

Graduates North West

Evaluation of
The North West
Graduate Employability
Support Project
Executive Summary



European Union
European Social Fund
Investing in jobs and skills



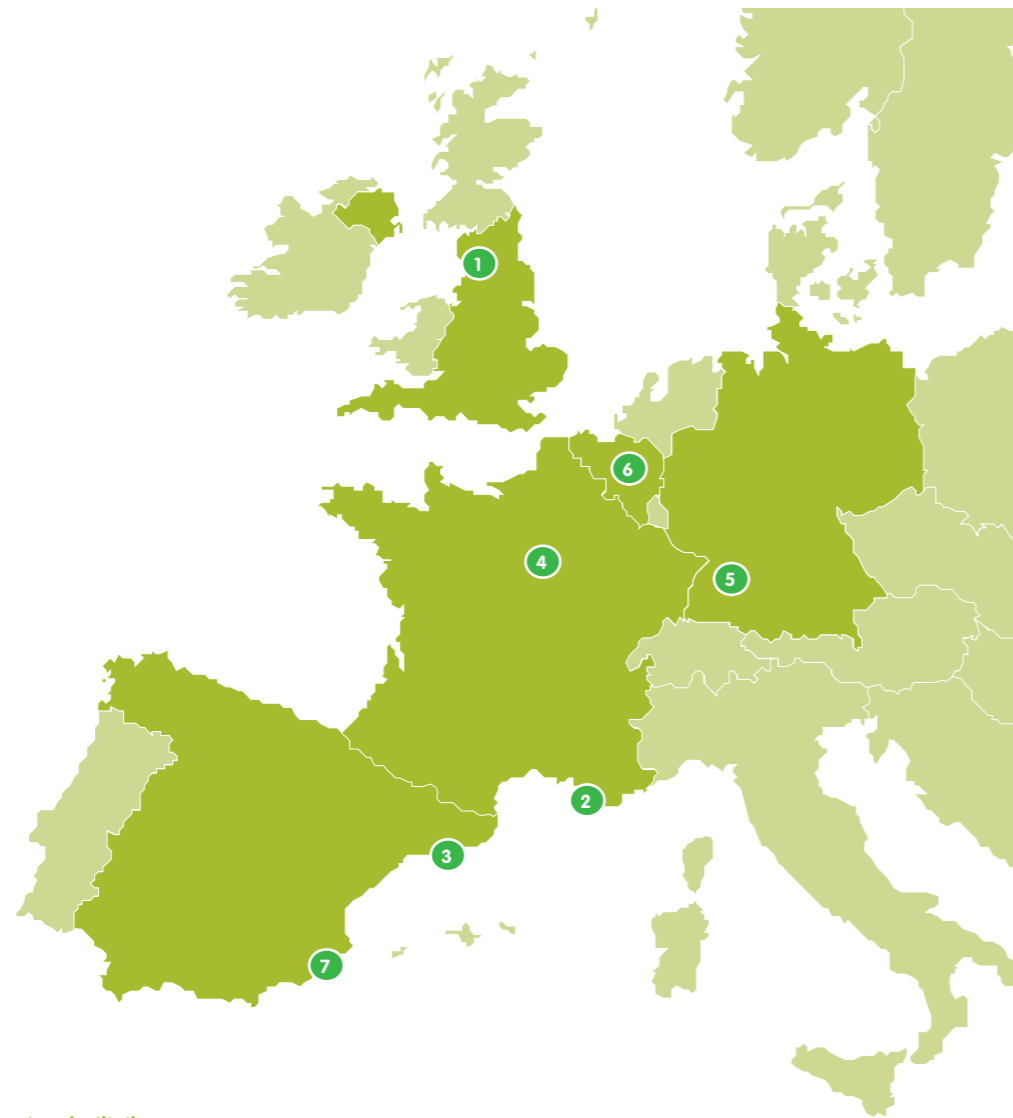
University of
Chester

University of
Cumbria



University of
Salford
MANCHESTER

RELATIONSHIPS



- 1 UK partner institutions**
Bolton, Chester, Cumbria, Lancaster, Liverpool John Moores, Manchester Metropolitan, Salford, UCLan.
- 2 Euromed Marseille École de Management**
Marseille, France
- 3 Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari a Catalunya**
Barcelona, Spain
- 4 Novancia Grand École**
Paris, France
- 5 Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg**
Horb, Germany
- 6 Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel**
Brussels, Belgium
- 7 Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche**
Alicante, Spain

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The executive summary of the programme evaluation produced by University of Cumbria on behalf of partners in the North West Graduate Employability Support Project, supported by the Innovation, Transnational and Mainstreaming Unit of the European Social Fund. Vicki Goodwin, Programme Evaluator, University of Cumbria is acknowledged as the author of this report.



1 THE PROJECT AND ITS METHODOLOGY

1.1

Introduction

The North West Graduate Employability Programme began with a successful bid by the universities of Bolton, Central Lancashire, Chester, Cumbria, Lancaster, Liverpool John Moores, Manchester Metropolitan and Salford, to the European Social Fund (ESF) via its Innovation, Transnational and Mainstreaming (ITM) strand.

1.2

Methodology

This was a large synthesis evaluation involving many participants and multiple delivery partners, so it needed a robust methodology. The partners chose a theory-based approach, to facilitate systematic articulation and testing of connections, alongside a multi-method approach that yielded qualitative and quantitative data from a range of sources. An intervention logic model (ILM) was created to guide the evaluation by identifying the rationale and purpose of the institutions' activities and their anticipated outputs, outcomes and impacts. All this ensured good identification of what to evaluate, facilitated triangulation and created a strong evidence base. The broad areas of evaluation were the innovative, transnational and mainstreaming activities of the programme, and their benefit and impact.

In 2009 the partnership of universities, led by the University of Cumbria, started the programme, which gained extension funding in 2012.

Liverpool John Moores withdrew in 2012; Lancaster University had previously withdrawn. The other six universities continued. Overall the partnership provided funding to match the £2,500,000 from the ESF.

2 OVERVIEW OF INNOVATION

2.1

Innovation

This evaluation uses the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) definition and the ESF description of innovation:

Innovation can be defined as the successful exploitation of new ideas.¹

In the context of ESF, innovation can include new approaches, tools, methods and service provision to extend employment and raise skills. It can also mean adapting and applying existing approaches, tools, methods and services to new regions, sectors or target groups.²

That description left room for interpretation, particularly of this project, so this evaluation also applied the classifications of innovation taken from whole ESF ITM programme evaluation:

- process-oriented innovation: developing new methods, content and/or approaches;
- goal-oriented innovation: for example, working with different target groups, sectors, types or levels of qualifications;
- context-oriented innovation: new organisation of training, networking or dissemination.



