

Student Success: perspectives from our global membership

Podcast transcript

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Key

- + **CB:** Catriona Bell (host)
- + **JB:** Jacqueline Brodie
- + **IP:** Issra Pramoolsook
- + **RP:** Ruth Puhr

Transcript

CB: Colleagues, welcome to this Advance HE podcast on employability. This forms part of our six-month longitudinal member benefit on Student Success, and this is going to include a range of resources and activities including two new literature reviews on both employability and access, retention, attainment and progression. My name is Catriona Bell and i'm a Senior Advisor in Learning and Teaching at Advance HE, and it's my great pleasure today to introduce three international panellists from our global member institutions. We've specifically invited them as they are leading some really interesting work around employability at their institutions, and we were keen to share their perspectives particularly from members in international countries and the devolved nations in the UK.

So I will just go through now and introduce each colleague in turn and then they will tell you a bit more about their institution. So if I could come first to Ruth Puhr. Ruth is Head of Teaching and Learning development at Les Roches in Switzerland. So welcome Ruth.

RP: Thank you very much Catriona.

CB: Great to have you here and tell us a little bit more about Les Roches if you wouldn't mind?

RP: So Les Roches is a small higher education institution in Switzerland specialised in hospitality management education, and we have branch campuses in Spain and in China. Our student body on the Swiss campus numbers up to a thousand students, sometimes a little under that and we have undergraduate and graduate programmes all in hospitality management.

CB: Fantastic, thanks very much indeed Ruth. Our second panellist is Dr Issra Pramoolsook who is Assistant Rector at the Suranaree University of Technology in Thailand. So welcome Issra, and again if you wouldn't mind telling us a little bit more about SUT.

IP: Sure, first of all thanks for having me and it's my pleasure to be with everyone here today. My name is Issra and i'm from Suranaree University of Technology or SUT in Thailand. We are the first university in the country that introduced what we call cooperative and work integrated education or CWIE to our curriculum. It's similar to the internship programme that you all may know. So we basically place our students in their final years to work full-time, four months in workplaces, and at the end you know most of the time they get a job offer from the workplaces right away after their graduation. We have to thank Professor Dr Wichit Srisa-an who is the founding director of our university who introduced CWIE to Thailand even, not just to our university, and he happens to be the first principal fellow of Advance HE in Thailand as well.

CB: Fantastic thanks very much indeed Issra. And our third panellist is Dr Jackie Brodie who's an Associate Professor in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at Edinburgh Napier University in Scotland. So welcome Jackie and again if you wouldn't mind telling us a little bit about Edinburgh Napier University.

JB: Yes no problem. Thank you and welcome everyone it's just amazing to see everyone here today and to speak to them about what we do in Edinburgh Napier. So my university was founded back in 1964, so quite a modern university. And we teach a range of subjects including management computing and nursing with around 19,000 students in total on our three main campuses which is spread within Edinburgh.

So personally I work in the business school and it's one of the largest business schools in the UK so quite a lot of students to support - 8,500. We're seeking to be the business school for empowerment, enterprise and employability for all so we get the opportunity to teach a variety of different subjects like entrepreneurship strategy and tourism, lots of different modes of delivery and even locations in terms of online and international. And I got the pleasure of being the Head of Learning and Teaching there so able to support all aspects of employability and to that end, I was particularly involved in our skills 'Get On Board' programme which sought to provide students an opportunity to spend some time shadowing a charity board to enhance their employability skills. So that's a bit of a taster for you.

CB: Wonderful, thank you so much to the three of you, that just sets the scene for this conversation that we're going to have now. So my colleagues are going to discuss some questions that we've posed to them around employability, really bringing in their own

experiences from their own institutions. And as I say we've intentionally selected these colleagues because they're doing some fabulous work around employability and we wanted that international and devolved nations' perspective to share with members as well. So i'm going to start by posing a question and i'm going to come to Ruth first of all. How has the approach to employability changed at your institution over the past five years and what internal and external factors have influenced this?

