

## 8. Socialising Career Readiness with students and tutors to enhance engagement

*Oliver Laity*

Heine (2023) states that developing career readiness in an individual not only includes developing new skills, creating goals and preparing for a career, but that it should also place emphasis on how students should make the most of opportunities to engage with employers at careers fairs and recruitment events. This will enable students to better understand what employers are looking for when they are making hiring decisions. McCarron (2023), when outlining what a career readiness model could entail, referred to the use of reflection, particularly when advising students to reflect on how well prepared they are for life after university. The model proposes using the concepts of exploration, development and application, to enable students to self-evaluate their preparedness and then to identify their next steps, including accessing career development resources.

At the University of Exeter, we are attempting to achieve student self-awareness, self-evaluation, and bespoke engagement with services based on the Careers Registration, Career Readiness model. To achieve our mission of **‘supporting student transition into professional careers & beyond’**, we are using Careers Registration information to achieve, amongst other things:

- Creation of filterable data resources
- ‘Triangulating data’ for maximum targeting and impact

- A transferable framework to measure impact
- Bespoke services at scale
- Informed staff and self-aware students

At Exeter, Careers Registration is structured as follows:

- 8 questions posed to all students at the point of online enrolment each year
- Used as strategic performance indicators
- An intervention tool for the careers service and faculties
- ‘Exit’ survey delivered at Graduation
- Follow up work with recent graduates (internal 6-month survey)
- Filter-able via Widening Participation (WP) markers

### *Student awareness of Careers Registration (‘Decide Plan Compete’)*

One area that sets Exeter apart is that we have reflected student’s self-assessment in terms of their career planning back to them in the form of marketing. We are making students aware of their ‘status’ and therefore their most effective next steps in terms of careers engagement and services.

Ongoing work in this area includes:

- Service ‘labelling’ (i.e. Mentoring as ‘Plan’, Interview Skills as ‘Compete’ etc.)
- Student direct and bespoke emails
- App dashboards
- Decide, Plan and Compete (DPC) one-to-one ‘health checks’ designed and delivered

Each area is addressed in turn below.

### **Service Labelling**

At Exeter we have taken the time to label our services to where they might most effectively sit within Decide, Plan and Compete (see Figures 8.1 and 8.2).



Figure 8.1: The Decide Plan Compete model used at University of Exeter

This follows through into webpages, online resources, signposting and triaging of enquiries so that we ask the correct questions and route enquiries to the most relevant and effective next steps for students.

Promotional videos and student Vlogs have begun to happen to support the concept and will continue into 2024/25 as we encourage students to talk about relevant services and their thought-processes of being in one of those phases. Promotion of DPC includes:

- Animated promotion on TV screens around campus
- Above the line marketing (see Figure 8.3 below)
- Career timelines (see <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/students/careers/research/careerplanning/> and Figure 8.4 below)
- Service promotion through appointments and events.

Activity/Scheme/Resource	Decide	Plan	Compete	Already Secured
Handshake	Y	Y	Y	Y
My Career Zone Digital	Y	Y	Y	Y
Create Your Future	Y			
The Exeter Award	Y	Y	Y	
The Exeter Leaders Award	Y	Y	Y	
Careers Guidance Appointments	Y			
Careers Advice Appointments		Y	Y	
Careers Fairs	Y	Y	Y	
Career Research	Y	Y	Y	
Grand Challenges	Y	Y	Y	Y
Green Consultants		Y	Y	
Aspiring Educators		Y	Y	
Skills Events	Y	Y	Y	Y
Professional Pathways	Y	Y		
Career Mentor Scheme		Y	Y	
Ask An Alum		Y	Y	
Access to Internships (A2I)		Y	Y	
Employer and Alumni Events		Y	Y	
Internships		Y	Y	
Placement and Study Abroad		Y	Y	Y
Enterprise and Student Startups		Y	Y	Y

Figure 8.2: Service labelling according to Decide, Plan, Compete

# WHAT STAGE ARE YOU AT WITH PLANNING YOUR CAREER?

At Registration, as a new or continuing student, you'll have indicated your current level of career planning by picking one of ten statements. The Career Zone aims to equip you to 'Decide', 'Plan' and 'Compete' for opportunities to follow your chosen graduate career path. This 'Career Registration' helps us to define the support you need at your stage of career planning.

