

SECTION 4: CAREER READINESS AND INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY

13. Enabling our Student Opportunities and Futures Strategy: developing and embedding new performance indicators and aligning to corporate KPIs

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Introduction

One of the historic challenges facing those working to support student employability relates to responsibility: Who is responsible for developing the strategic direction? Who is responsible for directing enabling activities? Who is responsible for providing direct support to the students? Often the answer to each of these questions has been ‘Careers Service Teams’. Consequently, student employability has been associated primarily with extra-curricular activities, supported beyond the curriculum. This chapter shares the strategic approach we have taken at the University of Leeds to work in partnership to share responsibility for supporting student futures. Our approach speaks to the research-led agenda prevalent with the Russell Group of universities, is closely framed by a new University Strategy (Universal Values, Global Change 2020-2030) and a major cross-institution curriculum change programme (Curriculum Redefined): working in partnership within this context has influenced changes to our strategic vision and the development of new institutional Key Performance Indicators and has led to new initiatives

designed to empower all educators to support student futures – within and without the curriculum.

A partnership approach

The University's new strategy and the launch of our curriculum change programme 'Curriculum Redefined' provided an opportunity to revisit our approach to supporting student employability. The 'Surfacing Skills' initiative, led by members of the Student Careers Team, had been instigated shortly before these new strategies/projects were introduced and the team took this opportunity to appoint an Academic Lead for Surfacing Skills. The lead had a background in researching employability within her discipline area (Music) and her research-led approach meant that she became an important bridge between the professional services team and the academic community. In particular, she provided insights into the concerns and priorities of academic educators when developing new courses, emphasising the focus on discipline knowledge and workload implications of innovation and creativity; the team worked to develop a series of resources and 'How To' guides that would make the process as straightforward as possible and as a result they gained a strong reputation for being supportive, pragmatic and collaborative, enabling discussions of skills that were framed by the discipline and therefore relevant to both developing subject knowledge and employability skills.

The Academic Lead joined the then University Employability Group spearheading a renewed vision for student employability. Collaborating with the Head of Student Careers they demonstrated that leadership transcended any specific part of the university. Through workshops involving stakeholders (staff, students, external partners) a refreshed vision for student employability emerged. This vision was then shared for consultation more widely; here, the position of the Employability Group within the deliberative structures was important; it reported 'up' into the Taught Student Education Board, which meant that it was discussed at the highest strategic level in relation to the other strategic priorities, whilst also feeding 'down' to academic and professional services colleagues within Faculties and Schools who were closer to the 'on the ground' activities.

This wide consultation was purposeful and necessary if we were going to succeed in changing the institutional approach to support student employability. The language of the strategy shifted to a focus on ‘Student Opportunities and Futures’ with a clear mission of “Empowering a meaningful and healthy attitude to their futures for all our students”. We established four Enabling Themes:

1. *A Professional Literacy Approach to Curriculum Design and Delivery*

Being professionally literate involves an individual’s ability to understand, define and reflect upon what success means to them and to then take personal responsibility for identifying the attributes, skills and behaviours they wish to develop. We will support them to understand the relevance and connection of their curriculum experience to that of the working world and make appropriate decisions to enable them to embark on a successful career.

2. *Support, Expertise and Collaboration*

We will provide a diverse range of expert information, advice and guidance to all students and graduates through a range of events, support meetings and resources. We will work in partnership with colleagues across the university, as well as with alumni, employers and other Higher Education institutions. We will ensure that colleagues have the right training and support to deliver the strategy.

3. *Local, National and Global Opportunities*

We will provide opportunities for students to build awareness of the ways in which they can make a difference and develop as global citizens. We will provide opportunities for students to gain an international perspective overseas, at Leeds and through online activities, and work with external employers/partners to enhance mutually beneficial opportunities such as internships, volunteering and graduate jobs. We will support students to develop their social capital through building professional relationships and networks.

