



AGCAS HE CAREERS SERVICE RESOURCING SURVEY 2020

Research report

September 2020



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Executive summary

This short report details how the resourcing of higher education careers services has changed, and is expected to change further, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The research survey was open from 31 July to 18 August 2020 and shared with Heads/Directors of AGCAS member career services (referred to as careers service leaders in this report).

Staffing resource

- The average number (headcount) of staff members in the 63 careers services that participated in this research was 23, and the average full time equivalent (FTE) number of staff members was 20;
- The most common FTE staff to student ratio of respondents in this research was 1:500-999. The average staff to student ratio is 1:781;
- Only a small proportion of universities that participated in this research had furloughed careers service staff (8%). Of the institutions that used the furlough scheme, the number (headcount) of individuals placed on furlough ranged from one to 14, or 0.9 to 10 FTE. The percentage of staff furloughed of the total number of staff in the careers service ranged from 2% to 100%, with the average being 38%.
- A small number of careers services are already reporting staff reductions and recruitment freezes.

Income generation and external funding

- 72% of respondents expect income to decrease in the academic year 1 August 2020 to 31 July 2021 compared to previous years. 24% expect the income they generate to stay the same and 5% expect to see an increase in income generated. The main reason for the expected decrease in income is due to the need to move careers fairs online and charge less – or nothing at all – for employers to attend;
- 9% of respondents expect external funding to increase, whilst 76% expect external funding to stay the same and 15% expect it to decrease between 1 August 2020 and 31 July 2021;
- Reasons given for expected decreases in funding included funded projects coming to a natural end, pots of funding at risk, or funding still unconfirmed.

Supporting graduates

- All respondents support graduates for at least a year after graduation. 59% offer support to graduates for 1-5 years after graduation and 38% offer lifetime support to graduates;
- 97% of respondents anticipate that there will be greater demand for support from the 2020 cohort of graduates compared to previous cohorts. Only 1% expect the level of demand to stay the same and 2% expect a significant decrease;
- Only 10% of respondents support graduates from other institutions, though a further 13% will do so in certain circumstances.

Opportunities and challenges

- The most common opportunities that careers service leaders expect the 2020/21 academic year to bring are *'technology'*, *'increase engagement with broader range of students'*, *'improve links with*

stakeholders', 'spark innovation and new ways of working' and 'raise prolife/increase importance of careers and employability';

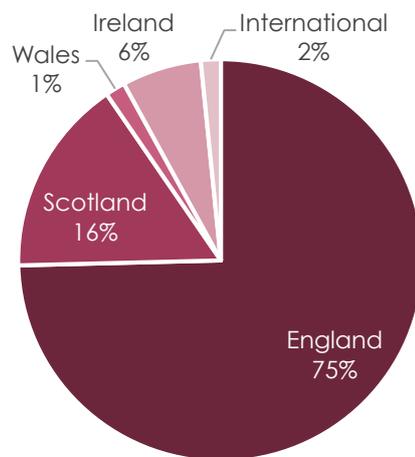
- *The three most common challenges all relate to concerns about the resourcing of careers services over the next academic year: 'cuts to staffing, funding and budgets', 'resourcing (increasing) demand' and 'recruitment freezes and inability to recruit';*
- *Careers service leaders are also concerned about how to manage their staff remotely and managing the transition back to campus, as well as about the 'Graduate labour market, recession and opportunities available to students' and 'Student engagement and satisfaction'.*

1. Introduction

This report aims to capture how higher education (HE) careers services are resourced and how the Covid-19 pandemic is influencing changes in service provision and modes of delivery. A previous piece of research by AGCAS in March 2020 (conducted shortly after the UK Government's lockdown enforcement and subsequent move to home working as a result of Covid-19) found that uncertainty about funding and less resource (e.g. staff budget) were two of the top five strategic concerns facing leaders of careers services at the beginning of the pandemic. This research intended to assess whether careers services were indeed facing the challenges they predicted and to better understand perceptions of opportunities and challenges on the horizon so that AGCAS can provide the support required by members.