## IDENTIFY YOUR CAREER STAGE

### DECIDE


- I'm not ready to start thinking about my career yet
- have no career ideas yet but want to start thinking
- I have some ideas about my career and I am ready to start planning

### PLAN

- I am ready to apply for graduate level/professional opportunities
- I am ready to apply for further study
- I have been applying for opportunities and so far I have not been successful

### COMPETE

- I have a career in mind and intend to gain relevant work experience
- I know what I want to do but I'm not sure how to get there
- I want to spend a year gaining experience



**If you're undecided, that's fine!**  
**Hear from current students to get you started:**

Your time at university will pass by quickly and graduation is right around the corner. It is wise to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the Career Zone, but your time at university is also a marathon not a sprint. So don't be too hard on yourself and try to approach these opportunities with the mindset of 'little and often', rather than trying to do too much all at once

By Katie Bennett

You don't need to have a clear idea of what sort of job you want at this point – it's about building a variety of skills and experiences which will allow you to keep your options open, and will help you to work out what sort of work you enjoy doing.

By Daisy Newbold-Harrop




Figure 8.3: Example of above the line marketing to students incorporating career readiness

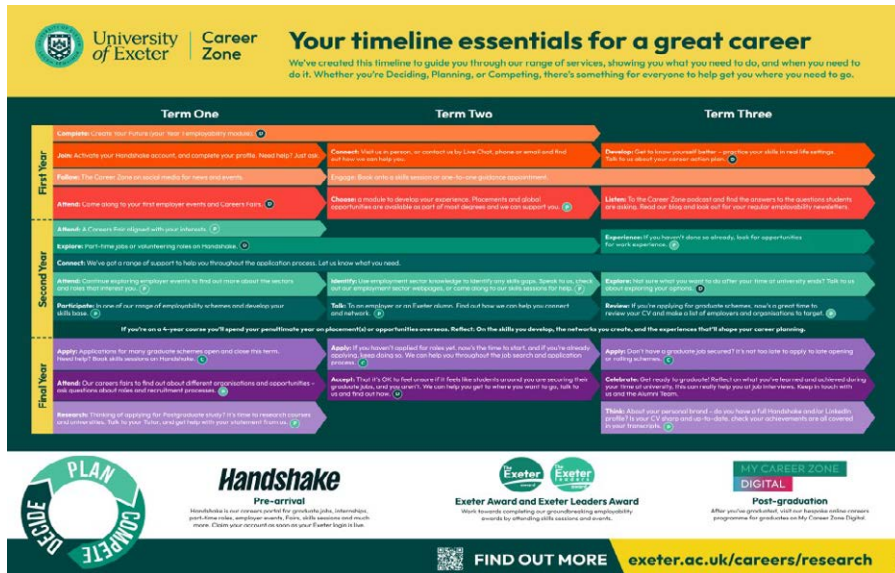


Figure 8.4: Example of careers timetable incorporating career readiness

### Direct and bespoke emails

Subsequent to the Career Registration survey being asked at enrolment, participants are emailed according to their self-assessed planning stage (Q1 of the survey). These emails are tailored according to whether the student is in the Decide, Plan, Compete, or Secured stage.

During the enrolment process these emails are automated and sent automatically through SITS (Exeter’s student information system) once the student has registered. Please see an example email below:

Dear [FirstName],

*Thank you for completing the Careers Planning section of the Registration form. From your response we can see that you are in the “Competing” stage of your career progression.*

*This is a great position to be in, especially if you want to start work or further study soon after you graduate. Given the competitiveness of the job market, we recommend you take advantage of the careers resources available to someone in your position. As a first step*

*we recommend that you visit the following Competing web page, which has been tailored to meet the needs of students who are ready to make applications. After exploring these online resources, we recommend that you visit the Career Zone, or one of its satellites located at the Hubs, for further advice and to book a one-to-one appointment with one of our careers consultants.*

As registration for graduation is governed by a different process, we are not able to send out automated emails via SITS. Instead, emails are sent out via outlook or our careers system.