4. *Enterprise*

Students can access enterprise and entrepreneurial opportunities across the university, and we will provide an ecosystem for enterprise learning both within and beyond the curriculum. All students and graduates (up to 7 years post-graduation) will be able to access entrepreneurial support through SPARK in order to establish their own start-up opportunities

The ambition of the Student Opportunities and Futures strategy, its co-creation, and the way in which it shapes our enabling activities are informed by research and a recognition that successful outcomes for students will rely on a sense of shared responsibility which makes the most of the expertise and knowledge of different stakeholders:

“...all stakeholders play their part in creating an ethical, sustainable and culturally enriching ecosystem, but with more equitable cultural capital, particularly for those emerging as novice professionals from higher education. Here we arrive at an expanded employability narrative: an employability ecosystem...with students at the centre. Paradoxically, we envision this centre to be more decentered to allow for greater diversity of experience, greater differentiation of identities, and greater awareness of the power of excluding dominant narratives (Burland et al., 2022).

The shift in tone and focus of the strategy creates interesting challenges, since it demands a move away from a metric-driven approach to measuring student outcomes towards a more student-centred focus, which responds to their personal lived experiences and desired futures. Being flexible about the times, spaces and places for students to reflect is therefore critical, and cannot only happen in a silo, dependent upon a student signing up for an extra-curricular career intervention, for example.

Understanding what this shift might mean for students was also vital. Key insights into student motivations and needs were provided by a team of student interns who developed a student-facing version of our strategy. We worked in partnership with them to understand how they wish to receive information and what prompts them to engage with information.

Their insights confirmed that a student-centred approach was the right one; they wanted to feel that available support and opportunities were targeted/personalised, meaningful, relevant and inspired action. We have shared their insights (alongside the student-version of the strategy and the supporting film) with colleagues with the aim to ensure that all messages to students follow their guidelines.

As a summary of where we are now in the development and delivery of our strategy, we co-lead the new Student Opportunities and Futures Strategy Implementation Group, ensuring that different perspectives, approaches, opportunities and audiences are heard and represented, within and beyond the curriculum. The group's wide-ranging membership, including academic, professional services, and student representation from across the university emphasises the shared responsibility of supporting Student Futures. Establishing how to realise our ambition more fully across the university ecosystem was more challenging and relied on the development of key data sets to stimulate conversation and support local decision-making.

Using Career Readiness data to support decision-making

As the University was in the process of developing the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the 2020-2030 Strategy, a mapping exercise was undertaken to examine the extent to which the metrics used previously (specifically those which focused on the level of graduate employment and numbers of students in Further Study) aligned with principles the institution had established for setting the new KPIs (which included how we helped students to 'make a difference in the world' and 'develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed and make a positive impact in the world' (University Strategy, 2020-2030)). The previous metrics did not meet the required threshold and alternatives were explored. At this point, the Graduate Voice questions were considered and deemed to meet the required principles in full. Therefore, the KPI changed to the three Graduate Voice questions, 'Graduates feel their work is meaningful, important, uses what they have learned and fits with future plans', and was adopted in 2022.

This approach aligned strongly with the mission of our strategy and brought into focus the need to more directly help students to reflect on their future plans, the kinds of work that would be meaningful for them, and to recognise the skills and knowledge being developed through their programmes. Equally importantly, the new KPI provided a mandate and institutional support for our approach and the work already in progress (particularly the Surfacing Skills project). However, Graduate Outcomes data, gathered 15 months after graduation, proved relatively unhelpful for monitoring and planning strategic efforts during a student's university journey. To address this, we sought additional real-time data, accessible to various stakeholders, reinforcing our distributed model of responsibility.

Using strategy to develop Performance Indicators

A sub-group of the Student Opportunities and Futures Strategy Implementation Group was established to identify which of our available indicators would provide an overall view of our performance in implementing the strategy. The group led by the Student Careers Student Opportunity Insights and Engagement Manager consisted of individuals representing different elements of the Student Futures Ecosystem – those working within the curriculum (including academic and professional service educators) and in co-/extra-curricular spaces; careers, mentoring, and global opportunities staff; professional services staff responsible for the development of academic and digital skills; and employer and student representation.

