

Wider stakeholder engagement with the HEAR

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Introduction

This short report distils the main findings of a small-scale research project that looked at the ways in which a range of types of key stakeholders might use the new Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) in their organisations and circumstances. It aims to provide stakeholders, both those within the higher education sector and other, external, end users of the HEAR, with information about emerging practice. To this end it also draws some general conclusions about the current direction the introduction of the HEAR is taking. More detailed information, targeted at the specific stakeholder groups, is also being prepared using the research findings.

The work was initiated by the Burgess Implementation Steering Group and has subsequently been carried out under the auspices of the HEAR Advisory Committee and funded by the Higher Education Academy. The brief was to carry out research work to investigate stakeholder attitudes to, and potential uses for, the new Higher Education Achievement Report with the aim of informing stakeholders and the HEAR Advisory Committee on the uses and potential uses being made of the HEAR.

Methodology

The work was carried out by Rob Ward of the Centre for Recording Achievement and Jane Denholm from Critical Thinking, between January and October 2012. It involved 16 face to face or telephone interviews with a range of (non-student) stakeholders who might use the information contained in the HEAR, or otherwise be impacted by its existence. Due to the exploratory nature of discussions, and to encourage frankness, interviewees were assured of anonymity. The different types of stakeholder interviewed were:

- 4 large volume recruiters (2 large “blue chip” companies, 1 private sector company, 1 public sector company);
- 3 small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs);
- 2 third sector voluntary organisations;
- 4 professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs);
- 3 university postgraduate admissions offices.

Detailed notes of the meetings have been used to inform bespoke stakeholder group briefing materials. They have also been synthesised into the key findings and conclusions, below.

The research

It became clear during the early stages of the research that some interviewees had already developed erroneous and/or fixed ideas about the HEAR and its uses and limitations (e.g. that student experience in specific work environments “won’t be in the HEAR”). We found that the possibilities and potential of the HEAR needed to be teased out with interviewees and this was best done as part of a discussion which enabled everyone in the meeting to explore how it could work in their particular circumstances. Subsequent interviews were framed very much in these terms. Most interviewees were open to at least considering possibilities, with some seizing upon them.

The research project was small-scale with only a few interviewees drawn from each of the groups identified. However, the interviews have yielded a rich range of useful information and observations, which echo and develop conclusions from earlier work. Indeed, there is a large degree of consistency across the sample.

Findings

This section draws out some broad general messages and overarching conclusions from the interviews.

General messages from stakeholders

The following general messages emerged from the research:

- the HEAR is considered by all groups and most stakeholders interviewed to be a highly welcome development for a wide range of good reasons;
- employers consider the benefits of the HEAR to students and graduates to be paramount and significant and employers themselves expect to reap the benefits of this substantively but indirectly via, for example, better applications;
- the richer picture provided by the HEAR is welcome but most employers expect it to be mediated through the student tailoring their application using the employer's system;
- the role of the HEAR as an aide memoire for students is significant and the role of the process of having and compiling a HEAR, even more so. Employers and postgraduate admissions officers concur that graduate applicants are often poor at linking their own experiences to the (often competency-based) questions posed in application forms and interviews. Both employers and PG admissions officers welcome a development which enables students to better match their abilities to the opportunities on offer.
- related to this, a strong message emerged that students cannot start consciously making the most of their time in higher education too soon, thereby enhancing their employability, from the outset. In starting this process off, from the first day at university, the HEAR has the potential to provide a welcome focus and a framework for thinking about these sorts of issues which, appropriately supported, has the potential to result in more informed decision-making about career choices and better, more relevant applications;
- most employers will not ever want or need to see a full HEAR. Different employers will use the information contained in the HEAR in different ways and at different points in the process:
 - those with established recruitment processes may not, at least initially, see a reason to change these as a result of the advent of the HEAR. In some companies, the information contained in the HEAR is unlikely to play a major role directly in the hiring decision;
 - some employers may not, ever, see even parts of the HEAR at all other, perhaps, than through the use of some specific HEAR information, made available through their own application systems, or when verifying information on making an appointment;
 - on the other hand, some employers will ask to see, particularly, sections 4 and 6 as part of the application process and others have indicated that they are prepared to build the HEAR into their selection processes in more proactive ways e.g. by designing a role play scenario around the HEAR at an assessment centre activity; and
 - some employers can see the potential of the HEAR contributing to the starting point for discussions with a new line manager, when an individual starts a job. The HEAR is “part of the tapestry of the individual” and could be attached for the manager to read, as a prelude to starting the job. Others would explicitly use it as a basis for an initial discussion about staff development needs. On the other hand some employers/PSRBs emphatically wish to draw a line under university and reinforce with the graduate that “this is work now”;
- employers and PG admissions officers like the idea they can have access to verified information prior to graduation. Employers think this will be especially useful for selecting interns and recruitment processes

