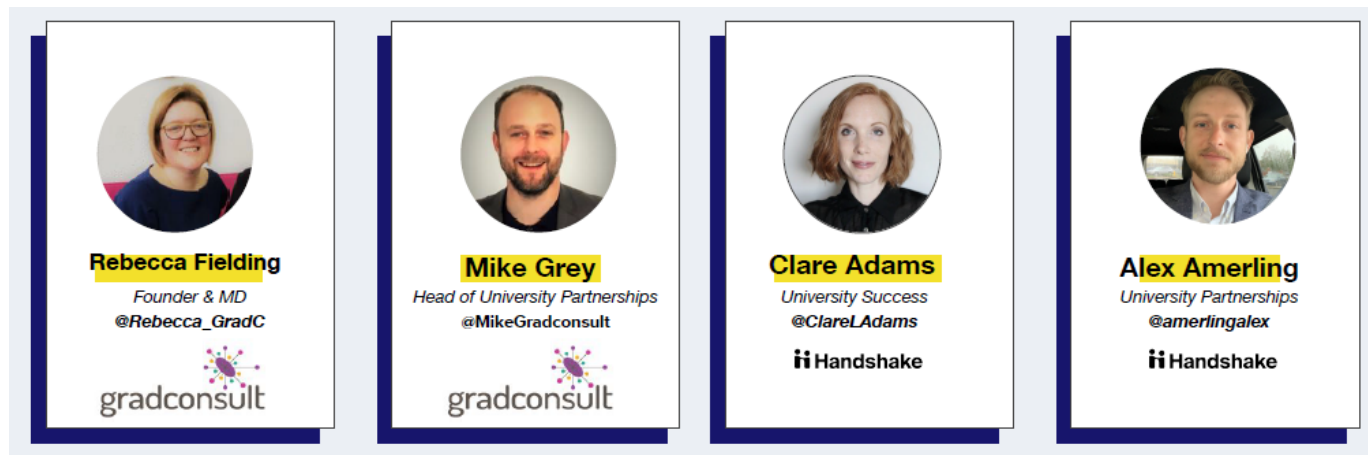December, 2020

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INSIGHT PAPER

About the event

On Monday 14th December 2020, Handshake and Gradconsult brought together over 100 professionals from across the sector to discuss their learnings from the most tumultuous academic term in living memory. The session was hosted by:

Rebecca Fielding
Founder & MD
@Rebecca_GradC
gradconsult

Mike Grey
Head of University Partnerships
@MikeGradconsult
gradconsult

Clare Adams
University Success
@ClareLAdams
Handshake

Alex Amerling
University Partnerships
@amerlingalex
Handshake

The aims of the session were to:
- Create a space for community, collaboration and connection
- Enable idea generation and exploration
- Reflect on the learnings from the academic term
- Discuss challenges around measuring impact in the new paradigm of digital engagement

We asked two sets of questions looking at different elements of connecting employers and students in a virtual world. For each set of questions, the 100+ participants were split into Zoom breakout rooms to confidentially discuss their insights, ideas and challenges, with each group sharing back to the main group using PollEV software. We have collated a synthesised summary of the insights from the session in this Insight Report. The event also featured expert insights from the following thought leaders:
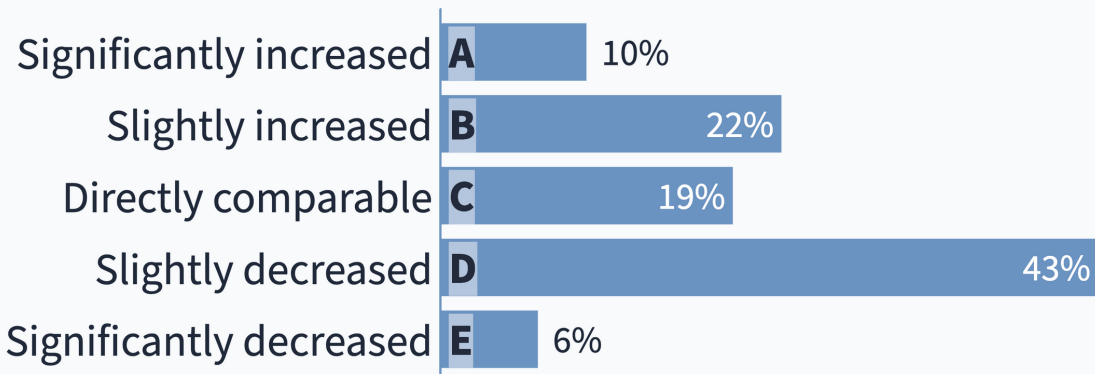- Adele Browne – Director of Careers at De Montfort University
- Andrew Wright – Head of Employer Engagement at Kings College London
- Aranee Manoharan – Curriculum Enhancement Manager at Kingston University
- Jenny Blakesley – Director of the Careers Service at University of Cambridge
- Judith Baines – Head of Careers at University of Hertfordshire
- Maryane Mwaniki – Head of Employer Engagement at London School of Economics