1. See *Innovation Nation* (Dept for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008) at www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BISCore/corporate/MigratedD/ec_group/18-08-C_b.pdf.
2. *Guidance and Requirements for the ESF 2007–2013 Programme in England and Gibraltar. Manual 1: Overview of the 2007–2013 ESF programme; eligibility rules; innovation and transnationality; and information on how to apply for ESF funding* at www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/manual1.pdf.
3. P. Dickinson and R. Lloyd, *Evaluation of the European Social Fund Innovation, Transnational and Mainstreaming Projects*, Research Report No. 817 (Department of Work and Pensions, 2012) at <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rreports2011-2012/rrep817.pdf>.

3 THE ACTIVITIES DELIVERED

“The activities used various new delivery methods and approaches, all supported by new, ESF-funded staff posts.”

3.1 The activities delivered

A mapping exercise at the start of the evaluation found that the eight universities had designed and delivered many different activities to unemployed graduates, but most were one of these types:

1. information advice and guidance (IAG),
2. placements,
3. taught modules,
4. events,
5. employer engagements,
6. funded students,
7. leadership.

The great range and scope of these activities included: filmed mock interviews, speed networking events with employers, work with British Army Officer Corps, team building, self-awareness development, realistic-thinking cognitive behavioural activities, webinars, confidence building, personal branding and mock assessment centres. The activities used various new delivery methods and approaches, all supported by new, ESF-funded staff posts. Nearly 1,800 unemployed graduates engaged in these activities, more than was anticipated, and their experience was very positive.

4 THE PARTICIPANT AND STAFF EXPERIENCE

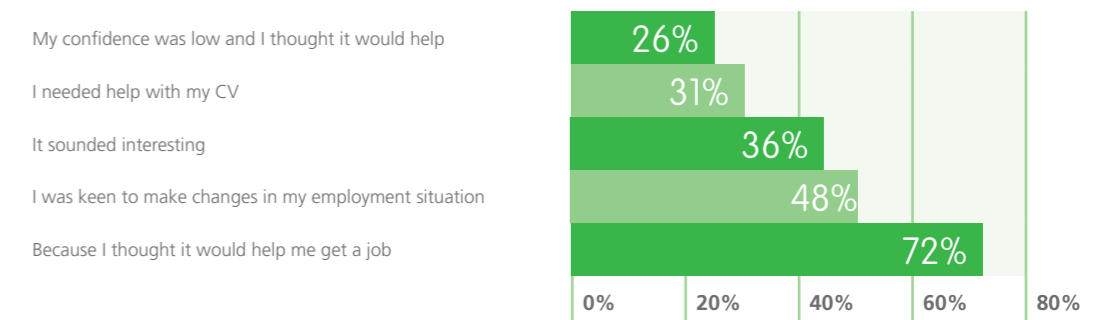
4.1 Participants

A survey of participants – to provide data for the evaluation and to inform institutional practice – brought 285 responses and 70 of those were also interviewed. Survey data showed that:

- Most respondents engaged with the ESF provision at a university they had previously studied at (56% as undergraduates, 22% as postgraduates).
- The largest group were aged 21 to 25 (48%).
- A further 48% were aged from 26 to 60, spread evenly across each ten-year band, up until age 51-60, which formed only 4%.
- Lone parents made up 4% of respondents, 9% indicated a disability and 3% were carers (excluding caring for their own children).

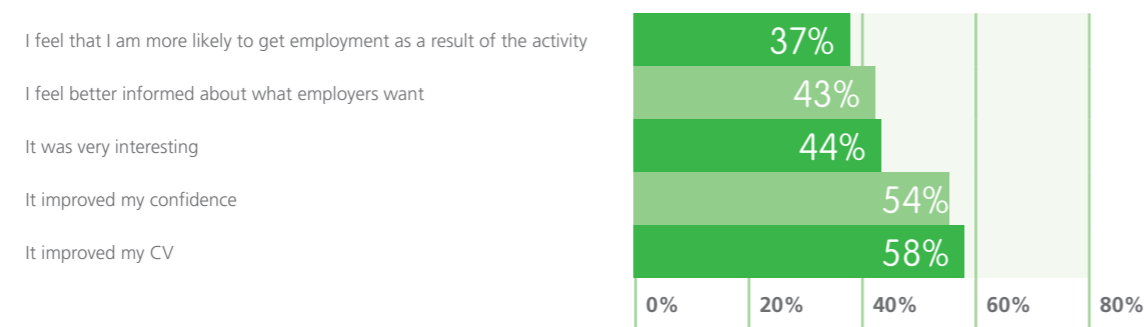
Figure 1 shows the top five motivations for engaging with the programme.

Figure 1: Why did you decide to get involved with the employability activity?



The survey showed that 91% of participants found the employability activities useful and 92% would recommend them to other students and graduates. Participants were then asked why they found the activity useful, and Figure 2 shows the top five responses to this question.

Figure 2: How was the activity useful to you?



A free-text box brought these two comments, among others:

After the course I took my newly found skills and knowledge and applied them to my job hunting techniques and within a few weeks I found the position I was looking for.

It gave me the 'tools' to analyse job applications and to identify how my skills relate to those which employers seek in job advertisements.

Most interviewees thought the provision was valuable in three areas: developing their interview skills, improving their CV and raising confidence:

I got quite a few phone calls as well saying 'Oh look, we've just got your CV. Would you be interested in an interview?' And I'd never received anything from a CV before and that was, like, the first time ... it made a massive difference. (female, 25, undergraduate)

I needed to get over my lack of confidence and my presentation skills needed improving ... I didn't really know what could be done but it was absolutely fantastic, and I mean the course was absolutely perfect ... I'm talking to you this confidently now because of that programme. (male, 34, postgraduate)

Mock interviews were popular, particularly as a rehearsal for the real thing. They seemed to relieve some nerves and anxiety around interviews:

The simulated interviews were most useful; they picked whoever you had it with ... and they'd give you an interview as if you were going for that job. That was excellent and really useful. (female, 35, undergraduate)

The mock interviews; they gave me more confidence. (male, 27, undergraduate)

I felt there were always a couple of questions that would throw me in interviews before. I don't feel that any more now. (male, 28, undergraduate)

The survey showed that 72% of participants had not done any similar employability activity and 97% believed the ESF-funded employability activities should be offered to all students. They were asked which activities would be most useful, and Figure 3 shows the top ten responses.