that take place prior to graduation: the HEAR “could help us have a conversation with a candidate about why they should be chosen to be on a scheme”. For PG admissions, Section 4 offers a more detailed breakdown of the skills likely to have been developed within an undergraduate programme, which may provide a “diagnostic” opportunity to ensure new applicants are appropriately supported in the early period of a PGT programme in particular. There is also some evidence that some employers with specific technical requirements will be interested in the level of detail contained within Section 4 of the HEAR;

- employers (and universities) are attracted by (substantial) business efficiencies that could potentially arise through being able to verify the HEAR electronically. For some this seems to be the major benefit at this stage – because it will save time to-ing and fro-ing with institutions checking details (often outsourced to costly call centres). This may change over time, as other benefits are realised once the HEAR is a mainstream activity across institutions;
- over time the HEAR has the potential to dispense with the need for academic references, in some circumstances;
- logistics are important, for those that will read parts of the HEAR the information needs to be short and concise. It must follow the common template – anyone who has to use HEAR information does not want two systems, or more, to have to learn and process. For most, the electronic format is essential – at least for verifying information and, for some, for seeing the information for the first time earlier in the process. The HEAR must not contain too much detail and it must not be too many mouse clicks away. One employer said “to be really useful, and used, the HEAR needs to be a seamless part of the process – it can’t involve extra work”;
- it is appropriate and desirable that universities should develop HEARs for PG students and many are, whilst acknowledging that a full-time Master’s can involve “a packed year” in academic terms, with little room for additional activity;
- some PG admissions officers suggest that the HEAR could be a useful tool in managing/communicating over time and place with part-time and distance Master’s students;
- mid-career professionals, being recruited to professional PG courses, may have out of date HEARs, though these will, of course, confirm their earlier qualifications and experience;
- professional bodies can see merit in their being standard text regarding professional status, at Section 5.2, that can be used in a common format in all HEARs (at the university’s discretion). Such text has so far been provided by: the Engineering Council, the General Medical Council. The Law Society of Scotland, the Institute of Physics and the General Dental Council; and
- in a global recruitment market, only UK applicants will have a HEAR, and this may impact on some processes in some sectors as, for example, employers and PG admissions offices seek to recruit internationally on an equitable and consistent basis.

Conclusions

Our research has led us to the following conclusions. Importantly and helpfully, many if not all of these are congruent with learning generated through the trialling phase of the HEAR.

The HEAR is a process

There is much more to the HEAR than it simply being a piece of paper/electronic document – it is better thought of as a process than as a static document. With this in mind, different end users will use the HEAR, and the information it contains, in different ways. As Table 1 shows, there is a wide spectrum of possibilities for use, ranging across aspects of the student's academic career, through graduation and from application to appointment and early days in the workplace. Not all universities, students or employers will use the HEAR in exactly the ways outlined, but the research has identified all of these uses.