Below is a word cloud illustrating which institutions our attendees were from:
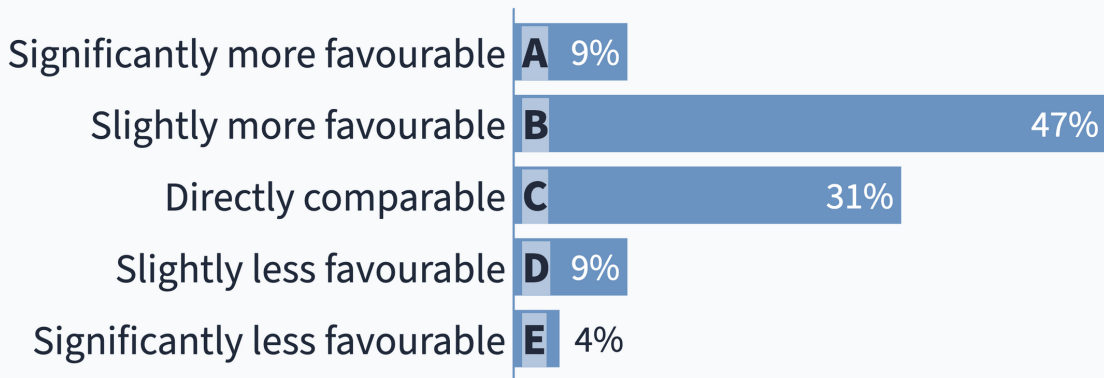
To set the scene we asked participants to respond to the following questions, they told us:
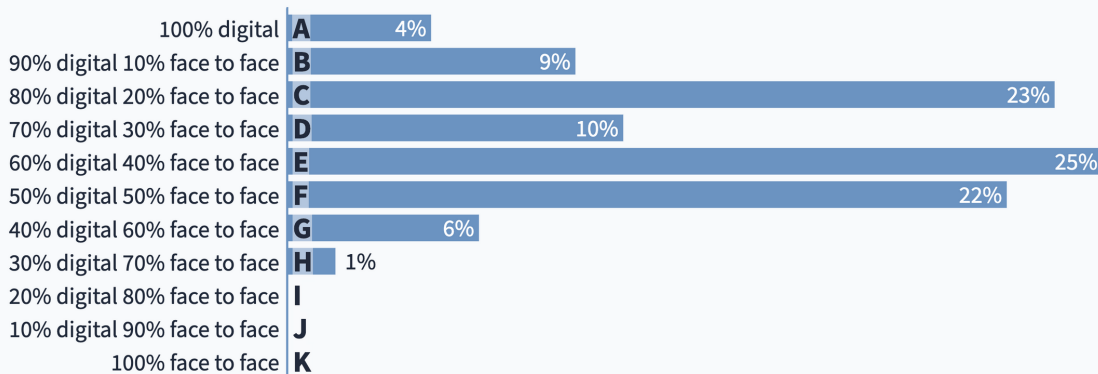
Have you seen student attendance at employer events increase, decrease or remain comparable to last year?

Significantly increased **A**	10%
Slightly increased **B**	22%
Directly comparable **C**	19%
Slightly decreased **D**	43%
Significantly decreased **E**	6%

How has your employer feedback/evaluation/NPS compared to last autumn?

Significantly more favourable **A**	9%
Slightly more favourable **B**	47%
Directly comparable **C**	31%
Slightly less favourable **D**	9%
Significantly less favourable **E**	4%

On a scale from 100% digital to 100% face to face, what do you think Autumn 2021 will look like?