Figure 3: What type of activity did you do?

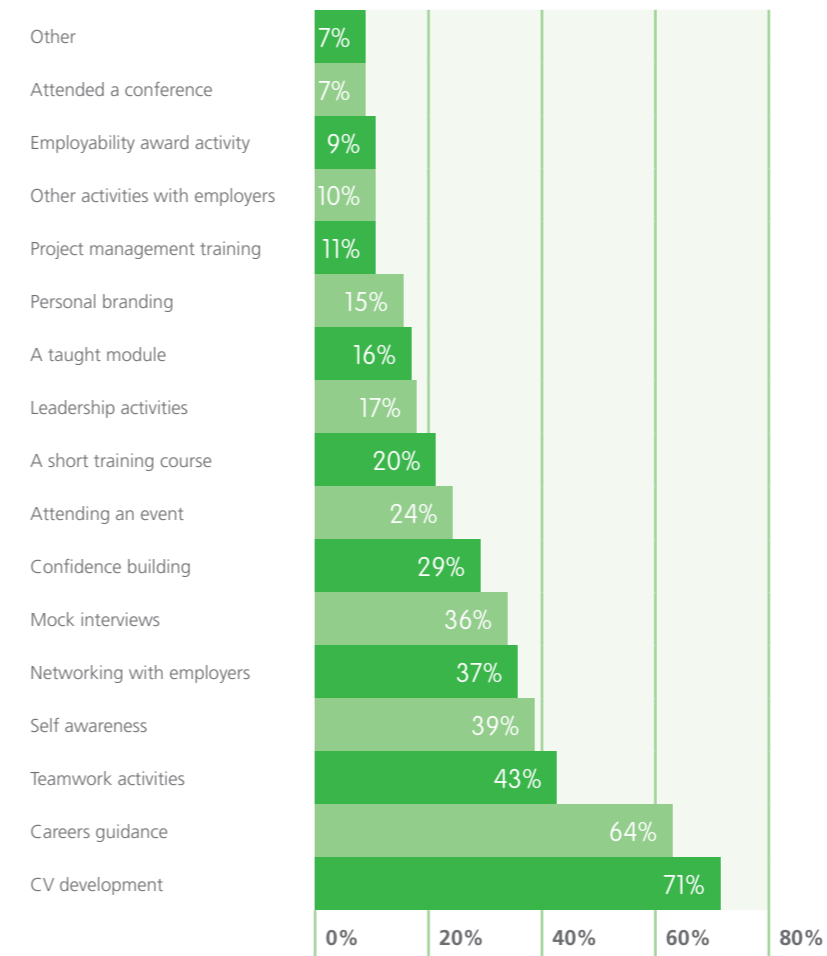
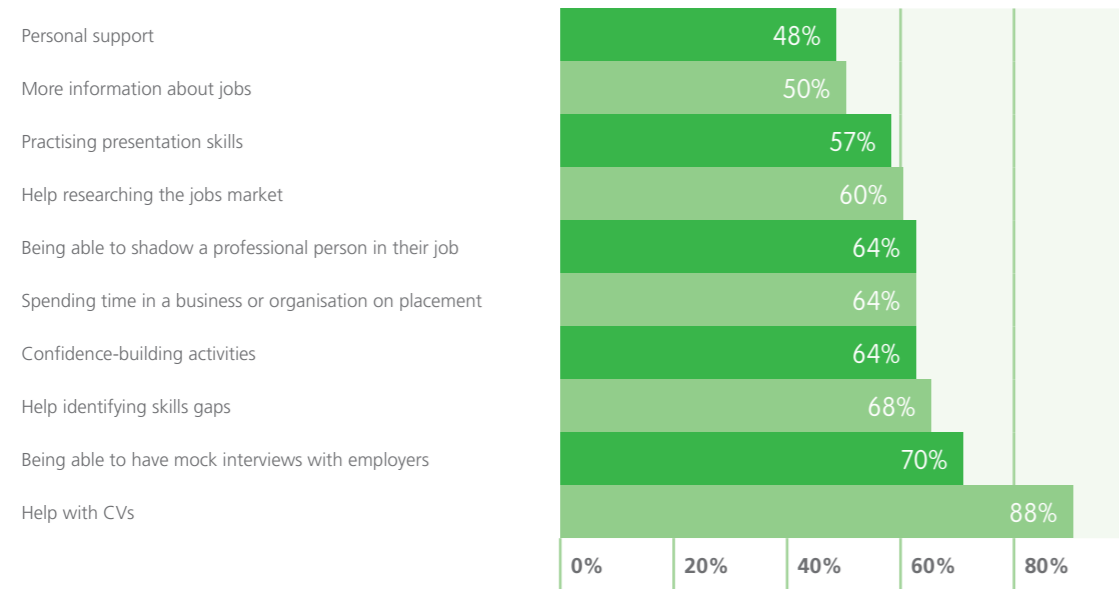


Figure 4: What employability activities would be most useful?



Three of the top six activities involve employer engagement, though only four of the 17 answer options related to employers. This comment represents the view of several participants:

Undertaking a placement in today's society is virtually essential in my opinion; especially when the job market is already stretched for anyone seeking employment. Students have worked hard getting their degree, but without the additional support in terms of helping provide a placement/career planning. Tuition fees are increasing, therefore more funding should be allocated to helping those find a job after uni!

In interviews, participants ascribed high value to employer activities, and the university staff interviewed were strongly aware of the importance of employer interactions.

4.1 Staff

There was innovation – of all three types mentioned in section 2 – in a number of aspects of this project. The university staff identified the areas of most innovation, or most success in the innovative phase, as:

- changing approach,
- processes,
- impact on participants,
- specific activities,
- recognition of need,
- new relationships.

Staff from some institutions thought the most significant innovation had been moving employability from being an assumed by-product of graduation to, instead, something to be woven through students' curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular life – the programme had engendered positive change in processes and approaches to employability at individual, departmental and institutional level. Seeing employability from the graduate's and student's viewpoints had a positive impact on many staff, changing and enhancing their professional practice.

4.2.1 Increased knowledge

The university staff involved were careers and employability professionals with extensive knowledge and expertise, yet many had never delivered activities explicitly designed for unemployed graduates.