Grouping students and graduates according to their career planning stage not only allows for the service to target these individuals in terms of email messaging, but also in terms of promotions. During the third term of academic year, 'Deciding' finalists were invited to pick up a free USB stick which contained useful content for someone in their situation. More recently we have used 'decide' and 'plan' alongside a low level of career service engagement to create target lists for campaigns and boot camp activity under the title 'Get Ready to Graduate'.

### **Exeter App and Student Dashboards**

Prior to an app relaunch in 2024, all students had access to their Careers Registration results on the iExeter App. For an idea of what a student saw via this app, please see the images below which display the home page and 'my employability' sections and then the 'my employability' dashboard.



Figure 8.5: iExeter App homepage and navigation to 'my employability' sections

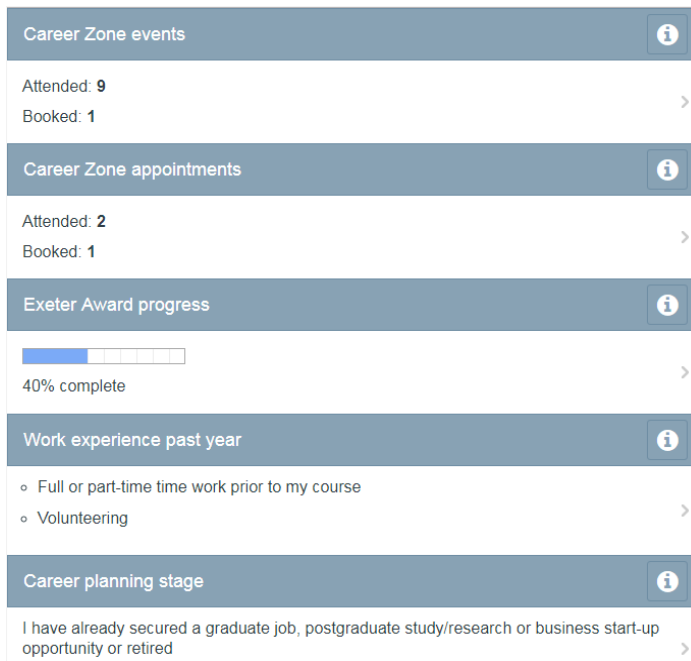


Figure 8.6: Example of the iExeter App 'my employability' dashboard



### **Career ‘health checks’**

Since 2022 we have empowered our student staff to provide tailored careers support to students with Career Health Checks, in conjunction with the ‘Decide’, ‘Plan’ and ‘Compete’ promotional material.

- Our staff offer the Health Check support, which is incentivised with a small prize draw too. We ask what stage students are at with their career planning.
- With the students’ statement added to their online profile within the careers system (Handshake) we are also able to check the career planning stage of students.
- The suggested activities on the health check form will change depending on which career planning stage the student identifies with; these activities correspond to those on the ‘decide’, ‘plan’ and ‘compete’ flyers and other promotional materials such as careers timelines, student staff use these to reinforce the message.
- If the student answers ‘no’ to a question on the form, guidance will appear below to help staff to suggest next steps.
- The student can request a copy of the responses which should give them a good idea of where they are with their career planning and what they should do next.
- At the end of each health check, we encourage the student to check back in a few weeks to review their progress – the form can be overwritten and added to so it’s a good way of tracking progress over the course of the year.

As well as providing peer-to-peer bespoke support and an ‘onward’ action plan, this method of engagement has also contributed over 500 pieces of student feedback per year regarding our services.

### ***Using Careers Registration and careers readiness to boost academic engagement and support***

In order to inspire, inform and motivate academic colleagues into action, we are engaging in ongoing work including:

- Development of tutor dashboards
- Production and dissemination of Careers Data packs and Employability presentations
- Tutor support information and resources

These are addressed in turn below.

