

5. Operationalising the conceptual model

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How it started, how it's going

The University of Leeds is proud to be the birthplace of Career Readiness. Bob Gilworth and a team of careers professionals developed a blueprint for embedding an on-course measure of career progression in Higher Education, signalling a step change for the University of Leeds and, over time, for the sector more broadly. That blueprint has been adapted and tweaked in its implementation across numerous higher education institutions both in the UK and abroad.

Fast forward thirteen years and very little has changed in how we track the data at the University of Leeds. The language of the statements has held across the years, the point of data collection is the same and the timelines for reporting are unchanged. There has, however, been a shift in the audience for the data which has impacted on the way it is reported and how we train staff to use it.

Decide, Plan, Compete: a student perspective

In 2018, the then Deputy Head of Student Careers began a co-creation project with our Students' Union to redevelop our employability framework; a project aiming to inform a new employability strategy for the university. After conducting focus groups and many conversations with the elected officers, the feedback was relatively clear: students

disliked the language of Career Readiness which prevented them from engaging with it. The word ‘compete’ was the most contentious as students felt that it was not accessible and did not reflect their values.

This feeling was especially prominent in our arts programmes. When coupled with the corporate brand of the careers service at that time, arts students were left with a general view that the service was not for them and that it prioritised graduate schemes and earning money rather than finding your passion; as such students perceived the service as being more relevant for Business School or Engineering students. Their perceptions were driven by the language that we used and the way in which we chose to present ourselves to them.

This prompted two major changes for our service: an under-the-radar-but-quiete-complete rebrand of the careers service and a complete rethink about how we encourage students to engage with their career journey – an employability framework.

A framework for life, not just their studies

At the University of Leeds, we are proud of our commitment to our ‘Leeds for Life’ approach, where our doors remain open to alumni throughout their life for career support. The newly developed employability framework aimed to give students a tool that they could carry with them throughout their life too. The concept was based on firm understanding that career paths are not linear. There are twists, there are turns. Our minds change. Our circumstances change. So, we developed a framework that responds to this never-ending cycle of career development.

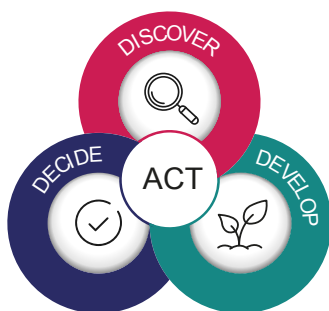


Figure 5.1: University of Leeds framework of career development

In the framework, there are three core elements: Discover, Develop and Decide. The idea, supported by the visualisation of the framework (figure 5.2), is that a career journey will take students into one of these states at different times on a never-ending cycle. The most important underlying principle throughout, housed in the centre of the graphic, is ensuring that students are acting on opportunities to progress their career journey. Sometimes that involves exploring/finding new opportunities (Discover), trying something new, like an internship (Develop), and realising that something is or is not a good fit (Decide). Deciding that a particular line of work is not a good fit is not a failure in the way we conceive of our cycle; it is deemed to be a sign of growth, because the student has learned something about themselves. The crucial element in our conceptualisation is that actions are happening; it is only when there is no activity that career planning stalls.

The role of Career Readiness at Leeds

The project helped us to conclude that although as a careers service the data insights from Career Readiness were highly valuable, they were not particularly helpful to our students. Knowing that they are deciding, planning or competing doesn't overly give them a framework to develop into their next steps or progress in their journey. That does not, however, mean that the categorisation of the data does not have value, but rather it does not have value for the students.

We concluded that the primary audience of Career Readiness was staff. With over 40,000 students at any given time, we are unable to react to the granularity of individual journeys or individualised statements, but we can use the categories to give us a sense of our direction of travel. We can use the categories to identify pockets of concern or success. At the macro level, the data can inform interventions, it can redirect resources, and it can pre-empt where our problem areas are for outcomes.

However, the categories of 'Decide, Plan, Compete' do not offer much utility to the majority of staff, so the project group looked at the statements with a different lens: operationalised groupings. The work aimed to group our nineteen statements into categories that would make sense to any staff member at the university – no matter how engaged in careers practice they may be.

Operationalising Career Readiness

The project group coordinated a series of focus groups with careers practitioners where we had the statements on individual post-its, in no particular order, and tasked the participants with grouping those statements together based on 'similar characteristics of need' from a careers support perspective. They were also asked to write down the kinds of interventions or advice that might go to those groupings. Fresh post-its were used each time and the focus groups consistently placed those statements in similar groups, with slight differences in agreement on the interventions or advice needed.

The project group compiled the outputs of these focus groups together and created six new categories for Career Readiness:

1. Not started thinking
2. Looking for information
3. Looking for experience
4. Looking to apply
5. Next step confirmed
6. No comment

Each of these categories give a clear summary of student progress in career thinking. The detail of the statements and categories can be found in figure 5.2 below. Three of them offer a clear message about the kinds of activities that are likely to spark engagement: 'Looking for information', 'Looking for experience' and 'Looking to apply'. For instance, students who are eligible to undertake a placement would be placed within the 'looking for experience' category and would therefore be prime candidates to be offered a placement hunt workshop or information session. Students who are 'Looking to apply' might be best supported with interventions around mock interviews, CV or application support.