Each partner experienced some challenges in recruiting graduates to employability activities, partly because many students see graduation as ending the relationship between them and the university, so graduates have little awareness that support is available.

Marketing and promotions featured in many discussions; some partners felt there was more to learn and success depended on getting the message 'out there' along with better support from marketing and communications departments and better access to graduates' contact information. There were some specific areas of staff learning from the innovative phase:

- **There is not a typical unemployed graduate**
Some might believe there was a stereotypical unemployed graduate but the staff observed that the diversity of graduates in this programme did not support that view.
- **Issues around self-awareness and confidence**
Staff recognised that many of those who engaged in the programme had low levels of self-confidence and self-awareness:

They really struggle with self-reflection and self-awareness ... that's a massive barrier and that's why some of them submit awful CVs and obviously don't get anywhere, because they just do not understand what it is they have to offer.

- **Staff assume that graduates know about jobs and careers**

Staff realised that they could not assume that graduates already had a good knowledge of the labour market and what employers are looking for:

It's about not overestimating their understanding of it all, not to make assumptions in relation to where they're at this stage ... you've got to pitch it at the right level.



Some staff were surprised that many participants stated they had never done anything similar in employability; although there were innovations in this programme, there was also university core provision in employability that had been available to these students:

They're not very aware of the careers service or how we can help them ... that's possibly why they are where they are; because they either weren't aware of or never made use of the services while they were students here

4.3 Relationships

As a result of the ESF funding, a number of universities worked in partnership and this in itself was a great innovation. These new domestic relationships are highly regarded across the partnership, non-competitive and collaborative; without them the programme could not have been delivered:

It's a huge step forward for universities to collaborate across the North West because there's no competitiveness amongst everybody. Everybody is willing to share experiences and activities and I think that's a huge step forward.

We've had a lot of learning that just wouldn't have happened otherwise.

I don't feel like there was ever a real competitive element to it. You'd think with us, particularly in terms of recruitment for admissions, there probably is a massive amount of competition, but I've never felt that through this project. ... it's actually inspirational.

4.3.1 Employers

Contact with employers is highly valued by unemployed graduates and employer engagement was increasingly emphasised as this programme developed. The participant data illustrates areas for further development of employer engagement in UK higher education (HE), highlighted by some of the inward learning during the transnational phase. Staff attributed the status quo to two factors: HE being too inward-looking and no tradition of employer–university engagement (affecting both):

It's not that the university didn't invite employers in, but it was usually a kind of talk to the students in a lecture sort of environment.

We had no database, nothing on existing links and offerings from employers ... I've kind of started from scratch in terms of developing relationships with local employers ... the database is up to 700.

It is sort of opening the employers' eyes as well to what is available within the university and to a path which is more productive.

From the innovative phase onwards, employer engagement increased across the programme. The employers came from a range of sectors and business sizes, and university staff found that employers were generally keen to be involved and see how they might work better with HE. Staff described multi-faceted benefits to participants of these new relationships, which will potentially bring more benefits in the future.

4.3.2 Jobcentre Plus

Each of the universities tried to engage with local jobcentres and this led to new relationships. University staff suggested that this required persistence from both sides, but resulted in valuable opportunities for the universities to promote their activities while the jobcentre could offer an option to the unemployed graduate:



The Jobcentre were actually pleased that there was something else that could excite those graduates ... there was so little support out there for graduates and I think even the advisers themselves were getting to a bit of a dead end where they'd got a graduate sat in front of them, and nothing to offer.

Some of these relationships have matured into a more formalised referrals process. Jobcentre Plus design and deliver some activities, and university staff attend local jobcentre meetings.

5 TRANSNATIONAL

What it means

All programmes delivered under ITM funding include the following requirement:

1.12.6 Transnational working provides opportunities to add value to domestic activities, deepening understanding of labour market issues and providing opportunities to influence policy development and delivery⁴.

In this project the partners built relationships with universities elsewhere in the EU, which each partner visited to bring learning back to the UK. Some of the non-domestic universities have become transnational partners, seeing potential in continued relationships and inward learning. There were other international visits, domestic staff attended overseas conferences and the partnership hosted two transnational conferences attended by staff from domestic and non-domestic universities. All these transnational activities resulted in inward learning and added value.



⁴ . *Guidance and Requirements for the ESF 2007–2013 Programme in England and Gibraltar, Manual 1: Overview* (version 8) at www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/manual1-v8.pdf.

6 VISITS AND INWARD BENEFIT

The visits to non-domestic universities involved staff members from some or all of the UK partners, and covered the Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark and Spain. Some transnational partners in these countries were visited more than once, to seek further information and examples of good practice. Other countries visited included Romania, Slovenia and Portugal.

6.1 Case studies

Two case studies have been selected to give more detailed examples of the learning opportunities presented by the transnational activities.

Three Visits

Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg (DHBW), Horb and Stuttgart, Germany

Domestic participants: University of Bolton with Chester, Cumbria, Salford, UCLan
Transnational participants: Senior representatives and faculty staff of DHBW Stuttgart and Horb campuses, representatives of the companies Leuco and Eisenmann, Director and other staff of IHK Akademie Reutlingen

What the visits involved

- Meeting with the university Rektor, several academics and two Dual partners, to understand the whole Dual approach
- Discussions with Faculty staff and students of the 'Dual University' programme's effectiveness
- Meetings with employers in the 'Dual Programme' to understand their motivation and expectations
- Reviewing the DHBW learning contract
- Meet employers to assess their influence on the curriculum and student learning
- Visit to IHK Akademie Reutlingen (German equivalent to UK's chambers of commerce) to understand the relationship between them and HE

The objectives of the visit

- To understand more about the broader German and DHBW employability model
- To explore the 'Dual Programme' in which the university partners with key local businesses to develop the students' academic and employability skills and provide work-based experience
- To establish how the tripartite learning contract (university, employer and student) can be adapted for the UK
- To establish how employer 'buy-in' is maintained
- To consider how the UK partners might develop a new model for employer engagement
- Assess employer engagement and influence in the curriculum and how this relationship is managed
- With curriculum managers, assess the impact of employer engagement and the influence of industry on course content and delivery in engineering and business
- To look at the role of chambers of commerce in Germany and consider this in the UK context
- To assess how Dual partner experiences might inform partners' plans for student placement policies
- To assess DHBW's approach to employer engagement in social care education and consider potential benefits to the domestic partnership in developing this line of enquiry
- How the course content delivered in the Dual system links to the time spent with the employer
- To look at the role of government regulation