The HEAR is relevant to a range of stakeholders

The HEAR is an important and pervasive development. To fully realise its benefits, all stakeholders need to know about it and, crucially, think about it. This includes, for example, those employers who are currently sceptical (who should be kept informed and invited to keep an open mind) or who expect they will never actually see an applicant's HEAR (because they will still be affected by the process and could benefit from it but this will only be fully realised if they are aware of its existence so they ask the right questions in interviews/assessment centres).

The HEAR is potentially a powerful lifewide – and lifelong – learning tool

The HEAR has the potential to increase student self-awareness from day one at university and will provide a focus and basis for thinking about strengths and areas for development throughout the student's career with the institution. Some employers think that waiting until the later years to start thinking about career issues is already too late and there are clear trends within universities towards encouraging earlier engagement with career and employability issues. Those employers who have embraced the concept of lifelong learning can see enormous potential in the HEAR and will work with the grain of the initiative to get the best out of it.

The HEAR promotes individuality

Many employers and PG admissions tutors are seeking individuals with a blend of specific skills and attributes. The HEAR can help them in unpacking an often perceived as homogenised UG (or even PG) experience and also help students find/develop a sense of self.

Accessibility is vital

The HEAR information must be easily and simply accessed. This means it must be available electronically but also that if it is being used/consulted in the application process, it must be 'there' not several mouse clicks away.

The HEAR is already misunderstood

Although it has only just been launched, there are already some misconceptions/preconceptions about the HEAR. These include:

- the HEAR is simply a long report card (and employers won't use it);
- the aim is that students submit their HEAR in full to employers at application (and employers won't use it);
- the HEAR is intended to replace the CV, personal development planning and/or an application form;

- some interviewees said of certain types of activity, and with some certainty, though no great evidence, “that won’t be in the HEAR”, “The HEAR won’t cover that”.

The uses for the HEAR are still evolving and emerging. The increasing availability of the HEAR over the next few years needs, therefore, to be accompanied by further work with all of the key stakeholders - and particularly employers and employer groups - to support consideration of effective use, consideration increasingly able to be supported by evidence from implementation.

There is unrealised potential

As it becomes embedded, there is potential for the HEAR to change student and graduate behaviour and the processes and behaviours of HEIs and employers, in ways that cannot yet be envisaged. It makes sense to acknowledge this and to encourage the possibilities. Universities and employers with an interest in this will take forward developments – some already are. They can be collected and used to inspire others.

The HEAR is here - but this is just the end of the beginning

That the HEAR now exists on no account means that the ‘job is done’. To fully realise its potential the sector, and other stakeholders, will need support and opportunities to consider the issues and develop ideas.

Table 1: Using the HEAR information and processes

Universities (issuing)	Students	Employers	Universities (receiving)
Conceptualising and publicising the unique university 'offer'	Recognising the value of the HEAR for documenting civic engagement etc.		
	Grasping importance of employability and skills building from the start		
As a basis for formally engaging with students throughout their studies	Identifying gaps and acting upon them	Benefitting from all this through better applications	Benefitting from all this through better applications
	Increasing self-awareness of skills and attributes, strengths/weaknesses		
	Aide memoire in compiling applications/interview preparation		
As a means of bringing different and disparate elements of the university together, purposefully and with common cause			
	Being able to make use of their HEARs/HEAR data set in applications for internships, employment and further study	Using detailed module content/additional information as one basis for selection of candidates to interview	Using module content/additional information as one basis for selection of candidates to admit
		As one basis for devising interview questions or assessment centre exercises	
Providing students with an individualised, unique, record of their time at university	Feeling acknowledged as an individual by graduating with a unique record of their career in the institution	Clear picture of professional status of applicants conferred by qualifications	
Saving time and costs by providing access to verified information		Easily and cheaply electronically verifying that appointee information is accurate	
Saving time and costs by preparing fewer academic references	Being more disposed towards lifelong learning	As one basis for simply getting to know more about a new recruit	
	Controlling own employability and being more autonomous in the job market	As one basis for discussing starting point/staff development needs	