RP: Thank you Catriona, so it's impossible really to think about the last five years without the huge beast of the pandemic in the middle of all of that and the impact on the global hospitality and tourism sectors have been profound as you all know. In the case of our institution, all of our students have embedded in their programmes internships or work integrated learning and also field trips, all with an international flavour. And so we saw these interrupted. And we have very important career fairs on campus with up to 100 companies coming to recruit our students, those had to happen remotely. So we've seen a really profound impact in the last 18 months to two years but going back to before that we had already begun to completely overhaul both our on-campus professional development courses and the online courses that accompany students on their internships and even the support offered to students during internships, all with the intention of improving student awareness and their ability to articulate what they have to offer in the workplace. I think that's very key to their success out in the workplace: their own understanding and awareness of what they can provide the workplace.

CB: Fantastic thank you. Issra, Jackie, any areas of common ground for you there in relation to how your approach to employability has changed over the last five years? Issra, maybe if I come to you next.

IP: Sure, obviously we have to talk about the increasing impact on employability during the pandemic time, so we share a commonality there with Ruth but before that, let me share with you a little bit about the internship programme, like I said it's called CWIE programme that we have been offering in Thailand for 30 years. It started back in 1991 and it started from our university alone and after 10 years the government realized the potential and the benefits of CWIE so they stepped in and they put full support to that, and they even promoted CWIE to other universities in the country by telling them to follow the SUT model. So that's one thing that we are proud of here at our university. The challenges of course have been both for the internal factors and external factors. The internal factors have been our determination to make our internship programme, CWIE programmes even better so we are thinking of placing our students in a longer period of placement, instead of four months we're extending it to eight months or even a year. We have been placing our students abroad and that's one issue that we need to talk about later when we think about the

literature and we are thinking of even expanding our CWIE programme to the postgraduate level as well.

As for the external factors, like I said Covid is one of them. The normal placements of our university is totally impossible especially in hospitality area because we cannot place our students to work in hotels or resorts like the way that we used to. And you know for a country like Thailand which relies heavily on hospitality business, so it was almost dead last year, so these students have to do something else. So I think maybe we'll hear from Ruth what her university offered to their students for placements.

Another important external factor is our government's official support in the Higher Education Act 2019. The government stays in the act that all the universities in the country have to offer CWIE and another thing is just last year they announced what we call the CWIE platform as a national roadmap for CWIE development of all the universities in the country. And one key message in that roadmap document is that we have to double the number of our students each year so from 100,000 to 200,000 so that's quite an ambitious aim that all universities have to achieve.

CB: Wow that's really fascinating and huge student numbers as well, thank you Issra. Jackie how about you, have things changed for you over the last five years?

JB: Yeah I mean I think as an institution we've always had a focus on employability. We've always been involved in making it the forefront but I think what's happened over the last five years certainly is really seeking to make it an inclusive approach and really tailoring that approach. So building those opportunities through placements and internships and employee engagements and making sure the careers guidance is really focused on what the students need and I think there's been a sizable investment in our university over the last five years in terms of digital and supporting employability online. And that is really just to give us that wider more inclusive reach to all our students, as you said sometimes our students are studying overseas. We want to reach out to them at all points during their studies. So we've got a series of digital resources really and those tools allow us to enable the students to undertake professional development studying modules online that support their employability and give them understanding and a deeper level of commitment to their own careers so they're able to be more informed. And when they do get to speak to careers and skills advisors they understand the value of the purpose of why they're learning about employability, and we've also spent quite a lot of money investing in our business incubators and just creating a sense of a community and staff and even alumni who are able to capture the opportunities that are in the workplace.

