7. Using Career Readiness to support group career guidance

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Introduction

Group careers guidance is becoming a prominent topic of discussion within Higher Education (HE) careers and employability services. There is currently limited research on the delivery and impact of group careers guidance work within HE – an area of research which the University of Leeds is contributing to, using careers readiness (CR) data and language to support student progression.

This case study will provide an overview of the strategic use of CR to augment careers guidance provision at scale, at a large Russell Group institution.

Discover how the University of Leeds Careers Service embarked on a robust pilot of group careers guidance, driven by a vision to adapt one-to-one career guidance expertise to small group settings and to bolster service capacity. Over a six-week period in the 2023/24 Semester 1, the pilot reached a diverse range of students, offering insights into its efficacy, the usefulness of CR targeted interventions of this nature, and its potential within HE. After a successful pilot, group career guidance is now business-as-usual across the service, with CR pivotal to ongoing delivery and evolution.

Cultivating the Foundations for Group Careers Guidance

Defining Group Careers Guidance

At its core, 'group careers guidance' involves the application of techniques typically associated with one-to-one career guidance, such as contracting, exploration and reflection, in a small group setting. Group careers guidance creates a space for students to discuss and explore their career ideas, facilitated by experienced career practitioners in a semi-sheltered social environment. Groups can be either homogeneous or heterogeneous, with a students' motivation to engage being a key parameter.

Taking inspiration from group counseling, the Group Integrative Narrative Approach (GINA) (Meldrum, 2017) is recognised as a blueprint for careers professionals looking to implement group careers guidance. The GINA model is based around GROW coaching models (Whitmore, 2002; Yates, 2014) and person-centered counselling techniques (Rogers, 1961). Meldrum's (2017) pilot of group careers guidance with secondary school students (age 16-17) in Scotland suggested the huge potential of this approach, should guidance practitioners be curious to innovate – an invitation which the University of Leeds was keen to accept and apply to a HE context.

Pilot Overview

In Semester 1 of 2023/24, a six-week, pilot of extra-curricular group careers guidance was conducted, engaging 121 students across 23 sessions. Groups were attended by 5.2 students on average, and each 1-hour session was in-person. This approach represented a 160% increase in guidance capacity compared to traditional 30-minute one-to-one appointments. Figure 7.1, below, provides an overview of the student demographics who engaged with the pilot.
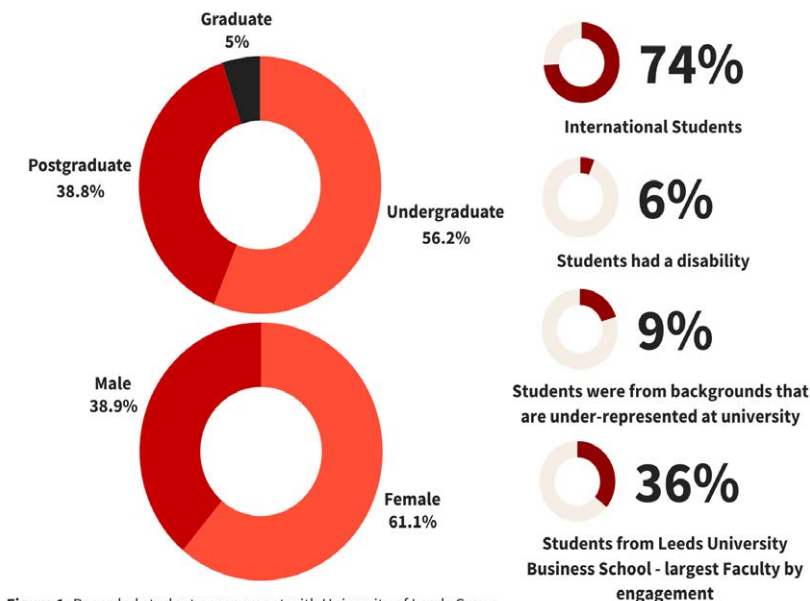
Figure 1: Recorded student engagement with University of Leeds Group Careers Guidance Pilot (October to November 2023). 121 students.