The report is based on a short snapshot survey, which was open to Heads/Directors of AGCAS careers services (referred to as careers service leaders throughout this report) between 31 July and 18 August 2020. The survey received 63 completed responses from English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh and international AGCAS member careers services (figure 1). This is slightly lower than the number that completed the survey in 2018 (68). Three quarters of the respondents were from careers services in England (47) and the other quarter was comprised mainly of careers services in Scotland (10) but also Wales (1), Ireland (4) and 1 international careers service.

Figure 1: Regional profile of responding careers services



2. Staffing resource

The average number (headcount) of staff members in the 63 careers services involved in this research was 23, and the average full time equivalent (FTE) number of staff members was 20. Only a small number of responding services had fewer than one member of staff (four services with fewer than 1 FTE) or more than 50 members of staff (four services with more than 50 headcount/FTE) (figure 2).

Data from 68 careers service leaders in 2018 shows an average staff number of 26 headcount and 22 FTE, slightly higher than this years' survey. This equals a 12% decrease in headcount and a 9% difference in FTE. The data from this year's survey more closely resembles 2016 staffing levels of 23 headcount and 20 FTE. Whilst the difference in staffing levels from 2018 to 2020 is small (3 headcount and 2 FTE), careers and employability has moved from the periphery of university objectives to being pivotal to them. Research by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), supported by AGCAS, outlined the drivers for this shift¹:

- Government policy changes related to graduate outcomes and employability, including the introduction of Longitudinal Employment Outcomes (LEO) and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF);
- Students entering university focussing on how their degree can enable their chosen career aspirations;
- Employers who recruit graduates calling for more workplace readiness.

In this context, we might expect the staff resource in careers services to have increased, rather than decreased, since 2018. However, more exploration is needed to draw robust conclusions.

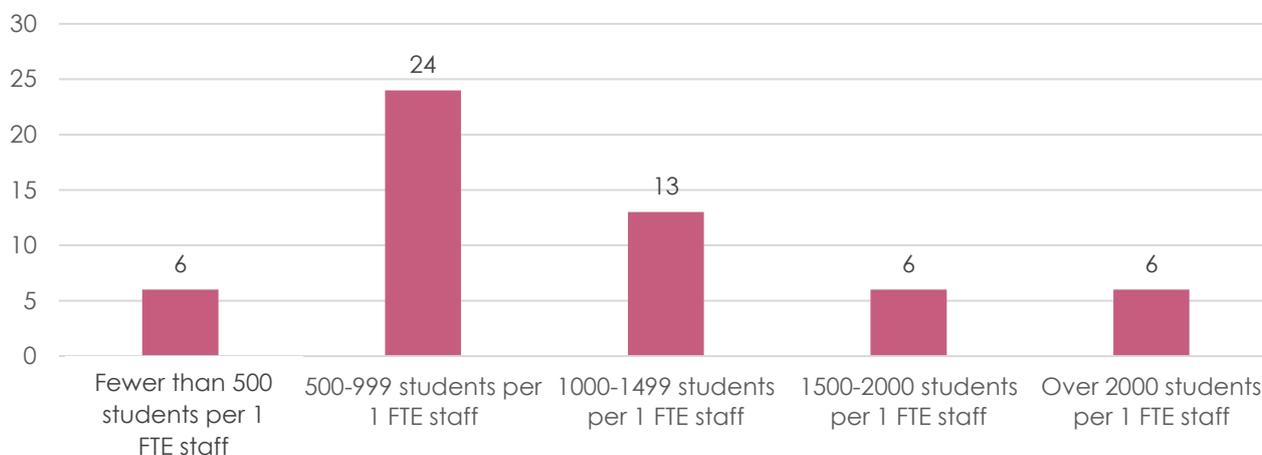
Figure 2: Staff employed in responding careers service as of 31st July 2020 (including staff on furlough, long-term leave, i.e. maternity/paternity leave, sick leave)