So lots of really exciting things at a university level but in terms of our school in particular, I mean obviously as I said before I was involved in our Get On Board programme and that actually went on to win a CATE from Advance HE and that really gave students a flavour

and supported their employability within the charity sector, but currently what we're trying to do is embed it even more in the actual curriculum. So we've created something called the Employability Skills Programme where students are developed every year of their study through a structured set of activities that really it helps them create an evidence base for their own skills and they're developing their communication skills their collaborative skills their creative problem solving skills it's been developed in partnership with industry and obviously involvement with our student union. So lots of different aspects there I think and all of our undergraduate students now participate in this and also we've widened up placements in the work-based learning opportunities to all of our programmes. So lots and lots of different changes I think, and some of them obviously have been brought about - particularly the move to digital when speed became a quicker pace because of the Covid situation and also lots of what we do are reflective of our students and their anxieties around a post-Covid world, and what skills they're going to need and how resilient and how flexible they've got to be.

So I think reflecting lots of what Ruth and Issra said about our students and making sure they're properly supported. I mean as a nation we're trying to respond to Scottish government policy documents about skills and making sure we fill the skills gaps and making sure that we also respond to things such as Brexit, technological change and the global climate emergency. So I think they're all important aspects which I think are the employability skills that we're developing or addressing. And there's also the theoretical perspective as well and Advance HE can often support us by giving that theoretical perspective but also supporting us with case studies to help develop our understanding around these issues, and making sure that we do support our students and allow them to take their role as future leaders in the economy and society.

CB: Thanks so much that's great. Is there anything within what you've all just said that you'd like to develop further as a conversation? Is there anything that springs to mind for the three of you?

RP: There's one thing that i'd like to just mention in terms of the importance and the value of work-integrated learning experiences. In looking at the literature there are some literatures around negative work-integrated learning experiences and how damaging these can be for students. So I looked at this in my research with some of our students, and in our undergraduate programmes we don't have just one we have two work-integrated learning - two full semesters - embedded into their programme. And what I discovered was that while students often have a negative or a problematic experience on their first internship where they're very green and very new to the workplace, the second experience is incredibly valuable because they then reflect back on what they learned from the first work experience that maybe it wasn't so damaging but actually was helping them to build resilience, helping them to build their understanding of the workplace. And the second work integrated learning

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experience really consolidated their understanding of the workplace and what might be needed of them in the workplace. That was an important point to bring in.

CB: Yeah that's fascinating, has that changed the way you support students for their first placements in any way at all?

RP: It changed really the way in which we're supporting students on both placement and also what we're expecting of them in terms of their reflections they can bring back to campus from those experiences, and how we sew those experiences into their on-campus learning when they come back on campus. For us that's really important to acknowledge their experiences in the workplace when they come back into the courses they're taking on campus

CB: Great thanks Ruth and Issra you look like you might have some areas of commonality.

IP: That's very spot-on because it happens to our students as well. Unfortunately we do only one placement and that we plan to do two placements. Like I said earlier the students struggled a lot during the first month of their placement because it's like they're jumping to the new world. They have been in the cocoon right in the higher education environment for three and a half years and then we just send them out to work full-time as staff. So the first month is very difficult for all of the students when they're reported back but then they learn, they developed, they get better and at the end by the time they finish they said 'oh it's too short we want to stay longer'. And one word that Ruth said is the word 'reflection'. We ask them to do journals where they reflect what they did well or what they failed in that week and then what would they do in the following weeks to make things better again. This is another similarity. When they come back they are different people, they're like young professionals ready to go out for their real work, but they have to come back here to finish courses before they graduate. So reflection and holistic change in our students I think.

CB: Really interesting, really interesting. And Jackie you're also nodding so were there some areas of commonality with you?

JB: There certainly is and it makes us think about the student journey as a whole doesn't it and this need to scaffold learning before students actually enter placement. So we obviously give them a module before they do that which as you said allows them to start reflecting about what they've learned so far and how they will be this professional in the workplace when they join their company. So I think that's important. I think peer mentoring, having

someone support them throughout that whole placement to give them an opportunity to be that reflective practitioner is really beneficial. But then also getting them to think about how they'll use it when they go back into their studies as well and seeing the links, for instance in terms of dissertations, we often say to the students 'did you encounter an issue that you'd like to explore further as part of your main honours dissertation', so that's tying up the whole student journey but making sure it's scaffolded and supported all the way along.