Figure 7.1: Recorded student engagement

Each session was facilitated by an experienced careers practitioner and supported by a colleague; sessions doubling up as CPD opportunities for aspiring guidance practitioners and encouraging cross-service collaboration. Pilot objectives:

1. To ease the pressure and demand for one-to-one guidance appointments during 'peak', scaling up provision.
2. To offer a new, comfortable way for students to engage with the Careers Service. Creating opportunities for students to share plans, ideas, and considerations with their peers in a supportive environment (peers careers learning) and engage in collaborative problem solving.
3. To increase the proportion of students who are either thinking, or developing, in their Career Readiness.

During Semester 1 there is always a high demand for one-to-one guidance appointments. Introducing group guidance appointments helped to meet

this demand, recognising that many students could benefit by increasing their confidence in their ability and knowledge on how to move forward with their career planning. It was also acknowledged that students may feel solidarity in the presence of their peers, at the same stage of CR. In our experience, students can sometimes benefit from a precursor to a one-to-one appointment to help frame their career thinking, which could be a group session.

Career Readiness Language to Target Engagement
CR was identified as a strategic dataset when planning the group careers guidance pilot, helping to target sessions to specific student groups, encouraging attendance, ownership, and a sense of belonging among participants. Our Careers Service has been utilising CR data and language since it was pioneered at the University of Leeds in 2012.

After a series of student focus groups, it was agreed that group careers guidance would be locally marketed as 'Group Careers Support'. CR readiness statements and categories were then used to theme sessions. Students were able to book onto whichever session felt most appropriate for their current stage of career thinking, via a CRM platform. The two themes/titles communicated to students were:

a) 'Group Careers Support - I have *some ideas about my career, and I am ready to start planning*', or
b) '*Group Careers Support - I have no career ideas yet but want to start thinking.*'

Use of CR language helped the service to engage students who may not be at a significant career decision point, but who are ready to make progress, and who would benefit most at the start of the academic year. The scheduling of sessions, across October and November, provided students with ample time to develop their career thinking, book onto further support as required (e.g., skills workshops, a mentoring scheme), and set actions in motion to meet application deadlines.

Listening to the feelings and career experiences of your peers can have a positive impact on your confidence. A theme across all sessions were those 'lightbulb moments', with students realising that they were

not alone in their stage of career readiness. Referring to CR language in session titles, when advertising group career guidance in newsletters or social media, and within sessions themselves, helping to normalise the complexity of career development journeys. Another piece of feedback was that students enjoyed and felt comfortable attending sessions themed by CR, as their peers understood them – they felt validated in their career thinking, their worries, concerns and aspirations.

We anticipated that group careers support sessions might be popular with international students. Subsequently, we planned three bespoke sessions for international students, also themed using CR language.

CR data collected during the registration process played a pivotal role in advertising the group career guidance interventions. Although sessions were open to all student groups, targeted emails were sent to all first-year students who had identified themselves as being in the two CR categories. CR data, integrated into the services' CRM, was integral in allowing us to target promotions to first-year students who had the potential to benefit most from the sessions. To ease the pressure and demand for one-to-one guidance appointments, a strategic decision was made that first-year students were only able to book onto group careers guidance during the pilot.

Career Readiness to Tailor Delivery
Group career guidance sessions were themed around two CR categories: 'No Idea' and 'Some Ideas'. Topics, activities, and discussions were tailored to align with the career readiness of the students attending each session. Mirroring one-to-one appointments, students were empowered to propose and co-design areas of focus during the contracting phase of each session. Moreover, students co-created guidelines for how group members treat one another and how confidentiality is maintained. Fostering cohesion is a key predictor of outcomes in group guidance, as it is in group therapy (Burlingame et al., 2018).

Careers practitioners recognised that CR stage was an influence in how the student groups selected topics of discussion, and that CR was a factor which shaped the 'texture' of each session e.g., the delivery format, outcomes and content of sessions. CR language and open questions, themed around CR, were used with students throughout each session.