Inward benefit/inward learning

In considering the German employability model and the domestic market, delegates noted that incorporating the DHBW model wholesale into the UK would require an overhaul of the HE system – this being clearly unfeasible, delegates focused instead on what could be learned from elements of the Dual approach:

- New types of relationship between industry and HE
- How companies can be more involved in workforce development via, potentially, placement schemes, industry presentations and workplace open days
- How information from employers might be used to develop university employability activities
- The specifics of key relationships between HE and employers, and how these are managed
- Implementing Eisenmann's model of exit interviews after each placement for students to reflect, talk about the future and learn to articulate their time spent with the employer and the skills developed
- Means and benefits of increasing the use of external staff in teaching (at DHBW up to 60% of lecturers brought in from industry)
- Models of how to involve employers in developing course content, and managing those relationships
- Possibly adopting DHBW's quality assurance model used in employer work placements
- The model of meeting local employers to understand their challenges and what they want from HE
- Making heads of department, or other key staff, more externally facing
- Including key employers on course committees – in the UK these are the opportunity for students and academic staff to meet, discuss and evaluate course programmes
- To consider increasing the role of SMEs in placement provision – DHBW suggests SMEs provide the most opportunities for students to work in a variety of roles
- The German model places employability as integral – alongside work placements and live workplace projects, time is spent helping students with workplace culture and professional behaviour
- The role of open communication channels in positive relationships between employers and HE – e.g. via regular visits between organisations and where possible work placements
- The significance of the close working relationship between chambers of commerce, HE and employers and how these relationships are managed

Two visits

Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel (HUB)

Domestic participants: Universities of Chester with Bolton, Cumbria, Manchester Metropolitan, UCLan, Salford

Transnational participants: HUB, KAHO Sint-Lieven University College (KAHOSL), a partner college of HUB, and the employer, Colruyt

What the visits involved

- Examination of the curriculum at HUB and how employability is embedded in it
- How the formal partnerships with employers work and how they facilitate employability exercises
- Sharing good practice in the support offered to students and graduates to enhance their employability while looking to establish international links for possible joint projects in the future
- UK staff given an overview of HUB and their merger with KAHOSL
- Investigating how the employer fair was organised and the model of fair that HUB use
- Looking at HUB links with their equivalent of chambers of commerce etc.
- Looking at how HUB addresses and delivers employability, with structure of the team responsible
- Investigating how HUB manage/maintain employer links and how they get employers to 'buy in'
- Looking at how HUB and employers manage placements
- Meeting with Colruyt Group (partner of HUB) to examine employer branding and partnerships with education
- Visit to the HUB job fair

The objectives of the visit

- To examine the range of careers and employability activities and approaches adopted by HUB staff that could be fed back to the partnership
- To learn more about the HUB model of employer engagement
- To consider the support given to postgraduates in terms of employability
- To look at HUB's use of IT in careers and employability approaches
- To gain a detailed insight into the structure of the organisation and the Tailor Made Programme, which provides students with a range of employability skills
- To meet an employer partner of HUB to understand more about this relationship
- To consider the employer's view of graduates and what makes an employable graduate
- To gain a detailed insight into the organisation of the jobs fair, how this is promoted to students and how students are prepared for the jobs fair

Inward benefit/inward learning

- Ways to increase embedded employability provision, particularly in HUB's curriculum
- New strategies for employer liaison that can be used in the UK, particularly to involve employers in workshop delivery
- The use of formal partnerships with employers and how that might be replicated in the UK
- How employability and careers provision for postgraduate students and researchers could be advanced in the UK and include employer activities
- Means and benefits of involving students in organising events like employer fairs; HUB find it enhances student knowledge of the labour market and offers networking opportunities
- The HUB Portfolio incorporates opportunities for students to reflect on their coursework, workshop attendance, etc. – their reflections are stored electronically in the portfolio, which is also linked to the curriculum and captures their academic credits
- Potential of HUB's approach to using LinkedIn for keeping in touch with alumni
- The use of alumni as mentors and as links to employer organisations
- HUB's model of careers fairs, which could improve levels of involvement in fairs and make them more desirable and accessible to employers
- How HUB formalise their relationship with employers by setting up contractual partnership agreements, which employers join a waiting list to pay for, obtaining in return access to potential graduate recruits and wider brand awareness – a key learning outcome
- The HUB approach, focusing on quality of employer engagement rather than quantity, and how these relationships are managed – has influenced UK practice
- Employers do not appear to expect 'work-ready' graduates, but look for potential to develop – UK universities perhaps need to manage expectations better

6.2

Inward benefit

In the staff survey, 88% described the transnational visit/s as 'very useful' and 12% as 'quite useful'. Despite models of HE and employer engagement being quite different across the EU, the delegations found resonance in other institutions in the challenges of enhancing student/graduate employability, the employability needs of unemployed graduates ('soft' skills and confidence issues) and the desire to increase contact with employers.

Much of the learning in the transnational phase concerned employer-HE relationships, as these staff observed:

Universities must make themselves more open and transparent to employers

The project partners' experience reinforced the value of employer engagement, internships and embedding employability into the curriculum

"In the staff survey; 88% described the transnational visit/s as 'very useful' and 12% as 'quite useful'."

Inward benefit was gained from the transnational activities and each UK university partner identified learning they were able to import, for example:

- Adopting new models for employer fairs
- Increasing the use of new technology, including LinkedIn for communication with alumni
- Developing ideas for a domestic institution to make a funding bid to HEFCE
- Introduction of Alumni Partner Group internships
- Embedding self-awareness reflection modules into the curriculum
- Ideas of how to re-align university systems to focus on, and better support, internships
- Involving academic staff in encouraging student engagement in careers and employability
- New approaches to working with employers, being more open and aware of employer needs
- Using labour-market information and statistics in developing and managing provision
- Including more employer input in careers and employability sessions
- Development of new employer-liaison/engagement strategies
- Working with academic departments to embed employability modules in the curriculum
- Exploring IT development to replicate some approaches of the non-domestic partners
- Increasing and developing support for postgraduate students and researchers
- Involving students in organising employer-focused events
- Improving links with alumni and developing their role as peer mentors and employers

"Key lessons and approaches to employer engagement were identified by all UK partners, with each making changes to their programmes or approaches as a result."

