

FT REPORT - GRADUATE RECRUITMENT: Spoilt for choice but ready for a challenge

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Published: May 01, 2008

Their salary expectations are higher than average and they are willing to work slightly longer hours. But this group of students are not entirely sure what they want to do or whether their degree has given them a good chance of securing the right job.

You might think these are the views of young people emerging into the world of work with qualifications from the less prestigious institutions or after clocking up serious debt studying slightly silly subjects.

But this is a description of undergraduates and recent graduates at Oxford and Cambridge, whose responses to questions in this year's survey set them apart from many of their peers.

More than 28 per cent of Oxbridge graduates admit to agreeing with statement "I have no idea what career I want to go into", far higher than the average 20.5 per cent of the total student survey.

But at the same time, their ranking of preferred employers displays an unusual taste for high-pressure environments in both the public and private sectors and across a wide variety of industries, from management consulting and investment banking to publishing, diplomacy and government.

"They are spoilt for choice," says Carl Gilleard, chief executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters. "And the more choice you've got, the harder it gets."

According to Trendence, which carried out the research, this simultaneous high ambition and lack of certainty about employment destinations is a feature of the different approach to careers in the UK.

Across Europe, for example, there is an appetite at the elite schools to work for the diplomatic services and upper reaches of the civil service - also reflected in the Oxbridge preferences.

But only in the UK, the Berlin-based researchers say, can employees decide to be so mobile in the first few years of their career. And because degree subjects are often so little related to the industry into which a student is recruited, British high-fliers have lots of options.

"In the UK, you can study history then go and work at an investment bank. But even then, you really don't have to decide about your whole future at once," says Trendence's Oliver Viel.

This gives graduates with a good degree from a prestigious British university an advantage - and the confidence to play the field and aim high.

"If you are constantly told that you are the elite, you don't think 'Oh dear can I do this? Do I have the ability?'," says Viel.

Recruiters say they still see a different outlook among students at Oxford and Cambridge - and they are aware of the competition for talent with the other big names in several business sectors and the civil service.

The companies lay on events ranging from parties to business competitions to get the attention of potential recruits. But they also rely heavily on the informal networks formed by alumni in the workforce and even academic staff who influence the aspirations of the next crop of students.

According to Darius Norrell, an entrepreneur who set up the *Real World*

magazine and website for graduate recruitment and careers guidance, there is a price to be

paid when students at other excellent universities take umbrage and are put off by an employer's image as too filled with personnel from the ancient institutions.

"It's a complex interplay between where companies do and don't promote themselves and the decision of students to apply," he says. "That exclusive focus can have an effect on other grads, who think: 'OK, you don't want us. Fine'."

Most companies with an active graduate recruitment programme focused on top academic performers are keen to make it clear that they are also looking at other research-intensive universities in the Russell group, the club for the most academically selective institutions.

And they appreciate the lack of complacency at many Russell Group universities, which have worked hard to build links with employers, lay on skills courses and create excellent careers services such as those at Manchester and Warwick.

Goldman Sachs, on the hunt for ambitious individuals with a well-informed understanding of the financial world, wants to recruit those with at least one other language apart from English, and this takes them to 10 to 15 campuses in the UK.

Accenture says that a few years ago, it would only have been targeting five to eight universities, but now it has a presence on 20 campuses.

According to the AGR, most graduate recruiters look at about 20 to 25 campuses. Face-to-face recruiting is enjoying an upswing, as organisations realise the limits of "faceless" online recruitment.

But even with diversity targets and anti-discrimination policies to satisfy, it is difficult for any organisation to break away from the usual suspects.

"It's a challenge deciding where to put the resources in terms of marketing, and, chances are, you'll return to where you had success.

"You might find the one, two or three geniuses at a back-street university, but at Oxbridge you are bumping into a whole lot more," says Mr Gilleard.

All this could be changing, however. Under the new tuition fees regime, there are signs not only that graduates are more focused on getting a good, well-paid job straight away, but that they are studying at institutions closer to home to minimise costs.

"I think increased debt has changed where people go to university," says Accenture's head of graduate recruitment, Sally Atherton. "So that is changing the way we recruit, because the traditional universities don't have all the good people now."

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