Within 'No Idea' themed group guidance, topics of focus included:

- Developing self-awareness
- Identifying strengths
- Understanding values
- Finding work experience
- Key skills which employers are looking for

Within 'Some Ideas' themed group guidance, topics of focus included:

- Bouncing back after job application rejections
- Networking and making connections with industry professionals
- Placement application strategies
- Transitioning into a graduate job
- Specific industry questions e.g., career paths within finance

Across both themes of group guidance interventions, students were encouraged to action-plan, reflect, summarise discussion points, and signposted to the full menu of careers services available.

A resource box was created for use in each session with a printed copy of the contract and session structure, along with activities that could be used within the session. These activities were not compulsory, but to use if beneficial to the students and included flashcards on resilience and growth mindset. These activities were curated around CR, for example, within 'No Idea' sessions, activities related to identifying values and strengths.

Evaluation – Measuring Success
The pilot's success was evaluated through confidence gain data from students, attendance data, and qualitative feedback from both students and Careers Consultants.

Students were asked 'How confident do you feel progressing your career ideas? Rate from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest)' at both the start, and at the end, of each session. Student career confidence increased within all 23 sessions, indicating a positive impact of attending a session on a students' career thinking.

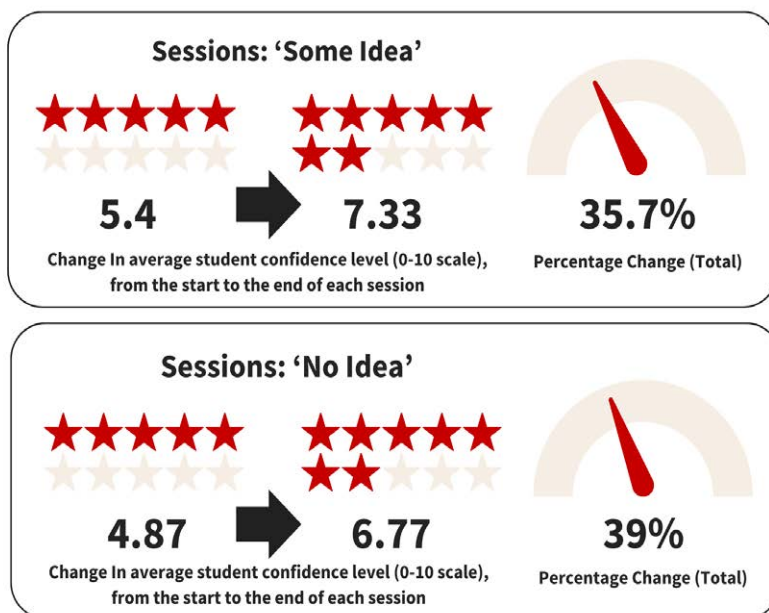Figure 7.2 below visually represents average student confidence change, by CR theme, across all 23 sessions:

Sessions: 'Some Idea'

5.4 ➡ 7.33

Change In average student confidence level (0-10 scale), from the start to the end of each session

35.7%

Percentage Change (Total)

Sessions: 'No Idea'

4.87 ➡ 6.77

Change In average student confidence level (0-10 scale), from the start to the end of each session

39%

Percentage Change (Total)

Figure 2: Recorded student confidence data, University of Leeds Group Careers Guidance Pilot (October to November 2023). 121 students.

Figure 7.2: Recorded student confidence data

Four weeks post-session, students were surveyed to track the career actions they had taken. Actions included applying for opportunities, improving their CV, booking one-to-one guidance and attending career events.

After the 2024/25 registration, we intend to compare students' CR statements with those from the previous year to measure progress and learning gain. At the time of writing this case study, comparative data was not yet collected.

Feedback from students:

> *"Feeling like you are not the only person with doubts and concerns about your career is so important! My favourite part was just having these open discussions with the other students and sharing*

helpful tips and advice on books to read or websites to visit when you are feeling stuck."