In addition to the specific examples above, there has been a spread of less tangible, but no less significant outcomes and impacts from the transnational phase. Overall, the partners describe the benefit of increased awareness of activities in universities outside the UK and the reassurance of knowing that staff in other universities face similar challenges. Key lessons and approaches to employer engagement were identified by all UK partners, with each making changes to their programmes or approaches as a result.



7 MAINSTREAMING

Sharing the benefits

The whole ESF ITM programme had an imperative that the learning garnered during the innovative and transnational phases must not be lost but should, in effect, become mainstreamed.

ESF/DWP guidance describes the function of mainstreaming as supporting the “transfer of new learning, products and good practice into future policy and provision”, which may entail the sharing and transfer of good practice, lessons learned and innovations resulting in a legacy to the project⁵. Achieving this, the guidance states, could involve dissemination and influencing. As noted by Dickinson and Lloyd in the overarching evaluation of the whole ESF ITM programme, “identifying and verifying mainstreaming outcomes is ... notoriously difficult”⁶, so this evaluation of mainstreaming uses a triangulated approach, involving both primary and secondary research and data collection.

The North West Graduate Employability Programme had a natural, fairly sequential evolution, so mainstreaming came to the fore once the innovation and transnational activities were well under way; partners felt they must assess the effectiveness of their activities, and identify good practice from outside the UK, before starting to mainstream. Each successfully delivered mainstreaming outcomes arising from both the innovative and transnational phases and each provided a number of examples of dissemination and influencing activities; these made it clear that mainstreaming had required significant efforts from their staff. The challenge of effecting positive change in universities was exacerbated by the economic situation, which deteriorated during the lifetime of the programme, and by changes in the HE sector leading to straitened times for many universities.

5. *Guidance and Requirements for the ESF 2007–2013 Programme in England and Gibraltar, Manual 1: Overview* (version 10, August 2012) at www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/manual1-v10.pdf.

6. P. Dickinson and R. Lloyd, *Evaluation of the European Social Fund Innovation, Transnational and Mainstreaming Projects*, Research Report No. 817 (Department of Work and Pensions, 2012) at <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2011-2012/rrep817.pdf>.

8 MAINSTREAMING OUTCOMES

Case studies

Bolton

Two 0.5 FTE careers adviser's roles, originally funded by the project, are now core-funded and an additional 0.4 FTE has been put in place to support the work of the careers service. A business consultant has been appointed to provide expert advice on self-employment to students, working one day per month on an appointment basis.

The two-day graduate summer schools will be offered to all students and the careers fair, supported by local businesses both in the private and public sector, will continue.

The career-management modules will be delivered to undergraduate students across all psychology degree programmes, supporting an estimated 180 1st-year students.

A new Employability Guide has been published. It is aimed for student use, gives a definition of employability and sets out 10 key employability skills. The guide identifies the three areas: curriculum, extra-curriculum and work experience – and sets out different ways to enhance employability in each of these.

Chester

The three members of the project team are now all core-funded by the university. Graduate Head Start will continue; following feedback, as a three-day programme. It will now include a 'Self Review Day' which is the taught element of the Self Review and Negotiation of Learning module – replacing the original Business Skills and Professional Development module. This module specifically links into continuous improvement/lifelong study and allows a flexible mode of work-based study on a taught or distance-learning basis.



A second Career Planning Day has been introduced in which sessions are delivered on personal branding ('Brand You') and on 'Effective Networking'.

Mock interviews have been introduced with feedback, both written and verbal, provided to all participants

Central Lancashire

Following the successful pilot using ESF funds, the Employability Development Profile (EDP) will now be used by a wider group of careers and employability specialists across the university. The EDP has been launched on Pebblepad to allow students to access it via IT. Students can then use this to develop an individual employability portfolio.

Thirty personal advisers have been appointed by the university. They are based within schools and work with both the Futures Employability Team and School Employability Leads. They will also be using the EDP.

The Futures team members, as funded by ESF, have designed, piloted and embedded a new triage system. This involves daily drop-in clinics of 15-minute appointments with further signposting and longer appointments available thereafter.

“Employability is one of the university’s four key strategic themes and each faculty has identified a member of staff to act as an Employability Champion, working to embed employability into the curriculum.”

Cumbria

The university now has an employability plan and an Employability Group. Employability is one of the university’s four key strategic themes and each faculty has identified a member of staff to act as an Employability Champion, working to embed employability into the curriculum.

The Career Ahead Employability Award, developed and implemented using ESF funding, is to continue, with the award lead post being funded for another year.

An Employability Manager has been appointed. Core funding is now also in place to continue a specific post of Student Enterprise Co-ordinator focused on supporting students and graduates who wish to pursue self-employment; a post previously supported by ESF funding.



Liverpool John Moores

World of Work (WOW), the five-day employability programme delivered under ESF funding, is to continue in a new form. The LJMU graduates attend only key elements of the programme, while a day-long ‘Get That Job’ programme is now timetabled provision for all students.

The university’s Board of Governors mandated that the WOW Skills Certificate Process become a compulsory element of all 240-credit undergraduate programmes; as a result, the Self-Awareness element of the World of Work Skills Certificate Process has been integrated into the Level 4 curriculum and forms part of a credit-bearing assessment. This will now reach thousands of students annually.

Manchester Metropolitan

Graduate to Work, a two-day workshop for underemployed and unemployed graduates, is to be fully funded by the university when ESF funding ends, as is the associated careers advisers’ time.

The Employer Forum, bringing together employers and universities, is to continue. ESF funding has enabled the development of new documents available to students and graduates; these will continue to be offered and cover a range of employability matters.

Mock interviews (including those video recorded) are to continue, using core funding.

Salford

ESF funding was used to develop and deliver the five-day programme, Graduate Gateway. This is to continue as a three-day programme following a successful pilot of the new format.

The Student Life team will continue to approach employers to seek placements and work experience for graduates who complete Graduate Gateway.

The university now recognises Employability Champions, a temporary role negotiated by the Careers and Employability team using ESF funding, and has integrated them into a university manual that standardises academic role descriptions and is used by heads of the 12 schools to ensure necessary roles are in place. Several schools have appointed Employability Champions to embed employability into the curriculum and student experience.

9 DISSEMINATION AND INFLUENCING

Dissemination and influencing are an aspect of mainstreaming; the latter presents something of a challenge in evaluation. Effectively this evaluation looked for evidence of a directional shift, following dissemination, that resulted in the whole, or part, of a desired action. Applying this approach, it is apparent there was success in influencing agendas within each institution; resulting in a wide range of provision – developed and delivered using ESF funding – becoming core-funded.

