

16. The developing role of Career Readiness data in university and service strategy

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The University of Leicester is a socially inclusive, research-intensive institution located in Leicester, a city of 370,000 residents in the East Midlands of the England.

The University was Top 30 ranked in Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 (Grove, 2022) and Gold rated in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023 (Office for Students, 2024). Research strengths include health and medicine, space, heritage and culture, and our education portfolio is organised across three Colleges: Life Sciences; Science and Engineering; and Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities.

Statutory, policy and market forces, coupled with an increasingly diverse student body and changing student behaviours, have initiated a broader purpose to our educational offer, including a push to enhance the development of employability through the curriculum, whilst remaining true to our research inspired traditions.

Seeing into the future

In common with many institutions across the sector, the University of Leicester has a KPI relating to the onward progression outcomes of our students.

Our chosen KPI is the metric used by the regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), to assess the *quality* of students' labour market and other destinations 15 months after graduation. This metric compares the rate of positive outcomes amongst the University's graduates to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) calculated benchmark rate (HESA, 2018). The benchmark rate represents the performance of similar students taking similar courses across the entirety of the English HE sector. A positive progression outcomes rate that is materially above benchmark is classed as outstanding.

From a strategic planning perspective, the big problem with this KPI is the long lag time between interventions and results. This means that any insight that the latest results provide into how interventions may have impacted on the effectiveness of the offer to students is always at least two years out of date. And a lot can happen in in two years!

Overcoming this problem requires a reliable leading indicator - a measure that provides an early signal about where our KPI is heading and whether or not current interventions are helping to shift the dial.

Enter Careers Registration data.

Early adopters of Careers Registration have reported a strong correlation between the career readiness of final year undergraduates and positive progression outcomes at 15 months. In other words, and perhaps not entirely surprisingly, students who report that they feel ready to progress as they come towards the end of their course, are more likely to be in professional employment or further study 15 months after graduation (and vice versa). While not entirely fool proof, the predictive power of Careers Registration data provides strategic planners with a means of "seeing into the future" and, in particular, anticipating how the positive graduate outcomes rate is likely to trend up to two years before the result is confirmed.

At Leicester, where we run the Careers Registration survey at the point of graduation as well as at earlier points in the student lifecycle, we have found that this correlation holds true and this is opening up opportunities to expand the reach and impact of the careers and employability service.

Lessons learned in getting to this point:

- A Careers Registration survey at the point of graduation provides the basis for a reliable leading indicator of positive outcomes at 15 months after graduation and a measure to help assess the impact of interventions to enhance the employability development offer to students. It also generates data that can be used to segment new graduates and differentiate communications and marketing messages
- The biggest cost involved in setting up a Careers Registration survey is securing the buy-in of key professional services stakeholders to deliver a process that generates data for a large, representative sample of students (if not all) across all subject areas. In our case, this meant working with colleagues in Student Records and Digital Services to introduce the survey questions into existing institution-wide processes of online registration and graduation
- It is important to find ways to socialise Careers Registration data with education leaders. The predictive power of the data provides the executive team and education leaders with an early warning system that affords the opportunity to course correct much sooner than they otherwise might. In a context where prospective students place such a high premium on employment prospects when choosing where to study, this is valuable insight. At Leicester we have used measures of career readiness to inform the evaluation of key strategic initiatives, such as the introduction of reflective, skills-focused assessments into UG programmes, and reported these through the education committee structure. We have encouraged education leaders to draw on this evidence to inform the University's TEF submission and to consider the value of Careers Registration data to the articulation and evaluation of educational gains. More recently, we have made the data more widely available across the institution by surfacing it in an online dashboard.

Future-proofing the offer

The employability development offer is the sum total of those learning and support activities that enable students to develop the knowledge, skills, behaviours and experiences they need for future success, which,

for the vast majority, includes managing the transition into fulfilling graduate employment.

In recognition of the pivotal role played by the curriculum and local learning environment, the Director of Careers & Employability at Leicester has:

- Advised the University's Education Committee to hold academic departments accountable for the quality of the onward progression outcomes of their students and to commit to sustaining outstanding progression outcomes in their subject areas, or else to work towards these.
- Consulted with academic departments to ensure that they each have a designated careers and employability lead with responsibility for leading data-informed continuous improvement.
- Reshaped how the careers and employability service works with academic departments by creating a new post of College Business Partner and introducing College Aligned Groups (CAGs) to enable agile deployment of design and delivery expertise.

This is paving the way for Careers Registration data to be used at *subject area level* to inform assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation of the employability development offer, and to target careers and employability service expertise where it is most needed.

Central to this approach are the College Business Partners who have been recruited for their ability to develop and manage relationships, influence and negotiate, and support the use of data to inform problem-solving.

Business Partners work with all academic departments in their designated College to:

- Assist each department's careers and employability lead to navigate the continuous improvement cycle and available data products
- Curate resources for course teams to inform the design, delivery and evaluation of employability development activities and support in a curriculum context

- Negotiate an annual employability partnership agreement (EPA) that documents the careers and employability service contribution to implementation and evaluation of the department's skills and employability action plan

While Careers Registration data is available via dashboard, at Leicester we are seeking to create an environment where data is used effectively. For that reason, College Business Partners are contributing to the design and delivery of training for departmental careers and employability leads in how to make effective use of key data products in performing their role. In other words, the emphasis is on supporting colleagues in academic departments to *apply* the data to the process of continuous improvement, and ensuring that this is being done with a reasonable degree of consistency, rather than assuming that the dashboard will somehow be enough.

If we take the strategic planning aspect of the continuous improvement process, for example, careers and employability leads are being trained in how to use Careers Registration data to:

- Forecast the trajectory of their progression KPI
- Identify equality gaps in career readiness
- Understand their students' career aspirations (e.g. intended next steps, sector preferences) and compare these to onward progression outcomes
- Get a handle on how their students' rates of significant experience compare to those of their peers

In this way, and in combination with other sources of data and insight, it seems much more likely that actions to improve employability development experiences and progression outcomes will be responsive to the needs, aspirations and preferences of current and future students.

Changing with the times

An inevitable consequence of a more data-informed approach across a careers and employability ecosystem that takes in the curriculum as well

as the more traditional territory of careers services is that change will come.

At Leicester, the reshaping of the service and the introduction of College Aligned Groups (CAGs) are resulting in resource and expertise being pulled into areas of activity that go way beyond the repackaging of central workshops for a local audience.

At this point in time, it is conceivable that alongside a more personalised central offer, Leicester's careers and employability service could be routinely deploying staff across academic departments to support:

- The organisation of timetabled opportunities for students to engage with, and be inspired by, employers, alumni and others
- The design and delivery of assessments to enable students to reflect upon their own learning and articulate the technical and transferable skills they are using and developing
- The widening of student access to opportunities for work-related experience including departmental internships and the development of co-curricular and curricular experiences
- The incorporation into academic programmes of assessment methods and learning activities that enable development of the skills, experiences and behaviours needed for future success
- The strengthening of employer and alumni engagement in programme design or delivery
- The channelling of student voice into the continuous improvement process

The logic behind this approach is sound. The curriculum and local learning environment are where impact on employability can be delivered at scale. Where the balance is eventually struck between a centrally delivered careers service and departmentally delivered employability support remains to be seen. For the time being at least, there remains in many institutions a strong business case for providing academic departments with the support they need to make their courses as appealing as possible, and graduates from their courses as employable as possible.

References

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