¹ 'Getting on: graduate employment and its influence on UK higher education' (2020), Rachel Hewitt, HEPI. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Getting-on.pdf>

The most common FTE staff to student ratio of respondents in this research was 1: 500-999, though ratios ranged from 1:332 to 1:5211. The average staff to student ratio is 1:781. It is important to note that the staff to student ratio includes all staff employed by careers services, not necessarily student-facing staff.²

Figure 3: Number of students per 1 FTE careers service staff member in responding institutions



2.2 Furlough

The UK government introduced the *Coronavirus job retention scheme* in March 2020, which allowed employers to place their employees on temporary leave (furlough) and claim back 80% of furloughed employees' wages from the government.³ From 1 July 2020, the scheme allowed employers to bring furloughed employees back to work for any amount of time and any work pattern, while still being able to claim the grant for the hours not worked.

Only a small proportion of universities represented in this research had furloughed careers service staff (8%). The vast majority (over 90%) have not furloughed staff.⁴ Of the institutions that use the furlough scheme, the number (headcount) and full time equivalent (FTE) of staff who were furloughed is displayed in figure 4. The number (headcount) of individuals placed on furlough ranged from one to 14, or 0.9 to 10 FTE. The percentage of staff furloughed of the total number of staff in the careers service ranged from 2% to 100%, with the average being 38%. However, qualitative comments indicate that some institutions made use of the flexible nature of the scheme to furlough colleagues for only part of the total length of the scheme, so whilst a large proportion of a service may have been on furlough at some point, it is unlikely that it would be at the same time.

"Five members of staff were furloughed, but not for the full period, for three or four weeks each."

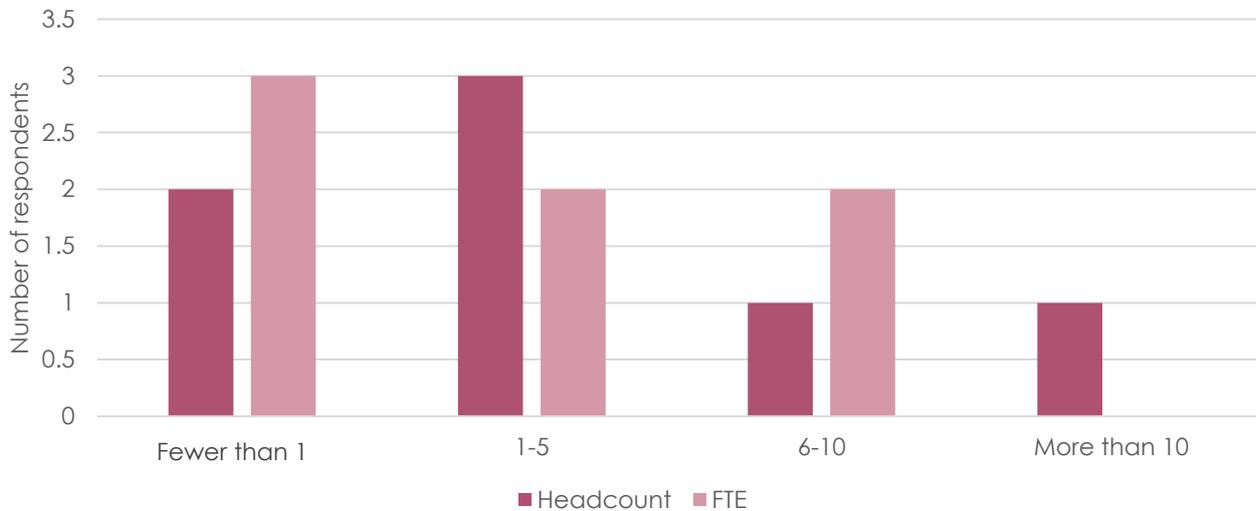
"The Placements Team was furloughed for 3 weeks, with 50% of the team furloughing first then swapping around, so that over a 6 week period 50% of the team were on furlough."

