

# University of Exeter

## Getting the employability message across through creative marketing

**The University of Exeter has about 15,500 students, of whom 11,300 are undergraduates. There are three campuses, two close to the centre of Exeter and the third at Penryn in Cornwall. Almost a third of the university's undergraduates are recruited from the south west.**

### Communications and marketing

It's difficult to miss employability at Exeter. Although the Careers and Employment Service (CES) is tucked away in a mews building on the Streatham campus, there are carousels of information on employability and careers in every academic building, often outside lecture theatres. Advertisements for events and opportunities are on lamp-posts across each campus and in the student newspaper. On the employability pages of Exeter's website, a series of podcasts – made by students for students – contain snippets of useful information, such as Top tips many graduates wish they had known. Ian Hodges, director of the Careers and Employment Service, explains Exeter's approach:

"We're constantly on the lookout for opportunities to get our employability messages across, and our communications and marketing is evolving all the time. We haven't bought in expertise, just learnt as we've gone along, but it succeeds because our emphasis is on engaging with students from day one and keeping it fresh. We believe it's important to use students themselves to help produce many of our materials – while bringing skills to the task, they benefit by gaining real work experience."

### Key points:

- An evolving and innovative marketing strategy to get employability messages across to students
- An annually produced Employability Matters handbook for every student, together with a synopsis for academic staff
- Ninety-five percent of students taking part in volunteering, vacation work, internships or part-time work, in strong collaboration with the Students' Guild (the students' union).

### Why employability matters

Hodges says that Exeter has understood the importance of employability skills since the CES was founded in the mid-1960s. But there has been a growing recognition at the university of the importance of equipping its students for life after they leave, which has led to more staff being involved in the work on employability, including many outside the CES. Exeter's employability policy dates back to 2000, and represents a consolidation on paper of what the university wants to achieve. A deliberate choice was made to promote employability as a concept, rather than the CES itself or the other units that contribute to the work.

### Comprehensive training programmes

Employability officer, Dr Dawn Lees describes what's available to students:

"Over 95% of Exeter students take part in volunteering, vacation work, internships or work part-time alongside their course. Different schools in the university provide placements but it varies according to subject area. If a school doesn't provide anything, there is an accredited independent work experience module which any student can opt to do as part of their course."

Exeter is the Shell Step agent for the south-west peninsular, and promotes the opportunities for placements with small and medium enterprises to its own students as well as more widely. The university was the Shell Step agent of the year in 2008. It also runs a 20-week graduate business placement scheme for new graduates living in the area. Lees says:

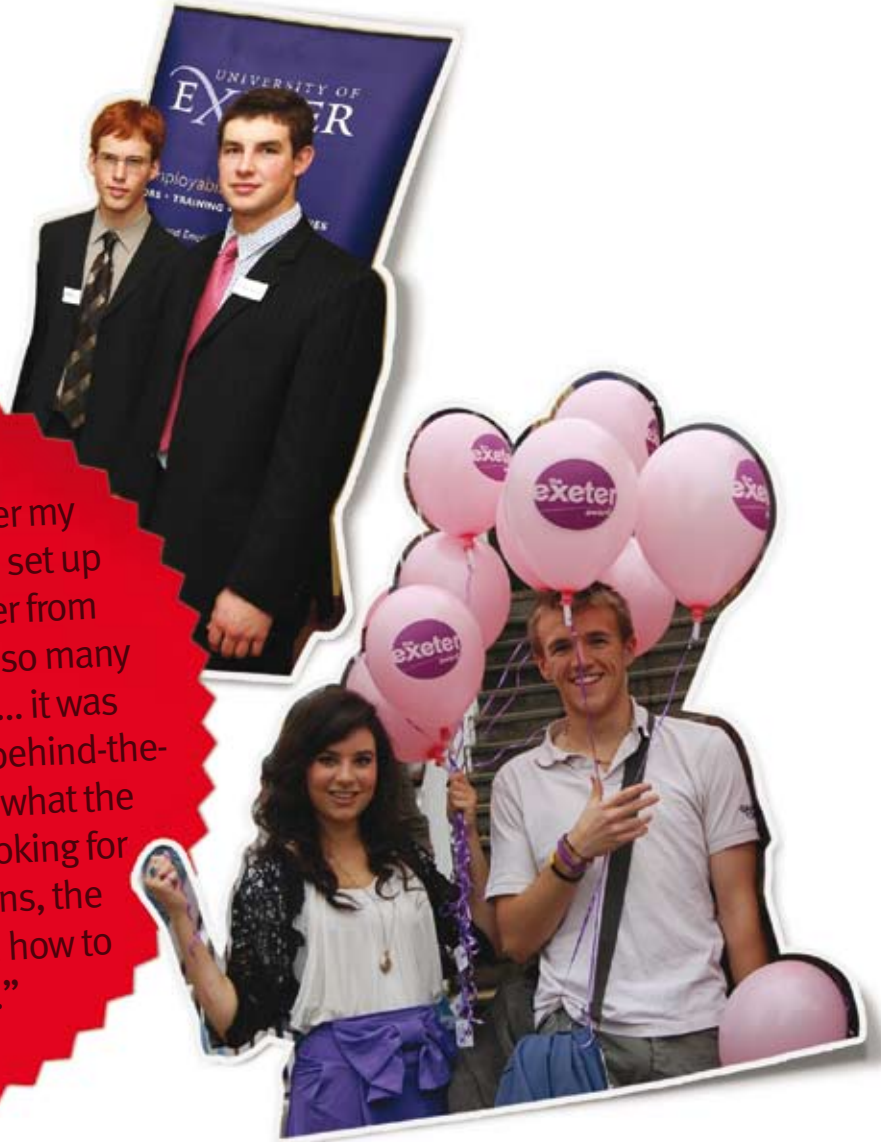
"CES works centrally to offer sessions on softer skills such as leadership and negotiation, which employers come onto campus to deliver. In addition, employers come to give presentations on their company, and we offer three hours' in-depth training on how to perform well at interview, which includes a practice interview. There's a chance to learn some practical skills, too – such as British sign language or first aid."