### **Tutor dashboard**

All personal tutors have access to the Tutor Dashboard, which allows them to not only monitor their tutees' academic progression, but also their careers progression via the Employability tab. Within this dashboard the personal tutor will be able to see their tutee's latest Careers Registration results, as well as the number of events and appointments they have attended and whether they are enrolled on the Exeter Award. All careers data within this dashboard is updated daily, and therefore will reflect changes following the completing of Careers Registration at graduation sign-up.

This tool should help facilitate careers conversations within personal tutor meetings and make signposting easier.

### **Discipline data packs, Faculty presentations and Power BI dashboards**

During July/August the Careers Information Team compiles discipline data packs/employability presentations for all Faculties. These reports investigate the impacts of engagement and Careers Registration on Graduate Outcomes scores. The first Data Packs are issued in August; revised Data Packs are released in October and include the latest Careers Registration enrolment data.

On a termly basis, the team attends Faculty employability meetings to present a rolling schedule of data, invite discussion and suggest recommended interventions. Based on feedback received, the team are shortening the presentations and building dashboards to present 'real time' data filters and evolving the meeting agenda to invite greater discussion about interventions and recommendations.

Careers Registration forms a significant part of departmental KPI reporting, is sponsored and supported both by the Director of Education

and Student Services and the DVC for Education, and, as described above, has been used in reporting which is increasingly informing the development of Faculty employability and engagement strategies.

### **Personal tutor support and resources**

Emails are sent to personal tutors highlighting the support and resources available to help them proactively engage with their tutees regarding employability and careers. Below is an example email linking data to dashboarding solutions mentioned above with a reminder to contact graduates at potential risk of un/under employment:

*In November last year we sent you an email informing you of your tutees self-reported career planning stage and their work experience risk level. We hope you found this information of value and it helped shape any employability/careers conversations you were having with your personal tutees.*

*The mechanism we used to collect this data (Careers Registration) at enrolment has recently been replicated with graduation sign-up, and you can see the results from your personal tutees below. Collecting this data at graduation, as well as enrolment, allows us to compare an individual student's results to see how they have progressed in their final year at Exeter. Additionally it allows us to target those finalists that might require additional support, with specific resources and help.*

*We thought it would be useful to share this with you so that you have an understanding of how your tutees were feeling going into graduation, and which ones of them could be 'at risk' of not finding graduate level employment or further study. If you don't see one of your tutees in the below list, this is because they are either not attending graduation or decided not to complete the survey.*

*We appreciate it can be difficult to stay in touch with graduates, but should you want to reach out to your 'at risk' tutees this could prove invaluable given their situation. A range of resources have*

*been created to assist tutors and academic colleagues in order to facilitate these sorts of conversations with students and these can be found here. Alternatively you may be aware of discipline specific opportunities which could be useful to your tutees.*

*If you wish to request more information or have any questions at all, please reply to this email and my team will be happy to help. We recognise this is a new resource and would be interested to hear of your experiences in using this information and receive any feedback.*

*Kind regards,  
The Career Zone Team.*

Your Tutees' Career Planning Information			
Student ID	Student Name	Career Planning Stage	Work Experience Risk Level*
123456789	Student 1	Applying/Competing	Low
234567891	Student 2	Planning	Low
345678912	Student 3	Planning	Low
456789123	Student 4	Applying/Competing	Low
567891234	Student 5	Planning	Low
678912345	Student 6	Applying/Competing	High

Table 8.1: Example 'Your Tutees' Career planning information' table included in email to tutors

*In the 'Career Zone' dashboard, you will be able to view an overview of a student's employability progress. The dashboard will display the number of appointments and events the student has attended, as well as their progression through the Exeter Award.*