9.1 Influencing

Each university team was represented on internal committees and groups, some involving senior staff, and used such roles to disseminate activities and to influence internal agendas, spending priorities and policy creation, so as to:

- kick-start dialogue at a top level
- shift employability from an operational activity to a strategic focus
- get to people at the right level within the institution:

It's about getting the messages up there so it's got that gravitas.

The programme brought a new focus to relationships between the universities and their wider milieu; delivery teams reported that their practice had become more outward-looking, particularly in the areas of: improving relations with, and influencing, external stakeholders; and disseminating and articulating the university offer externally. This helped institutions achieve a number of successes in employer engagement and stronger relationships with more employers, the results including:

- Redesign of activities to incorporate employer networking lunches,
- Better preparation of graduates before employer engagement,
- Integration of employer presentations in individual programmes,
- More speed networking events involving employers and graduates,
- More 'world café' events with employers,
- Engaging employers to inform university–employer liaison strategies,
- Employers and university staff considering a more formal basis of engagement,
- Development of an Employer Guide, particularly aimed at SMEs,
- Presentations from significant employers in the transnational conferences.

The universities developed new links with Jobcentre Plus, resulting in a better offer for unemployed graduates in the North West. The positive outcomes included:

- A number of Jobcentre Plus offices now identify where a jobseeker is a graduate,
- Jobcentres referring, or signposting, unemployed graduates directly to the university,
- University hosting of workshops led by Jobcentre Plus staff,
- A written agreement between the university and a Jobcentre Plus office.

New relationships were also developed during mainstreaming activities with a number of chambers of commerce, other business organisations and the British Army Officers Corps. The chambers have been involved in university events and one institution has staff representation on a chamber board. The relationship with the British Army Officer Corps developed from a meeting between careers staff and members of the local training corps into a successful relationship, and the army delivered a well-received leadership and team-building day, which became part of the core university offer.

Nationally, the programme engaged with at least five MPs and had questions raised in parliament, shared information with the department for Business, Innovation and Skills, shared findings with the Higher Education Academy and had these published on their website.

9.2 Inter-institution influencing

The partnership approach resulted in a number of benefits. Each university team identified instances when learning or findings from a partner had a direct influence and impact on their own institution:

It [the partnership approach] has brought shared learning, and that's critical, you know when you've got ideas ... and other partners will critique it or suggest a different approach; that's really great because you can't buy that expertise ... it saves so much time potentially as well.

We've all learned a bit from each other and we've also learned what we don't want to do just as much as what we do want to do.

Some of the lessons learned from one another included:

- Formats and content of mock interviews,
- How to increase employer engagement,
- Changes to formats of employer events,
- Adopting a more holistic approach,
- Content and delivery of effective networking sessions,
- Triage systems and how they can work in careers and employability settings,
- Models of employability awards – successes and challenges,
- Personal branding and its significance in employability,
- Importance of 'preparing' graduates before employer fairs,
- Engagement with British Army Officer Corps.

Some interviewees also observed that, in terms of awareness-raising, the partnership approach at times provided something more noticeable and tangible than the sum of its parts.

10 IMPACT

This programme resulted in a series of impacts across different areas, most significantly the impact on participants. The potential for positive outcomes for these individuals was the chief motivation for the university staff involved. There have also been a number of positive effects on the university staff, their institutions and the wider employability agenda.

10.1 On the participants

The data presented here shows that the participants enjoyed and valued the provision:

- 91% found their activity useful,
- 92% would recommend it to others,
- 97% believed the activity should be offered to all students.

All this is clearly heard in the participant 'voice':

The training in how to present myself, seek out jobs and make contacts made such a huge difference to my confidence and approach to applying for jobs that I am now in a job that I enjoy ...

Since learning how to approach companies, I was able to get an interview with one of the biggest football clubs/brands in the world ... ended up being appointed to a role that was made permanent.

Attending the course gave me the confidence and the know-how (they gave us lots of helpful hints!) to find my way into a successful company ...

I would definitely recommend this to any graduate who doesn't feel they are fulfilling their potential, doesn't know where to start with job hunting or just doesn't know where to turn for career advice ...

I hope these kind of programmes and initiatives continue to receive funding and Universities continue to see their value.

A lot of graduates feel like they go from a high [graduating] to a horrible unfamiliar low, being trapped in a strange job situation where you're too overqualified for non-professional jobs, and have not enough experience to work in the industry you desire to break into ...

Graduate programmes make it seem like there is light at the end of the tunnel. I can't believe my own university doesn't offer something like this; it should be offered at every university as part of a degree and be compulsory that every student attends.

10.2 On the universities and their staff

The staff involved in this programme are clear that, without the ESF ITM funding, this programme and related developments would not have happened. The project required significant collaboration across universities and this had positive effects across the institutions.

In terms of working relationships in our own team and the wider careers team across the university, that has been really successful.

We had success and I think it's put more support behind it. That's helped really push it out.

Delivering the programme also illustrated areas of improvement, a key area of challenge being the engagement with the academic community in each university:

There are pockets within each faculty where we have real enthusiasm from a few [academics] ... it's how we replicate that, and I certainly think there is a need for a lot more awareness on the part of the academic teams.

Each of the teams said the programme had significantly raised awareness of the need to cater for unemployed graduates, as well as enhancing employability provision for existing students:

I think it [the project] has brought a real sharp focus to it. It's brought the evidence to the table of what's happening in other institutions and it's really enabled the shift to happen.



The 'championing' of the project and its team within universities by senior staff – enabling them to see "first-hand the impact the project has had" – was, the staff say, essential in effecting positive change and breaking down internal barriers between teams or departments.

In addition to building internal relationships, this programme has prompted the development of new relationships across a partnership of universities. The staff teams found this to be a positive and collegiate relationship, facilitating collaboration and shared learning. The partnership, at the close of the project, was planning to continue in some form. All universities involved have built relationships with non-domestic universities and have benefited from these networks and the resulting learning.

The programme also had notable success in providing the means and impetus to universities to look outside the higher education sector in considering new partners and activities, leading to employer engagement being significantly increased in each of the institutions.

11 Conclusion

When the North West Graduate Employability programme began there was little inkling that the UK would be shortly beset by a significant economic downturn or that higher education would face particular challenges. In these austere times the ESF funding made possible the development and piloting of new graduate employability provision. The programme raised the profile of employability in all the partner institutions and in the higher education sector; more specifically, it directed a spotlight onto the needs of unemployed graduates, both at sectoral and institutional level.

