Leeds University Business School - Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 41:   Trends in employment practices for student hires during the pandemic
Speakers: Dr Helen Hughes, University of Leeds, and Dr Nicola Thomas, Institute of Student Employers.

[00:00:00] **Helen:** Welcome to the Research and Innovation podcast. I'm Dr Helen Hughes. I'm an associate professor and I'm the academic lead here in the Business School for work placements. And I'm delighted to be joined today by Dr Nicola Thomas who's head of research at the Institute of Student Employers.

Welcome Nicola. It's great to have you here today.

[00:00:23] **Nicola:** Thanks so much Helen. It's awesome to be here.

[00:00:26] **Helen:** Brilliant. So we started talking about doing this podcast because we were talking ourselves weren't we, about the future of work and what this is meaning for students and graduates today? I think we've all experienced the challenges of working remotely and the sort of settling in some people to new jobs.

And when you think, you know, students and graduates today have got that kind of magnified by the fact that they've never worked before. They've got no benchmarks. And they don't have loads of work experience to think about. And obviously we've been doing some research here at the university on this very topic and trying to understand the sort of challenges that our students have faced over the last year or so, particularly if they've worked as interns, for instance. And I know that you've done some really exciting work at the Institute of Student Employers as well, and you've written some blogs and so on, on this too. And so, I'm really excited to hear how we're each thinking about this.

So Nicola, perhaps if I can sort of start by maybe asking you a question, can you, can you tell us a bit about the kind of trends that you're seeing in employment practices over the last 18 months?

[00:01:35] **Nicola:** Yeah, definitely. So I think you've hit the nail on the head. There has been such a huge shift at the moment from, from COVID really, to more of an online working space. And we're especially seeing this for people who are early in their career. So in the case of our research it's been for student hires. So what we've been looking at is mostly is how employers are shifting the practices and working practices for the students and how they're changing their working environment.

So we asked the main employers who are the members of the Institute of Student Employers where the student hires are working at the moment and where they've been working since COVID. And we've seen a huge shift to hybrid working as the most common sort of method of work. So 65%, roughly, of employers that we interviewed said that the student hires are now working hybrids. So that's a combination obviously of face-to-face and virtual, with only 11% working almost exclusively remotely, and also only 8% working mainly face-to-face. So we can see really that flexible and hybrid working as dominant as a work practice.

And I think that really is an interesting thing to explore more. As you said, people who are early in their career don't necessarily have the same norms and working practices to build on when they shift into remote working. So I think it's something interesting that we need to be researching more for sure.

[00:03:05] **Helen:** I think, I think you're absolutely right. It's so interesting isn't it? And I think I, are you hearing that this is likely to stay? Or is this something that, you know, we're looking to, employers are looking to transition back to, or is it something that you think is going to be with us a while - hybrid working?

[00:03:19] **Nicola:** Yeah, definitely. So what I actually asked the employer members was - where are people working now, and where do you expect them to work in the next 12 months? And as I said, around 65% said that people were working hybrid at the moment, increasing to 68% projected in 12 months that'll still be working hybrid.

So what we can see there, including people who said it will remain flexible, which was an additional 10%, is we're hovering around 80% of the main employers for student hires in the UK and indicating that there'll be remote, flexible and hybrid working. So I think it shows that this is not only a trend at the moment through the pandemic, but it's something that is going to stay in the next 12 months and onwards from there.

[00:04:06] **Helen:** Yeah, and I, and I think it's so interesting, isn't it? Because what we're certainly hearing from our students is that this brings with it really different challenges to what they expected from a workplace. So they talked very often about going for their interview in the building and being really excited that "I might be working here" and that in a way, one of them even described it as a customer journey, that part of the reason they joined the company was because they were so excited about the idea of working in this space. And they also talk a lot about kind of learning the norms of the company through that, even the interview, you know, some of them were telling us that they'd gone for the assessment centre and that they'd got a sense of what the company was like, and the culture of it and so on. And that was much slower for those who then had to work remotely or in a hybrid way for the rest of the year. And I thought one of the things that reading one of your blogs, I was really interested to see is that when you'd asked employers whether they thought the opportunities that students were getting through this year were the same or better or worse than in previous years, I was really interested to see that it was somewhere around 85% of your employers had said that they felt the opportunities were students were just as good. And I think another 10% also thought that they were better. Is that right?