"Sometimes it is just nice hearing what other people are thinking too which helps with personal overwhelm...listening and sharing ideas with other people was also motivating."

Feedback from careers practitioners:

"I was originally wondering how I might facilitate potentially wide-ranging participant needs but, as it was, with each group session, we found much overlap in queries and the variety of questions made the discussions dynamic, stimulating and fast-moving."

"...once underway, the students can learn from each other's experiences or, if they don't have much in the way of experience, ideas as to how others in the group might tackle the problems they face; so, the sharing of ideas."

Future Direction

A key conclusion from the pilot was that use of CR language and data helped target group career guidance, structure sessions, and enhance the experience and potential learning gain of students. Students with similar CR levels positively engaged in sessions together, supporting their career development. However, it is recommended to identify additional commonalities, alongside CR stage, such as year of study and faculty, in future sessions to further strengthen student connectedness and career thinking.

During the pilot, separate sessions for international students were successful, with strong interest observed from this group. Group career guidance offers an exciting opportunity to tailor support to international students, who face complex career decisions and unique challenges.

There is potential for group career guidance to support distinct student groups' employability and self-efficacy, informed by CR, to help close progression gaps. These groups could include care-experienced

and estranged students, under-represented students, students with a disability, and mature students.

Tailored icebreakers could be useful for building cohesion within group career guidance. More work is also recommended to explore how HE students respond to online, versus face-to-face, group careers guidance.

Strategic Toolkit

Implementing group careers guidance, rolled out using CR data and language, can significantly benefit both students and career services. Sessions provide a scalable way to offer guidance interventions, foster a sense of community, and help students develop their career readiness with peer support.

This toolkit provides a structured approach for senior management to introduce and refine group careers guidance within their institutions:

Initial Planning

- Consider conducting initial surveys and/or focus groups, to understand student preferences and the demand for group careers guidance.
- Determine which student demographics, or CR stages, would benefit most from group guidance, and at which point in their student journey.
- Agree on the language used to describe group guidance to student audiences, considering use of CR language. Test different terminologies with student focus groups to find the most engaging and clear language. Develop a glossary of terms related to career guidance for consistency in communication.
- Is there an opportunity to deliver group guidance within your curriculum, or would this sit best in your extracurricular space?
- Consider starting with a pilot and review. Collect detailed feedback during the pilot to refine and evaluate.
- Explore and agree the session themes, this could be based on CR stages. For example:

- • "I have no career ideas yet, but I want to start thinking"
  - • "I have some ideas about my career, and I am ready to start planning"
- Confirm marketing and communications for the sessions, including use of a CRM to manage bookings.
- 5 to 6 students represent an ideal group size. Experiment with different group sizes to find the optimal number at your university.
- Explore and agree whether students are to access sessions as stand-alone, or as a series.
- Consider which mode students might prefer online, face-to-face, hybrid.
- Consider the length of sessions, e.g., 1-hour or longer.

Resourcing Group Guidance

- Develop a staffing workload plan, considering who could support the delivery.
- Consider practitioner training needs, and their CPD journey.
- Designate a project manager to oversee the implementation, design, organisation and continuous improvement of group guidance sessions.

Group Guidance in Practice

- Establish clear guidelines and expectations for both facilitators and students at the beginning of sessions.
- Consider if any activities or resources are required, e.g., career coaching cards.
- Ensure the sessions are accessible to all students.
- Consider how to ensure that all students feel heard, supported and comfortable engaging with the session.

Evaluation

- Organise debrief sessions for practitioners to share experiences and improve practices.
- Implement real-time feedback tools (e.g., digital polls) during sessions to gauge immediate reactions.
- Develop metrics to measure effectiveness, such as student satisfaction, confidence change, career action completion, and longer-term career outcomes.
- Use follow-up surveys to track the impact of sessions on students' career development.
- Consider undertaking a comparative analysis of CR data, to measure the student learning gain.

Figure 7.3: Photo of group career guidance

References

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