

SECTION 1: MAKING IT HAPPEN AND MAKING IT WORK: CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

2. More than just the data: the Careers Registration origin story

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It has been well documented in this guide and elsewhere, that Careers Registration was first developed and implemented at the University of Leeds in 2012. Among the relevant articles and book chapters, it is quite common for there to be some reference to the first dissemination of the approach through the Gilworth and Thambar presentation at the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) conference at Exeter in 2013.

The presentation itself was made available to subscribing members via the AGCAS website for some time after the conference but is now no longer accessible online through the AGCAS archive. Even if it were readily accessible, a slide deck alone would not convey the full narrative of the presentation.

This piece, by the two presenters, seeks to fill that gap in the historical background. The title of the presentation was “Careers Registration: A Data Revolution.” The title is not inaccurate, but we feel that it is important to try to convey the holistic, student-centred approach to the origin of Careers Registration and its strategic and operational context. This was a data revolution that was about more than just the data.

Some background to the style and institutional position of the University of Leeds Careers Centre at the time should be useful at this point. By sector standards at the time, the Careers Centre was a large (c60 staff) and comprehensive service. In addition to careers information, advice and guidance and employer engagement, the service

was a centre for placements and internship activity, student enterprise and business start-up support and career development modules in the formal curriculum. In its central operations, it was undoubtedly what Watts and Butcher (2008) would call an “Extended Central Service”. It was also very strongly Faculty-aligned, meaning that it was one of the earliest examples of the extended and institutionally embedded model (Gilworth, 2019) which is now the most common model in the UK.

The University of Leeds had been an enthusiastic participant in the UK government’s Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative, which ran from 1987 to 1996. EHE was a policy initiative with “significant impact on the university landscape and the work of careers services” (Winter & Yates, 2021). EHE supported the introduction of career development learning or career management skills (Butcher, 2007; Watts, 2006) into higher education curricula.

The Careers Centre was a key player in EHE and the subsequent development of career development learning at Leeds. The legacy of this was that the Careers Centre became home to numerous career development modules in the formal curriculum, both central electives and departmentally embedded with the latter being the majority. The service had its own Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) and External Examiner, feeding into the university Learning and Teaching mechanism through the LTC of the School of Education. This meant that the Careers Centre occupied highly unusual organisational territory. It was simultaneously a central professional service (though strongly Faculty-aligned) and a service teaching department while the Director of the Careers Centre reported directly to the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching (latterly Student Education) and had a seat on the University Learning and Teaching Board.

This description of institutional position illustrates the embedded nature of careers and employability within the strategic and operational educational infrastructure at Leeds. Careers and employability strategies were, therefore, component parts of a broader student-centred educational endeavour. The same is true today (University of Leeds, n.d.; Karen Burland & Jane Campbell in this volume).

In 2011, the HE sector was still several years away from the inception of the Office for Students (in England), the introduction of the Teaching

Excellence Framework (TEF) and the heavily metric-driven regulatory environment which exists today. Nonetheless, Graduate Prospects scores (the proportion of the graduating cohort available for work who are in what are deemed to be graduate level destinations) as measured by the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) were established measures in published league tables. The same metrics were feeding the newly established Key Information Set which would be published for all undergraduate programmes. These measures were important and the university paid attention to them.

However, the key considerations informing universities' employability strategies as defined by Ruth Brigstock and Denise Jackson (2019) are useful here: (i) "short-term graduate employment outcomes" (p.470); (ii) professional readiness; and (iii) "living and working productively and meaningfully across the lifespan" (p.474). Our experience was that, whilst the strategic environment contained all three components, the second and (especially) the third elements were culturally dominant. This ethos connected well with the professional instincts of the Careers Centre, its leadership and staff as well as with the institutional learning and teaching community. In 2012, the institutional ethos was conducive to a strategic initiative which was essentially about shaping provision through better understanding students' needs and aspirations. Contributions to this guide from current Leeds colleagues tend to suggest that this remains the guiding philosophy.

It was in this student-centered strategic context that the Careers Centre leadership team were considering issues which many Higher Education Careers and Employability professionals might see as perennial. Even in a very busy Careers Service with relatively high levels of engagement, how do we connect more effectively with students beyond the engaged minority? How do we bust the myth that the Careers Service exists to serve only to provide application support to those with clear career plans? These were essentially student engagement questions in a university which at the time had around 32,000 students.

The realisation that we needed to fill a huge data gap between understanding something about the destinations of previous graduates, through the DLHE survey, and understanding the career development journeys of our current students, was central to the idea of Careers

Registration. That key players in the university, notably the PVC L&T, Registry and central IT colleagues supported the idea is well documented elsewhere. (Gilworth, 2022).

What was also conveyed in the original conference presentation, but has perhaps been less well documented since, was that gathering, analysing and sharing the data formed one part of the joined-up package of student engagement initiatives which were introduced concurrently.

Alongside the implementation of Careers Registration (CR) through enrolment, the Careers Centre website was re-designed. For example, a student landing page entitled “Your Starting Point” was configured with a clickable tile for each of the statements in the first part of Careers Registration (the career thinking, CR1 statements). Each title led the student user to resources and opportunities, which were relevant to the statement. The main student entry point to the Careers Centre website directly reflected the way in which students were asked to consider their starting points in Careers Registration at enrolment.

A key principle behind this re-design was to convey the idea that the Careers Centre gave equal recognition to all starting points and stages and would meet students where they were on their career development journey. The Careers Centre was not simply an application support service for those with clear plans. The re-design was a non-trivial task.