CB: Wonderful, thanks so much to the three of you. So the second question I was going to ask you links to the literature review that we're publishing as part of this member benefit around student success. So the literature review has really focused on the last five years of peer-reviewed publications and has brought through a number of new themes and aspects to it. I just wondered were there any aspects of the literature review that you were particularly interested in and why? And I was going to come to Issra first for that one.

IP: I'm looking at the literature review that you have produced thank you so much and there are so many things that I want to talk about. I'll limit it to one or two. One interesting thing is about core designing. In Thailand definitely this has been happening, apart from co-designing even co-investing. We have certain factories/companies who come and ask and give you this certain amount of money, we buy a machine and then we will send experts from the factory or from the companies to teach our students on campus as a part of that CWIE cooperative education. And we even have some hotel personnel to decide the hospitality curriculum with us as well, so that's co-designing, co-investment which is definitely one thing that is related to employability.

Another thing I mentioned earlier is about the topic about transnational students right and of course you know in Ruth's case - in Jackie's case you might not have a problem because individual students have good English already - but our students you know Thai students, most of the time we receive CWIE students from abroad to work in Thailand. But for our students to go out and work outside Thailand there's always a problem with language barriers. Sometimes our students got a rejection because their English is not that good you know so one point here is that language barrier could be a problem in terms of global mobility of our students.

CB: Really interesting thanks Issra. Jackie, Ruth any parallels with you along those lines or any other aspects of the literature review that are particularly interesting to you?

JB: Yeah I mean I would say that the key area I was interested to explore more really is how to make sure that we're providing students with flexible enough learning in terms of employability. I feel that flexible learning really empowers students to learn anywhere

anyhow and i'm a programme leader of an online programme in our entrepreneurship programme, and we've all just recently gone through the pandemic where we've needed to shift online and really break down the walls and the barriers that we had around employability. So i'm just really keen to explore that bit and to think of the value for both the students and the stakeholders around this, particularly the employers. People send their staff members on these short learning experiences so really interested in that and I think also i'm interested in how we know what works and how do we measure that, and how do we capture that, and how do we know what the value is supposed to be? So there's still some unanswered questions and I think looking at what you're attempting to do here will really support universities and the higher educational institutions to think further on those areas.

CB: Thank you Jackie. Yes the whole area around evaluation is really fascinating and still one for development. Ruth, how about your perspective?

RP: I'm very excited by this literature of you. I love delving into the literatures and discovering what research is taking place. I'm particularly interested in theoretical framing and there will be a chapter critiquing and conceptualising employability. I'm very concerned about the potency of terminologies that we use and even though we're talking about employability this morning, employability can be a really problematic term. It's linked with employment outcomes and its dependency on market forces over which higher education has really no influence can be really difficult to manage I think, and so i'm interested in exploring that.

I'm also really interested to see that there's a section focusing on skill gaps and alignments with marketing needs. That kind of reinforces what i've just been saying around my issue with the term employability. I mean hospitality management education has a really well documented symbiotic relationship with the industry that it serves. We know that employment and employability outcomes are decisive for students choosing to come to Les Roches for sure. We have a fantastic reputation for employment outcomes but even there I found in my research that reorienting students to focus on their preparedness for a complex and dynamic workplace, which may be very different in a few years from the one they're looking out at now, is really important rather than a simplistic matching with current employer expectations. So i'm very interested in that area of the literature.

CB: That's a fascinating point and it links back to the point Jackie and Issra were making earlier about how do you know what you're doing is working and what outcomes should you be measuring. So Jackie, any thoughts in terms of how you're evaluating your programmes for their impact and what you plan to do next in terms of developing or progressing further? What's your main priorities?

