

Case Study: International Graduate Finds Career Enhancing Job Opportunity using the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR)

The HEAR is an electronic document produced by a higher education institution that provides a more detailed report of students' achievements while at university. The HEAR is designed to encourage a more sophisticated approach to recording student achievement. Above all the HEAR records the full range of activities and opportunities that HEIs offer to their students in addition to academic results.

However, unlike a degree certificate, which merely records a summative judgement of a student's academic attainment, the HEAR includes detailed content on extra-curricular activities, prizes, employability awards, voluntary work and any offices held in student clubs and societies that have been verified by the awarding institution.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) provides the main support focus for the implementation and maintenance of the HEAR and it relates to several areas of the HEA's work in leadership and strategy for learning and teaching. The HEAR team at the HEA continues to work closely with these teams in order to help inform and enhance the development of the HEAR, as well as to ensure that messages about the value of the HEAR in relation to students' university experiences are disseminated through the relevant networks and communities of practice.

Gradintel.com – a graduate data hosting company – is one of the HEA's key partners in managing and promoting the HEAR. The company holds a student and graduate talent pool of over 130,000 registered users, which grows at around 150% year on year. Gradintel uses the accurate matching technology of the HEAR to connect graduate recruiters, agencies and universities recruiting for postgraduate programmes and research positions to the best qualified candidates for their opportunities.

Milo Cupik, an international student from Slovakia, who now coincidentally works for Gradintel.com, was informed about the job opportunity via an email from the HEAR shortly after graduation while he was already working at his first job. At first Milo thought that the HEAR was just another type of academic transcript. However, Milo had been carefully targeted by the HEAR's advanced search methods from a vast pool of around 100,000 potential graduate candidates.

It was this introduction to a new career opportunity with Gradintel.com that demonstrated to Milo both the ability of the HEAR to help graduates get ahead in a competitive market – even for those graduates who are already in employment. The HEAR is the foundation for systems that allow employers to find suitable graduates long after graduation - opportunities graduates may neither have considered nor otherwise heard about.

Milo believes that the varying degrees of implementation of the HEAR across different institutions makes it more difficult for students to understand its relevance to their personal development and future career.

"It always breaks my heart when a student asks me to close their Gradintel account if they already have a job. So I always try to persuade students to keep their accounts open, because they never know what interesting opportunities will come up that other graduates might never even learn about."

The key to increasing students' uptake of the HEAR seems to lie in getting students to understand the value and applicability of the skills and experiences acquired from non-academic activities to their future careers. Some students are concerned that their HEAR cannot be edited after graduation which prevents graduates from removing information and activities they might prefer some employers not to see, and in turn inhibits their ability to create their own narrative of employability, where they can choose which aspects of their experience and achievements to present and in what light.

Institutions are encouraged to adopt the HEAR in the most appropriate way for their institution. For example, the universities of Warwick and Manchester are working hard to offer specific advice tailored to the needs of each department and subject area as to what kinds of activities the HEAR should and should not include. In tackling this issue, Milo acknowledges that:

"We do need to be careful that we don't 'spoil the fun' in extra-curricular activities the point needs to be made that the HEAR is about encouraging involvement in activities where students can make friends, and enjoy new experiences and challenges. The recognition aspect should be viewed as an added bonus at the end."

Essentially the HEAR is a very useful employability tool, however, some staff and students remain unsure as to how to use it in that way. Proponents of the HEAR agree that if it is to fulfil its purpose of improving students' experiences and recording their achievements in higher education, it should help institutions to develop clearer processes policies and practices using the data on the HEAR which helps to engage students in active participation so that they fully understand its value and applications.

The implementation of the HEAR can also remove the need for certain administrative processes and systems, as well as increase the collaboration across different parts of the universities involved, particularly between careers services and academic departments, which has led to greater insight into how the HEAR related to other HE provision, such as employability awards. It also continues to build a stronger sense of community and achievement throughout the institutions that implement it.

Moreover, surveys conducted at pilot institutions indicated that those students, who understood what the HEAR is and how it could be used, ranked its purposes differently to those who did not. This difference was made clearer by the fact that

around 30% of former HEAR students agreed that the HEAR helped them to structure one-to-one meetings between students and their personal tutors.

Despite it being too early to assess the full impact on employment practices and recruitment processes, there is already a strong sense that the HEAR would be most helpful to the practices of small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) who often recruit fewer graduates and have less resource to build relationships with institutions. Pilot institutions agree that the number of students using the HEAR would need to reach a 'critical mass' in order to cause employers to reconsider their recruitment and adjust their selection processes to accommodate the HEAR.

Nonetheless, subscribers of the HEAR agree that it remains an excellent tool for encouraging students to think seriously about ways in which they can stand out and differentiate themselves from other graduates in the eyes of prospective employers, and should be promoted in that way.