² N = 55. Services with student number data missing from HESA (including international and Irish services) excluded

³ See <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus/business-support> and <https://www.acas.org.uk/coronavirus/furlough-scheme-pay> for further information about the scheme

⁴ N = 63. One institution answered "other", 5 furloughed staff and 57 did not

Figure 4: The number of careers service staff (headcount and FTE) furloughed in services that used the scheme



2.3 Other changes to staffing

Whilst this survey did not explicitly ask whether careers services had already undergone changes to staff resource as a direct result of the pandemic, some respondents left qualitative comments to highlight this. Three careers services have already had to reduce their team size or are expecting an imminent decrease, and three respondents alluded to recruitment freezes preventing them from filling vacant roles. The longer-term implications of Covid-19 on staffing and resource is discussed in section 6: Challenges.

- *"We have x3 FTE staff who will be leaving at the beginning of September."*
- *"This was the FTE on 31 July. FTE has since then reduced by 3FTE."*
- *"2 staff vacancies have not been filled."*
- *"Several vacant posts - to remain unfilled for the foreseeable."*

3. Income generation and external funding

3.1 Income generation

The majority (84%) of the careers services surveyed in this research generate income. Of those, 72% expect income to decrease in the academic year 1 August 2020 - 31 July 2021 compared to previous years.⁵ Approximately a quarter (24%) expect the income they generate to stay the same and a small proportion (4%) expect to see an increase in income generated.

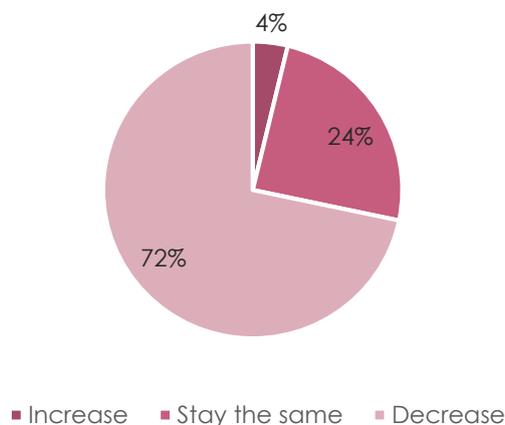
Qualitative comments reveal that the main reason for the expected decrease in income is due to the need to move careers fairs online and charge less – or nothing at all – for employers to attend.

- *“Like many, the vast majority of our income was via fairs. A move to digital and reduced fees plus a reduction in the number of companies actively hiring means we are anticipating at least a 50% reduction in income”*
- *“We still plan to charge employers for (virtual) attendance at the main autumn term careers fair however charges will be very much lower so income/surplus will be c.80% lower. Other events and smaller fairs will remain free of charge.”*

A small number of respondents also cited the loss of income from other employer engagement activities, such as events sponsorship, internships and on-campus marketing opportunities.

- *“Due to the economy situation during the Covid-19 pandemic; getting sponsorship for some events will be a challenge.”*
- *“Employers are showing more reluctance to pay for online recruitment events, and our income from internships is down.”*

Figure 5: Expected change to income generated by the careers service during 1 August 2020 - 31 July 2021 compared to the previous academic year



⁵ N = 53

3.2 External funding

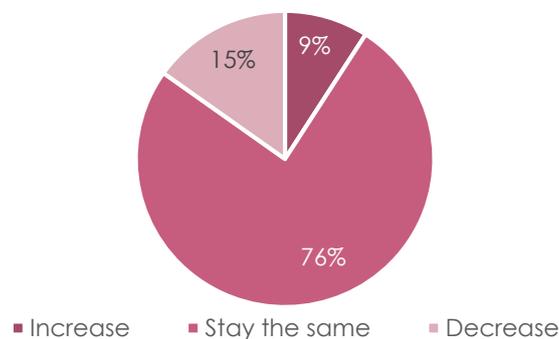
Just over 60% of the responding careers services receive some external funding, e.g. for staff or projects/initiatives. Of these, 9% expect external funding to increase, 76% expect it to stay the same and 15% expect it to decrease between 1 August 2020 - 31 July 2021.⁶ Some respondents reported an expected increase in external funding through optimism and horizon scanning, others did so because they have applied for, or received, funding already.