11.1 Innovation

There is strong evidence that in this phase the universities tested and piloted a plethora of activities aiming to enhance the employability of unemployed recent graduates. ESF guidance says innovation is the successful exploitation of new ideas: new approaches, tools, methods and service provision but also adapting and applying existing approaches to new places, sectors or target groups⁷.

The activities delivered under this programme contain innovation in their conceptualisation, their content, their delivery and the target participant group. Reapplying the classification of innovation from the whole ESF ITM evaluation – process-oriented, goal-oriented and context-

oriented⁸ – we find that the programme achieved innovation across all three. Those innovations could be inter- or intra-institutional and can be discerned at the level of the individual, the department, the institution and the programme partnership.

These innovative activities were highly valued by participants: 72% had not done anything similar previously and 97% believed the provision should be offered to all students.

Relationships between employers and programme partners burgeoned during the lifespan of the project and represented a new approach for both sides. Based on the evidence, it is highly probable that these will go on to continue supporting the employability of graduates in the North West of England.

11.2 Transnational

This element of the ESF funding stream was about creating opportunities to enhance knowledge in the UK by identifying, learning about and implementing good practice from other parts of the EU. The programme partners identified a range of good practice outside the UK and the evidence demonstrates that, despite the challenges of implementing learning in different contexts, these activities did achieve significant inward benefit.

The transnational activities were varied though, not surprisingly, mostly with other universities. However, there were also interactions with the employer partners of those institutions. Overall, the transnational activities helped strengthen ongoing relationships between the domestic and non-domestic universities, with several seeking continued collaboration.

Despite the quite different contexts of the universities involved in this phase, many of the challenges to graduate employability were shared by the various institutions. Each UK partner identified aspects or approaches to bring back to their practice in the UK, and these can now be evidenced in, for example, new approaches to: employer engagement, managing relationships, facilitating employer input, new approaches to job fairs, the way graduates and students are prepared for these, new applications of IT and increased use of labour-market data in planning employability activities.

The opportunity to learn from colleagues across the HE sector in mainland Europe would not have been achievable without the ESF funding. This evaluation has determined that the UK institutions' employability provision for graduates and students was significantly enhanced by learning from the transnational partners. This successful transfer of good practice fulfils the ESF criteria for transnational activities.

11.3 Mainstreaming

The mainstreaming phase of this programme is ultimately meant to ensure that the lessons learned in the innovative and transnational phases are not lost, instead becoming embedded in the mainstream activities of universities. The evidence in this evaluation shows that this requirement was fulfilled and that the legacy potential of the programme was vastly enhanced by the partnership approach, as staff observed:

ESF has been such a learning curve; a learning curve for everyone involved ... but it's been really beneficial going to other universities and seeing what everybody else offers.

I can see us [the partnership] doing more together in the future, so that's almost not a mainstreamed activity; that's something like a mainstreamed relationship.

In many ways this project has built bridges with other universities that I know will carry on in other shapes and forms after this project has ended; yeah, it has a legacy to it.

The best of the provision and activities are now embedded in the employability offers of the partner universities, supported by core funding of a range of staff positions initiated using ESF funding. Additionally, at the conclusion of this programme, all partners committed themselves to continuing to meet as a group to look at employability in the North West.

11.4 What was delivered

At the start of the evaluation, a range of potential outputs, outcomes and impacts were identified and the programme evaluation was able to ascertain that the project fulfilled each of the outputs and outcomes. In some instances it overachieved, for example in beneficiary numbers and levels of innovation. As regards the longer-term measure – impact – in the absence of ongoing longitudinal research it is impossible to prove fulfilment, but it is reasonable to conclude, given the robust evaluation process, the range of data sources and the strength of the data findings, that the programme impacts will be achieved.

7. *Guidance and Requirements for the ESF 2007–2013 Programme in England and Gibraltar. Manual 1: Overview of the 2007–2013 ESF programme; eligibility rules; innovation and transnationality; and information on how to apply for ESF funding:* <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/manual1.pdf>.
8. P. Dickinson and R. Lloyd, *Evaluation of the European Social Fund Innovation, Transnational and Mainstreaming Projects*, Research Report No. 817 (Department of Work and Pensions, 2012), at <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2011-2012/rrep817.pdf>.

There is clear evidence of success in each of the three core areas of this ESF programme. Innovation has been achieved in the conceptualisation, design and delivery of activities to enhance the employability of graduates. The transnational phase led to notable instances of inward benefit from the learning and identification of good practice, arising from interactions between the domestic universities and institutions outside the UK. Finally, the adoption of good practice from the innovative and transnational phases, and embedding it in policy, can also be evidenced.

11.4.1 The programme legacy

The legacy of this programme is felt at the level of the individuals who participated in the programme; their voices can be heard via the primary research conducted and there are significant statistical findings that support their messages. The legacy can also be discerned at the level of each university involved in the programme. The experience of being part of the programme has had significant positive effects on the individual staff members' professional development and practice.

The effects of this legacy have rolled upwards to affect the departments in which those staff work and, with their increased involvement in strategic committees and dissemination, can be felt higher in the institution, at faculty or school level. Furthermore, the significance of being a partnership in this programme brings additional legacy; as has been noted several times during research with the staff involved, the partnership has become bigger, in some ways, than the sum of its parts. This has lent weight to discussions at institutional level and in the wider HE sector.

11.4.2 What was achieved

This was a successful programme of activities delivered across the North West of England between 2009 and 2013. The universities in this programme innovated in their conceptualisation, design and delivery of provision specifically to enhance the employability of unemployed and underemployed graduates and there is clear and robust evidence of various types of innovation, present through a range of different activities. Furthermore, these institutions have been able to successfully learn from, and import, key lessons and good practice from universities outside the UK. This assertion is supported by the research findings, which have been able to trace new activities, being implemented in the domestic institutions, back to their inception – learning from a transnational partner.

The mainstreaming achievement of each of these institutions has been evidenced in both primary and secondary data sources. These achievements have ensured that good practice that evolved in the innovative and transnational phases is now embedded in core university practice.

Taking all these aspects into account, it is fair to conclude that the North West Graduate Employability Programme has indeed been a successful programme, in delivering good provision to enhance graduate employability and in fulfilling each of the programme's funding requirements.



ESF project team representatives from across the partnership.

EVALUATION OF THE NORTH WEST GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT PROJECT



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