JB: I mean I think from my perspective it's important to speak to the employers and get their perspective. I also think well we need both the numbers but also the qualitative feedback as well from students about the value of their learning. So I don't have any particular answers because I think this is a sector-wide discussion about what we all find valuable but I think it's important to take on board the different stakeholder views - the government views about what they feel the university should be achieving and also each individual university have their own perspective about their own value in their own society. So I think that's important to have that perspective as well and, as I said, to use different forms of measurements and different measuring points throughout the experience. And also different students are going to start from different levels as well in terms of employability. You might have a direct entry student who has spent some time in the workplace, so what are you exactly measuring and at what points? As I said i'm really up for further discussion around that.

CB: Grand, that sounds a very sensible approach. Ruth how about you from areas for future development?

RP: So I completely agree with Jackie in terms of what she said around understanding the student perspective. I think the literature is filled with employer perspectives and you know we have accusations of skill gaps and that higher education isn't always necessarily providing what employers want. But really looking at the student perspective is really important. In my research, I looked at the legitimacy of an institutional competency framework, perceived workplace relevance of the degree by the students and their own sense of work readiness and you know the quantitative data was really interesting to explore the relationship between those three. But where I became really fascinated was in interviewing students and discovering that yes indeed they understand employability as an extrinsic term as being all about the job market and how well they match these job descriptions out in the job market whereas work readiness on the other hand was a term that they understood as being intrinsic as referring to their own preparedness to their confidence, their efficacy, to their resilience as they go out into the workplace, and these are areas that I think we need to be focusing sharply on. And so i'm super encouraged to see that.

In terms of assessment there's a real shift away from traditional high stakes exams and towards assessments that might provide students with opportunities to develop robust working practices. We see team-based learning, we see practice-based learning, we see even in assessments interdisciplinarity appearing in assessments rather than viewing subjects as silos. And all of this is certainly supporting students in terms of their understanding of their preparedness.

CB: Thanks so much Ruth that's absolutely fascinating, and you know we're trying to foster more students as partners approaches throughout a number of disciplinary areas as well and it sounds like employability is absolutely perfect for that. I'm fascinated by your insights into the terminology and the different student perspectives around the word employability itself – it's fascinating. Issra, how about the Thai perspective, where are you heading next and what are your priorities?

IP: In terms of assessment right for our CWIE programme, we normally ask a student to work on a project, so it's a project-based client placement. The project is agreed upon by the students themselves and the workplaces, and for the outcome of the project the students' work performance is evaluated by both - we call job mentor, the people at the workplaces assigned to be the mentors of our students - and it's also evaluated and assessed by academic supervisors who are lecturers from our university who visit our students at least once during their placement as well. So that's the assessment on the students' performance and we also use reflection as part of assessment as well. We collect the weekly journals, the weekly reflection reports that the students have to collect for four months of their placement. And when they come back to the university we have one day which all of the students in that term have to present their learning experience from the work placements and that's the day when many of them will say 'oh and the workplace has asked me to go back to work at the workplaces after my graduation, so I already got a job even my graduation'. So that is the assessment that we have been doing here at our university.

CB: Wonderful that's a pretty important outcome for any student, that's fantastic. So thank you so much everybody for your time and i've really enjoyed listening to your conversation, we do appreciate it. We hope that this has brought some global perspectives to listeners. We particularly want to make sure that all of our global members are represented in our member benefits so thank you all of you, you're doing some fascinating work. Amongst the panel today we have Senior Fellows, Principal Fellows, we have teaching excellence award winners in the form of National Teaching Fellows and the CATE award - the Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence - so we've got some real cream of the crop colleagues sharing their thoughts with us today and we appreciate it.

So thanks very much to all of you, we'll sign off for now and please do take a look at the other resources in the member benefit theme for student success because you will find the literature review and other podcasts and webinars and other resources that might be useful for your own employability teaching and learning at your own institutions.



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