Using our four enabling themes as the strategic focus, we identified the range of possible indicators that we could access using university-supported systems (i.e. Career Readiness data, our careers platform MyCareer (and linked third-party systems), the Global Mobility Tool etc.) and gradually whittled the list down to a comprehensive yet manageable list. Work on how to analyse and present the data meaningfully was then undertaken and resulted in a dashboard which provides insights into individual student journeys at scale, measured in a positive or negative state for each of the different data points.

While the dashboard includes indicators relating to numbers of students who access particular kinds of opportunities (e.g. volunteering,

using digital tools or accessing careers counselling, placements/study abroad, accessing mentoring), Career Readiness data is vital for understanding the impact on students. By mapping a student's Career Readiness statement with engagement in support we are now better equipped to identify the impact of the interventions we develop and offer students more of the tailored support they crave – by making suggestions of activities they could try or resources they might access. Activities which embed the use of the Career Readiness statements throughout the year (rather than only at the point of registration) provide additional layers of insight too (see chapter 7).

The dashboard has been deliberately designed (and tested) with a range of stakeholders in mind. Rather than sit within Student Careers teams, it can be used by all educators; it forms part of datasets provided to Schools in their Annual Reviews, and academic and Careers employability leads use the data as they develop their annual action plans. This is central to our distributed approach to supporting Student Futures, which also provides us with opportunities to receive feedback on which other sources of data could be included. Regular review of the dashboard is vital, and it has just been revised, following the same process as when it was developed, to include new sources of data (for example, National Student Survey Question 9). Equally important to the way this work is received by academic colleagues is the fact that the institutional corporate KPI was also reviewed after we received the sector data in 2023; it was clear that the benchmark for the 'skills' question was unachievable within the context of the sector, and so it was refined to a more achievable, yet stretching, goal. This was reassuring for colleagues, and more motivating than what was seen previously to be an unobtainable target.

While supporting students is our priority, this work is also vital for measuring educational gain – enabling us more easily to understand the extent to which students are achieving their, and our, intended learning goals and recognising their developing skills and knowledge (Westerlund & Gaunt, 2022). With the largest data set of Career Readiness data, we are uniquely situated to understand the long-term impact of student experiences and using the insights to target interventions at those who have 'not started thinking' is its enabling superpower.

The ongoing puzzle of curriculum

As we were refining the Performance Indicators at the same time as our curriculum change programme was being launched, it was important to consider the impact of curriculum on Career Readiness; after all, the curriculum is the only place we can be sure we are reaching all students and encouraging them to think about their desired futures. This was, and still is, a sticky problem. It pointed to the need to capture information that could indicate that students were acquiring particular skills or knowledge, or being exposed to learning opportunities or assessments that could help them work towards their future working lives. However, there was no clear way to do this. Therefore, we lobbied for new modules and programmes (being developed as part of Curriculum Redefined) to include distinct articulation of Skills Learning Outcomes; this provided an indicator of the types of skills being developed that could, over time, be incorporated into the dashboard (though this work is still in progress). This could be extended to include types of learning activity (for example, activities that might be considered as experiential learning) or authentic assessment types (e.g. podcasts, project pitches, evaluation reports). Working with the limits of clunky corporate systems is an ongoing challenge, but one we will continue to tackle.

What has worked in our context?

Any strategic development depends on the local context (Elbanna et al., 2020), and our approach's traction has benefited from alignment with the new University Strategy and Curriculum Redefined which shape the activities of all staff. Empowering the Student Futures Ecosystem has been vital for ensuring our activities are meaningful and developing the strategy for Career Readiness Data has been a key vehicle for empowering all educators to engage in this important area of work. Our top tips for working in partnership to enable strategy are:

- Develop a shared, co-created, mission and vision, supported and amplified by student engagement

- Align your vision with key university strategies and embedding activities within core curriculum work (e.g. Quality Assurance processes)
- Ensure systemic commitment to working in partnership – model the positive impact of academic-professional services collaboration and complementary knowledge and expertise.
- Actively seek and respond to feedback via meaningful and widespread consultation
- Ensure strategic alignment of data to enabling themes
- Achieve advocacy and reach via formal structures
- Ensure you work with compassion and understanding of the challenges faced by the different educators that work on campus

References

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