- *"Santander has given us money for a new internship programme aimed at students with ASD [autism spectrum disorder]."*
- *"There could possibly be an increase in HEIF money allocated to the careers service in 20/21 to support development of work experiences/knowledge exchange. There is also a possibility of some alumni donor funding to extend our work with WP students."*
- *"We don't usually receive external funding, but are participating in a grant bid recently submitted by one of our academic schools. If we are successful this will generate some income for the careers service."*

For respondents who expect funding to decrease, reasons included funded projects coming to a natural end, pots of funding at risk, or funding still unconfirmed. Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) and Santander funding were referred to frequently but respondents had mixed views on whether funding from these providers will increase, decrease or stay the same.

- *"Some funds have been confirmed but others are at risk - but not yet sure which way it will fall."*
- *"Company budgets shrinking to support careers services work will trickle down to Patrons Clubs etc so I'd expect a decrease as it's not core attraction activity."*
- *"Whilst HEIF funding will remain constant a significant project has ended that provided external funding for working with SMEs."*

Figure 6: Expected change to external funding during 1 August 2020 - 31 July 2021 compared to the previous academic year



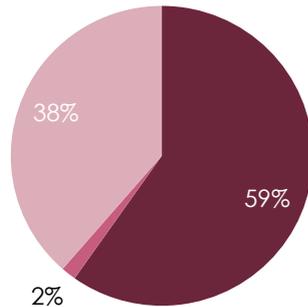
⁶ N = 38

4. Supporting graduates

4.1 Length of support for graduates

All respondents support graduates for at least a year after graduation. Over half the institutions surveyed offer support to graduates for 1-5 years after graduation (59%) and over a third (38%) offer lifetime support to graduates (figure 7).⁷

Figure 7: Length of support offered to graduates by responding institutions



- We offer support to graduates for over a year but less than five years after graduation
- We offer support to graduates for more than five years after graduation, but not lifetime support
- We offer lifetime support to graduates

Respondents had the opportunity to leave qualitative comments about the duration of their graduate support offer. Some respondents indicated that their support provision has no formal end date, or that they would support any graduate that requested it.

- *“We currently offer two years, but are now offering something with a lesser hard end date, more along the lines of ‘now and into the future’”*
- *“The Graduate Business School Careers Network tends to offer support as requested irrespective of years graduated but not stated in any formal Statement of Service.”*
- *“Officially we offer for up to 3 years, but in all honesty would support anyone who came back after that.”*

Some offer lifetime support to graduates but have some restrictions in place in order to prioritise resource.

⁷ N = 62. One respondent selected “other” and has been removed from the figure for clarity

- *"Our graduates have continued access to our careers portal... and an option to book 1:1 careers consultation. We are re-promoting this offer but limiting the careers consultations to max 2 in any 12 month period to ensure that we have the capacity to respond."*
- *"Face to face is 3 years. Online support forever."*
- *"We do prioritise recent grads in term 1 though so there are some restrictions on the lifetime support so it's not a free for all."*
- *"Lifetime support to all our services, with the exception of only 3 years access to 1-1 appointments."*