Statement	2011 Category	2018 Category
I am not ready to start thinking about my career yet	Decide	Not started thinking
*I have not yet thought about my career choice or specialty beyond graduation	Decide	Not started thinking
I have no career ideas yet but want to start thinking	Decide	Not started thinking
*I would like to consider career options which are not directly connected to my degree programme	Decide	Looking for information
*I have ideas about my career choice or specialty beyond graduation but need to explore the options	Decide	Looking for information
I know what I want to do but I am not sure how to get there	Plan	Looking for information
I have some ideas about my career and I am ready to start planning	Decide	Looking for information
*I need the right experience and networks in place to secure the professional career path I want	Plan	Looking for Experience
*I am confident that I have a sound plan in place to acquire the experience and contacts that I need	Plan	Looking for Experience
I want to spend a year gaining experience	Plan	Looking for Experience
I have a career in mind and intend to gain relevant work experience	Plan	Looking for Experience
I am ready to apply for graduate level / professional opportunities	Compete	Looking to apply
I am ready to apply for further study	Compete	Looking to apply
I have been applying for opportunities and so far I have not been successful	Compete	Looking to apply
*I am ready to apply for my chosen career but would welcome support with the application process	Compete	Looking to apply
*I am ready to apply for my chosen career and am confident about the application process	Compete	Looking to apply
*I have a job, postgraduate course or my own practice already confirmed	Confirmed	Next step confirmed
I have a job, further study or my own business plan confirmed	Confirmed	Next step confirmed
No comment		No Comment

Figure 5.2: Career Readiness statements and categorisation at the University of Leeds

When you apply the categories to the delivery areas of your service, it is possible to very quickly see how to structure engagement activities to align to Career Readiness grouping in a best-fit approach. This makes it possible to drive the right support and resources to particular segments

of the intended audience; when combined with good marketing support this will gradually increase engagement.

Such data groups also provide valuable insights into where communications or engagement activities do not have the desired impact. Contacting students who are ‘Not started thinking’ with regular newsletters summarising available placement opportunities may not be the most effective use of time or resource. Sending information to students who have already secured their future role is equally inefficient. Embedding this information into practice and process can have a positive impact on how student engagement is approached.

Balancing detail with deliverability

Ultimately, the purpose of tracking Career Readiness is to elicit change – the goal at the University of Leeds is to leverage this data to enable students to develop in their career thinking. Within the ‘Not Started thinking’ category we are trying to spark behavioural change and help the student to begin thinking.

Most psychological models of behavioural change will follow some variation of requiring: skills, opportunity and motivation (Michie et al., 2011). The motivation factor is something that can get lost in categorisation of Career Readiness statements. Take the example of two statements in the ‘Not started thinking’ category:

1. I am not ready to start thinking about my career yet
2. I have no career ideas yet but want to start thinking

If you were to use only the Career Readiness category of ‘Not started thinking’ to identify interventions, you would treat students in these two statements the same. Chances are, you would also potentially label them both as belonging to a hard-to-reach group. However, there is a clear motivation imbalance between students choosing these two statements: neither are ready for their future, but one statement shows willingness to start thinking. Ultimately, there is motivation there that can be capitalised upon.

When we work with departments to talk about targeting interventions, we often refer to that second statement as a group to prioritise. If we develop targeted interventions, we are likely to elicit the behavioural change we're seeking and help them to progress in their readiness journey. But the same engagement strategies will probably not work for students selecting that first statement.

What this highlights is that the ultimate challenge in using the data to deliver interventions at scale is that statements which have slightly different nuances are grouped together in order to make the data more intelligible to our staff audience. This makes it feel more manageable and allows the institution not to feel overwhelmed with the scale potential statements. After all, charting nineteen statements would overwhelm most receivers of reports. The usability of the data therefore needs to be balanced with its nuance.

Examples like the 'Not started thinking' one above can be found in every category of the data. In 'Looking for information' there is a statement that is ready to plan their approach and another that knows where they want to be, but not how to get there. The same intervention might work for the student, but the engagement hook will be slightly different. In 'Looking to apply' there are statements suggesting students are ready to apply vs one that says they have been actively applying and getting nowhere. Again, the same intervention will support this student, but if students cannot see themselves in descriptions, they often overlook them as being helpful for them. Ultimately, the devil is in the details when it comes to engagement.

Considerations for your own institution

Whether you read this and think you would like to take a similar approach to the conceptual model or not, our recommendation is that first and foremost you consider the audiences for your data. If you have embedded the Career Readiness model with students and would like to continue doing so, continue to code your data in that way and talk to students with that language. That does not prevent you from developing an operational view of the same data to empower your staff to make better informed targeted interventions.

You could use the framework that we have outlined in this case study, or you could run a similar exercise with your careers professionals. Our process involved conducting a series of focus groups with practitioners across the university where we asked them to organise the statements into groups based on their properties and characteristics. We compiled the outputs and tested them with colleagues in order to ensure they made sense and could be implemented operationally.

Once you have got that operational framework agreed, you begin the real task of utilising the data to improve your services – ideally at scale.

In a subsequent case study, colleagues at the University of Leeds showcase one of our initiatives involved delivering guidance services at scale whilst using the Career Readiness groupings to target student engagement. Taking this targeted approach allowed practitioners to reflect on the group needs and adjust their content to make the most impact.

References

Michie, S., van Stralen, M.M., & West, R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science* 6(42). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42>