100% digital **A**	4%
90% digital 10% face to face **B**	9%
80% digital 20% face to face **C**	23%
70% digital 30% face to face **D**	10%
60% digital 40% face to face **E**	25%
50% digital 50% face to face **F**	22%
40% digital 60% face to face **G**	6%
30% digital 70% face to face **H**	1%
20% digital 80% face to face **I**	
10% digital 90% face to face **J**	
100% face to face **K**	

Our summary:

Clearly this is a bit of a mixed picture with results indicating a small reduction in student engagement but an improvement in feedback from employers. It is also striking that careers professionals across the sector perceive the shift to digital to be here to stay; only 7% of participant believing we will return to face to face being the primary mode of delivery in Autumn 2021. As an average across our sample the balance is predicted to be 66% digital and 34% face to face – or put simply, our participants believe that broadly two thirds of delivery will occur digitally in 2021.

Q1. What were your main learnings from this term?

Each breakout room were asked to discuss the above question with these supporting questions as prompts:
- What has worked better than expected?
- What has been less effective than you had hoped?
- How have you altered your approach and applied new technologies?

Here is a video with our expert panel sharing insights on this topic.

Key takeaways from the groups
'Partnerships among universities to deliver large scale career events e.g. Inclusive Futures Virtual Fair.'
'No longer limited by geography when engaging employers'
'Employers value universities collaborating'
'More opportunity to engage in curriculum with employers'
'Lack of face-to-face connections isn't preparing students for realistic future engagements'
'Disabled student engagement has increased'
'Smaller events have worked well online whereas larger events have been harder to do. '
'Employers used this as an opportunity to do their own activity and reduce events at universities (especially in Banking and Professional Services).'
'Some found academics turning more to them to get them in modules'
'After using a range of technologies, would rethink this now'
'Easier for students to "leave" events'
'Students often leave when an interactive session happens'
'Adapt format of events and do not rely on replicating face to face e.g. have shorter online sessions'

Our summary
There are some real positives emerging from digital delivery, particularly increased collaboration between institutions and the opportunity to engage a wider cross section of employers that wouldn't travel to engage in a face to face event. There is also evidence that academics have become more open to having both careers professionals and employers presenting within the curriculum.

Challenges remain around student engagement, particularly their passive engagement in digital events and reticence to actively engage in interactive sessions. It is also less socially awkward to leave a digital event, managing employer relationships in the context of this passive engagement is proving complex. Inconsistent engagement can also be difficult for careers services.

The issue of blank screens was of course mentioned by many participants. We need to be very careful to balance the crucial importance of inclusivity whilst also encouraging students to build their confidence and aptitude with engaging more fully with employers. They need to prepare for recruitment processes, where they will be required to have their screens on, and will need interact with colleagues in this manner in increasingly digital workplaces.

There were also a number of comments around the need to procure the right software and to try and limit the number of platforms that you are asking students to engage with.

Q2. How has this term changed how you think about measuring impact?

Each breakout room was asked to discuss the above question with these supporting questions as prompts:
- How did you measure impact before?
- What new metrics do you have access to now to measure impact?
- How do you hope to measure impact in the future?

Here is a video with our expert panel sharing insights on this topic.

Key takeaways from the groups

'What constitutes engagement'? Is it logging on or is it actually contributing.'
'Benchmarking is almost impossible this year, it makes it hard to know how impactful events have been'
'Advantage of being able to 'count' conversations rather than just bodies in a room'
'Starting with clear learning outcomes– came from planning webinars which felt less like events'
'Same old issues chasing impact/data from employers persist'
Key Performance Indicators are all up for review'
'More focus on quality of engagement'
'It's easier to measure impact for more targeted work with priority groups of students'
'Potential for more granular data on engagement using digital platforms which can inform conversations with academic colleagues'

Our summary

It has become much more challenging to understand the impact of careers service delivery, professionals across the sector are grappling with redefining engagement whilst having to move quickly to service the needs of students, employers and academic departments.

Digital engagement provides opportunities to analyse more data points and understand more of the nuances in how different students groups are engaging with the provision. The key challenge is that there no reliable benchmarking and we must avoid the temptation to try and draw direct comparisons to anything that has come previously; the paradigm has completely shifted.

In an ideal world, the transition to digital delivery would have occurred in a more controlled way so teams could assess the impact of different elements and evolve the provision gradually. In the context of the pandemic, and all of the other external impacts students and employers are experiencing, it is hard to define which effects relate to the design of provision or mode of delivery and what is caused by the wider impacts of world events.