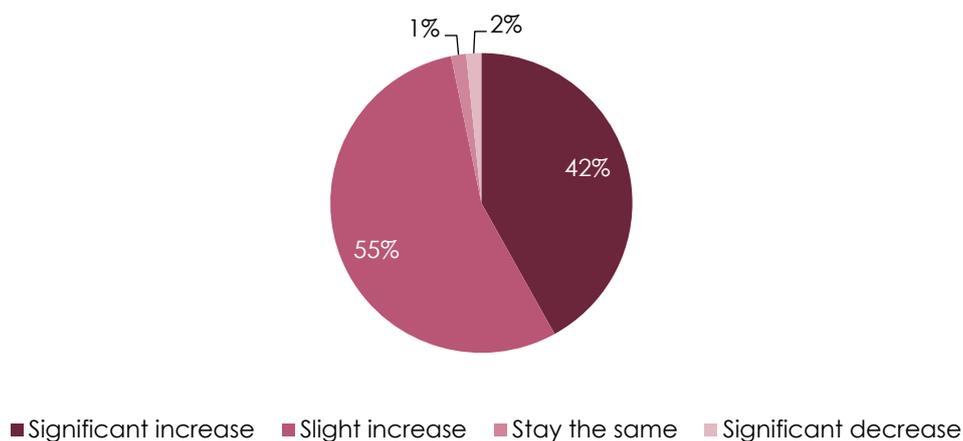
Whilst some services are hoping to increase the length of their provision, others are expecting that they will need to reduce support for graduates.

- *"Considering extending to career-long support."*
- *"Soon moving to lifetime support."*
- *"This is being reviewed with a view to remove support for graduates unless additional resource is given to the careers service."*

4.2 Supporting the 2020 graduate cohort

The vast majority of respondents (97%) anticipate that there will be greater demand for support from the 2020 cohort of graduates compared to previous cohorts. Only 1% expect the level of demand to stay the same and 2% expect a significant decrease.⁸

Figure 8: Expected change in demand for careers and employability support from the 2020 cohort of graduates compared to previous cohorts



Some careers service leaders mentioned how they have already seen an increase in demand from the 2020 graduate cohort for support over the summer.

⁸ N = 62

- “Our quick query services have been busy throughout the summer. Attendances at virtual Graduate Bootcamps and events has been up on recent years.”
- “We are having a really busy summer, much more so than in previous years.”

In qualitative comments, a number of respondents indicated that they expect greater demand from the 2020 cohort due to the economic impact of Covid-19.

- “We normally have excellent graduate outcomes but the effects of Covid have meant many students rethinking, or being forced to rethink/re-evaluate, their plans and we fully expect more support to be needed, and for longer.”
- “We did an Exit Survey of this year’s graduating cohort and significant numbers have no job or had their job offered retracted.”

Other respondents expect demand to increase as a direct consequence of targeted careers service campaigns.

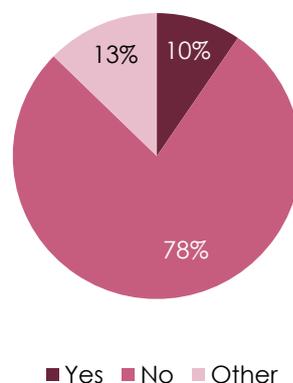
- “We hope to be supporting the 2020 graduates more than we have done generally with graduates. This is also due to a campaign we’ve launched with tailored support.”
- “We have stimulated demand from recent graduates by conducting a phone campaign led by our [career consultants], involving calling all 2020 graduates.”
- “We are offering a graduate mentoring programme and an internship for graduates new for 2020, that will add additional demands on the service.”

4.3 Supporting graduates from other institutions

Over three quarters of respondents do not support graduates from other institutions.⁹ Interestingly, the proportion of UK-wide careers services that support graduates from other institutions (10%) is significantly lower than the proportion of careers services in Scotland that offer this support (40%).

“We don’t advertise it, but wouldn’t refuse a request. The requests are very rare (one or two a year).”

Figure 9: The proportion of careers services that offer support to graduates from other institutions



⁹ N = 63

Of those that responded 'Other', answers included:

- Careers service will see graduates from other institutions in exceptional circumstances;
- The service will see graduates from other institutions if they have availability and are able to deal with the enquiry;
- Graduates from other institutions can access some support (e.g. attend recruitment fairs);
- Careers service will see graduates from other institutions if they are a prospective student at their institution;
- The careers service will see graduates from other institutions if they also studied at their institution, for example if they studied at the institution at undergraduate level but then a different institution for a postgraduate degree.

5. Opportunities

Careers service leaders were given the opportunity to outline the opportunities and challenges (section 6) they expect to face in the upcoming academic year (2020/21). Answers were analysed thematically and coded. The five most common opportunities are displayed in table 1.

Table 1: The five most common opportunities mentioned by careers service leaders, from most common (1) to least (5)

Rank	Opportunity
1	Technology
2	Increase engagement with broader range of students
3	Improve links with stakeholders e.g. employers, alumni
4	Spark innovation and new ways of working
5	Raise prolife/increased importance of careers and employability

References to 'Technology' as an opportunity made up just under a quarter (24%) of all opportunities. Respondents mentioned how virtual delivery can increase student engagement with careers and how the use of technology can make services more efficient and flexible, and improve the service offered to students and employers.

- *"More flexible deployment of resources - staff may be more willing to offer out-of-hours appointments if they can do so from their own homes with no need for lengthy commutes on public transport"*
- *"It's an evolving picture for 20/21 but there is considerable positivity within the Careers team regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of online tools and virtual service delivery, blended with in-person support when required."*

'Increase engagement with broader range of students', 'improve links with stakeholders' and 'spark innovation and new ways of working' were commonly cited as opportunities for the upcoming academic year that have been driven by the use of technology.

- *"To reach many more students through virtual webinars and employer-led sessions."*
- *"We have the potential to be involved with top 300 graduate recruiters we may not have engaged with before."*
- *"Opportunity to refresh practice and learn new methods of engagement."*
- *"We can continue innovate and find better ways to support students."*

A number of respondents reflected on how employability is likely to be increasingly important to institutions over the upcoming academic year, with the careers service playing a pivotal role in supporting students and graduates during economic uncertainty.

- *"We are an answer to the university's problem - lots of unemployed grads"*

- *"To be seen as even more relevant to the institution's success by senior leadership."*
- *"The area of employability seems to be gaining more focus at the university as a result of recent horizon scanning activity which could mean more resource and new work"*

Finally, some careers service leaders expect the upcoming academic year to provide opportunities for reflection and realignment of activities with strategic objectives.

- *"Chance to really consider the most important things our students need and make adjustments to the team to achieve this."*
- *"Reviewing activities that we have undertaken for a long time but may not be needed (eg lunchtime workshops)."*
- *"Staff worked well to provide greater resources for online support making it available 24/7, which is something we have discussed for a long period of time. Current circumstances have given us the space and motivation to make these resources a reality."*

6. Challenges

Careers service leaders were also given the opportunity to outline the challenges they expect to face in the upcoming academic year (2020/21). Answers were analysed thematically and coded. The most common challenges are displayed in table 2.

Table 2: The most common challenges mentioned by careers service leaders, from most common (1) to least (9)¹⁰

Rank	Challenge
1	Cuts to staffing, funding and budgets (31%)
2	Concerns about resourcing (increasing) demand (16%)
3	Recruitment freeze, cannot replace roles (10%)
=4	Remote management – concerns about HR, on-boarding, upskilling
=4	General concerns about HE funding and student numbers
6	Graduate labour market, recession and opportunities available to students
=7	Managing the return to face-to-face delivery and related safety concerns
=7	Staff wellbeing and morale
9	Student engagement and satisfaction

The three most common challenges all relate to concerns about the resourcing of careers services over the next academic year. Together, these three challenges make up over half (57%) of all those mentioned. Just under a third of all comments (31%) cited current or upcoming cuts to staffing, funding and budgets, 16% had concerns regarding resourcing (increasing) demand and 10% mentioned recruitment freezes and inability to recruit roles.