### Incentives

Most sessions are open to all students, although some – such as the interview experience – are aimed at penultimate and final-year students. Sometimes participation is incentivised. For example, over 400 students submitted their CV in return for a chance to win an iPod Touch, giving CES staff an opportunity to comment on their CVs and provide feedback. Exeter's Chancellor, TV presenter Floella Benjamin, plays a part too, choosing who should receive a career development award from among penultimate and final-year undergraduates who have submitted an application setting out their career plans and how they would use the £1,000 prize to further these.

“I just wanted to write and register my thanks for the mock interview you set up for me yesterday ... the interviewer from PriceWaterhouseCoopers gave me so many tips. Not only was it great practice... it was really interesting to hear about the ‘behind-the-scenes’ perspective. I understood what the interviewer (any interviewer) is looking for specifically with certain questions, the best way to frame my strengths, how to present my weaknesses.”

Third year English student



And most recently, in October 2008 the university launched The Exeter Award to encourage participation in extra-curricular activities and achievements by providing official recognition and evidence of attendance at skills sessions and training courses, participation in sporting and musical activities, and engagement in work experience and voluntary work. Over 2,700 students have signed up for the first year of the award, which will enable them to show employers what they have done.

#### Partnership with the students' union

Lees says that Exeter's students' union – known as the Students' Guild – is integral to the success of the university's approach. The guild is separate from the university, although it does receive some funding for particular activities, such as The Works – a one-stop-shop for students to access information on part-time work, training and opportunities. The guild also collaborates with the CES on marketing and design of materials, and has, for example, helped with recruiting students to the Exeter Award.

#### Measuring success

Hodges says there have been significant changes as a result of Exeter's focus on employability; the last HESA survey showed a higher percentage in graduate-level employment. The academic staff have a greater awareness of why employability is important.

They also have a very good relationship with a large number of employers, who provide sponsorship, lead sessions, conduct practice interviews, or attend events, fairs and evening presentations. Some employers sit on the CES board.”

Ian has some advice for others thinking of following Exeter's example:

“A comprehensive approach to employability does need to be adequately resourced. Each university's situation is probably unique, but good support from senior management is necessary to enable the grassroots work to take place. And it's definitely worth putting in the work required to engage the student union.”

We're constantly on the look-out for new ways to help our students gain the skills and experience they need. Recent additions are the university internship scheme – where Exeter itself employs students as interns on particular projects – and the work we do with alumni to tap into their expertise and support, which we're now developing into a mentoring scheme. It's hard work but it's definitely worth it when you see how your students benefit.

[www.exeter.ac.uk/employability](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/employability)