Careers services focussing on delivering high quality engagement and reducing the quantity of events is something we expect to see as we move into 2021. There is a general feeling students have become overloaded, the careers delivery is taking place in the context of a fully online academic experience which is leading to a high level of fatigue. Careers services might inadvertently be diluting engagement levels by offering too many events and activities, reducing multiplicity and increasing collaboration to improve reach could be hugely beneficial for institutions but also efficient for time-poor employers.

Q3. What are your hopes for the future?

We ended by asking our wonderful community of careers professionals what there hopes for the future were;

Here is a video with our expert panel sharing their hopes.

Here are some of the highlights from the groups in the event:

'More sustainable models of work. Less commuting, more flexible working conditions for graduates.'
'Change to how we are funded, not reliant on fair income'
'Greater collaboration and innovation in how we deliver our events'
'Increase in opportunities for virtual internships and authentic experiences'
'Students embracing the tech more and seeing we're just as helpful and friendly on screen as face to face.'
'Continued diversity in employers that are able to join us for events/sessions'
'Diversity remains high on the agenda of employers, and they really commit to it.'
''Greater flexibility and more asynchronous access to information'
'Trust in students' ability to adapt. The kids are alright.'

Our summary

There is no doubt that this has been and will remain a challenging time, but there are also many opportunities that have arisen and shifts that have occurred which could become huge positives as we move beyond the crisis.

Although challenges with student engagement remain, there are some real positives linked to the digital skill development that is occurring. We must take this opportunity to prioritise this skill development and guard against assumptions that students already possess the digital skills they will require in their future careers.

There are many emerging trends that our participants would like to see endure, such as employers diversifying their talent pools by engaging with more universities and the continuation of flexible and sustainable working patterns. There are clearly huge benefits with remote working but we must remain cognisant of the potential impact of graduates in their early career and how much learning comes from the process of osmosis through being surrounded by professionals in a physical working environment.

Seismic world events, particularly the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, should accelerate action to address diversity challenges in graduate recruitment. If not now, when?

The revenue generation model within careers services has evolved significantly as a result of the pandemic and a progressive approach to careers service funding which removes barriers to employers engaging will be crucial moving forward.

The sector has demonstrated a great deal of resilience and innovation already, it is likely that future challenges won't seem as insurmountable. We should come out of this stronger and with a host of new skills, models and solutions at our disposal.

Relive the event

Here is the video of the event which features the expert insights and our live analysis on the day:
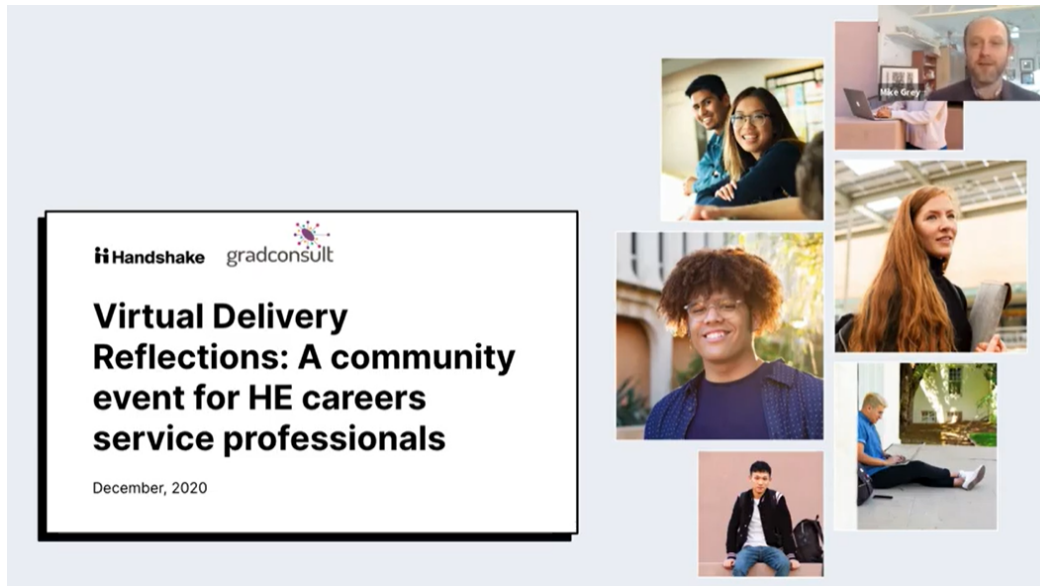
The last word

At the end of the session, we asked the participants to give a one-word summary of the how they found the 90-minute session. They said: