# 6. Revisiting the conceptual model*

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The University of Huddersfield has undertaken a project to review and reconceptualise the classic Career Readiness Questions / Questionnaire (CRQ) (Cobb et al., 2019) and to embed a new career planning model into professional practice. The project was a collaborative effort, led by the Deputy Head of the Careers and Employability Service (CES) with important contributions from Claire Aydogan, Head of the CES and Abby Abbott, Digital Content and Engagement Coordinator. The background to the project is that CRQ data has been gathered by Huddersfield since 2018/19. Historically the university has asked about prior work experience, career learning needs and sectoral interest as well as the standard 10 career readiness questions. Students complete the survey as part of registration (and re-registration) in September of each year. Completion rates are typically close to 100% with circa. 19,000 individual respondents. Over time the survey has become a well-established part of the employability infrastructure being reported on annually by the Careers and Employability Services (CES) and valued by internal stakeholders.

The project was initiated in Autumn 2020. At that time, it was clear that a growing number of universities were making greater use of CRQ than Huddersfield. There was at least one example of a university using

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*\* This is an extended and updated version of a case study which originally appeared as a section of a longer article by Bob Gilworth and Dave Stanbury on Prospects Luminate in June 2024.*

CRQ to create a real time student dashboard in its Careers Service Management System (CSMS). This pointed to the potential to engage students in using their own data more actively in their career planning. It was also apparent that other universities were using CRQ terms on their websites as part of their broader information strategy and, in some cases, also using student CRQ status to target marketing messages. At the same time, it appeared that use of CRQ data at Huddersfield had plateaued. Analysis of data and dissemination within the University was located with the CES and was not directly connected with the wider set of employability data provided centrally. Systems and capacity factors also meant that there was often a delay between collecting the data and being able to release it to Schools.

Taken together this pointed to the need to strategically reposition use of CRQ within the institution. The initial aim was to review the CRQ statements used in enrolment and the headline categories (or terms) used to categorise the responses, to provide a solid platform for future developments. Reviewing the categorisation terms supported an ambition to review the classic Decide, Plan, Compete model (Gilworth, 2022) which had been imported in the process of setting up the data collection. This became the focus of the project.

The consultation aims were defined as follows:

- Check if the current four over-arching terms (Decide, Plan, Compete and Sorted) were fit for purpose, including the intention to share the terms with students.
- Consider if there are more suitable alternatives.

The project identified 6 key criteria for assessing CRQ terms. Terms adopted should:

- Resonate with and engage students.
- Enable students to effectively undertake career self-management by helping them identify key developmental tasks.
- Be meaningful for a range of School stakeholders.
- Facilitate interpretation and dissemination of career readiness data results.

- Be accepted by the CES and the Global Professional Award team (responsible for delivery of the University's employability award).
- Be congruent with current and emergent career development learning approaches being used with the University.

*Process / Method*

The consultation was composed of four overlapping phases: (i) Researching practice elsewhere across the HE sector; (ii) feedback from stakeholders on the classic CRQ terms and alternatives; (iii) reflection on findings; (iv) feedback on options identified.

Phase (i) entailed an interview with an academic colleague with an overview of national and international practice in this area (academic adviser to the project) followed by desk-based research on CRQ practice at other universities identified through purposive sampling. This yielded a set of initial examples, with an additional example added in early during phase (ii). Examples were chosen to illustrate the diversity of good / innovative practice across the sector, provide contrasting approaches, and pragmatically constitute a short list that could be easily shared with stakeholders.

The consultation took the form of small semi-structured focus groups with key stakeholders. At these, the project was explained and set within the institutional context. It was made clear that the purpose was to ensure that terms used were fit for purpose. During the focus groups, each set of terms was presented separately, and attendees were encouraged to identify issues (positive / negative) with each in a non-directive context. Importantly, feedback was only sought in relation to the terms. The way in which each university used their terms and embedded them in local practice was out of scope. The focus groups ran over four months which enabled insights and issues identified from earlier sessions to be fed-forward into later ones. Focus groups were held with the following groups: The CES Careers and Guidance Team (Careers Consultants and Careers and Employability Advisors); The Global Professional Award Team (Trainers responsible for delivering the employability award); the CES Business Partnership Team (staff who

work with graduate employers): Students Union Sabbatical Officers. This approach of running focus groups with discrete sub-groups was designed to ensure that each distinctive voice could be heard, in co-developing the approach from the outset.

## *Discussion*

Based on the consultation, the project concluded that Huddersfield should not continue to use the current set of CRQ terms exactly as they were. While 'Decide' and 'Plan' were uncontroversial and widely viewed as acceptable, significant problems were identified with the two other terms. In *all* groups, *most* people had strong reactions against the term 'Compete' which was felt by some to be "intimidating and negative", and potentially demotivating. Defenders of 'Compete, however, referred to the need to signal to students the realities of the competitive jobs market. The term 'Apply' was frequently offered unprompted as a more acceptable alternative.

Instances of the term 'Sorted' being misunderstood were cited. These included in a careers education exercise, where some students regarded being at university or having a part time job as being 'sorted'. There was a perceived risk that students approaching graduation or after might think they were sorted, when their careers were still open to change and development. SU Officers noted that the term was not necessarily understood by International Students. There was no consensus on what term would be a better replacement, however. Suggestions included, 'transition', 'ambition' 'accelerate' and 'succeed'. The latter provoked some strong and mixed reactions. Concerns included the potential for creating heightened expectations and putting pressure upon students. The impossibility of guaranteeing success for all was noted, as was the desirability of students defining their own career success. The situation of students who were retired or planning on non-paid roles was also noted.

The examples generated by the desk research all had merit. The balance of opinion favoured short, positive, memorable and action orientated approaches, with 'Discover, Develop, Decide and Act' (DDDA) gaining the most support. All the groups which considered this example (GPA, BPT and the SU) preferred its formula.

There was a widespread recognition that all terms potentially need explanation and would benefit from framing for contexts. It was acknowledged that career development is complex and iterative and that the set of terms used should express this. This was a subjective and institutionally specific exercise. Other institutions have embraced terms that Huddersfield has rejected and vice –versa.

*Development*

The project identified and evaluated three options for change.

**Option 1: Minor changes to the Classic CRQ model.** With this option 'Decide' and 'Plan', would be retained; 'Compete' replaced with 'Apply' and an alternative to 'Sorted' used. One challenge with this would be what to replace 'Sorted' with. Synonyms such as 'completed', 'finished' or 'concluded' arguably lacked energy and similarly the term 'placed' felt too passive. 'Succeed', on the other hand was likely to prove controversial as outlined earlier. Option 1 would have been relatively easy to implement but would have forfeited the opportunity for strategic change. Furthermore, the Classic model and set of terms appears to imply a linear movement that begins with making a career decision. Using a modified form of the Classic model was felt to run the risk of obscuring the dynamic and adaptive nature of career development.

**Option 2: Adopt the DDDA model from the desk research.** All groups that considered the formula of terms used by this University rated it positively. It was seen as using memorable terms which had positive energy and conveyed the dynamic nature of career development. However, the project concluded that there was scope to retain the conceptual clarity of classic CRQ and to convey a stronger idea of process to aid career development, whilst emulating/retaining the strengths of the DDDA model.

**Option 3: The Huddersfield model.** The Huddersfield model aims to combine the dynamic and iterative quality of the DDDA example with the process clarity of classic CRQ. Starting with 'Explore,' the model

moves clockwise though 'Decide', 'Prepare' and 'Apply', through to 'Develop' which speaks to the need to remain employable even when employed. Reflection and Resilience are central and ever present, relating to each stage but also capable of being treated as distinct activities. The large arrows show the main direction of travel while the smaller ones indicate the possibility of feedback and revision at each stage.

Figure 6.1 The Huddersfield Model

Each of the elements is explained in table 6.1 below.

| Element | Description | Rationale |
|---------|-------------|-----------|
| Explore | Investigating career ideas. Self-awareness. Developing and discovering new skills, interests and values and priorities. | Accommodates Opportunity and Self-awareness so is compatible with DOTS. Front-loads career planning with dynamic and divergent student led-activities. Is an expansive and open space that encourages exploration and creative approaches |
| Decide | Refers to making a distinct career decision including those that are tentative and provisional. | Forming a (provisional) career decision is a key step in developing a career and enabling efforts to be effectively focused. By naming this as a goal we can focus students' attention and direct them to relevant resources. By identifying this as a distinct moment, it is distinguished from the micro decisions which are part and parcel of the 'Explore' stage. |
| Prepare | Things a student needs to do to improve their chances of achieving their goal. Gaining the right skills / experience / qualifications / evidence base; gaining the right contacts; understanding how to narrate their self-presentation for role / company / PG opportunities; how to set up a business. | By making this a distinct stage, these positioning activities are distinguished from those that occur within the Explore phase. Cues students to the need to compile a portfolio of evidence appropriate to the target audience. Corresponds to the 'Plan' stage of CRQ. Speaks to the need to accrue social and cultural capital. |
| Apply | The process of applying for an opportunity and the associated recruitment and selection processes | Separates the recruitment and selection process from the preparatory 'positioning' activities which need to be put in place before hand. |

Table 6.1 Explanation of each element of the Huddersfield Model

*Project Outcomes*

Feedback was gained on the Huddersfield model from key stakeholders: the Academic adviser, SU Sabbatical Officers, the CES, the GPA team and, subsequently, School-based academic employability leads. Feedback across the board was positive. The SU, for instance, really liked that the circle showed that students could go through the cycle several times and that it allowed for movement in both directions. They described it as 'mobile' 'flexible,' 'relatable,' and 'intuitive'. Staff valued the way that it included those in work, fitted with employer recruitment and selection practices, and supported an iterative approach to career learning based on reflection. The adoption of the new Huddersfield model concluded the developmental phase of the project and signalled the start of the implementation phase.

Having adopted our new Career Planning model our focus has moved from inception to institutional engagement. Currently, implementation is occurring at five levels.

**Level I: informational infrastructure.** Making the model available across the university, accessible to students and highly visible is a pre-requisite for effective engagement. To this end the model has been added to the Careers Service webpages, in a dedicated section on career planning: https://students.hud.ac.uk/opportunities/careers/career-planning/

**Level 2: Engaging academics.** In September 2023, the Planning team added CRQ survey results to the University's main staff data dashboard, along with information on Graduate Outcomes, etc., providing in-depth, real-time data at a course and school level to all academics. The Careers Service has capitalised on this by including CRQ data at a school and course level in the annual planning documents (School Enterprise and Employability Plans) created by Careers Consultants. Furthermore, course teams are encouraged to reflect on CRQ data and labour market information and discuss them with their Careers Consultant as part of Registry quality assurance processes such as Subject Review and Annual Evaluation.

**Level 3: Supporting resources.** To enable students to use the Career Planning model we have created over 40 research-informed, self-help guides addressing all stages of the career planning process. These address topics as diverse as managing mistakes, coping with imposter syndrome and making your own luck. Each Guide is completely stand-alone, meaning that students can pick and mix those that best address their situation. The guides have been mapped to each of the stages and a master list is also available as an alphabetically arranged library on the Careers Service website.

**Level 4: Undergraduate career development learning.** Since 2023/24, we have included the Career Planning model as a key part of the Global Professional Award Programme (GPA). The GPA addresses Wellbeing, Employability and Enterprise and is taught by a dedicated team based in the Careers Service. Importantly, because this is timetabled into the curriculum for most undergraduate degrees, we have been able to share the Career Planning model with thousands of students. In addition, the Careers Service has tested approaches to engaging students in course specific discussions, where the model has proved an effective aid to classroom discussion, individual reflection and personal action as can be seen in the Childhood Studies case study described in more detail elsewhere in this publication.

**Level 5: PGR processes.** Working in partnership, the Careers Service, the Graduate School, PGR student representatives, Registry, the Student Communication and Engagement Team and the Strategic Teaching and Development Team have devised a survey tool with a bespoke set of CRQ statements tailored to PhD options. By completing the survey, students are automatically emailed a package of tailored advice, weblinks and self-help guides. From August 2024, students are required to undertake the survey and discuss the results with their supervisor in preparation for their year two Progression Monitoring Meeting. This approach, which you can read about in more detail in the case study elsewhere in this publication, is designed to deliver a consistent and scalable, low-cost intervention which complements the wider approach to skills training in the Graduate School.

**Level 6: Professional development.** Working with the University's International Centre for Career Development, we are planning to pilot staff training sessions about employability for academics. These sessions will make links between the underpinning theory base of employability and establish common ground with the broader academic endeavor of universities. They are intended to prepare the ground for the course specific analysis and advice by Careers Consultants that supports the quality assurance Registry processes. Moreover, these sessions will offer an opportunity to promote our Career Planning model and invite academics to consider how their students can engage with it and the self-help guides.

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