Another key development was the introduction of automated messaging through which every student received a message from the Careers Centre, which was triggered by their completion of enrolment, with tailored careers information to match the statements that they had chosen and their year of study. The amount of work involved in considering and formulating responses to the numerous response/year group combinations should not be underestimated. At the most basic level, automated messaging delivered a moment of engagement with every student who looked at their message. From evaluation at the time, this appeared to increase footfall in the Careers Centre’s front line drop-in central service.

So, whilst the data made a huge and lasting impact through the original conference presentation, it was this whole package which was rewarded with the AGCAS Excellence Award for Student Engagement and judged to be the ‘Winner of Winners’ in that Award year.

Because of this work, student engagement increased and students' perceptions of their stage in a career development journey became central to the basis of engagement, through the new presentation and communication of the central offer. However, in a highly Faculty-aligned Careers Service, the configuration of the central offer alone was only part of the story. A great deal of student engagement with careers and employability came through and took place within, the main academic units of Schools and Faculties (principal academic units formed by grouping cognate Schools).

In the early 2000s, Leeds was a pioneer in changing the role and title of largely centrally based Careers Advisers to the (now common) Faculty-aligned Careers Consultant. The Faculty arena would be where the visualisation, presentation and interpretation of the new Careers Registration data would have its most immediate impact. At the time, the University had just established Faculty Employability Committees as sub-sets of the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees. The Faculty Lead Academic for Learning and Teaching usually chaired both groups. The structure was mirrored at university level through a University Employability Committee, reporting into the Learning and Teaching Board. The Careers Centre was routinely represented in all these groups. In each Faculty, this was through the Faculty Careers Consultant and a member of the Careers Centre leadership team.

These structural matters are important because they illustrate that the development of Careers Registration took place in an environment of certainty about established, mainstream Learning and Teaching mechanisms through which the data could be presented, considered and inform action. In developing Careers Registration, we knew that there would be immediate opportunities for the data to be shared beyond the Careers Centre itself and had those channels in mind from the outset.

The impact of sharing the data for the first time was recounted in the conference presentations and in numerous fora since. That impact would have been much less if the Faculty mechanisms to share it had been non-existent or patchy. Looking back, this reinforces a sense of being in the right place at the right time. Although similar structures are now quite common in higher education, they were much less so in

2012, and even now, a lack of established dissemination channels from the careers service into the academic ecosystem can be a challenge in some institutions.

There was a pre-existing career development model around Deciding, Planning and Competing (DPC) which had already been socialized through Faculty channels to some extent. Presentation of the data through these channels used the DPC model, with charts showing the distribution of student responses to the CR1 statements grouped into those headline categories. These could operate at Faculty, School and programme level and by year group. It was possible, and useful, to show Faculty data at the level of the individual career thinking statements and the work experience statements were always shown.

The headline categories created user-friendly visualization and carried important messages through Faculty channels. However, it is important to be clear that the enrolment process, central web presence and the direct communications to students from the Careers Centre as mentioned earlier, operated at the level of the individual statements, not the headline categories. Students were not asked if they were Deciding, Planning or Competing. They were asked to respond to clear statements about career thinking and work experience and the Careers Centre “starting points” web pages and the automated response messages aligned with those statements. A crucial part of the work in developing Careers Registration and the package of student engagement and communication around it, was deriving the statements from student focus groups. This was another key student engagement task which formed part of the overall package around the “data revolution.”

Since then, as illustrated in this guide, several institutions (including Leeds) have engaged students directly with their headline categories and, as a result, either evolved their model or retained the original.

In the very early stages at Leeds, the Faculty channels enabled consideration of the data and helped to shift the conversation about student engagement to consider not just volume and frequency of engagement but also the basis for engagement, informed directly by students’ own perceptions of their career thinking and acquisition of

work experience. Crucially, the data represented all students, not just the engaged minority.

The headline categories were very useful in this regard. For example, the fact that over 40% of undergraduate students at the beginning of their final year, chose statements which placed them in the Deciding category of the career development model was a powerful message in shaping the shared employability endeavour and the distribution of scarce resources in Faculties.

The intention was that over time, the data would support an evidence-based approach and the expert position of the Careers professional), particularly in the academic environment (Thambar, 2019). For the data to make a difference, it needs to be conveyed and explained by careers and employability professionals, particularly Faculty-facing Careers Consultants, who need to be supported in this as part of a broader evidence-based and research-informed approach (Winter, 2019).

Driven largely by the policy and regulatory environment, a data-informed approach to careers and employability work in higher education is much more common today. This has resulted in changes to the staffing make-up of some Careers Services. By 2021, the responses to an AGCAS resourcing survey showed that the proportion of higher education Careers Services with an in-house data analyst or similar role was around 1 in 5, whilst in-house IT/web development roles existed in just over 16%. (AGCAS, 2021). In 2012, the University of Leeds Careers Centre was an outlier in having a team of people with expertise in IT/ web development and data analysis and visualization (Sam Daoud Mata, Jim Bird and David Cooper). That in-house team was crucial to turning the data itself (What?) into meaningful, user-friendly information which could be interpreted by Careers and Employability staff and linked to student communications and resources (So What?) and to inform action (Now What?).

We hope that this account gives a flavour of the original conference presentation, with some enhancement through knowledge of developments since it was delivered. Hindsight enables us to look back at the collection of factors, over and above having the original idea, which needed to be brought together to create the whole package that we presented in 2013.

The contributions to this guide show that once the data is in place (and we do not underestimate the effort to get to that point), it is the starting point for making a difference, not an end. The Data Revolution continues to be about more than the data.

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