- *“Operating at considerably reduced capacity (up to 20% down) and therefore having to make hard choices about service offerings”*
- *“Non - pay budget has been cut by 30%”*
- *“We are expected to support students, 2020 graduates, improve graduate employability on reduced staff and reduced budget.”*
- *“We anticipate increased demand, but with the same limited staff resource. In other times we might have been able to bid for extra funding from the university but they are facing strained financial circumstances and so there is little to no possibility of extra staff resource.”*

¹⁰ Only challenges comprising at least 2% of all codes are included in the table

Some respondents are concerned that increased demand without adequate increases in resource will disadvantage some student groups.

- *“Increased demand from graduates into the autumn and beyond, without a dedicated graduate team, will impact on support available to current students. In addition, we expect there to be greater demand for our services from students who have missed out on work experience opportunities (internships/placements).”*
- *“More support for Grads so possibly less focus on current UG cohorts.”*

Careers service leaders are also concerned about managing their staff remotely, supporting their wellbeing, and managing the transition back to campus when it occurs. Together, staffing and management-related concerns make up just under a fifth (18%) of the challenges cited by respondents.

- *“Maintaining staff morale and engagement during institutional cost-saving measures.”*
- *“Anxiety levels in staff returning to work. Increase in time required from managers to constantly guide and support staff members.”*
- *“Onboarding of new career consultants, provision of digital resources, team dynamics will change”*
- *“Staff returning to campus and all the issues this brings with it.”*

Concerns about students and graduates were also commonly mentioned by respondents, with ‘graduate labour market, recession and opportunities available to students’ and ‘student engagement and satisfaction’ together making up just under 10% of all challenges raised.

- *“Working out how to maintain engagement with current students through blended forms of delivery, whilst short staffed.”*
- *“Lack of placement, work experience and extra-curricular opportunities.”*
- *“Supporting current and previous graduates in recession - will see huge increase.”*
- *“Reduced staffing will be a challenge as we anticipate increased demand from recent graduates as well as current students due to the recession.”*

7. Conclusions and next steps

This snapshot research paints a disparate picture of what the future holds for careers services in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, whilst only a small number of careers services furloughed staff over the summer, a much greater number are anticipating – or experiencing – staff/budget reductions, decreased income and recruitment freezes on top of increasing student and graduate demand. Careers service leaders are facing the reality of a prolonged period of home working, perhaps for the rest of 2020, or navigating the safe transition of staff back to campus. The year has already been immensely challenging and it is likely that this will continue.

However, the pandemic has resulted in some truly significant innovation, creativity and resilience, as demonstrated by the [36 case studies AGCAS collected for Universities UK in July 2020](#). Careers service leaders are optimistic that '*the new normal*' will yield new opportunities, such as the chance for reflection, to seriously focus on the activities that improve student outcomes, and the use of technology to create new initiatives. Similarly, with an increasingly innovative online graduate support offer, we hope that the barriers that geographically-dispersed graduates once faced in getting careers and employability support will now be overcome. Undoubtedly, the innovation that was sparked in the spring and developed over the summer will continue to be built on over the 2020/21 academic year and beyond.

The situation universities are facing is changing rapidly, with students returning to campus imminently. AGCAS intends to follow this survey with further research later in the year to track changes as they occur. Whatever happens, we are confident that careers services will continue to evolve and adapt to support their students through the pandemic, the resulting economic uncertainty and anything else the future holds.

We hope this research helps careers and employability professionals understand how the pandemic is affecting the sector. If nothing else it serves to highlight that at the heart of AGCAS there is a community of careers service leaders going through similar challenges, who support one another and with whom they can share experience, best practice and advice.



 @AGCAS
www.agcas.org.uk
research@agcas.org.uk

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