[00:05:29] **Nicola:** Yeah. So there was quite a surprising indication that employers felt that there was still opportunities for people who were working remotely. But there was actually sort of 44% of people indicated that they didn't think there was any change in the opportunities for early career hires, or student hires, which I think indicates something that's an employers' view.

But I would be interested to know from your point of view, do you think that's been sort of mirrored and the students that you've worked with, do they feel like the opportunities have been decreased working virtually.

[00:06:06] **Helen:** Yeah. I mean, it, again, it's interesting because I can say this as a kind of observer as a supervisor of students, if you like, that I know that they've had really great opportunities. I've seen

that through the work that they submitted and they've told us about it, but I also know that they found that when they sort of wrote about the challenges they'd had, they found it quite straightforward to get on with the tasks.

So there's kind of, you know, the digital natives as it were, they are perfectly capable, they got on with, you know, screen-sharing and the technological side of kind of getting into work really well. And were absolutely fine with that. The things that they struggled with were sort of finding the, sort of skills to be proactive and then say, "I can do these tasks. Can I have some more work? Can I do some different things" accessing the kind of developmental opportunities. And they felt it was much harder to do. And I think in a sense that's because of something else that they told us a lot about, which was that they kind of missed that osmosis learning of just being around other people and they kind of expected that other people would notice what they're doing and go "yeah, you're doing great with this. Here's another thing you can do." They found that much harder to be visible, much harder to shout about what they were doing and know how to do that. So yeah, that certainly, kind of mirrored what we've seen as well.

[00:07:27] **Nicola:** Yeah, definitely.

[00:07:28] **Helen:** In terms of the skills that you think our students might need from what your employers have told you, you know, is it as straightforward?

I mean, if performance isn't going down, which seems like your research is showing, you know, employers are really happy with the performance of students and interns - if that performance isn't going down, am I right to say, "well, look, you know, our graduates are fit for purpose. They don't need to do anything else." So are there skills that employers are finding that they perhaps struggle with? I know we found some, but is there anything that you found, through your research

[00:08:04] **Nicola:** Yeah. Yeah. I think that's a really interesting and important question. And one thing I can tell you is that, while 84% of employers felt there was no change in the quality of work, almost 10% thought there was an increase in quality of work. 71% felt there was no change in productivity and 20% almost felt there was actually an increase in productivity.

So we can see with those two variables that the quality and productivity of students hires has either not changed or increased, which shows that maybe there is a lot of skills already that student hires have in a virtual world. But I think what's really important is when we look at the ability to cope, which is essentially resilience, 46% of employers said there was a reduction since the move to virtual work. So I think sort of zooming out and taking as a whole, while the quality and productivity has increased or remained the same, there's a sort of resilience, which isn't maybe so much of a skill as more of a mind frame or an attitude, which I think is really important for students to continue to foster and especially as they maybe feel isolation in any role working completely virtually, that there's sort of wraparound services from employers and universities and supporting students transitioning to a fully virtual workplace. And just really understanding how we can be supporting this sort of attitude of resilience.

[00:09:31] **Helen:** It's so interesting, isn't it? Because I think what we found through the interviews we did with some of our students was that actually they talked about working really, really long hours,

perhaps longer than they would have been, had they been in work. And in large measure because they have no benchmarks, they had no, they couldn't work out actually what's normal.

"Should, you know, my employer's giving me this work to do, I should be able to do it." So they, they were sort of working really long hours and one of the things they talked about often was that they missed that social comparison. And that they had felt that actually through having some, you know, those, for instance, that had housemates who were in other organizations or in the same organization, had that kind of social comparison to say, "do you know what, actually, I'm working a bit too long" or "I'm not working long enough." And there were also those who, look to their parents, they were living maybe at home and they were sort of saying, "look, I'm going to model how my parents are behaving".

And sometimes it was actually their parents who would encourage them and showed them how to have conversations with their employer about things like their workload. And I think actually, you know, it's too much for today to think about, but actually, you know, that does raise issues around social mobility and inclusivity because, you know, not all of our graduates are going to have those role models in the home. And I think maybe we've got work to do as a university and, and institutes like yourselves have a role to play in sort of how, how do we support our students in this sort of time.

We could talk for hours about this; it's so exciting. It has been so nice to speak with you today, Nicola. I've really enjoyed that little snippet. And perhaps we can talk again another time. So thanks so much for joining us today, Nicola. And thanks also to those listening to today's episode. If you would like to hear more about the survey and the research, then the details are in the episode show notes. Thanks again.

[00:11:29] **Nicola:** Awesome. Thanks for having me. Seeya.