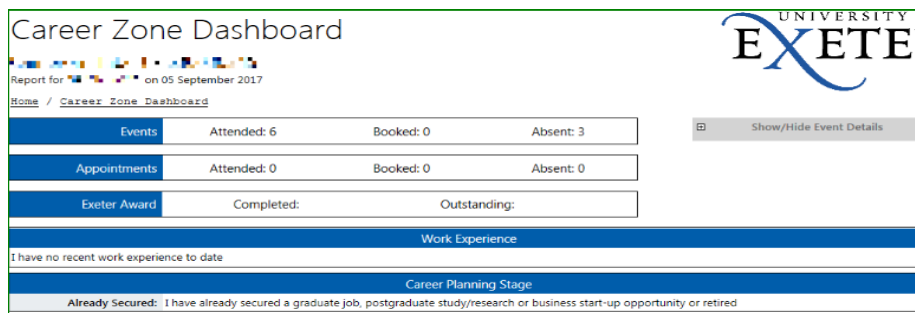


Figure 8.7: Example Career Zone Dashboard included in email to tutors

### *The role for Careers Registration in measuring the impact of interventions*

Careers Registration data has been used at Exeter as part of a Theory of change model, employing the methods contained within Contribution Analysis.

Contribution analysis (Mayne 2012, 2019) assesses the overall contribution of an intervention to the observed results. It does this through an iterative and step by step process to verify a theory of change, incorporating new evidence that examine the ‘causal mechanisms’ at play. Thus, providing a ‘logic chain’ that sequences the short-, medium- and long-term impacts of an activity. In this case, the analysis seeks to shine a light on the contribution of the University of Exeter’s Global Leaders Experience scheme to influence (a) students career preparedness/employability and (b) actual employment outcomes.

Contribution analysis is a theory-based method, which it has been argued is a good way to evaluate interventions in the social world, which are complex and highly influenced by the context in which they are situated (Harrison & Waller, 2017). It can provide causal explanations when a counterfactual or control group is not possible and when the number of participants is small. Contribution analysis recognises that the intervention being evaluated is one ingredient in a ‘causal cake’ rather than designed to answer the question ‘X’ causes ‘Y’ (TASO, 2022).

Contribution analysis was used to evaluate the impact of the University of Exeter's Global Leaders Experience scheme (GLE) – an outbound mobility programme designed to provide opportunities for students from widening participation backgrounds to gain valuable international careers experience. The contribution analysis approach involved the development of a theory of change, which was then assessed through the collection of new data, including interviews, focus groups and graduate outcomes data.



Figure 8.8: Schematic of Theory of Change developed for Global Leaders Experience

The evaluation provided evidence for the plausibility of the theory of change, indicating that the GLE scheme had a transformational impact on participants confidence, skills and career preparation whilst providing tangible experiences that were valuable in securing recruitment opportunities. There was some indicative evidence that GLE participants were more likely to be in skilled graduate roles 6 months and 15 months after graduation.

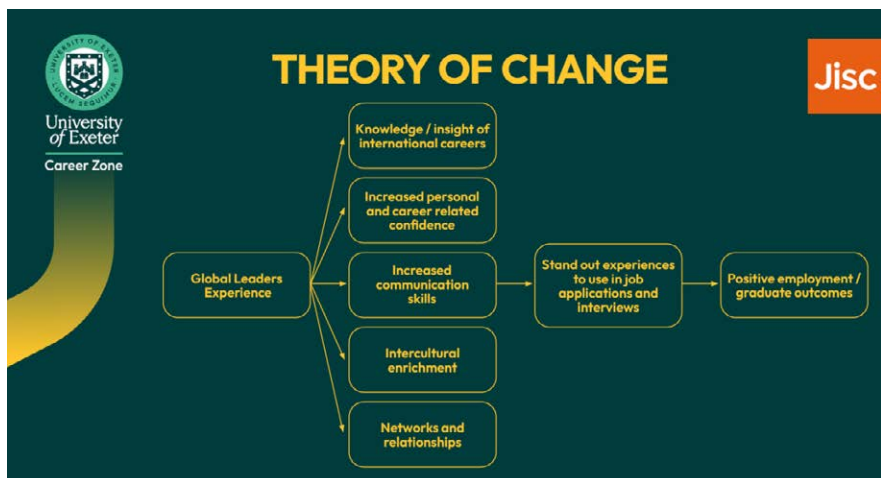


Figure 8.9: Evidence of impact gathered from participants

This evaluation provides insight into the efficacy of outbound mobility programmes to support the progression of students from widening participation backgrounds. It also provides an applied case study of contribution analysis as an evaluation method for employability interventions, which may be of interest to other providers who seek to evaluate similar interventions where the intervention to outcomes relationships is complex, where there are small numbers of participants, and where it is not practicable to form a comparison group.

