

Community Knowledge Exchange

Integrating Freelance Working Practices within Higher Education to Future-proof Graduate Employability



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The prevalence of freelance, self-employed, and casual contractor work continues to increase, particularly in specific sectors of industry. The Office for Students (OfS) does not recognise self-employment in its statistics relating to graduate outcomes in HE, meaning HE providers (HEPs) tend to focus on securing traditional employment prospects for students. Entrepreneurial initiatives remain discretionary due to a lack of sector-wide metrics or incentives from Government policymakers, a short-sightedness that fails to reflect the increasingly dynamic landscape of work.

The Impending AI Revolution

The anticipated proliferation of AI (Artificial Intelligence) is anticipated to disrupt many traditional work environments and lead to greater job insecurity, potentially thrusting more graduates into self-employment, further highlighting opportunity for HEPs to proactively identify and fill gaps in current practice.

Tracking and Understanding Self-Employment

To begin addressing this discrepancy, HEPs should systematically collect and analyse data relating to graduate self-employment. This would help build a comprehensive understanding of graduate outcomes by discipline and identify the sectors where freelance work is particularly prevalent.

Encouraging Entrepreneurial Skills in Programmes

In tandem, HEPs could encourage programmes to contemplate how freelance and self-employed working practices intersect with their disciplines. Tailoring teaching strategies to help students navigate both the challenges and opportunities of self-employment would foster a generation of self-starters better prepared for the flexible nature of modern work.

The Benefits of Promoting Internal Freelance Opportunities

HEPs could create opportunities for students to work on a freelance basis on non-critical internal projects, thereby aiding them to develop a professional portfolio while earning a living wage. For instance, media, advertising, and graphics students could contribute to internal marketing efforts, while journalism, English, and creative writing students might produce copy for internal communications or Institutional publications. Facilitating students to freelance on internal projects would give them the opportunity to apply theories in real-life scenarios, foster resilience, adaptability, and innovative thinking.





Incubating Entrepreneurship

HEPs could also establish entrepreneurship incubators that engage students throughout their degrees. Operating on a self-funding model by offering services to external clients, entrepreneurship incubators allow students to earn while learning and serve as a real-world platform for students to gain hands-on experience, provide exposure to the elements of entrepreneurship, such as identifying business opportunities, project management, cross-disciplinary collaboration and financial planning. This setup helps prepare students to navigate the complexities of self-employment and facilitates the development of a professional portfolio, ultimately enhancing graduate employability in a freelance or self-employed capacity.

Concluding thoughts

In a constantly evolving work landscape, the integration of freelance working practices within HE offers a novel route towards preparing students for the increasing prevalence of non-traditional work arrangements. By acknowledging the shift towards self-employment and addressing it proactively, HEPs could help equip students with the necessary skills, experience, and confidence to thrive in this new paradigm. To do so, HEPs should pioneer innovative solutions, such as integrating entrepreneurship incubators within their pedagogical practices. A proactive and innovative approach could inspire a much-needed policy shift towards recognising and integrating self-employment metrics in graduate outcomes. In turn, this could catalyze a transformative impact on future graduates, fostering a dynamic and flexible workforce that is ready to face both uncertainties and opportunities.

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