In collaboration with TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education), the University of Exeter recently evaluated its own Access to Internships (A2i) scheme - an internships scheme specifically for students who meet widening participation criteria. It showed that A2i and other university internships were positively correlated with good graduate outcomes. Interns were statistically more likely to be in employment or further study at 6 and 15 months and more likely to receive a positive graduate outcome (as measured by the graduate outcomes survey) than a comparator group. Survey and interviews with participating students also showed that A2i internships provided increases in career related knowledge, confidence and skills whilst providing tangible experiences for students to draw from during the recruitment process.

There are still many elements to consider when attempting to identify impact that is isolated from other factors. In a Prospects Luminate article (Braide et al., 2024) we explain more about these elements, such as: providing true additional value; running control group research to identify real differences; and elements of ‘deadweight’ activity which need to be fully thought through, in terms of project viability. Further methodological thinking is certainly required around the areas of self-reported evidence and assessment, and the theory of contribution analysis in order to understand and hopefully ‘master’ this approach into the future.

### *Summary thoughts*

There have been huge benefits of our approach to Careers Registration and some drawbacks.

Student self-awareness is still low; although labelling of services and targeted messaging does work, students will still need to be guided towards the correct resources rather than know exactly what to do next. Integration into tutoring and digital services will help but has taken a backward step since COVID and needs re-introduction.

The overlap between DPC and student timelines has helped us to do something we thought would be contradictory – use career readiness as a tool to be prescriptive rather than allow student-led choice. It has become clear since the pandemic that students want to be directed more than before. Feedback such as ‘I didn’t know you offered these services’ has been tempered by illustrating when students should be engaging and with what, directing enquiries through the Career Zone team and triaging them towards a bespoke next step or action plan based on need and planning stage. The ultimate result of us being clearer and more directive was that Exeter was named 4<sup>th</sup> best career service in the UK by student-review, according to Student Crowd.

The opportunity cost of our customer-focussed approach has been that we are not as advanced with our dashboard work, although it would certainly help with behind-the-scenes analysis and therefore planning.



### Further plans

At Exeter we are now looking in the direction of curriculum integration, further tutor support and academic familiarisation (including a new role of ‘pastoral mentors’), automation of student awareness and integration with self-assessed skills acquisition. Specific actions will include:

- Careers staff survey; surveyed about their readiness to engage with careers registration data.
  - Enabling us to produce further recommendations for using careers registration data including for student engagement, use of dashboards, and training for careers staff.
- Sharing results; regular dissemination and strategic engagement activities.
  - Which may include an event aimed at Planning officers, Careers staff and institutional stakeholders.
- Full integration into the new Student app – ‘MyExeter’

### References

Braide, S., Laity, O., Fawell, J., & Sandercock, K. (2024, July). Evaluating a Global Leaders scheme for widening participation students. *Prospects Luminare*. <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/evaluating-a-global-leaders-scheme-for-widening-participation-students>

Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2017). Evaluating outreach activities: overcoming challenges through a realist ‘small steps’ approach. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 21(2-3), 81-87.

Heine, A. (2023, June 3). Career Readiness: What it is and why it’s important. *Indeed*. <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/career-readiness>

Mayne, J. (2012). Contribution analysis: Coming of age? *Evaluation*, 18(3), 270–280.

Mayne, J. (2019). Revisiting contribution analysis. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 34(2), 171–191.

McCarron, H., & Strudwick, K. (2023). Changing mindsets - embedding employability in the curriculum through the Careers Education Hub and Careers Readiness. *Journal of Higher Education Research*, 6 (2). IMPact. <https://bpb-euw2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/dist/e/8583/files/2023/08/V62-3.-Changing-Mindsets-15.06.23.pdf>

TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education). (2022). *Impact evaluation with small cohorts: Methodology guidance*. [https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/TASO-Report-Impact-evaluation-with-small-cohorts\\_methodology-guidance\\_Secured-1.pdf](https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/TASO-Report-Impact-evaluation-with-small-cohorts_methodology-guidance_Secured-1.pdf)